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Reconciling the Past in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by

Haley Manis

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Keywords: Octavia, Butler, *Kindred*, history, slavery, reconciling, past

## ABSTRACT

### Reconciling the Past in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

by

Haley Manis

This thesis uses the observations of Nancy J. Peterson on historical wounds as a springboard to discuss Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* and its use of both white and black characters to reexamine the origins of the historical wounds and why they are so difficult to deal with even today. Other scholarly works will be used to further investigate the importance of each character in the story and what they mean to the wound itself. Specifically, Dana is analyzed alongside the other main characters: Rufus, Alice, and Kevin. Though Dana's relationships with these characters, *Kindred's* version of the past can be examined in order to determine why the past is so difficult to overcome and what the novel does to come to an understanding or reconciliation with it. This, in turn, allows for the present to be compared to Butler's representation of the past as a way of reexamining history.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. DANA AND RUFUS .....	11
3. DANA AND ALICE .....	29
4. DANA AND KEVIN .....	42
5. CONCLUSION.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	60
VITA .....	63

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) begins with Dana, a black woman living in Los Angeles in 1976 (Butler 12). Kevin and Dana have just been married and are settling down when Dana time-travels without explanation to the antebellum South. Her first trip is short; she saves a boy from drowning and faces the wrath of his mother and father before returning safely home because of her fear for her life, something she discovers on her second trip back. With the startling reality that this strange time travel happened and can still happen, Dana is thrust into an impossible situation. After time-traveling on her own and with Kevin, the two are able to witness the past for themselves. These views, for Dana and the reader, complicate contemporary views of how people existed in that time. Black and white, while startlingly separated by social constructs, are also bound together by love, violence, and the fact that they are all human.

Since Dana narrates the story, the reader experiences everything through the first-person perspective of her inner thoughts. She discovers the past for herself and must come to terms with its complexities firsthand, something a regular person cannot do. Butler uses her novel to relate various truths and misconceptions about the antebellum South to her reader. Dana finds out that she is descended from Rufus Weylin, the boy she saved on her first trip who will grow to be a white slave owner, and Alice Greenwood, a black woman eventually enslaved on the Weylin plantation. Dana believes she must save Rufus each time she travels to the South to ensure that her family will exist in the future. Witnessing life on the plantation brings Dana to a new understanding of history that she cannot get from historical texts alone. By participating in the history of her white and black ancestors, Dana sees much that society cannot. The emotional and physical scars she and Kevin return home with remind them of the traumas they have lived

through by traveling to the antebellum South. At the end, Dana leaves the past for good and returns home with a new view of history and a new view of the present. Her trips to the South give her the “solid evidence” that she and the reader need in order to come to terms with the past (Butler 264).

At first, Dana appears to be only a black female sent through time to ensure her own birth in the future. The reader might begin the novel under the impression that it is a science fiction story about time travel. However, the element of time travel quickly becomes something much deeper and more powerful as the novel progresses. Dana realizes she is not randomly returning to the antebellum South; she is coming to the aid of Rufus, who is in mortal peril each time she arrives. The persistence of this relationship draws the reader into the opposing lives of a white master and black slave simultaneously. In the times when she is in the past, Dana is the mediator on the Weylin plantation, often having more favor with Rufus than any other slave. She also has a good relationship with some of the slaves on the plantation, even though she is an obvious oddity due to her dress and way of speaking. To them, Dana fits somewhere between what is starkly black and white. Through Dana, the reader views differences between what their society says about the antebellum South and what reality was actually like there. While the characters are purely fictional, the experience is visceral for both Dana and the reader. This fictional story seeks to bring an understanding of a very real past to the modern reader in a way that avoids alienation and brings people together to resolve the issues on a human level, something many scholars cover through varying ideas and studies of the novel. Much of the criticism engages with the idea that Butler’s novel attempts to uncover the unseen with a story that allows its main character to leave the present and see the past for themselves. These studies elucidate the idea

that Butler's novel invites the audience to understand the past by treading the middle ground, by not taking sides, but rather by considering the characters as neither black nor white, only human.

In *Against Amnesia: contemporary women writers and the crises of historical memory*, Nancy J. Peterson discusses how history is identical to a wound. Her observations center closely on how history continues to be painful for minorities. She writes, "History as wound is so painful in certain respects that they will not or cannot tell the stories of their lives" (Peterson 2). Peterson also goes on to describe how different minority writers have told their stories and the stories of others, sharing the historical pain and the process of dealing with that pain with a world that may not initially understand.

Peterson's work identifies the struggles of various minority writers to tell the stories of those overlooked by history. Across many different examples, she explains that minority writers with painful histories have trouble writing about that history due to the lack of social support and/or difficulty speaking on the issue. Peterson's writes, "the painful effects of past events continue to pressure the present moment" (Peterson 1). The reason why the present is still plagued with insecurities from the past is because the past exists indefinitely. Despite efforts to fix issues in society that caused pain previously, the memory of that pain still lingers. Even if no one alive in the present can remember the past event, the history of what it meant to family, friends, and others can leave lasting impressions. Peterson's goal in her first chapter is to point out the fact that people still maintain a sense of hurt, loss, and mistrust because the past is so close (Peterson 1-17). When speaking for the writers, Peterson says:

[...] the history they remember is painful, because minority histories have never come into full cultural consciousness, because mainstream American history is so relentlessly optimistic and teleological that it has become painfully difficult to

articulate counterhistories that do not share these values, and because postmodern culture works against the sustained engagement with memory and commitment to complexity that is crucial for these histories. (1)

Because the present has chosen to whitewash the past, it has been almost forgotten by those that do not directly or actively relate to it. Peterson's book seeks to cover minority writers as examples of this issue. Through Peterson's observations and arguments, *Kindred* can be seen as a representation of a minority history by a minority writer which engages this idea of history as a wound. Butler's novel digs into Dana's family history with the intention of uncovering the truth. It makes the past more real than the collective historical memory has made it before by using its characters to portray various facets of society in the present and the past.

Marisa Parham examines similar themes as they appear in both modern society and Butler's novel. Parham first brings her readers into the article with an example from her own class. Though the United States has tried to be a country with equal opportunities for everyone, various communities and families still feel the alienation of race and other social markers. Parham presents the problem of association – a person who cannot relate to being black cannot, in memory or in the present, relate to what it means. However, the same person cannot openly relate to the white slave owner, white or otherwise, because it is socially unacceptable to draw connections between oneself and a person with enough historical flaws to mark him as a villain (Parham 1315-1317). Therein lies the problem Parham presents to her reader: If society will not tie itself fully to the past, how can it ever hope to reconcile with it in the present? In *Kindred*, Butler ties together all of the themes Peterson brings to the surface: physical and emotional pain, social discrepancies, morality, fear, and the definition of what it means to be human. Dana explores a painful history understood by modern society only in terms of written history and



remaining collective memory. *Kindred* creates a fictional link to a real past in order for the reader to relate to the events more easily. In tying Parham's and Peterson's ideas with Butler's fictional representation of history, the concept can be more easily understood and utilized in order to examine what the novel suggests about beginning to reconcile with the past. Reading Butler's novel through the lenses of both Peterson's historical wound and Parham's historical avoidance can reconfigure the past in ways that make it clearer to the reader. The wound cannot be dealt with without first accepting that the past happened and everyone is tied to it somehow, like Dana is to Alice and Rufus.

Through the ideas provided by Butler, Peterson, and Parham, Butler's novel can be explored alongside current scholarship<sup>1</sup> to provide an understanding of the historical wound. Does the novel represent an attempt to heal the wound? If not, what does it do to remove the pain and resentment? These issues are sprinkled throughout Butler's novel in the sections detailing the years before Dana met and married Kevin and the time after. The present in Butler's novel has gotten past slavery, but the separation still exists between black and white communities. Dana and Kevin are often stunned by past views on white versus black, even though they are fully aware that slaves were not meant to have the same freedoms they share in the 1970s. Using the ideas presented by Peterson about the historical wound and by Parham on social and historical separation from past events, the characters and themes in *Kindred* will be re-examined for their relationship to the historical wound; these ideas will also be employed in order to find out if *Kindred* provides a way for the reader to cope with the wound.

Before *Kindred* can be fully analyzed, one must endeavor to understand the climate of the 1970s. The Civil Rights movement was still winding down and tensions were felt throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> See Bibliography for further scholarship on *Kindred*.

United States. These tensions, though less obvious than lawful segregation, separated society in a more subtle way. Black and white were legally allowed to mingle in the same places, but behind the scenes, black and white were still seen as entirely separate by many. This feeling permeates Butler's novel, beginning with Dana and her husband Kevin. She is black while he is white. The two marry, but their families do not approve of the match. *Kindred* presents the notion that marriage between the two races would be tumultuous due to mixed feelings of pride in one's race and the collective memory of the slave era. Civil rights quelled some of these notions, but simultaneously fanned the flames in others. In discussing the book *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights* by Carol Anderson, Mark Newman signals one of Anderson's main ideas, which is that the Civil Rights movement existed alongside other social struggles that made the fight nearly impossible when it first began, including the Cold War and fear of communism (247-253). Newman further cites Anderson's argument that, "[t]he civil rights movement failed to tackle racial inequalities in economics, education, health care, and housing during its heyday in the 1960s, and these conditions persist in America today" (Newman 247-248). By setting the "present" in 1976, *Kindred* displays a comparison of post-Civil Rights movement conditions and slavery in the antebellum South; while things have improved, the comparison shows a need for progress through new understandings of slavery, race, and society.

In the 1970s, it would not be surprising, then, to find many people still on edge about the relations between the races and the issue of rights. Many were still transitioning into new social realities, and transitions of the social variety rarely go smoothly. History is not a fleeting remembrance; the future is built upon it. Society rests on unsure footing because of its continued resistance to resolving past issues in the present. It is difficult to build safely upon a foundation

that has yet to receive any repairs. If society wishes to mingle everyone equally, the past that it is built upon must be accepted as it was and understood for what it created. *Kindred* uses Dana's trips to the past to show the importance of understanding and coping with past traumas in order to make progress toward social and racial equality.

The historical wound that persists through history is evident during the 1960s and 70s, particularly because of the Civil Rights movement and what it failed to accomplish. Themes like racial inequality, white dominance, and gender inequality carried through from the past into later years and caused unrest. Butler's novel includes these themes and the issues they cause in both the past and present, relating the two times to one another in order to show the reader where the problem lies. Dana's interactions with each character reveal these themes and their implications on the present. The relationships in the novel clearly represent every facet of Peterson's and Parham's arguments; Dana and Rufus display the black/white struggle and the differences between the past and present, Dana and Alice represent the struggle of accepting the past and the reason why the wound still makes itself prevalent, and Kevin is another stand-in for the present-day person and the reader. These characters all interact with Dana in different ways, but represent the past and present through her interactions with them. Her relationships with these characters not only ask the reader to observe the past differently, but to become acquainted with the opposing ideologies and whether they can be effectively dealt with in society. Butler's novel does not directly tell the reader how to solve these problems, but leaves it open at the end. Dana's relationships with Rufus, Alice, and Kevin reveal the novel's purpose for the reader: to explore history and the historical wound in order to understand how the past and present are related. This purpose will lead to a better understanding of the progress that must be made, personally and socially, in order to move past the wounds that persist into the present.

## CHAPTER 2

### DANA AND RUFUS

While the plot of *Kindred* is intricate and multi-faceted, Rufus Weylin ultimately drives Dana and the plot. Neither villain nor hero, Rufus becomes the reason for the plot and the key to its resolution. For Dana, he is the problem to be solved. Rufus Weylin's survival means her survival, so she will do whatever she can to ensure that he lives long enough to have children. This becomes Dana's main focus once she realizes the boy she first saves is her ancestor. Rufus possesses no deeper meaning until she has cultivated a relationship with him. Rufus's character represents what the white slave owner was in the antebellum South. Rufus is not the two-dimensional representation that Butler hints at in the novel. He does not fully share characteristics with the white monsters in history books or the portrayals of benevolent white men who just happened to own slaves. Rufus exists as a complex character with a history of his own that rivals anything history could have said about him.

The relationship between Rufus and Dana becomes more complex with the understanding that he is her ancestor. Not only does this create a delicate situation for Dana when she is physically near Rufus, but it also creates an emotional tension because Dana, like the reader, finds it difficult to tie herself to someone like Rufus, let alone admit that she is descended from him. To admit this is to tie herself to both the slave past and its slave owners. For Dana, this relationship is guilt by association, and yet she is drawn to him. The relationship continues through the novel to help Dana and the reader come to terms with the past as it was. She cannot completely change Rufus, but she can understand him. The fact that Dana is descended from both a white slave owner and a black slave makes her a modern intermediary character for Rufus

and Alice and the past and present. She must understand the true past in order to bring about any reconciliation.

In a narrative about slavery, the relationship between Dana and Rufus certainly tests their racial and emotional boundaries. Her first few encounters with Rufus blur the lines, allowing her to maintain a close relationship with him as a boy. Rufus grows to see her as a person of safety and shelter. His family's views of slavery mean little to him as a child, and Dana is the closest thing he has to human comfort during his times of distress. To Rufus, Dana becomes what his parents should have been. His father is too rough and difficult to talk to, and his mother is overprotective and tries his patience. Dana bridges the two. She shows kindness to Rufus, but she also tells him how to behave when he does something that offends her or seems wrong. Her willingness to correct Rufus and help him brings him closer to her, at least during his childhood. Dana's attachment to Rufus as a child challenges the reader's response to him as an adult later in the novel. He is initially likeable and sympathetic because of his childlike innocence and vulnerability; he knows about the world around him, but does not fully comprehend what it means. Like any child, he is sometimes impudent but listens to Dana when she tries to make him understand her. Their early relationship is possible because of his childlike trust. He does not try to get Dana into any trouble because he wants her near him. Rufus's innocent attachment to Dana, while it becomes tainted by adult issues, remains present through his life. On the other hand, to Dana he is likeable and remains likeable despite his shortcomings because their early encounters.

It can be argued that Rufus represents the wound as early as his childhood because he embodies the inevitable conflict between what he will be and what Dana and the reader would like him to be. As a youth, he is innocent and only mimics what he hears without fully

understanding why. Butler humanizes Rufus early on. If the reader and Dana had met Rufus much later, the initial reaction would have likely been very different. It is important for Rufus to be portrayed as a human being early because the later chapters that feature his adult years reveal different facets of Rufus that are not at all innocent. Dana and the reader must meet Rufus early to obtain that attachment so that the later chapters do not immediately drive them off. There is a stark difference between introducing Rufus as an innocent child and introducing him after raping a woman. The idea is not to present Rufus as a monster, but as a person with good qualities and major flaws. Through his childhood, Dana can begin to understand how his world is educating him. She is able to influence Rufus early enough to create a bond that lasts through many years. To her, his childhood is the time to try to shape him for the better because his adulthood will start turning him into his father.

Rufus's personality changes when he becomes an adult, despite what Dana hopes for. His father's ways begin to show in his actions, and he views slavery the way the other adults do around him. Though Rufus still speaks to the slaves that he knew as a boy, it is not the same childhood friendliness that Dana observed before. Dana notes the obvious change in him, and knows that he has adopted the "logic" of American chattel slavery. The very first time she sees Rufus as an adult, he is getting a beating from a slave named Isaac. Dana saves him, though it is only for her sake and Kevin's. Once she knows Rufus will live, she figures out what happened – that Rufus had raped Isaac's wife, who is also his childhood "friend," Alice. Rufus's actions were part of what was considered acceptable at the time, and Dana must come to terms with how Rufus thinks about a black woman versus a white woman. To Rufus, Alice had no right to fight back about anything. He says, "I wouldn't have hurt her if she hadn't just kept saying no" (Butler 123). Dana counters by saying, "She had the right to say no," but Rufus's antebellum

beliefs prove that he thinks she has no rights to anything (123). He even smiles at the thought that she will be punished for what happened. Because Alice helps Isaac escape, she will be made a slave if caught and Rufus can wield his power more freely. Dana's inner monologue mirrors what the reader is likely thinking at this point: "If Rufus could turn so quickly on a life-long friend, how long would it take him to turn on me?" (Butler 123). Dana's relationship with Rufus until that point is based on their limited trust. Rufus repeatedly breaks Dana's trust over the course of the novel until Dana must defend herself from his physical and emotional influence over her.

Florian Bast speculates that "[a]t the core of Dana and Rufus's relationship is their capacity to hurt each other physically" (160). This speculation revolves around the parts of the novel that cover Dana's relationship with Rufus, which Bast summarizes by stating that the two make a deal with one another, and Dana's "leverage" involves "threatening to refuse to help him" in the event that his life is in danger (160). While Bast states that Rufus cannot do anything to Dana under this agreement, the fact that he could break his promise is also evident (160). Rufus agrees, but often asks Dana for more than she wants to agree to, like burning the only map she has of the area so that he will get in contact with Kevin (Butler 142). Rufus is as crafty as Dana at making his plans work, and Dana has either to make do or confront Rufus when he tries to turn the situation in his favor. Rufus begins pushing Dana further and further until she begins displaying her own free will against him more forcefully. Each time, Rufus acknowledges that he does not want to hurt Dana, but he insists that it is a choice he will make if she does not do as he demands.

Their encounter in the woods after his fight with Alice's husband, Isaac, is evidence that Rufus has changed, is changing, and will continue to change in ways that his society sees as

acceptable. Dana cannot completely alter his state of mind to fit her own, and their ideologies clash in this scene. Dana argues against Rufus's actions, eliciting various responses from him; he sometimes responds angrily to her claims, but he becomes overcome with guilt when confronted with truths he cannot easily deny. Dana understands that while the Rufus she met before is still there, he has been shaped by a society that allows actions like the rape of black women, something not even considered rape. This scene is the first time the reader can see Rufus's innocence from childhood clashing with his role in antebellum society. In the moments when Rufus fights against Dana's beliefs and ideologies, it is evident that he is also fighting against his own. His honesty to her reveals his inner thoughts for Dana and the reader.

Dana also discovers from this encounter that Rufus does care for Alice, even if it is in a distorted way. This is the point in the novel where Butler presents Rufus's views of Dana and Alice. Rufus is interested in Dana for her intellect (at first) while he is attracted to Alice in a mostly physical sense. As much as Dana wants to dislike Rufus for what he has done, he is still the boy she knew before, even if his personality has been altered by his time. This reaction to him is difficult for her because the social and historical contexts of 1976 do not normally portray the white master as a sympathetic person. Rufus reacts to the situation like a white slaveholding man can – with force. His honesty with Dana about his love for Alice, however, proves that Rufus is confused by his own world's warped mindset. He loves Alice, but he is not allowed to love a black woman. Dana's narration states, "There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (Butler 124). While the love he feels for Alice is strange and fueled by violent desire, Rufus still defines this as love in his own mind. His childhood friendship with Alice has become something more dangerous since their relationship is twisted by antebellum standards. His rape of Alice also changes the dynamic between her and Dana



because of Dana's involvement in her continued abuse. Dana struggles because she is related to two people divided by a cultural rift that allows slavery and rape and also because she feels she must ensure that these norms still occur in order for her to be born. The historical norms that governed the South taint this familial relationship, and Dana frequently finds herself with no choice but to bear the blame for the perpetuation of Rufus's actions. However, through their relationship, Dana makes attempts to understand and change the way Rufus thinks, even if it only works a small portion of the time. The moments when Rufus confides in Dana reveal much about his intentions and beliefs, and Dana also remarks on this often in the novel. This further complicates her relationship with him because Rufus becomes likeable and unlikable in different situations.

Marisa Parham retells a moment when her class discussed:

how neglected histories may sometimes go untold not only because "history is for the winners," or because history operates in the service of a national political majority, but also because, sometimes, people cannot bear to tell such stories or re-live such lives. (1316)

Parham reaches this conclusion that Butler is also likely trying to communicate to the reader. "Neglected histories" are often the parts that go unacknowledged in the social and historical narrative, like the stories of slave owners that did not either end horribly or very well, but somewhere in-between. Some histories are of the slaves who lived lives unlike what the history books tell society, or what society tells itself of history. Butler takes the historical and social narrative and explains history through the eyes of someone that ties the two together. If people "cannot bear to tell such stories," is that the reason why they willingly accept the dreamlike retellings many historical texts give? Of course, textbooks will include the basic "terror" that

comes with a term like slavery. This is not to downplay it, but to soften it for reading purposes. Some textbooks simply give this a glance and move forward while others dwell on it for a few pages. This limited view of slavery comes into harsh perspective in *Kindred* when Butler describes things through the modern eyes of Dana and Kevin. Simply stating that beatings occurred is easily forgotten. Describing the pain and suffering in detail on a personal level gains the reader's attention and emotions.<sup>2</sup>

Parham observes that her students “generally protect themselves from texts, usually by claiming deep admiration for the slave-protagonist, [...] or by asserting their own necessarily acontextualized resistance” (Parham 1316). This resistance is, for many, normal. The readers are called to imagine themselves in the shoes of the slave in the past, something they cannot fully mentally do. The reader can only relate to the feelings the protagonist evokes through the narrative, which is passed to the reader to analyze and understand. Parham further analyzes this by saying:

It is typical for students to avoid identification with slaves, but absolutely taboo for them to think too deeply about the slaveholders. If I am not careful, white people, except as a sort of shadowy, menacing force, are actively disappeared from class discussions. They are simply too difficult to deal with outside of their caricatures. (Parham 1317)

The difficulty with Rufus as a character is that he is a representation of a historically wounding figure – the very reason slavery persisted and became this nearly untouchable subject. As with Parham's students, the idea of identifying with a slave-owning white male during slavery is challenging. The reader fears becoming too attracted to a character who has been historically

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<sup>2</sup> See Douglass. The autobiography details pain and suffering from the point of view of former slave Frederick Douglass, similar to Dana's perspective in *Kindred*.

labeled as absolutely evil. This is why Butler made Rufus likeable at the start of the novel. It forces the reader to come to terms with the idea that Rufus, and white men of that time, were not entirely bad or good, just like any human being. Rufus *is* the taboo of the novel, the character the reader should not relate to, but cannot help liking or at least relating to at times despite his flaws and cruelty. In a further step, Butler keeps Dana in the same gray area where Rufus is concerned. She frequently switches between being friends with Rufus and hating him for his atrocities.

Rufus is identifiable as a character because he expresses basic human traits, both positive and negative, that have carried through centuries. He expresses a caring attitude toward his friends, black and white, to varying degrees, anger at his parents for their vastly different attitudes, jealousy of Dana, desire for Alice, and remorse for some of the things he does to the slaves and Dana. Rufus is relatable because he is a person, not because he owns slaves. This has the potential to make readers uncomfortable because an outsider could surmise that they relate to Rufus because of his views on race. History does not usually allow for a reader to relate to the “bad guy” because society is supposed to cheer for the underdog, the suppressed group trying to get by in a cruel world. Butler allows the reader the opportunity to understand every type of person involved.

Parham’s argument concludes that trying to identify with the white man can possibly create a hostile environment for the identifier due to this idea engrained in society that one must not feel for the villain (Parham 1317). She further states, “But, at the same time, not confronting oppressors, or even more specifically, not allowing oneself even for a moment to identify with an oppressor, potentially keeps one cloaked from one’s own horrible potentiality” (1317). Butler uses Dana to see Rufus on a closer level than many of the slaves would have been able to. Dana, as an in-between figure on the plantation, is capable of moving between the areas where the

slaves predominately dwell and the house where the Weylins live. Dana and Rufus are allowed to interact in many ways that show the reader how to interpret the “white man” in the novel. Dana’s description of Tom Weylin, for example, shows the reader he is an “ordinary man” doing what “society [says is] legal and proper” (Butler 134). At the same time, the reader is able to see Rufus closely enough to begin relating to his emotional conflicts. While the readers are less likely to relate to his rape and physical relationship with Alice, the notion of wanting someone they cannot have is still relevant to readers through history to the present. Dana feels a connection to Rufus that transcends their social, racial, and historical boundaries because they are “kindred.” Though their social lives are very different, Dana and Rufus share an understanding of cultural boundaries and misunderstandings that cause tension and anger. This attachment to him is necessary because Dana must understand not only the plight of Alice as a black woman, but also the impact of social rules on Rufus as a white master. By accepting this link to slavery and the white masters of the plantations, Dana is able to connect herself to her past more fully.

The reader is able to, on some levels, identify with Rufus’s inability to learn from his mistakes. Rufus also exhibits qualities that are, on their basic levels, human in nature (lust, greed, jealousy, anger, frustration, etc.) and the readers can relate to each of these emotions, though in different ways. Butler’s novel takes Parham’s observation and creates a situation where readers must identify with the oppressor; through Dana, they can identify with some of Rufus’s actions and character traits. If the readers can relate to Rufus, then they can also see their own human capability to be the oppressor, their own roles in a society based on power and privilege. Butler takes the historical white slave owner and makes him whole in Rufus. Dana is able to feel for Rufus because she relates to him in emotional ways, if nothing else. Butler’s humanization of

Rufus is necessary for the wound of the past to be observed. While Rufus does not ultimately change enough to alter the past, he is shown to grow slowly more concerned about his understanding of slavery and what it means. If his humanity can be shown in its fullest form, the reader can relate to him and identify with him in that respect. Rufus is one of the representatives of the wound, and must therefore be understood in order to begin healing the wound. If the readers cannot relate themselves to the past, they cannot hope to understand it enough to heal its residual pain.

The importance of Rufus's personal connection to Dana must also be noted. Rufus sees Dana in a complex way. She is black, and therefore fits under the criteria that any black woman would fit under. But, she is also a stranger from another time. She is mystical to the people of the Weylin plantation, and her status sometimes represents that. She has a closer relationship to Rufus than many of the other slaves, and the members of the house trust her as some sort of witch doctor that can cure any illness or injury. Butler makes the reader comfortable in the safety of Dana's relationship with Rufus until his slave-owning sensibilities predominate and he decides to punish her for any wrongdoing he thinks she has done. In some ways, Rufus is fickle in his relationship with Dana. His attachment issues often lead him selfishly to keep Dana on the plantation or threaten her. This idea of possession as an act of love runs deeply through the novel and is especially evident in Rufus's relationships with Alice and Dana. While Alice is the object of Rufus's desire, he confides in Dana and cannot afford to lose her to another white man or her own sense of agency. Rufus mixes love and attachment with control and possession, and that confusion becomes one of his defining traits as the novel progresses.

Rufus's possessiveness is evidence both of his destructive nature and of his emotional love. While this seems to be contradictory, the idea of "love" to Rufus is complex in itself. When

confronted by Dana about raping Alice, Rufus's argument is evidence of his possessiveness. While he loves Alice, it is a love that creates tension and confusion. When Dana asks Rufus if he has raped Alice, the novel says, "He looked away guiltily" (Butler 122-123). This line is one of the most telling about Rufus's understanding of love and possession. Though applied to Alice in this case, the same understanding is later applied to Dana, though slowly. To say that Rufus feels the act weighing on his consciousness is to say that Rufus understands that he has done *something wrong*. The novel and history itself tell modern readers that raping (or otherwise engaging in sexual relationships) with a female slave was fine by the time's standards. Rufus's rape of Alice coincides with social standards of his time and place, but to later acknowledge that he has done something wrong to her does not. Whether it is by Dana's influence or because of his own reasoning, Rufus realizes at that moment that what he has done was wrong. It can be argued that it is simply because Dana is berating him for his actions, but Rufus has the authority and white male dominance to have verbally countered Dana at that moment if he had liked. Instead, he reacts with guilt, creating a complex moment when his desire is mingled explosively with society's "right and wrong" mentality.

At first, Dana sees this through the eyes of a modern woman. She, and the reader, understand that society condemns raping a woman for any reason, especially due to thoughts of possession. Rufus's thoughts challenge Dana's, and readers must confront their thoughts as they read further into the novel and begin to see Rufus differently. Rufus attempts at every turn to keep people in his life – in his possession – in ways that are often destructive. Rufus is conflicted; the discussion in the woods mirrors Rufus's fight with good and evil in his own mind. He goes from pushing aside notions of Isaac's being married to Alice to growing quiet and saying, "I don't want her being sold South though. Her fault or not, I don't want her dying in

some rice swamp” (Butler 123). He lays his problems bare to Dana alone, and the reader can see the struggle within him as the conversation continues. Dana even asks, “Was he going to show a little humanity then? Did he have any left to show?” (124). Their argument in the woods is the first time that Dana and the reader are truly forced to identify with both their modern roots and the ideology that Rufus represents. It is difficult for Dana understand Rufus’s perspective because her modern beliefs clash so drastically with his own. The reader and Dana have to first see that Rufus is the white man they have read so much about before they can see the white man that history has written so little about.

Rufus, as a slave owner, is likely no stranger to the mental and physical abuses used to control slaves. His methods of obtaining what he desires start out as asking nicely before becoming enraged demands. Extraordinarily, though, he often apologizes to Dana in some fashion when he does lash out at her. In the same conversation in the woods, Rufus lashes out with his possessive mentality, but grows quiet when his emotional side takes over. When he talks about what he has done, he says, “I didn’t want to just drag her off into the bushes [...] I never wanted it to be like that. But she kept saying no. I could have had her in the bushes years ago if that was all I wanted” (124). Rufus makes a point of telling Dana that he kept himself from attacking Alice before. While this is not enough to satisfy a modern person, Rufus’s explanation seems out of place considering what Dana encounters when the patrolman attacks her and subsequently sends her home. If having his pick of slave girls is a white man’s privilege, why has Rufus not taken that opportunity sooner? Rufus’s next line may be an answer: “If I lived in your time, I would have married her. Or tried to” (124). Though his ideas are skewed and not fitting with the modern understandings of race and conduct, Rufus is shown to care about Alice in a way that is not the stereotypical standard for his time. He tells Dana this because he wishes

he could be part of a society where marrying Alice is possible; while this still reflects that he would marry her, it does not change his attitude toward their relationship. Rufus cannot marry her if he wants to uphold both his reputation and the law. His feelings, then, agitate his slave-owning mentality to the point where he strikes and apologizes many times. He wants things in his possession, but when he gets them, he is left emptier than before.

Not everything is as the reader would expect about slavery when Dana begins to work on the plantation, however. She teaches other slaves some of what she knows, and certainly tries to teach Rufus about how the world should work, even if the antebellum South would not accept it. Rufus involuntarily begins to care about what he does and whom he does things to, even if it is only slight and fleeting. He shows real moments of emotion to Dana, and they go against what she and the reader would have expected from history's retelling of the slave-holding days of the South. Rufus even cares for his children, regardless of how much he tries not to. Dana notices that Rufus begins showing fatherly love to his son Joe, and it would appear to be a sign of hope to the reader. While Joe is considered a slave, Rufus disregards that when they are alone. Dana is even allowed to teach him to read after Alice asks Rufus to let her do it. Dana ends up watching Rufus enjoying his son's company while looking at a map, and Rufus cannot hide that he loves his son.

As mentioned previously, Rufus also has moments when the historical idea of what a white slave owner should be like is shattered by his reactions. While he is tough on Dana, he often apologizes or tries to be softer with her afterward, justifying his actions as something he had to do. Rufus is often stuck between keeping up appearances and defying the normalcies of antebellum culture. When it comes to running the plantation, Rufus struggles with what is business and what is personal. It is generally only after Dana argues with him and stands up to



him that Rufus comes to the realization that he has done something wrong. He does not always learn from his mistakes, but they are made clear to him in spite of what the culture tries to say. Dana will not allow Rufus to do something horrible in her presence if she can help it, and she does end up altering some of the things Rufus used to think. Whether this is a subconscious attempt to alter the past or not is up to the reader, but Dana, nonetheless, is tempted more than once to try and change Rufus in order to keep him from doing what his society has already told him to do. He is not malleable enough to change completely, and Dana is forced to confront him several times because of his engrained thoughts about slaves. While the majority of his actions seem to live up to the historical portrayal, Rufus is also shown to be a deeper character with feelings and desires. He is often conflicted about his own choices, and has to think about the fact that slaves are people and not objects. Butler takes the time to humanize Rufus so that the reader is not tempted to throw him into the pile with other two-dimensional slave owning characters. His way of caring is just a product of how his time viewed life on the plantation.

The last the reader gets of Rufus is both confusing and revealing. As previously stated, Rufus is a complex character who confuses possession with love. After Alice's death, Dana realizes that there is no one between herself and Rufus to protect her from his wandering eyes. His desire for Alice translates over to Dana, and the shock of this rattles her and the reader. While there are hints that Rufus could, at any moment, use force against Dana, he still does not act on that impulse in the ending until Dana fights back. Rufus admits to Dana in this scene that he “‘never felt so lonesome in [his] life’” (Butler 258). His act of replacing Alice with Dana seals the complexity of his character. Though created as a humanization of the white man, Rufus also represents the cause of the historical wound and carries out actions that ultimately demonstrate the power he has over Dana, the irresponsible power that some white men wielded over slaves.

Though he eventually resorts to force to make her comply, he gives Dana ample time to choose freely. Dana understands there is no way out without a fight, but she gives the reader her observation of Rufus at this moment. Dana even asks, “What was he waiting for? What was I waiting for?” (259). Dana’s thoughts reveal that she could allow him to rape her and that the worst part would be killing him (259-260). She describes the pains Rufus has apparently gone through to look presentable, to be acceptable to Dana. She even states that she “would never be to him what Tess had been to his father,” a very stark reminder that Rufus is doing this out of possessive love, not possessive lust (260).

Dana attempts to rationalize the situation in her head in what could be mere seconds before finally settling on the resounding and final word, “No” (Butler 260). Bast comments on this word, stating, “the ‘No’ is not followed by an exclamation mark but by a period. This is no emotional shriek, no fearful or outraged outcry, but a calm creation of fact” (Bast 162). Dana makes the decision that this historical notion of dominance cannot endure, and she will end Rufus’s possessiveness of her if she has to kill him to do it. Further, due to their blood relation, allowing Rufus to engage with her in any kind of romantic and/or physical manner would be another taboo entirely. Though this may not be the first thing on Dana’s mind at this point, the implication that the act would be incestuous is more than enough to drive Dana and the reader away from the situation. Dana makes the decision to save herself from any further emotional and physical pain that history has caused.

Bast argues that Rufus’s death equals freedom for Dana mentally and physically (162). Not only is Dana freeing herself, but she is also freeing Rufus from his pattern of violence and inescapable habits. She is freeing *both herself and Rufus* from the antebellum South. If death is the release, then Dana finally unlocks the shackles on both herself and Rufus in order to leave the

South under slavery. In this context, the possibility of reading Rufus as a means by which to explore the wound of history is profound. By stopping Rufus's continued acts of violence and misguided possessiveness, she also stops the pain of living in a time when he cannot have what he so desperately seeks. He cannot live in Dana's world where black and white mix more freely together, and he cannot obtain what he wants through force because it always crumbles before his eyes. With Dana as a replacement for the reader, Rufus's death can be seen as a release from the past for both blacks and whites. The killing, while violent in its actuality, is subtly the act of letting go. Dana feels for Rufus and questions killing him before he begins to stir up the pain again. The past is the same; it binds people to it when they wish to remember good things, but harms them when they recall the painful things. This killing, while still remembered in Dana's mind, is necessary to heal the wound. While painful, the healing must take place before one can move on. Dana acknowledges that it will be difficult for her to kill what she has connected with. She more or less watches Rufus grow up, and her connection to him, like the past, is dear to her in a complicated and unforeseen way. Killing him means hurting herself in the process. If modern society is going to try to heal the wound of the past, it must first acknowledge that the past is painful for everyone. The ideas it has already accepted must expand to include the ones that are undesirable. Dealing with the past does not mean forgetting it, just coping with the damage it has left in its wake. Rufus, as this complicated historical figure, represents the pain of healing. He tries to hold on to Dana even as she cuts him off, much like how the past maintains a hold on the collective consciousness of society.

Butler also wants the reader to remember that Rufus character, while complex, is being tugged between worlds, although to a different degree than Dana is. While Dana's ideas have an effect, it is not enough to stop the years between her visits that turned him into a white master.

Dana's effort to change him and her influence on him in general, while unsuccessful, prove the point that humanity continues to try to close the wound. Dana's attempts in the past were like efforts to stop the injury before it happened. Dana, as one person, cannot do this on her own, but her efforts echoed the attempts of others during her time. People, black and white, deal with the history of slavery in different ways. Dana's husband Kevin even has his idea of the South shattered by what he sees during the time he is stuck there. The two become immediately aware of the wound again and are forced to deal with it accordingly. Dana tries to fix it while still perpetuating it. Her existence depends on slavery and Rufus's desire for Alice. She does not know what will happen if she allows things to go differently, so she goes with history and writes the story as it was. Butler's novel would seem to be an attempt to heal the wound, but it is more complex than that. By going through the trials of saving Rufus, enduring slave work, and understanding both the slaves and the white owners, Dana accepts that the wound happened and is able to go about treating it and living with the scar. The point is not to obliterate the history of it, but to accept that it happened and try to progress past it to a better future. Without making attempts to move forward, the wound is allowed only to get worse. Dana and Kevin understand that terrible things happened, they accept it, and they are able to move on with their lives knowing that the understanding of that time enables the wound to be closed and healed.

One major point that scholars emphasize about Dana is the loss of her arm after killing Rufus. This important detail remains symbolic to many, but for different reasons. In terms of Parham's historical wound, Dana's physical loss is evidence that the past does not completely disappear from memory, and its influence is felt across time. Many scholars agree with the idea that Rufus's familial connection to Dana calls her back to the past, so it is also reasonable to think that her missing arm is symbolic of leaving part of herself behind. However, the arm can

also be seen as history actively taking away part of Dana. Nadine Flagel says, “The loss of Dana’s arm manifests this lack [of the past], not only by testifying to the history of violent struggle but also by showing that history can disarm the present” (224). Bast also states that this removal of her own arm “means limiting the body’s signficatory ability to express agency” (164). The loss of her arm is significant when considered as a means of actively fighting against the past and changing events to alleviate the present. The arm proves that the past can still create pain and that it maintains a hold over any who try to understand it. Dana’s decision to resist Rufus becomes a symbol of her rejecting the past’s hold over her, even though it comes at a traumatic cost. Scholars agree that the missing limb will always be a reminder of the past, but also of her freedom from its power. Progress never comes easily or cheaply, and Dana learns this at the end of the novel when her only means of escape ends with Rufus dead and her arm pulled away by his grip on her – a last attempt for the past to hold her back by force (Hua 401). Though it is painful and difficult to live with, the wound becomes a reminder of the past that has been overcome and the work that must be done in order to continue moving forward (Flagel 232). Dana pays for her way forward to the present by sacrificing part of herself – literally and metaphorically – to the history she has learned so much about.

## CHAPTER 3

### DANA AND ALICE

Where Rufus represents the white man during the slave era, Alice represents the slave. Her role in the novel is largely defined by the decisions of Rufus and Dana, and these decisions ultimately lead to her suicide. As a formerly free black woman, becoming a slave puts Alice in an immediately disadvantageous position. She cannot leave without risks, she cannot refuse any demands, and she cannot hope to regain her freedom after trying to help her husband run away. Rufus maintains his hold over her, buying her more for the assurance she will be his than to make her into a working slave. Alice is a physical object used for sex instead a human being. Where Rufus feels a complex desire for Alice, she feels their friendship degrading into a master/slave dynamic. Dana notes that the two were friends as children and asks, ““wasn’t Rufus a friend of yours? I mean ... did he just grow out of the friendship or what?”” (Butler 119). Alice answers, ““Got to where he wanted to be more friendly than I did”” (119). Their friendship has dissolved into possession by this time. She grows to tolerate Rufus more as he treats their children like family, but his actions and empty words leave her wanting more from him. Alice is the slave with no way home and no way out. To Dana, Alice is part of the key to her existence, but also part of a past that she wishes she could erase. The wound, then, includes the slave in his or her existence as the person being harmed. The hurt itself is dealt to someone, and slaves were the ones feeling that pain. Alice is representative of both the truths and stereotypes given in written and oral history. The pain is tied to her and other slaves because they were the victims of violence and dehumanization. Alice stands as a human representative of slavery against the stereotypes and misconceptions of written history and memory.

Butler utilizes Dana and Alice to represent virtually the same woman in two different situations. Many scholars cover this idea in their work, and they often use this angle to represent Dana and Alice under the context of slavery versus 1976 freedom and beyond. Because Dana and Alice are related to one another, the two share a likeness in appearance and personality. The separation comes from Alice's starkly different circumstances. Alice is free before Rufus decides that he must possess her physically. Growing up in the antebellum South makes Rufus feel more privileged than in his childhood, and his desire often takes control before he can halt his actions. Alice reveals to Dana that she is married to Isaac Jackson, a slave currently on the run (119). Even though Dana meets Alice early on when she is a child, it is under a different context – the whipping of her father. Alice grows up knowing freedom, but lives the same story as her mother. When she helps Isaac escape, it condemns Alice to a life of slavery. Rufus later reveals his disgust at Alice's choice of a slave over him (123). His rape of Alice and subsequent fight with Isaac are proof of his pride, and it goes further when he buys her as a slave. Like Dana, Alice comes across as a strong woman despite her position. However, Dana becomes the key to Alice's continuing imprisonment and abuse at the hands of Rufus because of her belief that altering that portion of history will erase her from existence. The situation forces Dana to think about what being in Alice's shoes would be like.

This fluidity between Dana and Alice is complex and sometimes difficult for the reader to see, even if the characters repeatedly imply their similarities. Alice has more to deal with than Dana because of their differing positions and relationships with Rufus. She is aware of how differently Rufus treats her compared to Dana, and she even tells her, ““He likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike if you can believe what people say”” (Butler 228). When Dana responds, Alice ends the section with, ““Anyway, all that means we're two halves of the

same woman – at least in his crazy head” (228). Dana states that she cannot allow Rufus and Alice to not enter into a sexual relationship because they will parent Hagar, her ancestor. If her purpose is to prevent Rufus from dying before this happens, what is her purpose with Alice?

Sarah Eden Schiff argues that Dana and Alice’s relationship as two of the same runs deeper than familial connections:

This doubled imaging highlights the intimate connection between the past and the present as well as the need for both Dana and the novel’s readers to recognize the significance and source of the doubling across temporal and ego boundaries. (108)

The focus here is the connection between the reader and the past. Alice, the representation of the collective pain the wound causes, is the past while Dana and the reader are the present. The reader is meant to react as Dana reacts; the reader and Dana may not think in tandem, but their feelings resonate with the troubles and issues that still persist in society. Alice is the past that cannot be altered or changed because it would change the future. Scholars like Diana R. Paulin, Florian Bast, Lisa Woolfork, Stella Setka, Nadine Flagel, and Linh Hua often discuss Alice in the context of her rape. The one thing Dana cannot do for Alice is save her from Rufus. Morally, she knows she should. However, if the future is to be preserved, Dana can do nothing to stop it. Just as Dana cannot completely change the influences on Rufus, she cannot change her family’s beginnings because, without them, she will not exist. There is no way to marry the two happily, and the only option left is the oppressive relationship that binds Alice to Rufus.

Dana’s perceived need to ensure Hagar’s birth makes her part of the reason that Alice is continuously abused by Rufus throughout the novel. The dilemma is that Dana cannot alter this part of the past for fear of her own future. If Hagar is not born, Dana will not be born. But, if Dana does not stop Rufus from abusing Alice now, he will never stop. The problem is not only a



moral one, but a personal one. Dana knows that Alice is her ancestor, but she can do nothing to stop Alice's abuse if she hopes to exist.

Bast further notes Dana's role in Alice's sexual exploitation by saying:

Dana, in approaching Alice, frames the conflict in terms that clearly point to agency as an ability realized within specific constraints, as a potential which slaves had, but to a very limited degree, explicating the novel's project of minutely delineating possibilities of making choices about oneself without ever trivializing the horrendous cruelties of slavery. (168)

Dana is part of the force behind Alice's abuse because she can see no other way to ensure her own existence, and Alice does not have the freedom to refuse Rufus without severe consequences. Alice no longer has the agency of a free woman, and Dana's inability to utilize her own agency to alter history leaves Alice vulnerable to Rufus's advances. Dana becomes conflicted both about altering the past and making sure her family line continues on in order for her to even exist. Woolfork states, "Not only is repeated rape a trauma for Alice, who must endure it bodily and emotionally, but Dana must also live with the traumatic knowledge that her family line was generated by coerced sex" (25). Neither option seems like a good one, but Dana is the only one of the two that has some limited amount of agency; therefore, Dana must make difficult, emotionally painful decisions, and she chooses to preserve her own existence over possibly altering an entire family's timeline.

Scholars argue this issue because of both Dana's inability to see what altering the past would do and the complexity and unknown aspects of time travel in Butler's novel. No matter which way it is argued, Dana still sees the only logical option in front of her as getting Alice to go to Rufus. By doing this, Hua says, "Her justification is a critique of slavery's far-reaching

consequences on human liberty, but its cautionary tone reminds us of Dana's own complicity in rendering Alice a victim for the purpose of (re)producing 'history'" (398). Dana cannot change the past without affecting her own future, but that past will always include slavery no matter what she does. If she chose not to be part of Rufus's scheme, anything could have happened. As far as Dana can see, her only choice in the matter is to at least allow these events to transpire in order to reassure herself that she will not simply fade out of existence. Dana only follows because she has no other choice. She is bound by history just as Alice is bound by slavery. The guilt of allowing a friend and relative to suffer at the hands of another relative haunts Dana throughout the novel.

In Stella Setka's article, she refers to a conversation with Octavia Butler about the novel, "For Butler, the trauma of slavery has made us all kindred, and just as Dana is complicit in Alice's rape, we all are complicit in the perpetuation of slavery's racist underpinnings in contemporary cultural and political institutions" (105). Not only does this define the issue Dana faces in the past, but it also shines a light on the issues the present faces concerning racism. Everyone is part of the problem somehow, either by allowing racial issues to happen or by perpetuating them. Alice's representation of that victimization and dehumanization extends to the present through Dana's inability to do anything to help her. There are consequences she cannot face, like the loss of her own existence. Dana fears for her own life in this situation, and self-preservation wins out over changing the past. The question on every scholar's mind is always, "What if?" It is the same question asked in the present – "What if someone stepped in? Would it matter? What would happen?" Through Dana, the reader gets a sense of helplessness in the face of this adversity. However, Dana learns from this when Rufus tries to do the same to

her, and she forcefully takes history into her own hands, if only for a moment, and stops Rufus before he can force her into compliance yet again.

If Dana and Alice are from two different times and societies, the broader scope of their relationship must be taken into consideration. One interesting section to look at is when Dana and Alice are having an argument, and Alice says to Dana, ““What’s the matter with you? [...] Why you let me run you down like that? I seen people get lockjaw and die from way less than I had wrong with me. Why you let me talk about you so bad?”” (Butler 167). When Dana asks her why, Alice’s response is odd. She says, ““Because I get so mad ... I get so mad I can taste it in my mouth. And you’re the only one I can take it out on – the only one I can hurt and not be hurt back”” (168). Even though they are talking about whether or not Alice will go to Rufus, the dialogue represents something deeper on a metaphorical level. The wound itself hurts when it is caused, and also because it has not been healed. The people of the present still do not know how to heal it. History lashes out from the past like the sting of a whip or the hurtful words Alice uses to take out her anger on Dana. The past is fighting the present. When Alice asks why Dana lets her, Dana actually answers with, ““Why do you do it?”” (167). Alice shifts from being angry to being apologetic. She does not know who to unleash this fury on. She cannot get out, so her frustration has to be released in some way. Likewise, the past releases its fury through the inheritance of racism and injustice that affects the people of the present. Even if those people have never lived through past events themselves, the echoes still evoke feelings that challenge their perception of society. If one group is angry, it lashes out against the other. This happens to everyone involved with racial issues like slavery, as proven by Rufus with Dana. If opposing groups will not attempt to understand the reason behind their problems, the wound will remain open and painful for all.

Without considerations for the possibility that Dana could wind up not existing at all in the future, the reader could still ask why she does not attempt to drastically alter the past in favor of the people suffering, like Alice and the other slaves. For Lisa Woolfork, “that history is represented as inflexible” in Butler’s novel:

History as stasis is necessary here, I believe, to allow the characters access to a past significantly marked by trauma. If history were presented as flexible, then Dana (and Kevin) would never know the physical, mental, and emotional complexity of life in slavery. (Woolfork 25)

Woolfork emphasizes the idea that there is a difference between Dana and the other people in the past. She is an “observer who watches” and not “a participant who actively engages” in the past (26). This take on Butler’s novel is what drives the narrative. Dana cannot alter the past to the degree that something substantial changes. No immediate life-changing event will come from Dana to save the day. She cannot do this as one person alone. Alice, as an embodiment of the past, fits better into this mold under these criteria because she is the one person whose fate Dana cannot truly attempt to alter. Dana’s efforts to change Rufus are in order to change the issue at its source. Despite the fact that she tries, it does not work well enough to completely alter Rufus’s behavior. If she cannot change Rufus, then everything under his control will remain the same, as well. No matter how kind she is or how much she tries to help Alice, Dana must still watch and perpetuate the continued abuse Alice suffers under Rufus. Even if Alice ends up tolerating Rufus, it is still not a desirable outcome. Dana makes efforts to change the way Rufus thinks and the way others think, but Alice remains unchanged by Dana. Butler uses Dana to bring the reader into this fictional view of history. By her doing so, the reader is placed in the same unthinkable situation. As Woolfork stated, this inability to alter the past, to change Alice’s fate, shows Dana

and the reader the intense struggle that slaves endured on a unique and terrifying level. The wound of history is difficult to heal because the past usually cannot be felt in this way and because it cannot be changed.

Dana's identity as black is not the same as Alice's. Dana is not "black" in the same sense that the slaves on the Weylin plantation are "black." To the reader, the slaves would be the first people Dana could possibly identify with. Dana finds that this is true to a degree, but the slaves themselves have their own divisions and conflicts. When she rescues Rufus from Isaac, it is insinuated that Isaac will try to silence her, as well, if she sides with Rufus. Her inability to do much of the work that other slaves do also places her at a disadvantage. Dana learns quickly, which is sometimes to her advantage. Her main issue among the slaves is her relationship with Alice. While the reader knows Dana bears no ill will toward her, Dana acts to ensure that Rufus and Alice have children. This must happen by any means necessary. Dana realizes that she is pushing Alice into a physical relationship with Rufus when she does not want one, and she is at odds with herself about the issue throughout the novel. Alice, subsequently, becomes angry toward Dana more than once for her actions. She can see how Rufus treats Dana, and it is different from how he treats her. Dana and Alice are the same woman in two people to Rufus, and it pits them against each other sometimes when Dana does not intend for it to.

The accusations Alice places on Dana come from the fact that Dana is very obviously different on a plantation where there are only two categories: a slave or a white owner. Dana fits in neither comfortably, and Alice is aware of it when she is at her angriest. After Alice realizes what happened to her the night Rufus raped her, her anger toward Dana escalates. During a conversation about the event, Dana tries to tell her the truth, but Alice comes back with, "Doctor-nigger, [...] Think you know so much. Reading-nigger. *White-nigger!* Why didn't you

know enough to let me die?’” (Butler 160). Dana is not a slave and not a master. She even knows too much to be a white *woman* in that time. Her book knowledge and different way of thinking often lead to difficult situations. Alice’s accusation comes across as odd to the present day reader because the act is done out of the desire to help her. The downside is that Alice will live to see herself trapped as a slave and sexual object. Dana saves Alice, and, whether it is simply for the continuation of her lineage or not, this act is to save the life of another. For Dana, these accusations hurt, but she knows that her inability to alter the past puts her in that position. As Dana explains, “I said nothing. [...] it was better, safer for her to vent her feelings on me than on anyone else” (Butler 160). She knows that she is the only person Alice can talk to in this way without the fear of punishment. If Dana had let her die, it would have saved Alice from Rufus, but would have condemned Dana to non-existence. If the past is allowed to die, what happens to the present?

Unfortunately, there is one thing that remains certain about the distant past: the people there die eventually. When Dana returns to the past for the last time, Rufus reveals solemnly that Alice has hanged herself in the barn. This hits Dana hard. The first clue that the reader gets about why is when Dana goes to Sarah for answers. Sarah tells her plainly, ““He did it!”” (Butler 249). When Dana clarifies that Rufus was not the one who strung her up, Sarah says, ““Even if he didn’t put the rope on her, he drove her to it. He sold her babies!”” (Butler 249). Dana’s faith in Rufus, at this point, is shaken even further. While Alice should have had a long life ahead of her, Rufus’s actions lead her to her breaking point. In his mind, she will simply obey him after he tricks her. Rufus is not prepared for what Alice does to get out of the situation permanently.

When Dana goes to Rufus to see what his reasoning is, she finds a peculiar scene. Usually, she is called back by an immediate need for help when Rufus is in danger. This trip,

Dana winds up on a path with Rufus not far behind her, just walking. She and the reader are both confused until Dana says she “found Rufus at his desk in the library fondling a hand gun” (Butler 250). Dana wonders if this is the reason she returned, and it likely is. Rufus reveals that he did not sell the children away; he had them taken to his aunt’s in order to “scare” Alice into staying (251). Dana is rightfully angry at Rufus for this offense, and he lashes out less than he has previously in the novel. When she echoes what Alice must have thought – ““You were turning into something I didn’t want to stay near”” – it affects Rufus (251). Alice’s death leads Rufus to make choices he should have already made. For example, Dana finally gets Rufus to free his children. When he comes home with them, it surprises and delights Dana to hear Joe call Rufus ““Daddy”” (253).

Alice’s death much more strongly reveals the notion that Rufus confuses ownership with love. While his relationship with Alice is different from his relationship with Dana, Alice’s death leaves a void. Dana, as mentioned previously, strongly resembles Alice. Rufus has a conversation with her that reveals much more about his need for someone to understand him and fulfill his desires. He says, ““I used to have nightmares about you [...] I’d dream about you leaving me”” (Butler 254). Dana understands that Rufus likely means more than he is saying, but he explains, ““You leave, and sooner or later you come back. But in my nightmares, you leave without helping me. You walk away and leave me in trouble, hurting, maybe dying”” (255). Alice’s death puts into perspective the life Rufus has been living in contrast to the life Dana has been trying to show him. Rufus confuses his ability to own with his ability to love, and they become one and the same because there is security in knowing a black woman cannot just leave or fight back.

Dana possesses more freedom than Alice and her agency forces Rufus to face his own. Dana understands what she is facing, and she knows she can leave through whatever means are necessary. Alice could not leave and live in the literal or metaphorical sense. Linh U. Hua puts it this way: “The ability to deny Rufus this convergence of the symbolic and the material illuminates Dana’s greatest difference from Alice” (397). The only escape Alice had for herself when running away did not work was death. Dana just uses death differently by killing the source of the problem instead of ending her own suffering.

The most telling line that relates this to the reader comes after Rufus gets too close to Dana and begins almost mindlessly to refer to Dana and Alice as ““one woman”” (Butler 257). Dana gives the reader her inner thoughts as she tries to leave:

Abandonment. The one weapon Alice hadn’t had. Rufus didn’t seem to be afraid of dying. Now, in his grief, he seemed almost to want death. But he was afraid of dying alone, afraid of being deserted by the person he had depended on for so long. (257)

This moment, just before Rufus’s last crucial mistake, is the one moment where he is at his weakest. The fact that Dana calls it “abandonment” instead of anything else referring to an owner/slave relationship is recognition of the fact that, to Rufus, owning and loving were one and the same with Alice. He did not even fear her killing him, reasoning, ““Nothing else would matter. But if I lived, I would have her”” (257).

Rufus consistently humanizes Alice with these terms of love and endearment, even if he confuses love with possession. In some twisted way, Rufus understands that he needs Alice on a human level, and he enjoys her company more when she wants to be there. He loves her children as his own, even if it clashes with his antebellum ways. Rufus, the white problem and cause of



the wound, is humanizing the very person he is wounding. Alice becomes a three-dimensional figure through Rufus and Dana because of their relationships with her. Rufus, acting as the human cause of the problem, creates the same effect around Alice by steadily trying to overcome his objectification of her. While it does not entirely work, the progress is evident in his speech and actions. He does not forget Alice or write her off; he mourns her and contemplates killing himself. He frees her children at the request of Dana. Rufus reacts to a human death, not the loss of an object.

While Alice is not the sole focus of the novel, Butler includes her in a very critical fashion. Alice showcases the wound where it begins and why it continues throughout history to cause pain and a continuing memory of slavery. Nadine Fligel states that the wounds (in the same vein as Peterson's work) "don't heal over" (Fligel 232). She continues by saying:

Physical and emotional wounds are rhetorically indistinguishable. [...] A wound is no mere reminder of an injury but is that injury itself, which is remembered while it heals, which hurts while it heals (if it heals at all). Butler's time travel means that the wounds of slavery literally and figuratively have not healed over by 1976. (232)

While many scholars write about a similar idea in Butler's work, Alice ends up working as a representation of Fligel's idea. As Fligel has argued, Alice is not *just* a slave. She is a slave humanized in the past by both Dana's 1976 sensibilities and Rufus's inability to tell the difference between possession and love. Alice is a representative of an early breakdown between what slavery dehumanizes in the black population and what makes them just as human as the white population. The wound is represented in the way Alice is treated. Rufus tries but fails to claim Alice in love. He abuses and objectifies her until he causes her to resort to suicide.

The black population continues through history to feel that same weight of oppression both in memory and in the present, like a lingering wound that is regularly reopened. The white population feels it, as well, but in varying ways. The gap created by the historical dehumanization of African American slaves leaves a mutual pain behind. Alice's death is symbolic of this because it only ends her suffering. Her death, while freeing her, is foreboding to everyone else. For the slaves, this is almost an omen; there is no other escape unless it is a dire one written by their master. For Rufus (the white man), it leaves an emptiness and guilt behind that he tries desperately to fill. The pain of the memory prompts anger instead of healing, and people are still trying to comprehend it. Those wounds must be dealt with, accepted, and given time. While society in 1976 has come a long way from the slave era, the pain of that time and its social separation still exist. Though Dana and Kevin are happy together, their families are not. In their present and in the years beyond, separation by race continues to be an issue that causes pain. The wound has not healed; it is still an aching area of history that causes strong residual problems in the present because the right method to heal it has not been considered. Butler's use of Alice is representative of that pain. Before the past can be healed, it must be understood. People of all races must understand one another instead of distancing themselves from the painful issues separating them.

## CHAPTER 4

### DANA AND KEVIN

In a novel so focused on the past, it is easy to forget Kevin since he is important to the present. Though much of the scholarship on Butler's novel focuses on characters like Dana, Alice, and Rufus, little consideration is given to Kevin. Despite his less frequent appearances, Kevin is important to the reader's perception of the present and the way we understand how the wound of history is still relevant. Kevin is a white man of "today" in *Kindred*, and his ideals reflect those of the present and the past. He and Dana bridge the gap between black and white. Being married to one another presents problems for the couple, including family disagreements about their marriage. At the time, society was still hesitant about accepting interracial marriage and interactions. Even today, the "seamlessness" is less than perfect. Butler uses Kevin and Dana's relationship as an example of how the past still affects society. Since Kevin and Dana are able to experience the past in a real way, they grasp the complexity of both history and its effects where society relies solely on social and historical memory. Society cannot go to the past as Kevin and Dana do, so it must rely on written history and historical memory in order to make sense of it. This perpetuates the wound because the version of history that the present knows leaves out many details except for the residual pain of slavery and opposition.

One interesting thing that Butler does when presenting Kevin is to not reveal his race until a few chapters into the novel. In section one of "The Fall," the reader is finally told that Kevin is white – "He was an unusual-looking white man, his face young, almost unlined, but his hair completely gray and his eyes so pale as to be almost colorless" (Butler 54). This places an abrupt shift in the story since readers likely expected Kevin to be black. This delayed revelation calls into consideration the reader's preconceived ideas about Kevin. These assumptions are then

tested as Dana narrates his actions as she sees them. Kevin, while much different from Rufus, reacts in ways that have been shaped by his upbringing and society. His understanding of history is just as skewed as Dana's. S.E. Schiff argues that Kevin and Dana live in a state of "indifference" (112). For Schiff, "The blandness of their interracial relationship, its lack of meaningful exchange, is likewise indicative of the forgetfulness Dana must engage with in order to have a potentially meaningful relationship with him" (112). Schiff notes that this kind of "forgetting" is what society is doing on a larger scale around Kevin and Dana (112). Butler points these things out to the reader so that the connection to the past can be made and dealt with through Dana. Kevin, in many ways, reflects these actions. He does not see Dana with eyes that separate colors; he looks at Dana the way Butler intended for Kevin to be seen before revealing his race – as a human being.

The historical wound does not mean as much to Dana and Kevin as it does to the rest of the world. Critic Diana R. Paulin discusses in her article the fact that Kevin and Dana are an interracial couple living in a society with mixed views. She inspects their "isolation from family, friends and society" and brings up the fact that they both share the same interest in words and writing (178). To Paulin, this places them at the "fringe of society" (178). However, she also states that their relationship is a mixture of "romantic naiveté" and "the exclusion of the possibility of an acceptable sexual relationship" (178). This, to Paulin, is a "fantasy, enabling readers to suspend disbelief/skepticism" (179). Paulin says that this combination both avoids making Dana a stereotypical sexual figure and enforces "the transgressive nature of interracial desire" (179). By taking Paulin's observations into consideration, the reader can conclude that their relationship, while better than other relationships presented in the novel, is not ideal due to the pressure of social and racial issues that persist in 1976. Butler represents Kevin and Dana as

caring, even in their difficult moments. When he is present in Dana's narration, Kevin tries to protect Dana and understand the past that the two have been forced to live through. To disagree slightly with Paulin, Kevin and Dana are not a fantasy, but a reality that clashes with remaining historical notions in the present. Kevin and Dana, while they begin as people impervious to notions of the past, are characters that come face-to-face with it and must endure it in order to see the world and each other in a fully-realized way.

This humanizing aspect, seen at its height in interactions with Rufus and Alice, is present in Kevin through Dana's descriptions of him. Kevin is the white man of the present. He is sometimes idealistic and does not fully understand the past until he has lived it. His bond with Dana proves itself stronger than Rufus's relationship with Alice because of their mutual need for one another that attempts to work under the strain of racial issues and disparities in power between men and women. Kevin and Dana continue to stay with one another through these problems that have been passed through history to 1976. When Dana first returns home to him, Kevin is so concerned that he holds her too tightly, hurting Dana's already sore shoulders (Butler 15). When Dana tells him so, Kevin continues to try and help her in other ways – "We sat there together on the floor, me wrapped in the towel and Kevin with his arm around me calming me just by being there. After a while, I stopped shaking" (15). The second time she leaves and returns, Kevin does not get angry with her reactions to him; he tries to calm her and make sure she is still in one piece. The most important part of their conversation at this point is when Kevin asks her very seriously, "'Did he rape you?'" (45). Kevin's question can be read as either a concern about the idea of someone violating the woman who belongs to him or concern for Dana because he is protective of her. The text does not state specifically which. The immediacy of his

question, however, follows his concern for Dana's injuries and experiences, leading to a more emotional reading of his later question.

In contrast with Rufus's later confusion with love and possession, Kevin's actions are an example of love and concern in a present sense. While not entirely the same as the possessive traits Rufus displays, Kevin is possessive and protective of Dana because she is his wife. He does, at times, show characteristics that paint him similarly to Rufus, specifically in his actions and initial ideas. At the beginning of the novel, Dana describes Kevin in ways that make him seem aggressive, but in a playful manner. "He gave me a look that I knew wasn't as malevolent as it seemed. He had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant and angry whether he was or not. He used them to intimidate people. Strangers" (Butler 13). The moment before this description shows Kevin in a state of annoyance at having to help Dana put away books. This representation of him can be seen as historical white male characteristics, like possessiveness and a sense of superiority, making their way into his personality, albeit in a more subdued fashion.

The holdovers of white male privilege are also apparent in Kevin's misinterpretations of antebellum life and his actions toward Dana in some of the more intense situations they find themselves in. When she first returns home, Kevin holds her so tightly that he hurts her, and he demands to know what happened. While this echoes the later actions of Rufus who frequently acts harshly only to apologize later, Kevin separates himself from Rufus because he frequently acts out of a possessive and protective affection. While his actions are indeed harsh at times, Kevin's life is in as much turmoil as Dana's, and the past affects him differently as the novel progresses. Early on, he shifts between fear and concern, and both present themselves with either loving gentleness or terrified roughness. While the pain Dana experiences as a consequence of

his fear is not desirable, it must be noted that his actions only reflect Rufus's in that they hurt Dana. Both white men, whether through an act of possession or love, hurt her in some way. Rufus displays his desire for Alice through acts of possessiveness and white male superiority. Unlike Rufus, Kevin reacts in a possessive manner *because* he cares for Dana. His possessive nature does not stem from a need to own someone, but a need to keep someone he cares for safe. If Kevin hurts Dana, he instantly tries to alleviate the pain. Rufus intentionally causes harm in order to flex his power over Alice and keep her as his own. Kevin's possession continues from the past notions of male dominance, but has turned into something accompanying affection instead of physical desire and dehumanization.

One of the most complicated portrayals of Kevin in the novel is just after he and Dana return home from the past. For Dana, it is merely days. Kevin, however, is stuck for five years. They get home and things seem normal until the next day when Kevin cannot seem to figure out how to exist in the 1970s. His attitude is much different, and Dana begins to wonder if he is already tainted by the past too much to come back (194). Lisa Woolfork, when discussing Kevin's initial views of the past, states, "Stranded in the nineteenth century for five years, Kevin finds himself caught in the brutality of slaveholding ideology. By replacing Kevin's romantic notions of the past with grim reality, *Kindred* subverts the impulse to look nostalgically at the historical past" (23). Kevin's inability to write or feel at home is Butler's way of showing what knowing the true past can do to someone. The real, truly deep parts of the past that remain hidden from textbooks and memory have etched themselves into both Kevin's and Dana's minds. The present no longer seems real because the experience is so jarring. It affects the reader at the same time in the same way. Modern representations do not always reflect the way the past actually worked, and some of the exceedingly grisly details are omitted for the sake of the

audience. Kevin has been gone five years and comes home to find that nothing seems the same to him anymore. He sees everything through different eyes. The reader is forced to see how the past is still relevant to the present through Dana and Kevin. Their emotional distress becomes the reader's because they are the closest representation of the reader in the novel. The reader sees the worst through Kevin's eyes while seeing a mix of the good and bad through Dana's.

At first, Kevin takes no notice of the surroundings and only focuses on Dana. She pleads with him to come to bed with her, and tells the reader that "[h]e was so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known that he would, but it didn't matter. We were safe. He was home. I'd brought him back. That was enough" (Butler 190). This interaction between the two comes before Kevin's realization that he does not know his home anymore. He grows more and more violent as he tries to assimilate into 1976, but only acts out against his office materials. Dana, on the other hand, gets the "closed and ugly" expressions on his face (194). There is a separation at this point in the novel that makes Kevin see Dana as another outlier – something foreign. For several sentences, Dana and the reader see Kevin as changed because of the environment he lived in for five years. Dana tells him repeatedly that it takes time to get over that experience. As a representative of the white male in the present, Kevin displays the complexity of dealing with the past by immediately returning home after experiencing everything the antebellum South had to offer. When Dana says that he is moving too quickly, Kevin ponders, "I wonder how people just out of prison manage to readjust" (Butler 197). Kevin's experiences complicate his character, but only to add to his representation of the wound. Kevin begins without a full understanding of the past, and ends with a life-changing experience that reworks his view of the present. Like Rufus, these experiences harden him to a degree. The only thing that saves him is his return home to 1976.



To further compare and contrast Kevin and Rufus, the aspects of race and gender make themselves present even through Kevin. Because he is a foil to Rufus in some ways, it also stands to reason that he exists as his present day counterpart. Kevin's first misunderstandings about the past prove his ignorance about racial issues, and Dana must be the one to correct him. He sees the past through the eyes of one that cannot imagine the reality of it. History has been given to him in one light, but he becomes increasingly aware of it in its entirety later on. With this being one of Kevin's biggest shortcomings, it is one that he eventually comes to understand as the novel progresses. He and Dana both experience the South in a way that changes their perspectives in the present about the world and each other. Kevin redeems himself in that way by realizing the truth that no one else could reach.

When speaking of gender in *Kindred*, the first person to get any blame is Rufus. However, Kevin is also guilty of the same superiority that Rufus displays, but in more subtle and subdued ways. As noted, Kevin is often rough with Dana when he needs information from her. While this is less about power and more about fear, Kevin frequently causes Dana physical pain in attempting to help her. He becomes immediately gentler when Dana tells him that he is hurting her. Like Rufus, Kevin continues to repeat this process over the course of the novel. However, Kevin does not use this physical pain to threaten Dana and force her into submission the way Rufus does when he is angry. Kevin only truly gets angry around Dana when they return home together, and none of his violence is directed at her. Kevin is, on the other hand, a bit dominating as a male presence. When Dana first disappears, his way of speaking to her seems to be an effort to keep her calm. It is questionable whether or not he believes her the first time. Dana even says, "I don't blame you for humoring me" and then states that she "[gave] him a chance to deny it, but he didn't" (Butler 17). Until it happens again, Kevin appears skeptical and

rationalizes the situation instead of fully believing Dana's story. It is not until the second trip that he believes what he is seeing as she disappears.

Compared to Rufus, Kevin does exhibit some signs of lingering white male privilege over Dana in the moments they are together in the novel, but they are far less exaggerated than the times Rufus flexes his full power. Kevin does not try to physically overpower Dana, but he does try to verbally talk her down in cases where he believes she is overreacting, like the first trip to the South and back. Later on, he displays a need for control over situations that are getting out of hand. This can be seen as a normal reaction, but Kevin is almost always using it on or around Dana. When he arrives home from the past, he is confused and angry at everything. This includes Dana for seemingly no reason at all. Dana continuously reminds the reader that Kevin has spent five years in the antebellum South, so his state of mind has been altered in that time to fit in with the social climate. While Kevin still makes the switch back to 1976, the harshness of his tone and reactions to Dana clearly show signs of something more ominous underneath the anger. Dana even becomes worried that he has become like Tom Weylin (Butler 194). Each thing Dana attempts to suggest or clarify only angers him more, as if she should not be telling him anything. The possibility that the patriarchy in antebellum society affected Kevin's thinking is definitely there, but Butler does not state it outright. Dana and the reader receive glimpses of this possible change only through Dana's observations of Kevin's attempts to return home mentally. Of his flaws, Kevin is prone to moments of male dominance when situations are out of his control, but he makes up for this by learning from the situations he lives through, unlike Rufus who continuously repeats his mistakes even after apologizing.

Kevin is also the opposite of Rufus in very obvious ways. The foil is intentional in order to more fully flesh out Rufus's character. Dana sometimes places Rufus in contrast with Kevin in

order to judge his actions. After Dana's second trip and the discussion on how she can protect herself, Dana tells Kevin, "I need you here to come home to. I've already learned that" (Butler 51). In answer, Kevin tells her, "Just keep coming home [...] I need you here too" (51). Kevin uses terms like "need" to express his love for Dana instead of the terms of desire and ownership that Rufus uses to refer to Alice. Rufus often expresses his notions of love by stating that Alice is his, referencing both his ownership of her and his forceful nature. Though Rufus tells Dana that he needs her and Alice, the meaning is very different from Kevin's. While love can be defined as an attraction to someone physically and emotionally, the intentions behind those emotions are what count. Kevin places Dana before anything else going on in the novel. He listens to her and has conversations with her to work things out. Rufus, on the other hand, holds conversations until something does not go his way. At that point, he resorts to indirect force or underhanded schemes, like hiding Dana's letters.

As previously stated, Kevin begins the novel with limited knowledge of the slave era. When he travels to the antebellum South with Dana, he has to confront his own ignorance and preconceived ideas about race and the history of slavery. At first, Kevin does not grasp the gravity of the situation. He finds it somewhat fascinating, like a child reading a history book. There is still a separation present in Kevin when they arrive. Even though Kevin knows it is the slave era, he still reacts negatively to Rufus's exclamation that "Niggers can't marry white people" (Butler 60). Despite the fact that Dana and Kevin are both out of their time, Kevin represents a very strong contradiction to the past. His only trip there is enough to show him how little he really knows about the slave era. Dana is well aware of Kevin's inability to fit into this world and says, "The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility" (77). But Kevin remains ever optimistic at the start of his trip with

Dana. He understands the show they must put on to stay together, but Kevin also expresses his distaste for the time itself when he says, ““I hate to think of you playing the part of a slave at all”” (79). Even if Kevin is like the rest of modern society and knows nothing more than what he is given about history, he still understands that slaves did not have a good life compared to white men. Dana is black and a woman, which makes her twice as likely to get into danger. Kevin is protective of Dana, and he shows it even at the risk of revealing himself as a white man of the future instead of a white man of the past.

Many scholars point to one major conversation between Kevin and Dana to emphasize the point that Kevin looks at the past superficially; the scene where the two are watching the slave children playing a fake auction is one of the most telling moments for Kevin. Schiff states that “Kevin is too inclined to take in the material presented him as a passive receptor, to interpret with the luxury of a privileged citizen that which is represented before him according to a normative context” (128). Stella Setka continues that line of thought by saying Kevin is “detached” while Dana “is able to make broader connections among different minority subjectivities as they relate to the dominant white power structure” when Kevin mentions going West (113). The conversation, however, becomes deeper. Kevin attempts to rationalize their surroundings, which progressively irritates Dana. He starts by saying, “[...] this place isn’t what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage ...” (Butler 100). But Dana counters his argument with the negative side:

“... no decent housing” I cut in. “Dirt floors to sleep on, food so inadequate they’d all be sick if they didn’t keep gardens in what’s supposed to be their leisure time and steal from the cookhouse when Sarah lets them. And no rights and the

possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason – or no reason. Kevin, you don't have to beat people to treat them brutally.” (100)

This answer from Dana holds Kevin's attention, and he tries to apologize by saying he is not ““minimizing”” the past's events, but Dana tells him plainly that he is, even if it is unintentional (100). Butler is making a point with Kevin and Dana in this section by highlighting the way people view historical atrocities. If nobody is dying or being beaten, things seem lighter. Dana is used to show that the beatings and deaths were only part of the problem. Dying was not the only thing to fear as a slave. Life was a task every single day.

After Dana has been forced back to the present without Kevin, the reader is treated to another conversation between the two that reflects the views of the 1970s. Dana and Kevin discuss marriage and their families' reactions, and it indicates that race relations are still in a state of unrest, even after the changes that have occurred before 1976. Kevin's sister does not want Dana in their family, even though Kevin says it is mostly due to her husband's influence (Butler 110). The white against black comparison is almost expected here, but Dana surprises the reader with her family's response. She first says, ““I think my aunt accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light”” (111). Dana's aunt considers her too dark from what Dana tells Kevin. He is quiet as Dana continues – ““You see? I told you they were old. She doesn't care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks. Figure that out.”” Dana even says her uncle is taking it as a ““rejection”” of him (111). Dana and Kevin both understand that their marriage will drive their families away, since each family does not see things the way Kevin and Dana do. In a broader sense, society may have made changes, but the people did not readily alter their minds overnight. It is very easy to create rifts between people,

but it is difficult to simply force them back together again when resentment and mistrust are factors.

Kevin and Dana endure what nobody ever really could by going back to the past to see slavery as it was. In the end, they are both left emotionally and physically scarred by the experience. During their trip to find answers in the present, Dana and Kevin attempt to decipher the information they gathered and what it means. They cannot find much in the way of documentation. When Dana asks Kevin why they are looking, Kevin answers, ““You probably needed to come for the same reason I did. [...] To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane”” (Butler 264). Kevin ends the book with a statement that neatly ties together what critics have said about Butler’s novel: ““And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way”” (264). Kevin is talking about sanity, in this case, but the meaning is deeper. Going back to Parham’s article, her statement about identifying with both the victim and the oppressor rings loudly here (1317). She makes a case for understanding both the victim’s plight and the oppressor’s being as a whole. Identifying is the first step to understanding where things have gone wrong, and Parham’s ideas reach a finality in Kevin’s statement. Dana killed not only Rufus, but the oppressor. The historical cause of the wound is quieted, at least in Dana’s personal history. This does not mean that the victory is celebrated. Though the past has caused trouble for everyone, Dana and Kevin have seen the complex reasons for the problem. Death does not release Rufus from his wrongdoings, but it creates a different type of victory. Killing Rufus ends the power he has to call her to him, but does not erase her experiences there. To kill the past, one has to understand what they are fighting and why. There is a difference between what Dana calls “self-defense” and murder. Killing him hurts, just as coming to terms with the past hurts. The wound cannot be healed

instantly, as Kevin has come to realize. The offending party must be taken care of before it has any hope of healing. Dana and Kevin effectively shut the book on the problem because they have the experience and understanding that allows them to do so. They understand how they got where they are, and they accept it in order to move forward.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Peterson states in her first chapter that “facts are not enough to produce ‘real’ history” (17). Realistic representations of the past do not come from historical representations alone; facts reduce history to statistics. She states that “the narrative must compel the reader to want to investigate further, to make the facts worth knowing” (17). Written history must be supported by stories of the past that appeal to the heart and the mind. *Kindred* directs the reader’s attention to the deeper issues surrounding Dana in the past and present. Butler elevates the past to a personal level and brings into perspective the social and emotional aspects of the antebellum South. The action of creating both relatable black and white characters in a novel about slavery is a shift from what many readers would come to expect. The characters are humanized to the point of having major flaws and strengths no matter if they are black or white.

Dana’s travels to the past begin on her birthday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, and they end on July 4<sup>th</sup>, the nation’s bicentennial. These two beginnings are symbolically tied to the understanding of history and how it affects the people of the present. While the reader can make connections to Dana personally through her experiences in the past, the overall understanding of the events that occur affect the reader and the nation as a whole. Dana’s understanding of the past and its implications in her life echo out to the nation’s relationship with the past and its identity because of the events that have occurred. The problem of distancing oneself from aspects of the past that are uncomfortable or even traumatic causes those events to become unimportant. Without every facet of history, the deeds done to improve upon various mistakes become all but meaningless; progress depends on history to indicate what must be overcome. This does not mean that the past has to be seen as a bright and shining time, but it implies a different relationship with the



nation's beginnings and more complex understanding of what has passed in order for citizens to live among themselves in freedom and equality.

The use of the bicentennial informs the reader that the nation is 200 years old and still working toward racial equality. Dana travels to her family's past and comes to an understanding about herself because of that historical knowledge and firsthand experience. On a larger scale, the nation can learn from its past in order to cope with the collective memory of trauma and hardships that history bring. *Kindred* asks every reader to acknowledge the past as their past with nothing left out. The past, as a whole, is the history of a person and a nation, not just the pieces picked out for written documentation or stories. For the novel to be set in 1976 displays the potential for something better during a time of unease and unrest, mirroring the events of the slave era when fear was only combatted with the hope that something would change.

The characters of Butler's novel also bring the reader to an understanding of themselves and how they think. Dana and Kevin become representatives of the reader through the novel. The two begin the story as mostly unaware of the deep trauma of the past. What they know is what they were given in historical texts and teachings. When they are scarred, the reader is there to feel it emotionally. *Kindred* seeks to bring the past to the forefront as more than words by detailing the daily lives of slaves and their white owners. The novel challenges the reader to think about the stereotypical representations of slavery and what they do to the average perception of the past. For example, at times Rufus is a likeable white slave owner. History and society alike would likely challenge this thought because relating to him would be like relating to the villain in the story. Butler does not present him as a villain, but as a man shaped by the world around him. The way the characters are portrayed challenges readers to consider them as human

beings instead of stereotypes. *Kindred* manages to emotionally tie readers to both the past and present.

Butler's novel may appear to be only about the past, but it also points out the issues with the present. Dana and Kevin live just after the Civil Rights movement, and America still feels the effects of attempting to integrate races into one society. Kevin is white, but he does not care if Dana is black or not. Dana, likewise, feels the same about Kevin. However, they find out that even family bonds are easily broken because of an adherence to past shortcomings. Kevin's sister will have nothing to do with them, and Dana's family distance themselves because Kevin is white. The racial boundaries exist for whites and blacks. Butler brings this across in the novel by showing both Dana and Kevin's relationship and the destructive relationship between Rufus and Alice. Rufus expresses many times to Dana that his love for Alice exists on an emotional level, albeit a broken one. His mind tries to break out of the social norms of his time, but he cannot defy it because it is so deeply a part of his understanding of slaves. In the present, this understanding, while it has mellowed over time, still exists in society. Stereotypes exist even in today's society that separate skin colors and ethnicities. By portraying characters like Rufus in the antebellum South, Butler's novel is able to parallel present society on a basic level.

The historical wound carries through history into the present because of the pain caused by that history. Events that cause damage on this scale place a stigma on the past that does not easily go away. The point of Peterson's work and Butler's novel is not to erase the past, but to learn from it. The past shapes the people of the present into who they are. This does not mean the actions of the people in the past define those of the people in the present. Dana and Kevin learn from the past as they experience it and make difficult choices because they must. They know

they cannot change it themselves, but they can use the experience to change their view of life and how they live it.

The wound, as it stands at the end of the novel, is not something that can ever be fully healed in the sense that it can be made to disappear. Rather, it can be dealt with and the pain eased. Like any wound, the scars will still be visible, but the act of overcoming the obstacle that put it there can create unity among those that still hold on to the pain. Dana and Kevin come to an understanding of the past that shapes their future. Ultimately, they understand the reasons why race is still an issue in their time, but they also know some of what must be done in order to begin healing.

Humanizing the characters of *Kindred* makes the past even more complex and important to the reader because there is no set morality there. The situations Dana is forced to live through are set in moral gray areas that cannot easily be solved in one way or another. Her unwillingness to kill Rufus, at first, is proof of that. Dana cannot kill him in the beginning because she has to see him through to his adulthood. After that, she begins to understand Rufus as a human being. She connects with him personally, as Butler wants the reader to do. By killing Rufus, Dana takes back her life and her future while sacrificing her arm; the loss of Dana's arm serves as a symbol of the inability to escape the trauma of the past without being hurt. For Dana, this is emotional and physical. However, the reader acknowledges this as a symbol of the emotional connections made with the past and the situations many people were placed in because of traumatic events like slavery. Dana keeps the past from defining her with trauma, even if it means facing the emotional and physical pain of knowing the people and events of that past personally.

The human aspect of the past brings the reader into a new understanding of history. The historical wound was created by people – those possibly related to the ones in the present – and

must be overcome by people. In the present, slavery is gone, but issues between races are still present, and the wound makes itself known through this kind of discord. Only by understanding what caused the wound can the people of the present hope to obtain any kind of peace with the past. Dana and Kevin reconcile with what happened in order to move on. They know they cannot change everything themselves, but they can be a start. *Kindred* represents the wound at its beginning and as it is many years later so that readers can come to understand why the issue of race is still a cultural difficulty. The wound cannot be fully healed because that would require erasing it from memory. *Kindred* is another example of the minority writing discussed in Peterson's book; the novel seeks to "make the facts worth knowing" by bringing the past down to the human level (Peterson 17). Without the human element and the understanding that history cannot be changed, the past will continue to exist in a two-dimensional space without any personal and emotional connections (Woolfork 25). The pain itself will be the only thing that stands out. Butler and many other minority writers seek to give audiences the complex human issues of history in order to create the possibility of a future that allows them to move past the historical wound.

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