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# Back to the Future: Taking a Trip Back in Order to Move Forward in Octavia Butler's Kindred

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Back to the Future:  
Taking a Trip Back in Order to Move Forward  
in Octavia Butler's Kindred

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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## Introduction

Although Octavia Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred* is often classified as science fiction, Butler says, "*Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There's no science in *Kindred*" (qtd. in Kenan 495). The central character of the novel is Dana, an African American woman living in Los Angeles, California, in 1976. Throughout the novel, Dana is several times transported back to pre-Civil War Maryland, and Butler indeed offers "no science" to explain the mechanism for these episodes of time travel. Readers know only that the antebellum South is dangerous for her, but she arrives there each time to save the life of a young white named Rufus Weylin, whose survival, at least for a time, is necessary for Dana's own. Throughout the novel Dana begins to realize the effects of other cultural beliefs. Additionally, she realizes what they do to people, or relationships, that are exposed to these ideas for long periods of time.

When Dana first travels to 1815 Maryland, she does not know anything other than there is a boy drowning and his name is Rufus. She quickly jumps into action and saves the boy, only to be attacked by the boy's parents. It is not until the second trip back to Maryland that Dana realizes Rufus's survival is crucial to her survival as well.

Prior to time traveling, Dana lives in Los Angeles in 1976—almost 100 years after reconstruction. This greatly influences the way Dana makes connections with people in her era. In fact, Dana's husband, Kevin, is a Caucasian man. Although societal taboos on interracial relationships still exist in the 1970s, they are much less harsh than those in the American nineteenth century. The 1800s, or Rufus's time, are greatly defined by slavery, slavery of

African Americans by Caucasians. Therefore this defines the way Rufus and Dana act toward each other throughout the novel. In Dana and Rufus's first few encounters, Dana starts to figure out how she should speak to Rufus when people are around. If she does not speak to him in the "proper" way she could be punished for disrespect.

On Dana's third time traveling back to Maryland she accidentally brings Kevin with her, when he grabs her arm as she is about to warp back. Since the 1800s and the 1970s are very different time periods, Kevin and Dana must lie about what their relationship in order to not be ridiculed violently attack, physically or verbally, by other people, black or white. Dana then poses as Kevin's slave because it would be unheard of in this time for a white man to have married a black woman. Dana's relationship with Kevin makes other slaves feel as though she is a traitor of her people and that she cannot always be trusted. This third trip to the Weylin plantation extends to the longest for Dana; it is not until she is whipped for teaching an African American slave boy to read that she goes home, without Kevin.

Dana returns home and tends to her newly created wounds. She remains in the current time for almost eight days before finally returning to Maryland. Each day during this separation, she worries about what the time period will do to Kevin since the amount of time that passes between visits is not always equal. For example, this trip, Dana is home for eight days until returning to a world in which almost five years have passed. Dana knows that there is a great chance that the Kevin she left will not be the same Kevin she returns to, since even she finds herself accepting slavery while she is there.

Dana returns to find Rufus being severely beaten by a slave named Isaac. She learns that Rufus has raped Isaac's wife Alice, a local black woman, initially free by birth, for whom Rufus has had progressively increasing feelings. Rufus does not take responsibility for raping Alice,

but instead says that it is because of the actions of everyone else that he had to do it.

Additionally, Rufus says that if Alice had only loved him he would not have had to force her to have sex with him. A short while later, Dana learns that Kevin has left the plantation to go north. Unfortunately though, she does not know when he will return since the only form of communication during this time is by letter.

Alice and Isaac then decide to run off because they fear the consequences for the fight they have just gotten into with Rufus. Later they are caught and severely beaten and, in Isaac's case, mutilated. Rufus then goes and buys Alice since she is being sold at the slave market for escaping. Rufus brings her back, has Dana tend to her every need, and hopes that she will love him after that. Dana spends a great deal of time caring for Alice and nursing her back to health, but Alice would rather die without Isaac than live with or love Rufus. This angers Rufus greatly because he believes that after all he has done to save her, she should love him.

After a large amount of resisting, Alice finally gives in to Rufus's love for her. Dana finds out that Rufus never mailed the letters that she wrote to Kevin, announcing that she had returned. It was Tom Weylin, Rufus's father, who finally wrote to Kevin. He believed it was best for Rufus's emotions that Dana be back with her husband. Not long after that Kevin finally returns to the Weylin's plantation, and Dana instantly wants to leave because she feels Rufus has betrayed her. With Rufus on the verges of shooting her, Dana and Kevin are returned to their home in Los Angeles only to find that it does not feel like home at all, since they have been "living" on the plantation for as long as they have.

After being home for almost fifteen days, Dana is once again, and for the last time, called back to Maryland. When she returns she finds that Alice has hung herself because Rufus lied to her and told her that he sold their two children. Rufus then starts to transfer his feeling for Alice

to Dana, drawing similarities between the two. In the end, when Dana is returning to the attic where all slaves sleep, Rufus follows her and tries to rape her, as he had once raped Alice. Dana stabs him twice and is instantly warped back to her time.

A recounting of actual slavery in Maryland can be found in Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845). Although his father was probably his mother's white master, Douglass was born a slave because his mother was African American and a slave. The law of the South stated that no matter what ethnicity the father was, if the mother was a slave, the baby was then a slave. Douglass was conditioned to be unaffected by the absence or loss of family. At a very young age, he was taken from his mother and raised with the mentality of a slave. Douglass says, "It is as common custom, in the part of Maryland I ran away from, to part children from their mother at a very early age. . . . For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (1-2).

Not only did slave owners hold the ability to rip apart families, they also had the ability to punish their slaves in any way they saw fit, even if that meant killing them. Since African Americans were not seen as human, slaveholders did not believe, superficially, that any methods of punishment chosen could be inhumane. In his preface to Frederick Douglass's narrative, William Lloyd Garrison writes about the laws suppressing the punishment of slaves: "Let it never be forgotten, that no slaveholder or overseer can be convicted of any outrage perpetrated on the person of a slave, however diabolical it may be, on the testimony of colored witnesses, whether bond or free" (qtd. in Douglass xiii).

Contrary to popular belief, slaves were not the only ones affected by aspects of slavery. Slavery affected just about everyone involved. While slaves were the ones who got the brute

force of it, owners as well became hardened from slavery. In Frederick Douglass's narrative he comments on the change he experiences in his female owner when he says, "Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" (Douglass 22). This goes to show that even though many believe African Americans were the only ones affected by slavery, it is in fact both owner and slave that were affected by the process. While owners were not physically always affected by slavery, their moral self was suppressed and changed.

Slavery is something that cannot be taken lightly. Even Butler says no matter how harsh the slavery in her novel is, it does not compare to how gruesome actual slavery was: "As a matter of fact, one of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative... was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a some-what cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it" (qtd. in Kenan 497). Octavia Butler knew that if she presented slavery directly and in a way that called people, most likely white males, that there would not be an audience for the novel. Instead she had to present slavery as something society shaped, rather than a specific group of individuals. An analysis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* reveals that societal expectations alter the dynamics of such interracial relationships as those between Dana and Kevin, Dana and Rufus, and Rufus and Alice, determining their success or failure without regard to the foundations upon which these relationships were initially built.

### **Dana & Kevin: Part One**

Throughout the novel, readers witness many changes to Dana and Kevin's relationship. In the opening chapter, readers witness a relationship that is distant and independent. In "The River," when Dana makes her first trip to Maryland, she disappears suddenly from her Los Angeles apartment only to reappear seconds later on the other side of the room. Upon her return, Kevin immediately begins questioning her to find out what happened, even after Dana seems to want a minute to recuperate from what she has just experienced. Kevin is demanding and forceful with her, ultimately appearing as though he is entitled to know what happened to her. Due to the abrasive natures of the two, the reader gets the feeling that the relationship is extremely superficial and that beneath their happy fronts there may in fact be other issues.

At no point through the first few sections of the novel does Butler ever reveal the ethnicity of Kevin. She points out several times that Dana is African American but never says anything regarding Kevin. This causes readers to stray from believing, immediately, that all tensions are due to a differing ethnicity. Later, however, when Butler reveals that Dana and Kevin are of differing ethnicities, this does play a major role in Dana and Kevin's plans to get married and the associations with their families. Both families disapprove of the marriage, almost solely based on the fact that they are not of the same ethnicity. Dana's aunt tells her that she accepts their marriage "because any children . . . will be light. She doesn't care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks" (Butler 111). This viewpoint, however, greatly contradicts that of Dana's uncle and Kevin's family. These viewpoints are of absolute refusal. Dana says that her uncle has "'sort' of taken this personally. . . . He wants me to marry someone like him—someone who looks like him. A black man" (Butler 111). Similarly, Kevin's sister replies with, "That she didn't want to meet you, wouldn't have you in her house—or me either if I married you" (Butler 110). Kevin is dumfounded by her response because she once



was not like that. Similarly to societal influences, Kevin believes his brother-in-law has influenced his sister. In fact, he says:

He shook his head. “The thing is, there’s no reason for her to react this way. She didn’t even believe the garbage she was handing me—or didn’t used to. It’s as though she was quoting someone else. Her husband, probably. Pompous little bastard. I used to try to like him for her sake.”

“Her husband is prejudice?”

“Her husband would have made a good Nazi. She used to joke about it—though never when he could hear.” (Bulter 110)

In this time, Dana and Kevin can just walk away from their families’ beliefs and values and not directly have any problems. After they get turned down by their families, the two run off to Las Vegas and get married anyway.

In the beginning of Dana and Kevin’s relationship, the two appeared very flirtatious and playful. They seemed crazy about each other. They were both just starting out their careers as authors, Kevin further along than Dana. They knew a career in writing would not be easy and, therefore, until they could get established would have to continue to work other jobs. Dana says that when they first met, they both had empty voids that needed to be filled, Kevin more than Dana. From what the characters say, the reader infers that the reason the two have empty voids is due to the facts that both have lost their parents at an early age. The two quickly take to each other and begin to fall in love. Kevin even goes as far as to immediately care for Dana, through buying her lunch when she cannot afford it because he is worried about her not eating.

Not only do Dana and Kevin experience resistance from their families but they also experience judgment from the societal values surrounding their culture. At this point in the

1970s, the treatment of African Americans had progressed a great deal from the ways they had been many years before, especially in Dana's home state of California, but they still had a ways to go before being considered completely equal by most. In the beginning of their relationship, a woman tells Dana, "with typical slave-market candor," that she and Kevin are "'the weirdest-looking couple,'" to which Dana responds, "not too gently, that she hadn't seen much, and that it was none of her business anyway" (Butler 57). This shows that though the degree to which people object to interracial relationships has decreased, there still is a disliking of them. Even though the woman from Dana's work only refers to Dana and Kevin as "weird," Dana takes it to mean more than that, more like an objection to their relationship, which is something she will not tolerate.

Though the reader does not follow Dana and Kevin from first meeting to current life, it can be seen that something is different. Partially, this can be contributed to the different life experiences each has had. For Dana, growing up has involved being constantly exposed to the prejudices against African Americans. Peggy Pascoe comments on how interracial or miscegenation relationships still are looked down upon: "The 1948 decision in the *Perez* case was remarkable for many reasons. It marked the first time since Reconstruction that a state court had declared a state miscegenation law unconstitutional" (Pascoe 63). A miscegenation law, as defined by Pascoe, is a law that "prohibited marriages between 'persons of Caucasian blood, or their descendants' and 'negroes, Mongolians or Indians, and their descendants'" (Pascoe 44). This goes to show that even from the day she was born, in 1950, there was still a great debate going around interracial relationships. Many Caucasian people, such as Kevin, believe that with the end of slavery so ended the extreme prejudices African American's experienced.

Dana grew up in a world that was, to a much less extent, still plagued by the same problems as the world during the slavery era. Though there are not people owning other people, African Americans in the 1950s and up to the 1970s still do not have all the privileges that white Americans do. Kevin grew up in a culture that was extremely different than that of Dana's. His world was one of ignorance and supremacy.

In Kevin's world, unlike Dana's, he is not exposed to or even aware of some of the difficulties experienced by other ethnicities. As a white male, Kevin is in the majority and part of the power structure. Throughout most of history, and up to current time, white males have been the ones who make laws and are the leaders. This is significant for other ethnicities just as much as it is for Caucasians. With Caucasians being the majority ethnicity, they do not see the broader implications of the choices they make. For them there is an absence of perspective; they do not often see the repercussions. Instead they have a myopic view of their laws and governing. Therefore, when laws and decisions are made, they are usually made in favor of the Caucasian ethnicity and the repercussions are not felt.

This is crucial and evident in the ways that Kevin and Dana interact. Several times, Kevin asks Dana to do something for him and Dana will reply by telling him no. When she does this, Kevin gets extremely angry with her and does not understand why she will not just give in and do it. Blinded by white privilege, Kevin is unaware of the implications of what he asks Dana to do, the association of these requests as interpreted through feelings about slavery.

### **Dana & Rufus: Part One**

From the opening chapter to the closing scene, Dana's curious and unstable relationship with Rufus Weylin is the novel's primary focus. Prior to Dana's travelling back in time,

everything she knows about her ancestry comes from a handed-down bible with names and details scribbled in it, the first being “Hagar Weylin, born in 1831” (28). Dana does not know who Hagar’s parents are or anything else about her family other than what she can read as the family tree in the bible.. Hers being the first name listed. And she had given her parents’ names as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something Weylin” (28).

The first few time that Dana is called back to rescue Rufus, she does not realize who he is in relation to her. She eventually realizes, however, that there is a reason she is chosen to save Rufus each time he gets into trouble and that it is simply to preserve her lineage and insure her own eventual birth. This concept remains in Dana’s mind from the time she realizes it to the end of the novel. No matter what Rufus does, Dana has to remember that her survival depends on his, and therefore she must help him until Hagar is born.

In the beginning Dana and Rufus’s relationship is loving. Upon Dana’s first arrival back in time, she rescues Rufus from drowning. In Rufus’s time, modern medical techniques such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation, or CPR, have not been discovered, but for Dana they have. Therefore, when Dana pulls Rufus out of the river and performs CPR, Rufus’s parents do not understand and believe Dana to be a guardian angel. Rufus tells Dana about the biblical implications of this experience when he says, “Where Elisha breathed into the dead boy’s mouth, and the boy came back to life. Mama said she tried to stop you when she saw you doing that to me because you were just some nigger she had never seen before. Then she remembered Second Kings” (Butler 24). Not only does this occurrence show Dana’s ability to strongly care for Rufus, but it also shows, reversely, how even in a circumstance of emergency, people of these past times see color before anything.

During the 1800s, a person's ethnicity was the primary determinant of status. Therefore even though Dana saved Rufus's life, Margaret, Rufus's mother, still sees her as a black woman and cannot, initially, comprehend her as anything else. This is best summarized by Loichot when he says, "By inserting into the past a medical technique from the future, Dana succeeds not only in giving birth to her ancestor, and by the same token in securing her own future birth, but also in escaping, albeit for a short time, her immediate violent categorizing and settling in the established structure of slavery: 'just some nigger'" (44). No matter the task or, in the Weylins' time, the miracle that Dana preforms, her actions will still not erase the fact that she is still an African American.

Even though Dana comes from a more progressive state in the 1970s, this is not a reaction that is new to her; the only thing different is that in the 1800s people are more vocal and upfront about their prejudices. During her second trip to save Rufus, Dana tries to explain to him why he should refer to African American's in ways other than what he knows:

I stared at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you mad?"

"Your mother always call black people niggers, Rufe?"

"Sure, except when she has company. Why not?"

His air of innocent questioning confused me. Either he really didn't know what he was saying, or he had a career waiting in Hollywood. Whichever it was, he wasn't going to go on saying it to me.

"I'm a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that's it."

"But . . ."

“Look, I helped you. I put the fire out, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“All right then, you do me the courtesy of calling me what I want to be called.”

He just stared at me. (Butler 25)

Dana believes that she can “train” or change the way Rufus thinks about African Americans. Since Dana met Rufus at such a young age, she believes that with enough correction and integration he will not grow up to be like the rest of his family. Society influences what people become by defining what is right and wrong. Unless individuals make a conscious effort to change the way they are and will be shaped, society will play a major role in what they become. Dana believes that if she does not intervene Rufus will begin to become his father, a man who is strongly rooted in slavery. Additionally, Dana believes that she is the sole one responsible for Rufus’s future, essentially playing Rufus’s mother.

With each trip that Dana takes back in time, she begins to feel more and more accepting of the way she is being treated. Dana even says at one point, “I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery” (Butler 101). This just shows how if exposed to a way of life for long enough, regardless of right or wrong, people will eventually get used to it.

The second most important concept that can be seen in the previously mentioned conversation is that Dana believes Rufus’s parents are not doing a good job raising him. Dana believes that without her help, Rufus will fall victim to society and be wasted away. Dana therefore feels that she will take on the role as Rufus’s acting mother. During her early responses to his call, Dana cares for Rufus as if he is her own child. She has never had any children of her own and therefore when Rufus is in need of her assistance she takes to it with no

problem. Loichot provides a possible explanation for Dana's feelings when he says, "Reciprocally, from Rufus's perspective, the hole in the water acts as Dana's womb. It is through that hole in the river that Dana's life comes to life for him" (47). This could explain why immediately after rescuing Rufus from drowning in the river, she takes to him and gets protective over him. From the first two trips Dana takes back to 1800 Maryland, she feels more and more attached to Rufus.

On Dana's third trip to the plantation she finds that Rufus has fallen out of a tree and has broken his arm. Dana then plays mother for Rufus as she provides and takes action to help heal him. Additionally, being her third trip back in time, she begins to bring things with her that may be of assistance to her and, ultimately, Rufus. Due to the intensive conditions Dana has already experienced, she decides that it is important that she bring back medicines with her, and for Rufus, it is a good thing she did. After Rufus breaks his arm, he is in severe pain and runs the risk of developing an infection. Dana sees this as an opportunity to help Rufus and care for him, like a mother would. This is concretized even more after Dana sees the way Rufus's mother, Margaret, reacts to his falling out of the tree.

Shortly after Dana gets Rufus back to the house after he has fallen out of the tree, Margaret begins to panic and want to simply comfort Rufus, rather than alleviate the reason he is in pain. Margaret, however, does not know the anything about the proper ways to help Rufus. Dana, on the other hand, does, whether this be from the "futuristic" medicine she possesses or the calm nature she handles situations with. Rufus wants a mother who is calm, caring, and loving to him. While Margaret can offer these to some degree, she is hyperemotional and overreactive. This leads Rufus to feel annoyed by the emotion she shows him and to push her

away. This separation causes her to resent Dana. Rufus wants Dana's care instead of his mother's. Dana sees this and does not hesitate to take right to it.

In addition, Dana believes that Rufus's parents are lacking in many ways. She feels that they are bad for him and will always be so. Dana even tells Kevin, "I hope Rufus has used all his bad luck in getting the set of parents he's stuck with" (78). Butler never says that Rufus's parents have done anything to qualify them as "bad parents," but Dana believes them to be bad. She believes they are improper parents because they raise Rufus in a way that she does not agree with. Tom Weylin is a traditional white, 1800s plantation owner, something Dana does not want Rufus becoming. Additionally, Margaret is a hyperemotional mother, who Dana thinks is irrational and overreacts in situations. When Rufus falls out of the tree, Margaret rushes to Rufus's side and wants to baby him. Dana believes that this is a ridiculous move and that she should not be around Rufus while he is hurting. Dana tells readers about how the situation looked when she describes Margaret's response to the accident:

"My poor baby," she murmured, cradling his head in her hands. "Seems like everything happens to you, doesn't it? A broken leg!" She looked close to tears. And there was Rufus, swung from his father's indifference to his mother's sugary concern. I wondered whether he was too used to the contrast to find it dizzying. (Butler 69)

Through all the babying Margaret does, Rufus seems to not even notice that she is there. In fact, following Margaret's hasty rush to Rufus's side, Rufus asks her to get him some water so he can be alone with Dana, even though Dana is the one considered to be the servant.

Rufus is drawn to Dana more than anyone else in the house, including his mother. He finds comfort in her. Since Dana at this time is much older than Rufus, it is easy for her to take



to him as a mother would take to her child, especially since Dana knows he is the key to her survival. If she cannot protect his life, then she cannot protect or save herself either. With each trip that Dana goes back, she watches as the Rufus she knew from the previous trip has changed, and with this Dana believes that maybe she can influence or stop him from becoming like his father or every other white man:

I thought of Rufus and his father, of Rufus becoming his father. It would happen some day in at least one way. Someday Rufus would own the plantation. Someday, he would be the slaveholder, responsible in his own right for what happened to the people who lived in those half-hidden cabins. The boy was literally growing up as I watched—growing up because I watched and because I helped to keep him safe. I was the worst possible guardian for him—a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children. . . . But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would keep both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice.

(Butler 68)

This quote additionally shows that not only does Dana realize that Rufus is growing up, and doing so to be like his father, but also that as he does grow up his and her relationship will change.

Slowly, over time, Dana and Rufus's relationship moves from the mother/son to a needs-based relationship. Originally on her first arrival, Dana takes to Rufus as if she is his caregiver or guardian. She must protect him and keep him alive at whatever costs. As time passes,

however, and Rufus is exposed more to the ways of the South, their relationship evolves to a purely needs-based relationship. In a conversation between Kevin and Dana, Dana tells him what she *needs* to do in order to survive future trips: “. . . I’ll have a better chance of surviving if I stay here now and work on the insurance we talked about. Rufus. He’ll probably be old enough to have some authority when I come again. Old enough to help me” (Butler 82-83). Dana believes that while she cannot shield him from the society’s beliefs, she can insure that he does not treat the slaves the same way other plantation owners, such as his father, Tom, does. If Dana continues to be a mother to Rufus, then he, like most children, will stop listening to her advice and in some cases may do the opposite.

Dana knows Rufus will trust her words more if she is a friend to him rather than a mother. Additionally, she knows that she cannot necessarily always be there to guide him; therefore, she needs to instill in him as many values of hers as she can. Dana needs him to take these values as well because without him taking them she will not have anyone to protect her on each one of her trips. Dana plans to show him how an African American is treated in the 1970s in hopes that he will do the same to not only her but also the other African Americans on the plantation, including Alice.

### **Rufus & Alice**

Early in the novel Alice and Rufus are not seen together, but each speaks of the other as a trusted friend. As a young Rufus puts it, “‘Sure. Alice is my friend.’ . . . ‘She’s no slave, either. . . . She’s free, born free like her mother’” (Butler 28). It is not until the fourth trip back to Maryland that readers see Alice once again. The Alice readers meet in this chapter is extremely different than the Alice previously known. As Dana has watched Rufus grow and mature, Alice

has been growing and changing out of sight of the readers. Until Dana's return to "The Fight," readers believe that Alice and Rufus have remained friends, and they have.

When Dana returns to Maryland, readers find Rufus being attacked by a black man, and next to the fighters is a young woman, tattered and broken. Dana comments, "What had happened here seemed obvious. The girl, her torn dress" (Butler 117). It is quickly made clear that Rufus has forced himself on Alice and raped her. Though the reader does not know why Rufus has done it, it is believed that it is due to one of two reasons: either Rufus is simply searching out a woman to have sex with or his feelings for Alice have changed and he now wants more from her. It turns out the second of which is the reason for the rape:

"Alice," I said, "wasn't Rufus a friend of yours? I mean ... did he just grow out of the friendship or what?"

"Got to where he wanted to be more friendly than I did," she said. (119)

Additionally Dana comments on miscegenational relationships when she says, "There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (Butler 124). Rufus's feelings for Alice have changed; no longer does he just want to be friends with Alice, but now he wants her to be romantic with him.

During the 1800s, it was not uncommon for African Americans and whites to have interracial relationships. Many times white plantation owners would have sexual relations with their slaves. In a quote by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she says, "Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation" (Jacobs 36). White men see African American women as a way to increase the hands on the plantation. If African American women gave birth to children of their masters,

the children automatically become slaves and, therefore, the property of that owner. In many circumstances this act of impregnating the slave woman was not seen as something that is morally wrong or unacceptable. In fact, it was common practice for masters to have sexual relations with the slave women he owned. Loichot comments more on the common practice as Butler portrays it: “The novel corroborates the fact that slavery turns women into available vaginas and lucrative wombs” (46).

For Rufus, even if he did not immediately love Alice, this would not have necessarily stopped him from having sex with her. Dana tells readers about this concept when she says, “He wasn’t a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper” (134). Not only could Rufus be criticized for having relations with an African American, but also Alice would be criticized by her people, African Americans, for turning her back on her race. In a conversation between Alice and Dana, Alice shows the feeling African Americans have about relations with whites: “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!” (165). This shows how not only would white people heckle each other about their interracial relationships, but African Americans would also heckle others about it.

Rufus wants Alice to love him, no matter what it takes. He tells Dana why he did what he did when he says, “I would have taken better care of her than any field hand could. I wouldn’t have hurt her if she hadn’t kept saying no” (123). This shows that he believes had a right to be with Alice and she had no right to refuse him. Ultimately, one way or another he and Alice will be together and she will be happy with him, or so Rufus believes.

Shortly after the rape, Alice and her husband make an attempt to escape. They are later caught and severely beaten and mutilated. When Alice is brought back, her freedom is taken away from her and she is put on the auction block to be sold to the highest bidder. Fortunately, or unfortunately, for Alice, Rufus is the highest bidder. In fact no matter how much he spends, on purchasing Alice, the amount he pays takes precedent over his love for her. In modern society, many would believe that love does not have a price, therefore, no matter what it takes, it will be done, regardless of money. Rufus says, "I had to pay near twice what she's worth to get her. That's all the money I had, and Daddy won't pay for a doctor to fix niggers" (147). The comment that Rufus makes shows how even after proclaiming all the love he has for her, there is still an amount to which Alice is worth.

In the end, however, the act of buying Alice is the final necessary step in forcing Alice to be with him. She no longer has any say as to who she is with. Before, when Alice was "free," she could decide whether or not she wanted to be with Rufus. Now that she is bought, all the choices and privileges she had before are gone and she is now Rufus's slave. This is portrayed as the final removal of Alice's free will. In the beginning, Alice's injury prevents her from resisting him. She has suffered trauma to her head and therefore has the mentality of a child when she is brought back to the Weylin plantation. As Rufus and Dana nurse her back to health, Alice starts to recall more of her past. Rufus sees this as a threat. Without her memories, Alice likes him. With the mentality of a child, Alice first sees Rufus as a friend and develops a relationship and ultimately feelings for him. As Alice regains memories though, she remembers why she didn't like him and wants distance once again. In a conversation between Dana and Rufus, readers see how Alice's regaining of memories hurts Rufus's relationship with her.

Additionally the following conversation shows Rufus's vision of how the relationship is progressing:

“I almost don't want her to remember,” he said once. “She could be like she was before Issac. Then maybe...” He shrugged.

“She remembers more every day,” I said. “And she asks questions.”

“Don't answer her!”

“If I don't, someone else will. She'll be up and around soon.”

He swallowed. “All this time, it's been so good...”

“Good?”

“She hasn't hated me!”

This conversation shows how Rufus believes that no matter what the reason, things are getting better between Alice and him, at least for him. Dana believes, however, that, for Alice, remembering would be the worst thing she could do. In the end it would lead to a loss of her happiness. Dana says, “She was getting too close, ‘growing’ too fast. Her life would change so much for the worse when she remembered. She would be hurt more, and Rufus would do much of the hurting” (157).

Rufus makes many attempts to win back Alice's affection, but when all of them fail he reverts to getting Dana to do the work for him. No matter what Rufus does, once Alice has her memories back completely, she does not give in to his pursuit of her. When Rufus has exhausted all other avenues he tells Dana since she is there to aid him, she must be the one to talk some sense into Alice; he says: “Go to her. Send her to me. I'll have her whether you help or not. All I want you to do is fix it so I don't have to beat her” (164). At this point, readers see that against everything Dana has tried to teach him regarding the proper ways of treating people of color,

Rufus has still become a victim of the times. Even though he knows he cannot have her according to the standards of Dana's time, or the 1970s, because it is the 1800s and she is his slave, it is acceptable for him to force her to be with him.

Dana agrees to help Rufus in his quest to get Alice, even if she does not agree. At first Alice resists Dana as well, even resenting her for falling down so far as to aid Rufus in something she knows is not right. Alice tells Dana how she feels regarding the incident when she says, "Do your job! Go tell him! That's what you are for – to help white folks keep niggers down" (167). Eventually Alice gives in and agrees to go to Rufus, even though she does not want to. She concludes the discussion with Dana by telling her, "I'm going to him. He knew I would sooner or later. But he don't know how I wish I had the nerve to just kill him!" (168). This shows that there is a divide in the progression of Alice and Rufus's feelings for each other. Rufus has a false sense that since she came to him, things must be getting better between the two of them. When in Alice's head she is doing it in order to save herself, and in actuality she has no loving feelings for him.

Things continue to "improve," or appear as if they are improving, between Rufus and Alice. After the first time Alice has gone to Rufus he begins to openly show affection for her. Shortly after this sense of things improving, Dana is sent back home to California, and the readers loses a glimpse of what is going on between Rufus and Alice. When Dana does return, though, readers discover that things, superficially, have not degraded. Alice is pregnant with the second of Rufus's children. For a while, things on the plantation, that Rufus now owns, continue to appear happy. Even though the plantation seems to be in a joyous mood, deep down Alice still dreams of freedom. In a conversation with Dana, Alice reveals her true feelings:

"You're still thinking of running?"

“Wouldn’t you be if you didn’t have another way to get free?”

I nodded.

“I don’t mean to spend my life here watching my children grow up slaves and maybe get sold.”

“He wouldn’t ...”

“You don’t know what he would do! He don’t treat you the way he treats me. When I’m strong again after I have this baby, I’m going.” (232)

When Alice does have her second child, Dana notices how Alice looks at Rufus and gives him a genuine, loving smile. This is something unexpected because since the first time she went to his room, Alice has been pretending to love him. Dana says, “I saw her smile at him – a real smile. No sarcasm, no ridicule. It silenced him for several seconds” (233). However, this happiness Alice experiences frightens her and she believes now more than ever that she must run away. She fears if she does not run then she will turn into a white person or, even worse, into Dana. At this point, once again, the reader is cut off from the events occurring between Rufus and Alice because Dana is pulled back to her home.

This final time when Dana returns, however, she does not return to Rufus but instead to Alice’s body hung, “her flesh cold and hard. The dead grey face was ugly in death as it had never been in life” (248). Things have changed drastically since the last time Dana was at the plantation. Dana and the readers come to find out that when Alice recovered from having Hagar, she attempted to run away. She was quickly caught and according to Rufus had to be punished. Rufus told Alice that since she ran away he sold their children. For Alice, this is seen as the final degradation of her humanity, and she believes that she has nothing left. Therefore, she kills herself. It turns out, however, that Rufus merely sent their children to temporarily stay with



family and they would return when Rufus felt Alice had learned her lesson. Even though Alice takes her own life, Rufus was the reason she put the rope around her neck, making him just as guilty for her death. In a conversation with Dana, Sarah, the cook, says, ““Even if he didn’t put the rope on her, he drove her to it. He sold her babies!”” (249).

In the end after Alice has been buried and is gone, Rufus seeks companionship from someone else: Dana. Loichot writes, “Dana and her ancestor Alice appear, in Rufus’s mind, as ‘one woman...two halves of a whole’ [Butler 257]. Each woman is therefore a fragment of a whole, united by Rufus’s abusive love. While Alice represents the corporeal side of the . . . enslaved woman, Dana is Rufus’s kindred spirit, his intellectual and spiritual partner” (43). This then seeks to explain why Rufus’s feeling for or love for Alice is quickly and easily projected onto Dana. Additionally, Dana makes her own comparison between Alice and herself:

I stared out the window guiltily, feeling that I should have been more like Alice. She forgave him nothing, forgot nothing, hated him as deeply as she had loved Isaac....She couldn’t bring herself to run away again or to kill him and face her own death. She couldn’t do anything at all except make herself more miserable. She said, “My stomach just turns every time he puts his hands on me!” But she endured. Eventually she would bear him at least one child. And as much as I cared for him, I would not have done that. I couldn’t have. Twice, he made me lose control enough to try to kill him. I could get that angry with him, even though I knew the consequences of killing him. He could drive me to a kind of unthinking fury. Somehow, I couldn’t take from him the kind of abuse I took from others. If he ever raped me, it wasn’t likely that either of us would survive. (180)

## **Dana & Rufus: Part Two**

Dana and Rufus's relationship takes a dramatic plunge when Alice returns to the story and runs away with her husband Isaac. Dana comments on the situation when she says, "Heaven help Alice and Isaac. Heaven help me. If Rufus could turn so quickly on a lifelong friend, how long would it take him to turn on me?" (123). Rufus once needed Dana in order to protect himself, but now that Alice had come into the picture he needs Dana for Alice. At first this need for Alice is innocent, simply wanting Dana to nurse Alice back to health, something Rufus believes is Dana's specialty.

Eventually, however, this turns to a more manipulative need. Rufus begins to ask Dana to do things she would never find morally correct, but since she knows she needs to secure her lineage, she must do them anyway. In fact, Dana states to readers why when she says, "It shouldn't take him long to realize that he and I needed each other. We would be taking turns helping each other now. Neither of us would want the other to hesitate. We would have to learn to co-operate with each other – to make compromises" (121).

Once Rufus begins to ask Dana to go against her morals, the relationship can go nowhere but down. On the second-to-last trip Dana makes to the plantation, the feelings begin to get increasingly tense after Tom Weylin has passed away. Rufus feels that it is Dana's fault because she was not there to doctor him. This blame placed upon Dana is the seed of their ultimate demise, which comes at the end of the chapter.

In the end of the second to last trip, Rufus sells a slave that Dana feels was good to Rufus and should stay. Rufus, however, does not care anything for what Dana has to say. When Dana protests, he smacks across the face. This is seen as the uttermost form of betrayal, and something Dana will not tolerate. She explains her feelings:

He hit me.

It was a first, and so unexpected that I stumbled backward and fell.

And it was a mistake. It was the breaking of an unspoken agreement between us – a very basic agreement – and he knew it.

I got up slowly, watching him with anger and betrayal. (238)

This final betrayal reduced Dana in Rufus's mind to nothing more than a mere slave on the plantation. Therefore, Dana then goes up to the slaves' sleeping quarters and attempts to kill herself, which sends her home to California.

On her final trip to Maryland, Dana is confronted with the death of Alice. Dana clearly feels as though Rufus is the primary cause for Alice's death. Due to the current state of their relationship, Dana does not feel a need to hold her feelings back and expresses them bluntly. Once Rufus comes to terms with the death of Alice, he transfers his feelings from her to Dana. These feelings, however, are something that Dana cannot tolerate. As she says, “. . . Rufus was Rufus – erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once” (260).

In this final act of desperation, Dana stabs Rufus twice and is sent back to her home in California. But upon her return, the spot where Rufus had been clinging to her arm is the exact place, in the wall, where her arm is when she returns back to her home. In the end, Dana's arm has to be amputated at the exact location. This removal of the arm, as Loichot says, “The flesh becoming part of the plaster, the organic joining the inorganic, evokes a freezing in time, the sinking of the body into a frigid, cold, and dead home, its inability to detach itself from the past” (45). In Butler's interview, she comments on this crossing of times when she says, “I couldn't

really let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole” (qtd. in Kenan 498).

### **Dana & Kevin: Part Two**

When Dana brings Kevin back to Maryland, the life differences that influenced their lives before, are going to become increasingly evident now that they are in a society different than their own. Upon first arrival, Kevin does not realize the extreme problems being here could cause to their relationship. Kevin's life of privilege may not have exposed him to the history surrounding whites and African American's relationships of the past.

Readers begin to see the implications of Kevin's life of ignorance in the way he acts when first in Maryland. Readers get the first reference to Kevin's calling Dana his property in an early conversation he has with Rufus,:

“My name's Kevin – Kevin Franklin.”

“Does Dana belong to you now?”

“In a way,” said Kevin. “She's my wife.”

“Wife?” Rufus squealed.

I sighed. “Kevin, I think we'd better demote me. In this time...”

“Niggers can't marry white people!” said Rufus. (60)

Kevin does not fully understand that he must choose his words carefully in order to lessen the damage his relationship with Dana could cause. Dana and Kevin, both, could receive harsh criticism from the people of the area if they commit to a relationship of marriage. Kevin does not realize extent to which this choice would impact Dana more than himself. While Kevin

would be criticized, Dana could be attacked or beaten by people who do not agree. This greatly contradicts the 1970s California view of their relationship simply being “weird.”

In addition to the lack of racial exposure for Kevin, he has also lived ignorant of the inequality seen between men and women. In the 1800s men were believed to be far superior to women, similar to the belief that whites were superior to African American’s. White men were given more privileges and, in most cases, rights in the eyes of society. Therefore when Kevin is brought back with Dana, he is unaware of the implications his gender and ethnicity have. For example, in Kevin’s first trip back in time, Rufus begins to question Dana about where she is from. Immediately after Dana explains it to Rufus, he turns to Kevin and says to him, ““This is crazy stuff. . . . You tell me. Are you from California?”” (62). This goes to show how even though Rufus has known Dana longer than Kevin, he still trusts the word of an unknown white male over that of Dana.

Not only does Kevin and Dana’s relationship influence Rufus, but also the times greatly influence Dana and Kevin. Since Kevin has lived a life of ignorance to prejudice and privilege for most of his life, it can be expected that he will do the same during this time period. In Octavia Butler’s interview she comments on how time does not influence the ideas, she says, ““And even though the roles in many ways are more affixed by society in the past, [Dana] has to make similar choices in the present; so it’s almost as though time were an illusion” (qtd. in Kenan 497). This can be severely detrimental to their relationship if Kevin’s eyes aren’t opened. Dana therefore takes on the responsibility of opening Kevin’s eyes to the world happening around him. If he did not read into the situations occurring around him, then he would find them acceptable. If this were to continue then slowly Kevin would gain the mentality of the classic white of the time, superior and privileged. Dana comments on the chance of Kevin being

influenced by the times, when she says, “A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. . . . But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn’t have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. . . . The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow” (77).

As time passes and Dana and Kevin remain in Maryland, they continue to be exposed to the cultural and societal viewpoints. They try to remain bystanders to the culture. But this appears impossible. As to why it seems so, Dana says, ““The ease. Us, the children . . . I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery” (101). She has always seen slavery as wrong, but when she is forced to live it out, she slowly begins to accept it. She still may not agree with it, but she does not find it as difficult to accept, to the extent of which she had previously. This shows how if exposed to a way of life for long enough, regardless of right or wrong, people will eventually get used to it. Society has a dramatic effect on how people see themselves and others. Dana’s fear of Kevin being exposed to the time is brought to life when she is returned to 1976 without him. She spends eight days alone in her time before being called back to find that Kevin has lived in the antebellum past for several years.

When Dana returns, however, she finds that Kevin has left the plantation and gone north. This causes her to have mixed emotions about his choice. She does not understand why he would leave knowing that she would eventually return, but at the same time she is glad that he did go north, a place where slavery’s influences are much less. Even though Dana and Kevin leave each other at a time when things are tense, when they are reunited they are relieved to be together.

Dana and Kevin finally make it home together again, but upon returning Kevin appears to be completely lost with all things modern, including Dana. Dana notices Kevin's drastic changes when she goes to hug him: "He stopped, glared at me as though I was some stranger who dared to lay hands on him" (Butler 194). It takes Kevin a while to recover from what he has experienced, and even longer to recover with Dana.

In the "Epilogue," Dana and Kevin travel back to Maryland to see if there is any record of the situations they have experienced. They do not find anything. Through all of the experiences they have been exposed to, their relationship has taken a major hit. In fact Dana and Kevin talk about their future by linking it to their past:

"If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane."

"We are," he said. "And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way." (264)

Butler leaves hope for the two and a chance that they will be happier now that they have witnessed Dana's past. Kevin now sees what it is like to have been an African American during slavery and even more so a privileged Caucasian.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the novel, readers can see that the relationships developed, before readers are introduced and after, change. These changes are primarily caused by a differing viewpoint of the characters' societies. In Dana's society, interracial relationships are accepted more than they were in nineteenth century America. While some people in the nineteenth century may still disagree with miscegenational relationships, their viewpoints are not as vocalized. This leads to

a suppression of a singular negative societal opinion. For example, as a small group of individuals suppresses their opinion, other people start to follow and eventually the whole society suppress these negative feelings. This greatly contradicts the society of the Weylin family. Their society tells them aversion to ethnicity is openly acceptable. This is what leads to the Weylin's owning slaves and running a plantation. Had society deemed slavery unacceptable, Tom, and eventually Rufus, may not have owned slaves.

In nineteenth century America, African Americans were seen as less than human. As seen in Harriett Jacob's novel, African Americans, especially women, were seen as an available body. Women, specifically, were used sexually as a way to advance the available hands on the farm. This leads to African American women being further pursued by Caucasians. White men seeks out slave women for pleasure, while white women vindictively seek out slave women due to jealousy. White women are jealous of the attention African American women get from the men.

African American men, however, are pursued for their productive uses. Men are used primarily as field hands, as described in Frederick Douglass. Any male slave hand that was subservient to their owner, would be punished greatly, usually by whipping. The whipping of a slave by an owner required a specific kind of moral suppression. This lead to a degradation of the master morally, as well as the slave physically.

These differing societies created the conflicts seen throughout the novel. Dana and Kevin grew up in differing levels of privilege in the same society, but, when taken back to the 1800s, these differences create problems. The culture of the nineteenth century opens Kevin's eyes to what life as an African American was like in the past as well as redefines life in their time. Dana learns more about slavery and why it took so long to abolish. It was not due to people wanting



servitude, but rather that American society raised them to accept it rather than question its moral validity.

Ultimately, this unwavering attitude leads to the differences seen in Rufus and Dana's relationship. Rufus does not understand Dana's problem with the way he lives. As Dana tries to change, or alter, Rufus's life, she realizes what is holding him and her back. Rufus is a man of his society. For Dana, it is a challenge to be a single voice telling Rufus what is right and wrong, competing against the many voices of society that directly contradict her own.

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