

# Reader's Guide

## Critical Essay

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"What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!"  
Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

### I

First-person American slave narratives should have ceased being written when the last American citizen born into institutionalized slavery died. But the literary form has persisted, just as the legacy of slavery has persisted, into the present. The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of what has been christened the "neo-slave narrative," a fictional mutation of the autobiographies of nineteenth-century Americans who lived as slaves. Among the many historical novels, often with first-person narrators, that have recreated the era of slavery, some of the best known are Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Charles R. Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990). Octavia Butler's hybrid of memoir and fantasy is a distinctive contribution to the genre of neo-slave narrative. Although *Kindred* is not itself a work of science fiction, Butler has brought to the creation of this narrative the sensibilities of an author who works largely outside the tradition of realism. When *Kindred* first appeared twenty-five years ago, no one had thought of using the fictional conventions of time travel to transport a modern African American to an antebellum plantation. Time-traveling

narratives are always replete with paradoxical questions: If you travel back a century and a half and kill your own great-great-grandfather, can you yourself ever be born? Is it as possible for the future to influence the past as it is for the past to shape the future? But then every good work of fiction is paradoxical: It lies like the truth.

*Kindred* begins and ends in mystery. On June 9, 1976, her twenty-sixth birthday, Edana Franklin, is overcome by nausea while moving with her white husband, Kevin, into a new house in the Los Angeles suburbs. Abruptly she finds herself kneeling on a riverbank, hears a child screaming, runs into the river to save him, performs artificial respiration, and as the boy begins breathing she looks up into a rifle barrel. Again she sickens and finds herself back once more in her new house, but soaking wet and covered in mud. She has not hallucinated; she has been transported, physically as well as psychically. This inexplicable, nightmarish transit from one place to another is the first of six such episodes of varying duration that make up the bulk of the novel. Sometimes Dana (the shortened form of her name she prefers) is transported alone, sometimes with Kevin; but the dizzy spells that immediately precede her movements occur without warning, and she is returned to Los Angeles only when she believes her life is threatened. The second time this happens, Dana discovers that she is moving not simply through space but into the past as well—to the Maryland plantation of a slave owner who is her own distant ancestor.

Dana's involuntary trips to the past, like convulsive memories dislocating her in time, occupy only a few minutes or hours of her life in 1976, but her stay in the alternative time is stretched as she lives out an imposed remembrance of things past. Because of this dual time level a brief absence from Los Angeles may result in months spent in the nineteenth century, observing and suffering the backbreaking field work, enduring verbal abuse, whippings, and other daily brutalities of enslavement. Rufus Weylin, the child Dana rescues from drowning on her first trip to her ancestral home, periodically "calls" her from the present, whenever his life is in danger. As he grows older he becomes more repugnant and dangerous, but she must try to keep him alive until he and a slave woman named Alice Greenwood conceive a child, Hagar, who will initiate Dana's own family line. Only upon Weylin's death can Dana return permanently to 1976, but she comes back without her left arm. This is the shocking premise on which *Kindred* depends, and the author makes no effort to rationalize it. That is, Butler does not attempt to *explain* what she describes so graphically at the end of the sixth chapter: How could Dana's

arm, from the elbow down, be physically joined to the plaster of her living room wall? The author is silent on the process by which Dana's arm is severed in the twilight zone between past and present. *Kindred*, one could say, is no more rational, no more comfortably explicable than the history of slavery itself. But that is a little too easy. The fiction has a ruthless logic to its design, and in an interview Butler has stated that the meaning of the amputation is clear enough: "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."<sup>1</sup>

Time damages as well as heals, and genuine historical understanding of human crimes is never easy and always achieved at the price of suffering. The loss of Dana's arm becomes, as Ruth Salvaggio has suggested, "a kind of birthmark," the emblem of a "disfigured heritage."<sup>2</sup> The symbolic meanings *Kindred* yields are powerful and readily articulable even if the literal truth is harder to state. It is the paradoxes of kinship, of family, of history, of home that engage Butler's imagination, not the paradoxes of time travel. In particular, the novel has much to say about the paradoxical nature of "home," that magnet for American sentiment and homilies: "There's no place like home"; "Home is where the heart is"; "You can't go home again." To all of those simplicities *Kindred* offers a challenge. By the time Dana's time traveling finally stops and she is restored to her Los Angeles home in 1976, the meaning of a homecoming has become impossibly complicated. Her first act, once her arm has sufficiently healed, is to fly to present-day Maryland; both her California house and the Weylin plantation have become inescapably "home" to her.<sup>3</sup>

None of this reads like the classic time-travel stories of science fiction. In *The Time Machine* (1895) H. G. Wells had his traveler display the shiny vehicle on which he rode into the future to verify the strange truth of his journey; in *Kindred* the method of transport remains a fantastic given. An irresistible psycho-historical force, not a feat of engineering, motivates Butler's plot. How Dana travels in time is a problem of physics irrelevant to Butler's aims. *Kindred* has far less in common with Wellsian science fiction than it has with that classic fable of alienation, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, whose protagonist simply wakes up one morning as a giant beetle, a fantastic eruption into the normal world. Butler has sacrificed the neat closure that a scientific—or even pseudo-scientific—explanation of time travel would have given her novel. Leaving the book's ending rough-edged and raw like Dana's wound, Butler leaves the reader uneasy and

disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than reassured by a tale that solves all the mysteries. She did not need to show off a technological marvel of the sort Wells provided to mark his traveler's path through time; instead, *Kindred* evokes the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting voyage of her ancestors, just as her employment in 1976 through a temporary job agency—"We regulars called it a slave market," Dana says with grouchy irony (p. 52)—operates as a benign, ghostly version of institutional slavery's auction block.

In many ways *Kindred*, set in a historical past scrupulously researched by the author, departs from Butler's characteristic kind of fiction. With the exception of *Wild Seed* (1980), all her other novels, from *Patternmaster* (1975) through *Parable of the Talents* (1998), have been situated in the future, often a damaged future, and have focused on power relationships between "normal" human beings and human mutants or extrasolar aliens. But if *Kindred* has some surface differences from the rest of Butler's fiction, at its deepest levels it is a central text in her exploration of the webs of power and affection in human relationships, of the ethical imperative and the emotional price of empathy, of the difficult struggle to move beyond alienation to connection. In all her fiction she has produced parables that speak to issues of cultural difference, whether sexual, racial, political, economic, or psychological, and to issues of mastery and self-mastery. *Kindred* shares imagery with Butler's futuristic novels, in particular with *Parable of the Talents*, whose electronically controlled collars and neurological "lashings" are but science-fictional extrapolations of the plantation owners' coffles and whippings. In both novels the degradations of slavery are a constant, as is the determination of the victims whose lives are under total control to resist and escape. But *Kindred* is technically a much sparer story, without the multiple narrative perspectives of the later book, and without any of the conceptual or technological apparatus usually associated with science fiction. Apart from its single fantastic premise of instantaneous movement through time and space, *Kindred* is consistently matter-of-fact in presentation and depends on the author's reading of authentic slave narratives, her assimilation of data from research at libraries and historical societies, the maps she used to plot her characters' movements, and her visits to the Talbot County, Maryland, sites of the novel. Butler herself has repeatedly insisted that *Kindred*

should be read as a “grim fantasy,” not as science fiction, since there is “absolutely no science in it.” She has also remarked that such generic labels are often more useful as marketing categories than as reading protocols.<sup>4</sup> Like Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* or Anna Kavan’s *Ice*, Butler’s novel is an experiment that resists easy classification, and like other neo-slave narratives it blurs the usual boundaries of genre.

## II

When she enrolled in a summer workshop for novice science-fiction writers in 1970 at the age of twenty-three, Octavia Estelle Butler took a decisive step toward satisfying an ambition she had cherished since she was ten. An only child whose father died when she was a baby, Butler was aware very early of women struggling to survive. Her maternal grandmother told stories of unrelenting labor in the canefields of Louisiana while raising seven children. Her mother, Octavia M. Butler, had been working since the age of ten and spent all her adult life earning a living as a housemaid. As the author told Veronica Mixon in an interview just before *Kindred* appeared, the experiences of the women in her family influenced her youthful reading and her earliest efforts at writing: “Their lives seemed so terrible to me at times—so devoid of joy or reward. I needed my fantasies to shield me from their world.”<sup>5</sup> The powerful imaginative impulse that produced *Kindred* had its first test runs in the escapist fantasies of a child who needed to find or invent alternative realities. By temperament and by virtue of her strict Baptist upbringing, Butler was reclusive; imaginary worlds solaced her against the pinched rewards of the actual world, and books took the place of friends. From the age of six the public library became her second home and writing became her “positive obsession.”<sup>6</sup>

*Kindred*, however, is anything but an escapist fantasy. If as a girl Butler needed to put some distance between herself and the soul-shrinking realities of her mother’s life, she nevertheless always had her eyes open. What she saw as a child she later confronted and reshaped as a novelist. When her mother couldn’t find or afford a babysitter, young Octavia was often taken along to work. Even then she observed the long arm of slavery: the degree to which her mother operated in white society as an invisible woman and, alarmingly, the degree to which she accepted and internalized her status. “I used to see her going in back doors, being talked

about while she was standing right there and basically being treated like a non-person, something beneath notice.... And I could see her later as I grew up. I could see her absorbing more of what she was hearing from the whites than I think even she would have wanted to absorb." At the time she blamed her mother's employers less than her mother for allowing herself to be demeaned.<sup>7</sup>

Some of these childhood memories infiltrated the fiction she produced in her maturity; certainly they shaped her purpose in *Kindred* in imagining the privations of earlier generations of black Americans who were in danger of being forgotten by the black middle class as well as ignored by white Americans. While a student at Pasadena City College, Butler heard a bright male classmate carrying on about being held back by his parents and wanting to kill off the older generations of African Americans. He knew a lot about black history "but he didn't feel it in his gut," she thought. It brought back to her mind her own earlier anger over her mother's cultivated deafness to the insults of her employers. At that moment, she later said, the idea for *Kindred* came to her.<sup>8</sup> Butler's effort to recover something of the experiences of the nineteenth-century ancestors of those who, like herself and her college classmate, had come of age during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements was an homage both to those women in her family who still struggled for an identity and to those more distant relations whose identities had been lost. "So many relatives that I had never known, would never know" (p. 28), Dana muses sadly early on in *Kindred* as she thinks of the bare names inked in her family Bible.

Although Dana's experiences when she is hurled into the midst of slave society are full of terror and pain, they also illuminate her past and freshen her understanding of those generations forced to be non-persons. One of the protagonist's—and Butler's—achievements in traveling to the past is to see individual slaves as people rather than as encrusted literary or sociological types. Perhaps most impressive is Sarah the cook, the stereotypical "mammy" of books and films, whose apparent acceptance of humiliation, Dana comes to understand, masks a deep anger over the master's sale of nearly all her children: "She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter" (p. 145). Here we see literary fantasy in the service of the recovery of histor-

ical and psychological realities. As fictional memoir, *Kindred* is Butler's contribution to the literature of memory every bit as much as it is an exercise in the fantastic imagination.

The artfulness of *Kindred* is the product of a single-minded and largely isolated literary apprenticeship. In her younger years Butler lived for her trips to the library, but her family paid little attention to what she read. Her teachers were unreceptive to the science-fiction stories she occasionally submitted in English classes. Her schoolmates also found her tastes in reading and writing strange and, increasingly, Butler kept her literary interests to herself. In adolescence she immersed herself in the science-fictional worlds of Theodore Sturgeon, Leigh Brackett, and Ray Bradbury, and the absence of black women writers from the genre did not deter her own ambitions: "Frankly, it never occurred to me that I needed someone who looked like me to show me the way. I was ignorant and arrogant and persistent and the writing left me no choice at all."<sup>9</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s no black writers and almost no women were visibly publishing science fiction. Not surprisingly, few black readers—and, we can assume, very few black girls—found much to interest them in the science fiction of the period, geared as it was toward white adolescent boys. Some of it was provocatively racist, including Robert Heinlein's *The Sixth Column* (1949), whose heroic protagonist in a future race war was unsubtly named Whitey. The highest honor available for a character of color in such novels was sacrificing his life for his white comrades, as do an Asian soldier named Franklin Roosevelt Matsui in *The Sixth Column* and the one black character in Leigh Brackett's story "The Vanishing Venusians" (1944). Other books tried resolutely to be "color-blind," imagining a future in which race no longer was a factor; novels like Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) embodied the white liberal fantasy of a single black character functioning amiably and unself-consciously in a predominantly white society.

A diligent reader in the 1950s, searching for science-fiction novels with something more than a patronizing image of black assimilation on white terms, could have turned up only a few texts in which race was acknowledged and allowed to shape the novel's thematic and ideological concerns.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most interesting example is a chapter in a book that Butler read in her youth, Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950). Titled "Way in the Middle of the Air," it is the story of a mass emigration of black Southerners to Mars in the year 2003. The Southern economy and the cultural assumptions of white supremacy are devastated when the

entire black populace unites to ensure that all members of the community can pay their debts and arrive at the rocket base in time for the great exodus. Barefoot white boys report in astonishment this unanticipated strategy for a black utopia: "Them that has helps them that hasn't! And that way they *all* get free!" In a speech that ironically skewers the myth of progress in African-American history, one petulant white man complains:

I can't figure why they left now. With things lookin' up. I mean, every day they got more rights. What they want, anyway? Here's the poll tax gone, and more and more states passin' anti-lynchin' bills, and all kinds of equal rights. What more they want? They make almost as good money as a white man, but there they go.<sup>11</sup>

"Way in the Middle of the Air" may be the single most incisive episode of black and white relations in science fiction by a white author. But its very rarity demonstrates how alien the territory of American science fiction in its so-called golden age, after the second world war, was for black readers and for aspiring writers like Octavia Butler. She has often observed, in response to questions about her nearly unique status as an African-American woman writing science fiction, that you have to be a reader before you can be a writer.

Butler's formative years and her early career coincide with the years when American science fiction took down the "males only" sign over the door. Major expansions and redefinitions of the genre have been accomplished by such writers as Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Pamela Sargent, Alice Sheldon (writing under the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr.), Pamela Zoline, Marge Piercy, Joan Slonczewski, and Butler herself. The alien in much of the fiction by women has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien, sometimes—more specifically—the black woman, the Chicana, the housewife, the lesbian, the woman in poverty, or the unmarried woman. Sheldon's famous story "The Women Men Don't See" (1974), about a mother and daughter who embark on a ship with extraterrestrials rather than remain unnoticed and unvalued on Earth, is a touchstone for the reconception of the old science-fictional representations of the human image. "Science fiction," Butler writes, "has long treated people who might or might not exist—extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, however, many of the same science-fiction writers who started us thinking about the possibility of extraterrestrial life did nothing to make us think about here-at-home human variation."<sup>12</sup> As American women writers have abandoned the character types that predominated in

science fiction for a richer plurality of human images, they have collectively written a new chapter in the genre's history.

During the course of Butler's career a parallel, although slender, chapter began to be written by African-American writers. When *Kindred* was first published in 1979, the only recognized African-American writer of science fiction and fantasy was Samuel R. Delany. As *Kindred* celebrates its silver anniversary the landscape is visibly changing. Steven Barnes, Jewelle Gomez, Nalo Hopkinson, Charles R. Saunders, and Tananarive Due have joined Delany and Butler. And the publication of Sheree Thomas's important anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) has showcased many contemporary black writers of nonrealist fiction while excavating a few surprises from the past, like W. E. B. Dubois's 1920 story "The Comet." In the years since 1979 Butler has emerged as the commanding figure among African-American writers of science fiction and fantasy, having become the first (and so far only) science-fiction writer to win a prestigious five-year MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Since the first Beacon edition of *Kindred* in 1988 there has been an explosion of critical interest in Butler. In 1988 it was possible to list nearly every critical article that had been published on her work, and most of that small body of material was published in obscure journals with tiny circulations. Today the list of works about Butler must be more selective, and the critical studies appear from major university and trade presses and in the premier journals of contemporary literature, African-American studies, and science-fiction studies. And the interest is not just academic, nor is it confined to science-fiction fans. In the Spring of 2003 the city of Rochester, New York undertook its third annual event titled "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book." An estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people read *Kindred*, discussed it in local reading groups, and for three days had a chance to meet Butler and talk with her about the book at her numerous appearances at universities, libraries, and bookstores.

### III

In 1980 Charles Saunders, himself the author of African-based heroic and mythic fantasies, wrote a lament titled "Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction." Twenty years later he published a more sanguine sequel in the *Dark Matter* anthology: "Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science

Fiction." If any contemporary writer is responsible for Saunders's change of heart, it is Octavia Butler. She has redrawn science fiction's cultural boundaries and attracted new black readers—and potential writers—to this most distinctive of twentieth-century genres. More consistently than any other African-American author, she has deployed the genre's conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them, stories that speak to issues, feelings, and historical truths arising out of African-American experience. In centering her fiction on women who lack power and suffer abuse but are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary, Butler has not merely used science fiction as a "feminist didactic," in Beverly Friend's terminology, but she has generated her fiction out of a black feminist aesthetic. Her novels pointedly expose various chauvinisms (sexual, racial, and cultural), are enriched by a historical consciousness that shapes the depiction of enslavement both in the real past and in imaginary pasts and futures, and enact struggles for personal freedom and cultural pluralism.

At the same time, Butler has been eager to avoid using her fiction as a soapbox. "Fiction writers can't be too pedagogical or too polemical," she told one interviewer.<sup>13</sup> The route she pursues to her readers' heads is through their guts and nerves, and that requires good story-telling, not just a good set of issues. Science fiction and fantasy are a richly metaphorical literature. Just as Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* invented a monstrous child born from a male scientist's imagination as a metaphor for the exclusion of women from acts of creation, and just as Wells's *Time Machine* used hairy subterranean Morlocks and effete aboveground Eloi as metaphors for the upstairs-downstairs class divisions of Victorian England, so Butler has specialized in metaphors that dramatize the tyranny of one species or race or gender over another. In *Kindred* the most powerful metaphor is time travel itself. Traveling to the past is a dramatic means to make the past live, to get the reader to live imaginatively in the recreated past, to grasp it as a felt reality rather than merely a learned abstraction. The chapter titles Butler has given to each of the major episodes of *Kindred* further invite the reader to respond metaphorically: "The River," "The Fire," "The Fall," "The Fight," "The Storm," and "The Rope." As one commentator has observed, these chapter headings suggest something elemental, apocalyptic, archetypal about the events in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> *Kindred*, after all, is not a documentary about racism, although the vividness of its invented details gives it a convincing "you are there" documentary power. But, finally, her work succeeds in engaging, terrifying, and mov-

ing readers because it is not fiction composed by agenda.

White writers, Butler has pointed out, have tended to include black characters in science fiction only to illustrate a problem or as signposts to advertise the author's distaste for racism; black people in much science fiction are represented as "other."<sup>15</sup> All Butler's fiction stands in quiet resistance to the notion that a black character in a science-fiction novel is there *for a reason*. In a Butler novel the black protagonist is there, like the mountain, because she is there. Although she does not hesitate to harness the power of fiction as fable to create striking analogies to the oppressive realities of our own present world, Butler also peoples her imagined worlds with black characters as a matter of course. While her frequent use of women as protagonists has brought attention to the black feminist aesthetic she practices, it is just as important to notice that there is always a critical mass of characters of color in her novels. One of the exciting features of *Kindred* is its attentiveness both to the exceptional situation of an isolated modern black woman in a household under slavery and to her complex social and psychological relationships within the community of slaves she joins. Despite the severe stresses under which they live, the slaves constitute a rich human society: Dana's proud and vulnerable ancestor, Alice Greenwood; the mute housemaid, Carrie; Sarah, the cook who nurses old grievances while kneading bread dough; young Nigel, whom Dana teaches to read from a stolen primer; Sam James, the field hand who begs Dana to teach his brother and sister; Alice's husband, Isaac, mutilated and sold to Mississippi after a failed escape attempt; even Liza, the sewing woman, who betrays Dana to the master and is punished by the other slaves for her complicity with the white owners. Although the black community is persistently fractured by the sudden removal of its members through either the calculated strategy or the mere whim of their white controllers, that community always patches itself back together, drawing from its common suffering and anger a common strength. It is the white characters in the novel who seem odd, isolated, pathetic, alien.

The most problematic white man in *Kindred* is not the Maryland slave owner but the liberated, modern Californian married to Dana. Kevin Franklin is a good man. He loves Dana, loathes the chattel system that governs every feature of antebellum life in Maryland, and works with the Underground Railroad while he is trapped in the past. Yet he is by gender and race implicated in the supremacist culture. Throughout the novel Butler ingeniously suggests parallels between Rufus Weylin and Kevin Franklin: their facial expressions, their language, even after a time their

accents merge in Dana's mind so that she mistakes one for the other. "I gave her that husband to complicate her life," Butler has commented, mischievously.<sup>16</sup> One of the novel's subtlest touches is in the chapter in which Dana is obliged to become Rufus Weylin's secretary and handle his correspondence and bills; in 1976 Kevin had, unsuccessfully but still revealingly, tried to get his wife to type his manuscripts and write his letters for him. When Kevin and Dana are in nineteenth-century Maryland at the same time, the only way they can spend a night together is to make a public pretense of being master and slave, playing along with the prevailing belief that a black woman was the sexual property of a white man. But, as Dana realizes, the more often one plays such a role, the nearer the pretending comes to reality: "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed" (p. 97). And, she fears, Kevin begins to fit into the white, male, Southern routine too easily. Shutting between the two white men in her life, she is aware not only of the blood link between herself and Rufus but of the double link of gender and race that unites Rufus and Kevin. The convergence of these two white men in Dana's life not only dramatizes the ease with which even a "progressive" white man falls into the cultural pattern of dominance, but it suggests as well an uncanny synonymy of the words "husband" and "master."<sup>17</sup>

The date of Dana's final return to Los Angeles is July 4, 1976, the bicentennial of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. In bringing the novel full circle from the protagonist's birthday to the nation's birthday, Butler deftly connects individual consciousness with social history and invites readers to meditate on the relationships between personal and political identities. What has been trivialized or sentimentalized—or erased—in the public celebrations of the past reemerges unvarnished in Dana's homecoming on the fourth of July. Dana comes back to southern California with a truer understanding of African-American history than the sanitized versions offered by the popular media. Predictably, she scorns the image of the plantation derived from *Gone with the Wind*, but she also learns the inadequacy of even the best books as preparation for the firsthand experience of slavery. In her first trips to the past, Dana's literacy, her education, and her historical knowledge sometimes lull her into a false sense of security. In one passage, she records her pleasure in the friendly atmosphere of the cookhouse where the slaves gather to eat and talk, usually free from white overseers. There

she observes “a girl and boy, sitting on the floor eating with their fingers. I was glad to see them there because I’d read about kids their age being rounded up and fed from troughs like pigs. Not everywhere, apparently, not here” (p. 72). Although she does not name her literary source, Dana is recalling an episode from chapter 5 of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* (a work Butler read carefully during her research for *Kindred*) that describes feeding time at Colonel Lloyd’s plantation:

Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called mush. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons.<sup>18</sup>

Mistakenly, because the food and the treatment of children are better than Douglass’s *Narrative* seemed to promise, Dana behaves as if the cook-house is a sanctuary. That error in judgment leads to her first vicious flogging, when she is discovered teaching slave children to read. After her second whipping by Rufus Weylin’s father following her attempted flight from the plantation, she reflects angrily as another slave woman salves her wounds, “Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape” (p. 177). Books had not taught her why so many slaves accepted their condition, nor had books defined the kind of bravery possible in the humiliating situation of being owned.

Films, Dana finds, are even less reliable guides to the past. Hollywood production values and the comfort of a theater seat insulate viewers from material purported to be historically accurate. Dana recalls witnessing the beating of a slave hunted out one night by white patrollers and how she crouched in the underbrush a few yards away from the man’s young daughter. The slave’s crime was being found in bed with his own free-born wife without having written permission from his owner:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn’t they stop!

“Please, Master,” the man begged. “For God’s sake, Master, please ...”

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (p. 36)

At such moments of first-person intensity, *Kindred* reveals its own literary kinship with the memoirs of ex-slaves published in the nineteenth century, for Butler's greatest achievement in the novel is collapsing the genres of the fantastic travelogue and the slave narrative. She incorporates into *Kindred* both narrative strategies of the classic memoirs of former slaves and occasional deliberate verbal and situational echoes of those texts. In doing so she establishes a degree of authenticity and seriousness rarely attained by contemporary writers mining the conventions of the Wellsian time-travel story.

*Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel V. Carby's feminist revision of the traditions of American black women's writing, contrasts the image of the slave woman as victim in men's slave memoirs with a very different image that emerges in such autobiographies as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Lucy Delany's *From the Darkness Cometh Light*, and Mary Prince's *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*. In those narratives, Carby argues, women define themselves as agents rather than as mere victims, and they record the brutality of their treatment by their owners in order to emphasize their resistance to victimization and their claim to freedom. Dana, Butler's fictive autobiographer, extends that ideology and aesthetic of the slave woman's memoir into the late-twentieth century. Much of *Kindred* is a record of endurance, but there are also numerous acts of heroism and humanity, culminating in the act of manslaughter in self-defense that finally liberates Dana, at terrible cost, from her tyrannical ancestor.<sup>19</sup>

Chained to her ancestral past by the genealogical link that requires her to keep the oppressive slave master alive until her own family is initiated, Dana works out the ethic of compromise that Harriet Jacobs tolerated to safeguard her children and herself. Despite her feelings of repugnance and shame, Jacobs compromised the sexual standards imposed on nineteenth-century women in order to maintain her central core of integrity and freedom of will; she reluctantly practiced a situational ethics dictated by the extreme circumstances that constrained the ethical choices of black women under slavery. As several commentators on Jacobs's memoir have argued, the crucial sentence around which our understanding of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* must be fashioned is her retrospective revision of the ethical norms that govern a woman's choices and behaviors under systematic oppression: "Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."<sup>20</sup> Butler's Dana must move painfully toward a similar eth-

ical relativism as she discovers that the moral choices of a late-twentieth-century black feminist cannot be exercised with impunity in the world of the slave state. At earlier stages in her experience in Maryland, as Dana tells Kevin, she is able to cling precariously to the ethical imperatives of her own time, though even then her perspective and choices must necessarily be fundamentally different from his:

You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer.... I can understand that because most of the time, I'm still an observer. It's protection. It's nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then ... I can't maintain the distance. I'm drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don't know what to do. (p. 101)

The longer she remains in the nineteenth century, the thinner the protective cushioning becomes, until Dana finds herself five years later (in Maryland time) divided against herself, torn between absolute standards and pragmatic choices. The Dana of 1976 California finds it unthinkable that she would assist in the sexual exploitation of another black woman by a white man, but the Dana of 1824 Maryland finds herself in a moral trap. Rufus Weylin asks her to persuade Alice Greenwood, her own great-great-grandmother, to go to bed with him. Although she knows that her family tree is traceable to a child that Rufus fathers and Alice bears, Dana initially finds Rufus's proposal repulsive, and she angrily rejects it. But when Rufus tells Dana that he will beat Alice—perhaps even beat her to death—if she refuses his advances and if Dana does not try to change Alice's mind, she is caught in Harriet Jacobs's dilemma: "He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl—help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn't think much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself" (p. 164). The choice demanded by the situation will satisfy neither Dana's own internal standards nor the larger feminist principle of sisterhood; she suffers the same shame that Jacobs felt, but she also adopts the compromise.

In the end, what may be most powerful and valuable for readers of *Kindred* is the simple reminder that all that history occurred not so very long ago. In foreshortening the distance between then and now, Butler focuses our attention on the continuity between past and present; the fantasy of traveling backwards in time becomes a lesson in historical realities. We may also be reminded that historical progress is never a sure thing. In one of her brief respites in 1976 between bouts of enslavement in the nineteenth century, Dana reads the memoirs of Jewish survivors of the Nazi death camps: "Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every

possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred" (p. 117). The systematic horrors of American slavery could have provided a model for that later programmed oppression and genocide.

Like Dana and Kevin, the reader of *Kindred* may discover a closer kinship with the characters and events of the antebellum South than we often care to admit. And just as Dana feels compelled in the novel's epilogue to travel to contemporary Maryland and "touch solid evidence that those people existed" (p. 264), readers of this fantastic invention may also find their felt understanding of history enriched and deepened. In *Kindred* Octavia Butler has designed her own underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader.

## Notes

1. Kenan, 498.
2. Salvaggio in Barr, et al., 33.
3. Rushdy's "Families of Orphans" comments astutely on the concept of home in *Kindred*; the chapter on *Kindred* in his later book, *Remembering Generations*, makes an extensive analysis of family as a social construct. For the most comprehensive discussions of *Kindred* and history see Govan's "Homage to Tradition," Levecq's "Power and Repetition," and Kubitschek's chapter in *Claiming the Heritage*.
4. Beal, 14; Kenan, 495; Potts, 336–37. Not all her critics have been willing to accept Butler's disclaimer, and some have seen genetics and sociobiology, not physics, as the sciences underlying *Kindred*. See the essays by Elyce Rae Helford and Nancy Jesser.
5. Mixon, 12.
6. See Butler's essay "Positive Obsession" in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 125–35.
7. Beal, 15; Rowell, 51.
8. McCaffery, 65.
9. Octavia Butler in a note to Beacon Press, 12 February 1988.
10. George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949), which imagines the evolution of a new culture in the aftermath of a biological catastrophe in North America, features a black matriarch who mothers the new society and warns against repeating the colonialist patterns of dominance and enslavement in the old culture. In *More Than Human* (1953), Theodore Sturgeon's three linked novellas about social outcasts with psychic powers, twin black girls with telekinetic powers help form the alternative human community the novelist calls *homo gestalt*. In both books, however, the black characters are largely stereotypical and play secondary roles to

white men.

11. Bradbury, 96.

12. Quoted by Govan, "Connections, Links, and Extended Networks," 87, n. 12.

13. McCaffery, 69.

14. Kubitschek, 27.

15. Harrison, 32–33. See also Butler's short essay "The Monophobic Response."

16. Kenan, 497. For a similar blurring of past and present and of the identities of ancestral slaver and contemporary husband see Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

17. Kubitschek offers an alternative reading, suggesting that physical affinities between Kevin and Rufus actually point to fundamental differences in character.

18. Douglass, 52.

19. The conclusion of *Kindred* can be compared with the final episode of the other notable feminist time-travel novel of the 1970s, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), in which Consuela Ramos kills her doctors in self-defense, a revolutionary act made in the hope of bringing into being the utopian future she has visited.

20. Jacobs, 56.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Both Kevin and Dana know that they can't change history. They say: "We're in the middle of history. We surely can't change it" (p. 100); and "It's over.... There's nothing you can do to change any of it now" (p. 264). What, then, is the purpose of Dana's travels back to the antebellum South? Why must you, the reader, experience this journey with Dana?
2. How would the story have been different with a third-person narrator?
3. Many of the characters in *Kindred* resist classification. In what ways does Dana explode the slave stereotypes of the "house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom" (p. 145)? In what ways does she transcend them?
4. Despite Dana's determination to refuse the "mammy" role in the Weylin household, she finds herself caught by it: "I felt like Sarah, cautioning" (p. 156). Others see her as the mammy as well: "'You sound just like Sarah'" (p. 159). How, if at all, does Dana reconcile her conscious efforts with her behavior? How would you reconcile them?
5. "I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery." Dana says this to Kevin when they have returned to the present and are discussing their experiences in the antebellum South. Do we also in the twenty-first century still have conditioned responses to slavery?
6. How do you think Butler confronts us with issues of difference in *Kin-*

*dred*? How does she challenge us to consider boundaries of black/white, master/slave, husband/wife, past/present? What other differences does she convolute? Do you think such dichotomies are flexible? Artificial? Useful?

7. Compare Tom Weylin and Rufus Weylin. Is Rufus an improvement over his father? How, if at all, is Dana's influence evident on the adult Rufus?

8. Of the slaves' attitude toward Rufus, Dana observes, "Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time" (p. 229). How can they feel these contradictory emotions? How would you feel toward Rufus if you were in their situation?

9. Compare Dana's "professional" life in the present (i.e., her temporary work) with her life as a slave.

10. When Dana and Kevin return from the past together, she thinks: "I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality" (p. 191). Why would the twentieth century seem less vivid to Dana than the nineteenth century?

11. Dana loses her left arm as she emerges—for the last time in the novel—from the past. Why is this significant?

12. Kevin is stranded in the past for five years, while Dana is there for less than one year. Why did Butler feel Kevin needed to stay in the past so much longer than Dana? How have their experiences affected their relationship to each other and to the world around them?

13. A common trend in the time travels of science fiction assumes that one should not tamper with the past, lest you disrupt the present. Butler obviously ignores this theory and her characters continue to invade each other's lives. How does this influence the movement of the narrative? How does it convolute the idea of cause and effect?

14. Dana finds herself caught in the middle of the relationship between Rufus and Alice. Why does Rufus use Dana to get to Alice? Does Alice also use Dana?

15. The needs and well-being of other residents of the plantation create a web of obligation that is difficult to navigate. Choose a specific incident and determine who holds power over whom; assess how it affects that situation.

16. Dana states: "It was that destructive single-minded love of his. He loved me. Not the way he loved Alice, thank God. He didn't seem to want to sleep with me. But he wanted me around—someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him and care about what he said ..." (p. 180). How does the relationship between Dana and Rufus develop? How does it change? What are the different levels of love portrayed in *Kindred*?

17. Discuss the ways in which the title encapsulates the relationships within the novel. Is it ironic? Literal? Metaphorical? What emphasis do we place on our own kinship? How does it compare with that of the novel?

18. Do *you* believe that Dana and Kevin's story actually happened, or did they simply get caught up in the nostalgia of examining old papers and books? How would their situation's significance have changed in Dana's and Kevin's lives if it had been imaginary? If it were merely nostalgia or an imagined situation, how would that change your perception of the antebellum South and the treatment of slaves? Would that make the events less significant?

19. Butler opens the novel with the conclusion of Dana's time travels. The final pages of the book, however, make up an epilogue that once again demonstrates a linearly progressive movement of time. How does the epilogue serve to disrupt the rhythm of the narrative?

20. After returning from his years in the nineteenth century, Kevin had attained "a slight accent" (p. 190). Is this alteration symbolic of greater changes to come? How do you imagine Kevin and Dana's relationship will progress following their reentry into life in 1976?