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Revisiting History: Anti-Racialist Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's Kindred

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REVISITING HISTORY: ANTI-RACIALIST AFROFUTURISM IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Brad C. Kelly

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ABSTRACT

Popular understanding of history is dominated by racial binaries that suggest the Black past and the white past are wholly antithetical to one another. In *Kindred,* Octavia Butler uncovers interconnections between Black and white Americans that complicate this understanding by having her characters travel to the antebellum period. By uncovering these interconnections, Butler is able to envision a future in which Black and white Americans are reunited through the recognition of their shared, yet vastly differing, sufferings under white supremacy. I have termed this idea anti-racialist Afrofuturism because Butler seeks to dismantle the social construct of race through her illumination of Black and white Americans' interconnections. I begin by explaining how Butler's representations of whiteness contrast with those of other Black writers. She differentiates herself from previous generations of Black writers by punishing white-supremacist characters who prove themselves to be irredeemable instead of generalizing about white morality. She also does not wholly align herself with Black Arts writers, her near-contemporaries, because she portrays white supremacy instead of whiteness as antagonistic to Blackness. I then discuss Butler's depiction of anti-racialist Afrofuturism in the epilogue, in which Dana and Kevin return to 1970s America transformed by their experiences in antebellum Maryland. These characters speculate on the anti-racialist possibilities of the past that historical records fail to account for, and they seem to have a better understanding of one another, an understanding that in turn benefits their interracial marriage. This anti-racialist Afrofuturism is represented allegorically in a number of Butler's other works, and I argue that it is a project that spans her entire career. Lastly, I discuss the continued relevance of Butler's ideas, as shown in multiple contemporary adaptations of her work and continued popular and scholarly interest in her writings.

KEYWORDS: Afrofuturism, Octavia Butler, *Kindred*, Blackness, whiteness, anti-racialist, race, slavery, racism, white supremacy

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I dedicate this thesis to my students. I hope to share my love of literature and learning with all of you.

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INTRODUCTION: THE MISEDUCATION OF A RURAL MISSOURIAN

While attending public school in a rural area of Missouri where Black people accounted for less than one percent of the population, I was taught that because of the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, racism was a relic of the past. My teachers imparted vague ideas that slavery was horrific and that Black people struggled throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but my classmates and I were assured that Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. solved these problems. We were never given specifics about the conditions on slave plantations or the wide-spread lynching of the Jim Crow Era. The true details were hidden behind vague euphemisms like "racial tensions" and "struggles."

However, I began to question this line of thinking during my senior year of high school. My English teacher tasked us to write profiles about someone close to us who had experienced an historic event. My grandmother, Mary Ann Nelson, offered to share her mid-1950s experiences with school integration. She gave me a glimpse of Black history that had been glossed over in my education. Recalling how white people in her community, many of whom I knew, actively protested against school integration, she said that "the boys were all 'gung-ho'" about trying to deter the six Black high school students who planned to integrate. She remembered hearing racial slurs daily and watching white students frequently assault their Black peers. More specifically, she witnessed these Black students brave a bombardment of rocks thrown at them on their way to school each morning, and a march occurred in her hometown in opposition of school integration.

I began to recognize that there were significant gaps in my understanding of racism. The "racial tensions" and "struggles" suddenly had faces—faces of people I personally knew. I

started to question the idea that racism had simply ended with the Civil Rights Movement, as I had been taught. How could these people, who had once assaulted young Black students and marched the streets to deny them rights, become accepting of Black people? It seemed like a dynamic change that would be unlikely to have swept so swiftly through an entire generation. It became even clearer that I was missing context when, in 2014, Black Lives Matter protests erupted in Ferguson, Missouri—only a few short hours away from my hometown. If racism had ended, as my K-12 teachers implied, why were these protests happening?

In 2015, professors at my university helped enlighten me of the context I was missing through Black literature and Black history lessons. In an African American literature course, I was introduced to the subversiveness of Phillis Wheatley and Richard Wright, the emotional testimonies of Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin, and the creative ingenuity of Amiri Baraka and Octavia Butler. As my education in literature progressed, I discovered contemporary Black writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Claudia Rankine, Jason Reynolds, and Angie Thomas. Through these writers, I made connections between historic and contemporary racism. I could trace the development of today's police brutality back to the patrollers of the antebellum South and the Ku Klux Klan and lynch mobs of the Jim Crow Era. I realized the simple story of the end of racism that my K-12 teachers told was blatantly false, and I started to read Black literature and engage with Black perspectives in contemporary media outside of academic contexts.

While later pursuing a master's in literature, I continued my academic exploration of Black history by writing about Black artists and representations for my coursework whenever possible. In 2022, with the significant help of Dr. Matt Calihman, my professor for African American literature and twentieth-century American literature, I presented a paper exploring

Zora Neale Hurston's politics in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her most well-known novel, at a literature conference. In the span of seven years, I had come a long way from being largely ignorant of Black history to being accepted as a presenter for a conference on a prominent Black writer.

Today, I am still learning about Black perspectives with this thesis project exploring Butler's magnum opus, *Kindred* (1979), a novel that directly connects Black history with the present through time travel. *Kindred* seems to be calling for readers to understand the relevance of the past to present-day society, and this understanding is precisely what my own studies of Black literature have illuminated. Butler represents whiteness to envision a future beyond white supremacy, a future that connects Black and white perspectives. Much of Black literature, such as Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" and Baraka's *Dutchman*, understandably casts whiteness as antagonistic to Blackness, while other texts like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* largely do not represent whiteness at all, or at least not directly. In contrast, Butler represents whiteness through multiple antebellum and contemporary characters, and she identifies not whiteness itself, but instead white supremacy, as Blackness's antagonist.

Butler's representations of whiteness are strikingly different than those of previous generations of Black writers. At the end of *Kindred*, Butler has Dana, the novel's Black protagonist, and Kevin, her white husband, reflect in their 1970s present on their travels to antebellum Maryland. These characters, who are both ill-informed about historic realities prior to time travelling to antebellum Maryland, become acquainted with the complexity of historic and contemporary race relations by the novel's close. Throughout *Kindred,* Butler portrays white supremacy's negative effects on Black and white characters alike to highlight the connections

these characters share despite white supremacy's insisting they are unalike. Butler invites readers to consider how white supremacy has separated Black and white Americans so that they may reconnect in the present and ultimately create a future free from white supremacy's grasp.

As my K-12 miseducation on race in America begins to suggest, Blackness remains underrepresented in mainstream society today. By merging Blackness and whiteness, Butler is forging a path to a future in which Blackness is included in normative conceptions of history and race relations. This future is therefore an Afrofuture because it centralizes Blackness by underscoring its inseparability from whiteness. I argue that Butler imagines an Afrofuture in which white supremacy is dismantled through a reexamination of history that reconnects the shared history between Black and white Americans that has been divided by the social construction of race. In chapter two, I explain how Butler's *Kindred* responds to the Black Arts Movement's asserting Black artistry's exclusion of whiteness by presenting white supremacy, rather than whiteness itself, as antagonistic to both Black and white Americans. In chapter three, I argue that she therefore differentiates herself from previous generations of Black writers and Black Arts writers, her near-contemporaries, by aligning Blackness and whiteness against white supremacy in what I term anti-racialist Afrofuturism, a concept that constructs a future in which Americans have overcome white supremacy through a deliberate historical reckoning, particularly by white Americans, that interposes unracialized possibilities among racialized historic roles. In chapter four, I provide further evidence for this analysis of *Kindred* by examining similar concepts across her writings, and I conclude by discussing the continued relevance of Butler's writing.

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT AND *KINDRED*

As Butler began publishing her work in 1970 ("Octavia"), writers like Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka were redefining Black art in what came to be known as the Black Arts Movement, which emerged as a cultural counterpart of the Black Power Movement. The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s centered around the concern that previous generations of Black writers failed to create authentic Black art. For instance, Baraka[1] criticized Phillis Wheatley, the first Black writer to publish a book in America, for imitating English poets of the eighteenth century instead of representing the voices of enslaved people across America (82). He said much the same of Charles Chesnutt's writing, suggesting that its "'refined Afro-American' heroes" were Chesnutt's attempts to show white oppressors that Black Americans were cultured enough to join their ranks, and Baraka felt Chesnutt's depictions were in stark contrast to the experiences of late nineteenth-century Black Americans, who were often lower class and faced lynching and racial discrimination (82-84). Baraka denounced what was considered serious Black art at the time for its failure to confront the reality of the Black American experience; instead, he hailed Blues music and James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* as models of Black artistry because they depict the emotions and experiences of Black Americans outside of the middle class (83-84).

However, Butler set herself apart, in some ways, from the Black Arts and Black Power movements. She suggested that their rhetoric failed to recognize historic realities (even if, as in the case of Baraka's critiques, these movements sometimes privileged historical consciousness).

[1] Baraka's early works, including "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" were published under his birth name, LeRoi Jones. I have used Baraka for clarity throughout.

For instance, Butler expressed sympathy with the struggles of previous generations of Black Americans and sought a meaningful representation of their struggles with racism. She recalls watching her mother endure kinds of Jim Crow experiences that were common even outside of the South: "people talked about her as if she were not there, and I got to watch her going in back doors and generally being treated in a way that made me … [feel] ashamed" ("Conversations" 28). Butler explains that when she was a child, she blamed her mother for tolerating racism but that she later realized that her mother's tolerance of racism as a domestic worker kept food on the table ("Conversations" 79).

This realization is what sets Butler apart from the Black Power and Black Arts intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. In an interview, she recalls a young Black man verbalizing the Black Power Movement's failure to rectify its conundrum with previous generations of Black people: "He said, 'I'd like to kill all these old people [the older Black generation] who have been holding us [Black people] back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents'" ("Conversations" 79). She believes this young man, like the Black Power and Black Arts movements in general, failed to recognize the necessity of previous generations' tolerance of racism "for not only their lives but his as well" ("Conversations" 79). Although this young man was knowledgeable about Black history, "he didn't feel it in his gut" (qtd. in Crossley 270), and it is upon this criticism of Black Power and Black Arts that Butler says she began to imagine *Kindred* ("Conversations" 79). As Robert Crossley puts it, Butler strives "to recover something of the experiences of the nineteenth-century ancestors of those who, like herself . . . , had come of age during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements" (270). She further explains, "one of the reasons I wrote *Kindred* was to resolve my feelings" ("Conversations" 28). This comment suggests that Butler is responding to her feelings of contradiction about her admiration of her

mother's endurance and her frustration about her mother's tolerance of racism. Butler is keenly concerned with multigenerational experiences with white supremacy, while also calling for the end of Black people's tolerance of racism, like her mother's tolerance of her racist employer, that seemed too complacent of a stance against racism. *Kindred*, then, is a complex answer to the Black Arts Movement's insistence on the need to reflect the reality of Black experience.

However, Butler seems to depart from Black Arts ideas in establishing her relation to white audiences. Some Black Arts writers railed against Black "protest literature," which they described as writing that addresses moral appeals to the white oppressor. In his widely read manifesto, "The Black Arts Movement," Neal quoted poet Etheridge Knight's critique of protest literature.

> Now any Black man who masters the technique of his particular art form, who adheres to the white aesthetic, and who directs his work toward a white audience is, in one sense, protesting. And implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protestor's 'grievance' (the very word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin. (qtd. in Neal 15)

Articulating the sort of Black nationalist position that dominated the Black Arts movement, Neal called for "the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world" (259). Although Butler's *Kindred* centers around slavery and contemporary effects of past and present-day white supremacy, she does not altogether believe, like Knight, Neal, and Baraka, that Black art should address only Black audiences and reflect only their experiences. Rather, Butler's depictions in *Kindred* indicate she is interested in addressing white audiences and representing their experiences alongside Black audiences and experiences. Notably, Dana, *Kindred's* Black protagonist, is married to a white man, and many of her close interactions in the novel are with the Weylins, her white ancestors. Throughout the novel, Butler

explores the psychology of these white characters through the eyes of Dana, the first-person narrator, to explain how the burden of white supremacy has negative effects on both Black and white people of the past and present.

This mixture of Black and white perspectives also veers from the work of prominent Black Arts poet Sonia Sanchez, who charts her departure from the "white world" and return to her "'roots' in the black community" in her 1969 collection *Home Coming* (Lee 229). Here Sanchez reclaims her identity as a Black American and celebrates it as beautiful (Sanchez 229), urges Black Americans to buy art from Black artists instead of "honkey thieves" (Sanchez 233), and responds to lynching by telling her audience to "git the word out" that "blk/[anti-Black slur]s / are out for lunch / and the main course / is gonna be … white meat" (Sanchez 233). Sanchez's clear denunciation of the racism she sees as inherent in whiteness is in stark contrast to Butler's depictions of mixed ancestry and interracial marriages in *Kindred*, even if Butler, too, directly confronts white supremacy.

Butler, as a science-fiction writer[2], was criticized for not "'doing something more relevant'" for the Black community, a criticism that further illustrates her departure from dominant Black Arts notions ("Conversations" 153) Skeptical Black readers asked, "'what good is science fiction to Black people?'" ("Positive Obsessions" 134). This question is comparable to Black Arts rhetoric, particularly Neal's notion that "the black artist must link his work to the struggle for his liberation and the liberation of his brothers and sisters" (13). Until recent decades, science-fiction was dominated by white writers, and Butler, Samuel Delany, and Steve

[2]*Kindred* is often excluded from the science-fiction genre because, as Butler notes, "there's absolutely no science in it" (qtd. in Beal 14). However, many claim that *Kindred* occupies a nuanced space between science-fiction and fantasy because the time-travel in the novel is what A. Timothy Spaulding and Roger B. Henkle characterizes as "the element of the fantastic" (26).

Barnes were outliers within the genre ("Conversations" 5). Given the genre's history of mostly white authors and characters ("Conversations" 5), Black Arts critics like Neal would have likely considered Black-authored science-fictions as a cheap imitation of white models, and both Butler and Delany admit that science-fiction had a reputation of being "juvenile" and "anti-intellectual" ("Conversations" 155).

However, Butler defends science-fiction's significance against Black people's devaluing her work.

> What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what 'everyone' is saying, doing, thinking—whoever 'everyone' happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people? (Butler, "Positive" 134-35)

Butler here challenges the idea that science-fiction is meaningless for Black people by stressing its ability to engage with all facets of history and society that then inform future possibilities. Particularly, I suggest the "narrow footpath" ("Positive" 134) Butler is directing Americans away from is the usual centering of white perspectives. However, her comment "whoever 'everyone' happens to be this year" ("Positive" 135) seems to suggest she does not want American perspectives to be skewed toward Black perspectives either, or any other racialized perspective for that matter. It is an unracialized perspective that encompasses the perspectives of both groups that Butler is aiming for in her anti-racialist Afrofuturism. In short, Butler hails the genre's unique ability to challenge cultural norms that she uses to imagine an unracialized Afrofuture.

Considering the context of *Kindred*'s publication in 1979, another cultural norm that Butler is challenging is contemporary racism. Although Black protest movements had made

progress against racism, racial discrimination continued throughout the twentieth century. Black Americans across the nation faced de facto discrimination, as seen by Dana and Kevin's families' rejecting their interracial relationship (Butler, *Kindred* 110-11), which seemingly reinforces segregationist thinking of the past. Although much of the novel takes place in the antebellum setting, it places the past alongside the present to demonstrate similarities in the treatment of Black people in the past and the present. It questions the idea that racism ended with the abolition of slavery and the Black freedom movements of the twentieth century. In essence, Butler is using the antebellum past to reveal white supremacy's survival into the present, a persistence that, without historic context, could go unnoticed or disregarded by some Americans.

Butler also finds value in science-fiction because it can depict Blackness in futuristic settings. Butler told an interviewer that Black people are too often thought of as "part of only [their] own past" ("Conversations" 64). In other words, people tend to think of Blackness only in relation to slavery; however, Butler's works suggest that Blackness also exists in the present and the future. Although *Kindred* deals directly with this past with its antebellum setting, it compares the past with the present to propel Blackness into an Afrofuture

Furthermore, her thoughts on science-fiction's relevance to the Black community also indirectly speaks to Afrofuturism, an artistic movement that would not be theorized until the publication of Mark Dery's 1994 essay "Black to the Future." Although the definition of Afrofuturism has fluctuated since that time, Butler has continually been considered a forerunner of Afrofuturism, with adrienne maree brown going as far as dubbing Butler "the mother of Afrofuturism" (Arablouei). As it is currently understood, Afrofuturism envisions, critiques, and speculates on the future using Black historical and cultural vantage points (Womack 9). Examples of Afrofuturism include Sun Ra's mid-twentieth century music that represented

"ancient African culture and imagery as well as space motifs" and George Clinton's music that placed Black people in outer space using "street talk and ghetto slang" within the futuristic setting (Caffrey). Butler's thoughts on science-fiction quite clearly portrays it as a genre that can do all these things for the betterment of Black people.

Danielle Fuentes Morgan considers *Kindred* a work of Afrofuturism because of its "remembering, recalling, and restating the past otherwise" (20). Morgan argues that the neo-slave narrative genre[3] allows Butler to undertake a postmodern exploration of slavery that is both released from Neal and Baraka's Black Arts mandate to reflect only Black experiences and free from the "didactic obligations" of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives (20). Although Butler's depictions of slavery are based on her visits to plantations and historical research ("Conversations" 29), her primary aim was to not retell the facts of slavery but rather to "confront the modern person with the reality of history" (207). By having Dana travel between antebellum Maryland and present-day Los Angeles, Butler creates a new Afrofuturistic perspective founded on this mixture of past and present Black realities.

I am not the only one to read Butler's *Kindred* as an Afrofuturistic response to the Black Arts Movement. Sarah Wood writes, "*Kindred* can be read as Butler's response to the ideological disparities that emerged within the black protest movements of the 1960s; it is also a parting shot at the marginalization of black history by white America and the concomitant dangers that this brings for the formation of both individual and national identity" (87). Wood argues that *Kindred* bridges a gap between Black Arts writers and writers (namely white writers) who tended to marginalize Black perspectives. Taking a similar approach to the novel, Philip Miletic reads

[3] Neo-slave narratives are a genre in which writers explore the topic of slavery without first-hand experiences of the practice itself (Kennon).

Kindred as a response to a certain ahistoricist tendency in Black Arts theory and practice. He argues that Butler's Afrofuturistic vision in *Kindred* meshes the past, present, and future in opposition to what James Edward Smethurst terms the "death of history" (qtd. in Miletic 265), an Afrocentric Black Arts notion of disregarding traditional conceptions of history that are often Eurocentric (Miletic 265). For instance, Black Arts writers sometimes separated the unpleasant parts of history, often involving whiteness, from their work (Miletic 265). In fact, some emphasized Black Americans' African ancestry while glossing over Black experiences in America (Miletic 266).

Butler is certainly rejecting late-twentieth century white conceptions of history. However, she does not ignore the reality of whiteness within Black history. She portrays antebellum America and 1970s America as having one deeply intertwined racial history tied together by white supremacy. She suggests the Black experience cannot be fully understood without the white experience, and vice versa, for the experiences of one group often cause ripple effects in the other. *Kindred* refuses the marginalization of Black history by interweaving the Black past and the white past. Butler portrays history as racially indivisible. She suggests that these pasts are, by themselves, decontextualized pieces of a single history. In all, Butler portrays history with both Black and white perspectives to promote a more complete version of history.

Like Morgan, I place *Kindred* within the Afrofuturistic and neo-slave narrative traditions. Butler centers Black perspectives on both historic and modern-day racism through Dana's detailed account of her experiences with slavery and her hardships of being in an interracial marriage. However, as I have emphasized, she does not discount white perspectives. Butler builds upon the literary tradition of the Black Arts Movement's recentering of Black experiences by finding common ground between Black and white perspectives. She does not pander to white

audiences—after the manner of "protest literature," as understood by Black Arts theorists like Neal and Knight—but instead creates an Afrofuturistic vision in which a more accurate vision of history is possible, a history in which Black and white perspectives are not separated. In *Kindred*, white supremacy haunts not only Black characters but also white characters. Butler is, therefore, keenly interested in depicting white supremacy as not only the cause for slavery and subsequent oppression of Black people but also the corruption of American society. I argue that Butler's Afrofuturism highlights a wide variety of experiences to propose an anti-racialist perspective that unifies Black and white audiences' reckoning of their shared yet vastly different experiences with white supremacy. Butler constructs this anti-racialist Afrofuture by showing that white supremacy has always been a problem for not only its objects, Black people, but also its subjects, white people. For Butler, this fact unites these two groups, even if racialism and white supremacy also separate one from the other.

The Multiracial Effects of White Supremacy

Butler's *Kindred* is often described as an Afrofuturist text, but scholars less frequently discuss Butler's depictions of whiteness in the novel. My account of *Kindred*'s anti-racialist Afrofuturism requires further attention to these depictions. Shreyashi Mukherjee does touch on whiteness in her essay on teaching *Kindred*, but she fails to mention the historical context of the novel. She suggests that Butler breaks the socially constructed binaries of race through her use of the "white [anti-Black slur]" (qtd. in Mukherjee 75), a phrase used by Alice, an antebellum Black character, to demean Dana, whom Rufus seems to favor over the other enslaved people on his family's plantation (75). This phrase suggests that Dana is seen as both white and Black. She receives privileges that the Weylins do not afford their other slaves, and these privileges make

her seem white to other Black people, but she is nevertheless a slave because white people perceive her as Black. Because she is identified as both Black and white, depending on who is identifying her, Dana's racial identity is a challenge to binary race.

Mukherjee also states that Butler's *Kindred* calls into question the idea of stereotyped historical roles through her depictions of Kevin and Rufus, who are not initially consumed by white supremacy but still have racist tendencies (75). Whereas Rufus does eventually fall into the role of a slave-owning white supremacist (though, as I will later argue, there is nuance here, too), Kevin spends his time in the antebellum period as an abolitionist activist, and his actions contradict traditional historical notions of what AnaLouise Keating frames as a binary of "bad whites" and "good non-whites" (qtd. in Mukherjee 75). Keating writes, "Like all binary oppositions, this dualism is far too simplistic and conflates literary representations of 'whiteness' and 'white' people with a homogeneous, ahistorical group composed of all real-life human beings racialized and classified as 'white'" (61). In her depictions of Kevin and Rufus, Butler suggests history is not quite as black and white as popular conceptions of history suggest but rather exists in a social gray area.

Keating provides several examples of Butler de-racializing her characters in *Kindred*. She points out that in many of Butler's novels, including *Kindred*, racial descriptions of characters are not given until the reader is well acquainted with the character (85-87). For instance, Dana is not identified as Black until the third chapter, and Kevin is only identified as white thirty pages beyond that (Keating 87). Keating finds that her students often assume Dana is white, and she therefore argues that Butler makes her readers confront their biased understanding of whiteness as the non-racialized standard (89). Butler further calls into question readers' assumptions about racial norms when she identifies Kevin as white because, as Keating notes, most readers will

assume he is Black because Dana is Black (90). *Kindred* also portrays race and color as an arbitrary social construct because many people, regardless of physical appearance, have multiracial ancestry (Keating 89-90). Keating emphasizes Dana's surprise at having a white ancestor and the description of one of Rufus's biracial children as "almost white" (Butler, *Kindred* 210) as evidence of Butler's dismantling of racial binaries in *Kindred* (90). In short, Butler seems to be suggesting that one's appearance does not necessarily indicate one's racial identity (Keating 90).

Like Mukherjee and Keating, Ashraf Rushdy considers *Kindred*'s representation of whiteness. Rushdy casts *Kindred* as a palimpsest text (10), or a text that traces how the past informs the present (27), pointing to Dana's struggles to discern differences between her ancestral kinship to white slave owners and her present kinship to her white husband (10). According to Rushdy, Butler challenges the notion of separate racial histories and identities through Dana's ancestry, which is riddled with complex family dynamics created by slavery (109). Furthermore, he posits that the injuries born out of Dana and Kevin's struggles in the antebellum period symbolize contemporary wrestling with such complexities (108).

Anne Donadey takes a symbolic approach to *Kindred* to suggest Butler is acknowledging white and Black Americans' roles in America's long legacy of white supremacy. She proposes that Dana and Kevin are symbols for the tension resulting from this unresolved legacy between contemporary Black and white Americans (67). She further develops this idea by explaining the significance of the particular dates in the novel. For example, Donadey points out that time travel events happen on July 4, 1976, the bicentennial anniversary of the United States, and June 19, the date that Juneteenth recalls (67-68). Donadey also suggests Butler addresses the entirety of the United States through *Kindred*'s geographical settings, Los Angeles and Maryland, that span

from coast to coast (67-68). Moreover, Donadey argues that even small details in the novel could be symbolic, with Kevin Franklin's name potentially being a nod to Benjamin Franklin, a founding father who called for the abolition of slavery as early as 1790 (Donadey 67-68). Interestingly, Donadey also extends this interpretation to Dana's severed limb, arguing that it represents the familial dismemberments caused by the slave trade and white men's raping of Black women under chattel slavery (72).

My aim is to explicate further the role of whiteness in *Kindred* to showcase an anti-racialist Afrofuturism that dismantles the social construct of race through its comparison of Black and white experiences. Butler's writing is markedly different from what Neal, Knight, and Baraka dismissed as protest literature. Neal and Knight stressed that earlier Black artists seemed to grovel to white audiences for racial equality, and Baraka felt that earlier Black artists were simply imitating white artistry and inaccurately depicting Black experiences. Butler's representation of whiteness is secondary to her primary depiction of the Black experience, and she represents whiteness not to grovel or imitate but rather to link Black and white perspectives. This linking is necessary to paint a version of history that accounts for how deeply intertwined Black and white experiences were historically and still are today. This connection, in turn, eliminates the need for separate racial histories that the term "Black history" implies because it becomes clear that Black and white history are inseparable due to the legacy of white supremacy that has impacted both perspectives for generations in different ways. With this unification of perspectives, Butler's Afrofuturistic vision begins to unfold through the deconstruction of racialized histories.

Like Rushdy, I argue that Butler implores her readers, beginning with the very title of the novel, to consider various kinships across racial divides. There are obvious connections to the

title, such as Dana's ancestral relationship to Rufus and Alice, but these are far from the only kinships. Throughout *Kindred*, Butler explores love, friendship, and family, all of which seem to know no racial boundaries despite white supremacy's efforts to impose them. Racial binaries would have people believe in rigid roles such as master and slave, but Butler illustrates that, although these social roles existed, people were able to play multiple social roles and so give the lie to racial binaries. This investigation of social roles highlights the complexity of history because Black people can simultaneously denounce white supremacy and accept their multiracial ancestry.

However, I disagree with Rushdy's premise that Dana disavows her white ancestry to come to terms with her present-day relationship to her white husband. Rushdy writes that "Dana is able to claim and deny kin, to relate and disrelate herself, across racial lines. Butler's point is that we should not allow our constricted sense of family to delimit our social connections but that we should allow a generous social and political will to enlarge our understanding of family" (118). Rushdy claims that by Dana's murdering of Rufus, her white ancestor, she disassociates herself from her ancestry so that she can form a new kinship to her white husband (125). I instead argue that Butler's *Kindred* embraces this ancestry to ultimately halt the perpetuation of white supremacy.

For instance, Rufus, despite developing into a slave-owning white supremacist, is openly in love with Alice throughout the novel, and his love adds complexity to his role as her master. As a child, Rufus refers to Alice as his "friend" (Butler, *Kindred* 28), and in his young adulthood, Rufus admits to Dana, "'If I lived in your time, I would have married her'" (Butler, *Kindred* 124). Rufus's innocent feelings toward Alice sour after she marries a Black man instead of accepting Rufus as her lover. Rufus becomes consumed with jealousy and possessiveness, and

these feelings prompt him to rape her and later enslave her. He feels that Alice had no right to reject his love and sexual advances: "'I didn't want to just drag her off into the bushes. . . . I never wanted it to be like that. But she kept saying no. I could have had her in the bushes years ago if that was all I wanted'" (Butler, *Kindred* 124). His white supremacist upbringing has taught him to assume ownership of Black people—including Alice, who is previously free—and this social conditioning causes misery for both him and Alice. It turns his innocent love into what Dana refers to as his "destructive single-minded love" (Butler, *Kindred* 179-80). Thus, Rufus can be characterized as both friend, rapist, master, and perhaps even lover in some of the happier moments he has with Alice.

Rufus is also both "master" and "Daddy" to his biracial children by Alice (Butler, *Kindred* 253), and these seemingly paradoxical titles further complicate the rigid racial binaries that often determine popular conceptions of history. Although Rufus is slow to accept his multiracial children, he admits to Dana that he intends to free them and discusses sending his son to a northern school (Butler, *Kindred* 235). His affection for his children brings kinship between Black and white Americans to the forefront because Rufus must choose either to fall in line with the white-supremacist custom of holding them as slaves or to follow his fatherly instincts and raise them as his children. He struggles to make a decision about his children because of his antebellum upbringing. After complimenting Joe, Rufus's son, Dana narrates, "Rufus looked surprised—as though it had never occurred to him that there might be anything special about the undersized runny-nosed child. He had spent his life watching his father ignore, even sell the children he had had with black women. Apparently, it had never occurred to Rufus to break that tradition. Until now" (Butler, *Kindred* 231). Shortly after this recognition, Dana catches Rufus in a fatherly moment with Joe as Rufus shows him a map of Maryland. Rufus's wrestling to choose

between the social roles of father and master is shown by his reaction to Dana's observing his interaction: "I made a noise and Rufus looked up at me. I thought he looked almost ashamed for a moment" (Butler, *Kindred* 231). However, he cannot "keep from laughing" when Dana compares Joe's curiosity to Rufus's childhood rambunctiousness (Butler, *Kindred* 231). Popular understanding of history would have people believe that holding multiracial children as slaves was an easy decision made by callous slave owners, whereas Butler proposes that such decisions were sometimes complicated and difficult.

Butler's blurring of racial boundaries illustrates the negative consequences of white supremacy on not only Black Americans but also their white American contemporaries. Of course, the effects of white supremacy are much worse for Alice because she loses her freedom and bodily autonomy, while Rufus only experiences negative emotions and the loss of familial connections. Yet, Butler demonstrates that Alice's misery cannot be explained without a thorough analysis of the white experience with white supremacy. Dana clarifies the shift that occurs in Rufus's regard for Alice because of his white supremacist notions: "'So you'll be rid of the man [Alice's husband] and have possession of the woman just as you wanted. . . . rape rewarded'" (Butler, *Kindred* 124). To understand fully Alice's misery, one must also account for Rufus's intentions and feelings because Alice is not made a slave simply because she is Black. It is a combination of her Blackness, Rufus's desire for her, and Rufus's white supremacist upbringing that has taught him that if she will not willingly submit to him, he can possess her as a slave.

Although Rufus does ultimately become what white supremacy urged southern plantation owners to become, Butler first depicts Rufus as a child without racial prejudice. Despite his antebellum upbringing, he seems to have no qualms about treating Black people as his equals.

When Dana rescues him from a fire, he is described as “curious and unafraid” (Butler, *Kindred* 20) and “surprisingly at ease with [Dana]” (21). He respects Dana’s command to not call her or other Black people “[anti-Black slur]” (25), and, as I previously stated, he refers to Alice as his “friend” (28). Although he uses an anti-Black slur to refer to Black people, a practice that Dana characterizes as “innocent questioning” (25), Rufus, as a child, does not wholeheartedly accept the white-supremacist ideology of the antebellum period.

However, Butler parallels the abuse Rufus’s father inflicts on him with the treatment of slaves, so even as a white child, Rufus is not unharmed by white supremacy. Tom Weylin, his slave-owning father, punishes Rufus in the same way he does his slaves. Rufus recounts being whipped so severely by his father for setting a stable on fire that, if his mother had not intervened, Weylin “‘would have killed [him]’” (Butler, *Kindred* 26). Butler reveals that this whip is the same one that he "whips [anti-Black slur] and horses with’” (*Kindred* 26). This identification of Rufus with the enslaved people on the Weylin plantation suggests that the physical cruelty of white supremacy extends beyond Black people to white children. Weylin’s white supremacy ultimately results in Rufus’s fearing his father and feeling his father is consumed by concerns with finances (Butler, *Kindred* 26). White supremacy, as Butler here understands it, is more than just a synonym for racism. It is instead a systematic dehumanization of others that is born out of slavery. Although white supremacy affects both Black and white people, it does indeed affect Black people in more physically and emotionally brutal ways because of the racial hierarchy inherent in white supremacy.

Furthermore, Rufus is himself objectified and reduced to his monetary value by his father, suggesting that capitalism also influences white supremacy. When Rufus suffers an injury from a fall, Weylin says, “‘Guess it’s broken all right. Wonder how much that’ll cost me’”

(Butler, *Kindred* 65). There is no concern for his son's pain; his only concern is the damage the injury will do to his finances. This reaction is unsurprising, for Weylin is accustomed to reducing Black people to their monetary value, referring to them as simply an "investment" (Butler, *Kindred* 80). Rufus's reduction to the price of his health occurs in the same chapter in which Sarah's children, all of whom are slaves, are defined in terms of their financial value. Sarah explains to Dana that three of her four children were sold to traders but that the fourth was not sold simply because her muteness makes her less valuable in the eyes of slave traders (Butler, *Kindred* 76). She further reveals that her children are sold specifically so that Margaret Weylin can purchase "'new furniture, new china dishes, fancy things … things she didn't even need!'" (Butler, *Kindred* 95). This blatant disregard for familial connections and humanity demonstrates that the Weylins view their slaves as a means to obtain their material desires. Yet Rufus, too, is caught up in this calculus.

Rufus's abusive upbringing and his father's reduction of his humanity to his financial costs provides context for his own moral corruption and his treatment of Alice in his young adulthood. Rufus is one of *Kindred*'s more dynamic characters. By the novel's close, he is shown to be indoctrinated into white supremacy through his own experiences with abuse and objectification, and he has learned to treat others, particularly Black people, in the same way his father treats others. Without this context, Rufus would be simply a possessive and cruel young man. Instead, Butler frames him as a heartbroken young man who, in his lashing out, replicates the ways he was abused and reduced by his white supremacist father. He therefore continues the cycle of white supremacy because he can gain authority by assuming the role of white-supremacist oppressor. His assuming this role then forces Black people to continue being oppressed because of white supremacy's racialization of them.

This is not to say that Butler tries to redeem white supremacists. Instead, I suggest she is explaining the nature of white supremacy. Butler paints white supremacy as a systemic force because it persists by white-supremacist parents abusing both their children and Black people, and this abuse later serves as a model for their children to abuse others. By revealing the nature of white supremacy, Butler provides context that allows for a fuller understanding of history to take place. Without this context, white Americans would seem to be senselessly cruel. However, looking at historical roles from this narrow perspective is harmful to understanding the interconnections between Black and white Americans because it suggests white people are unexplainably cruel to Black people. Although white supremacists were undoubtedly cruel to Black people during the antebellum period, Butler adds nuance to Americans' narrow perception of the time period by showing white people to be victims of white supremacy as well.

However, as victims with much more privilege, white Americans are tempted to become white supremacists because they can relieve some of their suffering by exerting power over others, primarily Black people but also, in less harsh ways, white children and white women. This nuance then allows for a more complex view of history to take root because Black and white people can be linked as victims of white supremacy, while also showing white supremacists to be born out of this power imbalance through the temptation of relieving their own abuse. In short, Butler invites readers to rethink popular conceptions of history that suggest that Black lives and white lives were absolutely distinct from one another.

This complexity provides context that allows for an Afrofuture free of white supremacy to take place. She paints white supremacy as a cycle of abuse that plagues generation after generation of white Americans, who then inflict their frustrations on generations of Black people. Without the complexities of history, like the interconnections Butler depicts, Rufus

seems a cruel perpetuator of white supremacy. However, the context Butler provides shows him to also be a victim of white supremacy. Although it seems paradoxical to depict white people as both victims and abusers, it is through examining this paradox that an Afrofuturism that moves beyond the social construct of race is possible, for Black and white Americans can be reconnected through a fuller understanding of history's racial complexity.

Butler provides other examples of the reciprocal consequences of white supremacy on Black and white people she depicts as an inherent aspect of white supremacy. As I mentioned earlier, white and Black characters alike are disconnected from their families by white supremacy. Specifically, white supremacy negatively affects the relationship between Rufus and his mother. Their relationship is depicted as strained and abusive as a result of his mother's racism. Margaret is overly protective of her son, particularly when it comes to his encounters with Black people. In the opening chapter, "The River," Dana performs CPR to save Rufus after he nearly drowns (Butler, *Kindred* 14). Upon seeing Dana with her son's unconscious body, Margaret assumes that Dana has murdered him. While hitting Dana, Margaret screams, "'You killed my baby!'" (Butler, *Kindred* 14). Had she succeeded in stopping Dana, Rufus likely would have died simply because Margaret views Black people as dangerous. Although she clearly cares for her son, Margaret is blinded by racism and cannot accept the idea of Dana's helping her son.

Margaret's obsession with and defensiveness about her son is also born out of the white-supremacist custom of slave owners' raping their female slaves, a custom that functioned to reproduce enslaved labor. In the chapter titled "The Fall," a conversation between Dana and Kevin reveals that Weylin has several illegitimate biracial children as a result of this practice (Butler, *Kindred* 85), which is the root of Margaret's violent jealousy toward Dana. During Dana's time on the plantation, she witnesses Margaret physically abuse these children because of

her "husband's sins" (Butler, *Kindred* 85). With these children running about reminding her of her husband's infidelities, Rufus is her only point of stability.

Through Butler's depictions of Margaret, Butler explains white women's role in white supremacy. Margaret's oppression is twofold. She lives in a patriarchal society in which women are only seen as wives and mothers, and white supremacy disallows her from effectively fulfilling these limiting roles. Her role as a wife is undermined by Weylin's infidelities. Since she cannot take out her frustration on Weylin, the person causing her frustration, because of patriarchal notions, she too is tempted by white supremacy and lashes out at Weylin's innocent multiracial children. This leads to an intense focus on her role as mother, which also leads to her suffering under white supremacy because her son prefers Dana to her.

This hyperfocus she has on her son as a result of her jealousy leads to strife in their relationship. Margaret's mistrust of Black people and her violent jealousy corrupts the loving bond she wants with her son. After Rufus's injury in "The Fall," Dana begins reading to Rufus, and Margaret, in her jealousy, attempts to compete for Rufus's attention. As Dana reads to him, Margaret pesters Rufus, trying to outperform Dana as a motherly figure, but Margaret's pestering only causes an aggressive outburst from Rufus. He tells her, "'You're making me sick, Mama. Get away from me!'" (Butler, *Kindred* 104). Her jealousy of Dana becomes apparent in her response: "'I don't see how you can talk to me that way. . . . Just because of some [anti-Black slur]'" (Butler, *Kindred* 104). With this comment, Butler reveals that Margaret's jealousy stems from white supremacy. She feels that she is supposed to be superior to Black people, and Rufus's preference for Dana's reading over his mother's doting challenges Margaret's claims on this status. Between Weylin's abuse and Margaret's jealousy, the Weylin family dynamic is dysfunctional and contributes to their abuse of Black people on the plantation.

The emotional disconnection of the Weylin family mirrors the physical separation of Black families under chattel slavery, indicating an all-encompassing strain on familial relationships caused by white supremacy. In the same chapter in which Rufus suggests that his father cares more about his finances than his family (Butler, *Kindred* 26), Dana witnesses the harrowing physical separation of Alice and her enslaved father. Dana watches fearfully as slave patrollers beat both of Alice's parents unconscious and drag her father away (Butler, *Kindred* 36). Alice, too, watches the scene, crying and kneeling next to her unconscious mother (Butler, *Kindred* 37). With these two disconnections being only a short eleven pages apart, Butler seems to be suggesting that white supremacy isolates both Black and white Americans. In other words, Butler appears to present the Weylin and Greenwood families as sharing a kinship because they both suffer under white supremacy.

Yet, the antebellum period is not the only setting in which white supremacy adds strife to white familial connections. As Butler recounts the beginnings of Dana and Kevin's relationship, it is revealed that white supremacy has alienated Kevin from his sister, Carol. Upon telling her that he is marrying a Black woman, he learns that Carol "'wouldn't have [Dana] in her house—or [him] either if [he] married [Dana]'" (Butler, *Kindred* 110). However, Butler characterizes Carol's racism as learned rather than inherent. Kevin explains that her racism is inspired by her husband, who, Kevin says, would "'make a good Nazi'" (Butler, *Kindred* 110). Before marrying, Kevin's "white and fat and homely" sister had a "black and fat and homely" (110) best friend whom she abandoned to marry "the first dentist she ever worked for" (111). Notably, the only difference in Butler's description of Carol and her Black friend is their race. Butler describes their relationship as almost sibling-like, but their close bond does not save Carol from white supremacy. Despite Carol's not falling prey to racist thinking in her youth, she eventually

conforms to white-supremacist notions at the cost of her life-long friendship and her relationship with her brother. This passage posits white supremacy as a powerful force in the late twentieth-century moment that constitutes one of the novel's two temporal settings.

Furthermore, this idea relates directly to Donadey's symbolic approach to *Kindred*, which I summarized earlier. When Dana makes her final return to the present on the bicentennial anniversary of the United States, Butler demonstrates that white supremacy has remained a constant force since the nation's inception (though she would surely locate white supremacy's beginning even earlier, at the beginning of American slavery). Butler mirrors white supremacy's corrupting Rufus in her descriptions of Carol's life. Both have seemingly innocent beginnings, but they both eventually conform to their white supremacist environment. This mirroring further stresses a need for a unification of Black and white experiences to combat the ongoing perpetuation of white supremacy in America. However, as I will argue in the next section, Butler's representation of whiteness does not neatly align with Black Arts writers who often bracketed off whiteness, nor does this representation align with what Black Arts writers considered to be "protest literature," i.e., Black-authored writing that groveled to white people for racial equality.

Beyond "Protest Literature" and the Black Aesthetic

Admittedly, these parallels in *Kindred* seem similar to what Black Arts writers would call "protest literature." For instance, Frederick Douglass's *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an ur-text for contemporary neo-slave narratives, also presents white supremacy, and more narrowly slavery, as a corruptive force for white and Black Americans alike. Douglass describes his former mistress's indoctrination into white supremacy upon becoming a

slaveowner. Raised in a non-slaveholding family, Mrs. Auld began married life with the "kindest heart," but her "cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage" (Douglass 47). Similar to Butler's depictions of Carol in *Kindred*, Douglass's *Narrative* shows white supremacy to be a corrupting force, even to those who were once unaccustomed to such practices.

However, I argue that it is important to consider audience and genre to understand Butler's representation of whiteness in *Kindred*. One key difference between Douglass's *Narrative* and Butler's *Kindred* is their audiences. Describing Douglass's readers, Kimberly Lankford observes that he "addressed an intended audience of white, northern men, who shared beliefs with editor William Lloyd Garrison, such as the value of self-education and self-sufficiency" (9). At its core, Douglass's *Narrative* set out to recruit these white men, who were the sole holders of voting power in mid-nineteenth century America, for his abolitionist cause by proving to them that Black men could be their intellectual peers (Lankford 5). Douglass's *Narrative*, out of political necessity, was a direct appeal to white audiences; because Black people held no institutional political power, Douglass had to combat his readers' prejudices so that they would join his abolitionist cause (Lankford 5).

In contrast, Butler's audience in late twentieth century consisted of "science fiction devotees, Black fans, and feminists" (Romeo), and, as Butler reveals in an interview, her science-fiction devotee audience was largely white because of the genre's historic exclusion of Black characters and perspectives ("Conversations" 5). Even though a significant portion of her audience was white, it is also important to consider that *Kindred* was published in 1979 following the Black freedom movements of the mid-twentieth century that granted Black Americans more legal protections and political power than they had historically held. Thus,

Butler does not have to prove herself as an intellectual to the same degree that Douglass and previous generations of Black writers did, and this context helps differentiate Butler's representations of whiteness from Douglass's representations of whiteness.

Furthermore, Butler represents whiteness in response to the Black freedom movements of the mid-twentieth century. As stated previously, Butler is writing *Kindred* to reconcile her feelings of sympathy toward earlier Black generations' struggles and her frustrations toward them for the stagnation of racial progress. It seems her solution is to dismantle the social construct of race. Against the advice of many of her Black Arts near-contemporaries, she chooses to represent whiteness to show interconnections between Blackness and whiteness that could lead to the undoing of racial binaries in the present. Butler revises her audiences' perceptions of history by demonstrating that racialized history cannot accurately reflect historic realities, and she brings this revision into the present to deracialize the present. Thus, I argue Butler is not placating white science-fiction readers per se, but she is instead showing white audiences their connection to Blackness.

Certainly, Butler's representation of whiteness is quite different from the representations found in Douglass's *Narrative.* The portrayals of whiteness in *Kindred* are not a direct appeal like the portrayals in *Narrative*. It is rather an Afrofuturist project that imagines a future without the social construct of race. Instead of the pandering that Douglass seems to be doing in *Narrative*, Butler asks her white readers to connect with Blackness because whiteness cannot ultimately be separated from Blackness if Blackness is to be understood in its entirety. Whiteness, just like Blackness, is an essential part to the construction of an anti-racialized future because it has a profound impact on Blackness.

Butler's depictions of whiteness are also partly based on original slave narratives such as Douglass's *Narrative*. As Christine Levecq notes, it is no coincidence that Butler sets the antebellum sections in Maryland, the primary setting of Douglass's *Narrative* (543). In fact, Butler acknowledges Douglass's impact on her writing of *Kindred*: "I also was aware of the two particularly famous Marylanders who had been slaves, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. . . . [The 1840s] was a time I felt a little bit familiar with" ("Conversations" 206). Levecq also notes many of Dana's contemplations and observations of the antebellum setting allude to situations and ideas found originally in *Narrative*. For example, Levecq argues that Dana's observation about the slaves being fed from troughs like animals and the idea that slaves are created over a long period of conditioning and dehumanization both appear in Douglass's *Narrative* (543).

Although Butler does not replicate the militant opposition to whiteness as some Black Arts writers did (e.g., the aforementioned Sanchez), she does align with Black Arts theory, in a sense, insofar as she kills off white supremacist characters who show no signs of remorse. Neal's idea of the "destruction of the white thing" (259) is realized, in a limited way, with the death of Weylin and Rufus. Weylin remains a staunch white supremacist throughout much of the novel; there are only fleeting suggestions that he has any morality at all. He enslaves, sells, rapes, and tortures the Black people on his plantation with little or no remorse. When he has a heart attack, Dana reluctantly tries to save his life: "For a moment, I stared at him, undecided, repelled, not wanting to touch him again, let alone breathe life into him" (Butler, *Kindred* 208). Despite Dana's efforts, Weylin dies without taking any steps toward moral redemption.

And despite Rufus's seemingly innocent beginnings, he, too, is killed off. As the novel progresses, Rufus develops into a white supremacist, and he ultimately becomes much the man

whom his father was. This persistence of Weylin's white supremacy is most apparent when Rufus assumes responsibility for the plantation after his father's passing. At first, Rufus is reluctant to sell slaves, describing the first sale in which he is involved as his father's doing: "'Look, this sale is something my father arranged before he died. You can't do anything about it'" (Butler, *Kindred* 222). He also frames this sale as a financial necessity, noting that despite his father's frugality, "he still left debts" (Butler, *Kindred* 226). Yet, he later sells slaves in a selfish attempt to claim Dana as his own. Rufus sells Sam, a slave who expressed romantic interest in Dana, out of his desire to have Dana for himself. When Dana begs Rufus not to sell Sam, Rufus strikes her (Butler, *Kindred* 238), causing a shift in their relationship that indicates Rufus's indoctrination into white supremacy.

Rufus further proves himself as irredeemable when his emotional abuse of Alice causes her suicide, which then leads to his attempting to rape Dana. Rufus tries to persuade Alice to willingly submit to him by pretending to sell off her children by him (Butler, *Kindred* 250-51). In her agony, she hangs herself (Butler, *Kindred* 248). In his adulthood, Rufus, at times, views Alice as his wife instead of viewing her as a slave to rape like his father did with Tess, an enslaved woman. He allows her to choose Hagar's name (Butler, *Kindred* 233), and there are fleeting glimpses that he cares for her despite his enslaving and raping her. For example, after she gives birth to Hagar, Rufus is less concerned with Hagar and instead peers "with even more concern at Alice's face" (Butler, *Kindred* 233). Rufus seems to try to turn away from white supremacy in his relationship to Alice. Therefore, Rufus's redemption from white supremacy seems to be halted when Alice dies. Rufus believes there is no other reason to turn away from white supremacy, so he tries to rape Dana, explaining, "'what else do I have to lose?'" (Butler, *Kindred* 259).

He then meets a violent end when Dana stabs him in self-defense, and he makes "an animal sound" as he dies (260), as if white supremacy has robbed him of his humanity. Dana's choosing to kill him thus reveals what Butler seeks to dismantle—white supremacy. As I have previously shown, Rufus often acts as a white supremacist in his adulthood, but Dana only kills him once he proves himself, by attempting to rape her, to be completely corrupted. It is also representative of Butler's refusal to accept white supremacy in her conception of an Afrofuture. Had Dana let Rufus live, she would have presumedly remained a slave on the plantation and become a replacement for Alice, seeing that Rufus viewed Dana and Alice as "two halves of the same woman" (Butler, *Kindred* 228). It is only through Dana's murdering of white supremacy that an Afrofuture can take place.

These deaths are certainly not something that would be included in protest literature like Douglass's *Narrative*. Although Douglass does fight a white man in *Narrative*, it is in self-defense, and he does not kill him. In contrast, Butler is quite direct about Dana's reluctance to help Weylin, and she gives Rufus a violent end. Butler is much more willing to destroy whiteness than her predecessors, but she is also more forgiving than many Black Arts writers. Sanchez's poem "for unborn malcoms," for instance, seems to call for the lynching of white people in response to the lynching of Black people (233). Levecq also proposes that although there are similarities between *Kindred* and *Narrative,* Butler, in the 1970s, was better able to depict the nuances of historical relationships between Black and white Americans, which would have been taboo when Douglass published *Narrative* in the 1840s (544-46). Considering Butler's literary and sociopolitical influences, I believe her depictions of whiteness can be explained as her answer to her sympathetic and frustrated emotions about racial progress and her adaptation of the slave narrative genre. Yet at the same time, Butler is not afraid to destroy

whiteness when she deems it to be irredeemably corrupted by white supremacy, thus differentiating herself from past and present Black writers' representations of whiteness.

Yet, Butler is only interested in destroying white supremacy, whereas Black Arts writers like Sanchez called for the destruction of whiteness in general. Notably, Butler does not kill off Kevin. Although he does not seem to be racist, he does have subconscious white-supremacist tendencies. At times, Kevin treats Dana in much the same ways that Rufus treats her as an enslaved person. Like Dana herself, Kevin is a writer, and he assumes prior to their marriage that Dana will be his typist. "'I'd let you type all my manuscripts,'" he tells her (Butler, *Kindred* 109). When she refuses to obey, he becomes "annoyed" and "angry" before finally telling her to leave if she "couldn't do him a little favor when he asked" (Butler, *Kindred* 109). Essentially, Kevin expects her to do his work without any compensation, just as an enslaved person would be expected to do.

Butler highlights this similarity when Rufus asks her to write his letters—a strikingly similar task to the one Kevin demands of her. "'You'll never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid doing jobs like this,'" Dana tells Rufus (Butler, *Kindred* 226). However, as an enslaved person, she must submit to Rufus's demand. Whether consciously or not, Kevin replicates the racial roles established in the antebellum period, as shown by the mirror relation between Kevin and Rufus's treatment of Dana. Hence, Butler appears to be suggesting that white supremacy, which developed during two and a half centuries of slavery, persists into the present, affecting even the most well-intentioned white person in contemporary America.

But even Kevin is not exempt from Butler's wrath toward white supremacists. He is not killed off like Weylin and Rufus, but he does have to endure a difficult learning experience in the antebellum period. Interestingly, Kevin must spend much more time in the antebellum era than

Dana must. After Weylin's whipping forces Dana to return to the 1970s, Kevin is left on the plantation for five years (Butler, *Kindred* 107, 185). Upon reuniting with Kevin, Dana indicates that these five years in the antebellum period had not been easy for him: "This place, this time, hadn't been any kinder to him than it had been to me" (Butler, *Kindred* 184). It is through his confrontation of white supremacy that Kevin emerges as a dynamic character. In fact, Kevin is left scarred and aged from his five years in the antebellum setting. Dana notices a "jagged scar across his forehead—the remnant of what must have been a bad wound" (Butler, *Kindred* 184). Kevin later reveals to Dana that he spent his five years in the antebellum period fighting against the white supremacy of the time. He was a conductor of the Underground Railroad, and he implies that he was involved with Denmark Vesey, a free Black man who plotted a slave rebellion (Butler, *Kindred* 193). His scar is presumably a result of this resistance to antebellum white supremacy.

Butler also describes Kevin as appearing more matured than he had in previous descriptions. He reunites with Dana "gray-bearded and dusty" (Butler, *Kindred* 183), and his face "was lined and grim where it wasn't hidden by the beard. He looked more than ten years older" (*Kindred* 184). These descriptions of a matured and grim-visaged Kevin suggest that his years of wrestling with white supremacy have not been easy. However, he does choose to oppose white supremacy through the Underground Railroad despite its difficulty. When Dana and Kevin initially arrive in the antebellum period, she worries he will instead simply tolerate white supremacy: "If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here" (Butler, *Kindred* 77). Yet, he defies Dana's expectations by actively opposing white supremacy when he does indeed become stranded for years. Butler further underscores his

difficulty when Kevin recounts witnessing a Black woman die in childbirth because her "'master strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her—dropped onto the ground'" (Butler, *Kindred* 191). Kevin is also transformed psychologically by his experience in the antebellum period. Upon Kevin's return to 1976, he has a difficult time readjusting to the present and connecting with Dana. His five years of countering white supremacy have alienated him from others and made him violent. When Dana asks him about his involvement with the Underground Railroad, his reply to Dana sounds "angry, almost defensive" (Butler, *Kindred* 193). In a bout of frustration, he topples everything on his desk and treats Dana like "some stranger" (Butler, *Kindred* 194). He then isolates himself from Dana by asking her to "'Leave [him] alone for awhile'' and shortly after gives Dana "what almost seemed to be a look of hatred" (Butler, *Kindred* 195). In these passages, Butler makes clear that Kevin has been deeply affected by the horrors of antebellum white supremacy, which have left him a changed man.

Butler redeems him from his unconscious white supremacist tendencies through this difficult learning experience. As I have already suggested, Kevin's bearded appearance could signify his gaining of wisdom. Prior to his years in the antebellum setting, he is quite ignorant about the seriousness of white supremacy. For instance, when Dana and Kevin are discussing the rejection of their relationship by his family, Kevin is surprised by his sister's racist reaction despite Dana's having warned him that his family might not take it well (Butler, *Kindred* 110). He again shows his ignorance in the antebellum world by telling Dana that she is "reading too much into a kids' game'' when she is appalled by the sight of Black children's performing the scene of a slave auction (Butler, *Kindred* 100). As a result of his white privilege, he fails to recognize the severity of the Weylins' abuse of their slaves. However, once he returns, he is much more aware of white supremacy, expressing concern about rape when Dana returns from a

subsequent interval in the antebellum past: "'Look, if anything did happen, I could understand it. I know how it was back then'" (Butler, *Kindred* 245). Ultimately, Kevin is forced to confront white supremacy head on, and, by spending five years rebelling against it, he becomes more understanding of the Black experience.

Returning to Kevin's injuries from the antebellum setting, I believe Butler's descriptions of his scar suggest his redemption. Butler's placing the scar on Kevin's forehead is symbolically significant because it points readers toward his mind. Undoubtedly, Butler portrays Kevin's experience as deeply trying through his changed appearance, emotional frustration, and anguished recollection of the antebellum past. His difficult confrontation with white supremacy is represented symbolically by the "bad wound" he incurred, but by the time he reunites with Dana, it is nothing but a scar (Butler, *Kindred* 184). This description implies that healing has taken place, and this healing could thus symbolize his journey from ignorance to enlightenment.

A. Timothy Spaulding and Roger B. Henkel argue that Kevin's transformation and Dana's experience as a slave suggest that Butler believes the key to healing from America's white supremacist past is the destruction of popular semblances of race and identity that disconnect the present from the past (60). An example of these popular semblances is historical records that often "document slavery as an institution" rather than the struggles of Black people (Spaulding and Henkel 60). I expand their interpretation to Butler's overarching project of anti-racialist Afrofuturism. In my view, Butler implies through Kevin's physical, psychological, and ideological transformation that a future without white supremacy is possible only if there is a direct confrontation with it. Spaulding and Henkel seem to place equal emphasis on Black and white confrontation of history. In contrast, I argue Butler places much of the onus on white Americans, as they have been and still are the perpetuators of white supremacy, whether

intentionally or unintentionally. Although Dana bears the brunt of the abuse, she spends much less time in the antebellum past than Kevin does, and she becomes quite aware of the reality of historic white supremacy much faster than Kevin does. Butler seems to suggest that contemporary white people with unconscious white-supremacist tendencies are not altogether irredeemable if they take the time to confront historic and contemporary white supremacy. Although Kevin's experience is not available in reality, Butler seems to be asking white Americans to educate themselves on Black perspectives. At the same time, she seems to be marrying Black and white American perspectives to come to a mutual understanding of historic realities. It is through this work that anti-racialist Afrofuturism is born.

Butler more directly compares white supremacy's effects in the antebellum and 1970s settings through Dana's description of her workplace. In the 1970s setting, Dana and Kevin's alcoholic boss, upon discovering they are in an interracial relationship, shouts, "'Chocolate and vanilla porn!'" (Butler, *Kindred* 56). To their boss, Dana and Kevin's interracial relationship is wholly carnal, not emotional. Buter portrays a similar scenario in the antebellum setting. When Margaret discovers that Dana has been sleeping in Kevin's bed, she calls Dana a "filthy black whore" (Butler, *Kindred* 93), presuming that their relationship has more to do with lust than love. This presumption is born out of chattel slavery, for many plantation owners raped their slaves to produce more slaves, assert their power, or achieve sexual gratification. Although which of these intentions Weylin acts upon in the novel is unknown, Butler reveals that he has several illegitimate multiracial children (*Kindred* 85) and rapes Tess, an enslaved woman on the plantation, on a regular basis (221).

By linking the antebellum past to the late-twentieth-century present, Butler shows that the root problem—white supremacy—remains long after the abolition of slavery. This persistence

also explains why Butler understands the acknowledgement of the past as a challenge to present-day white supremacy. Dana and Kevin are only able to recognize fully the effects of white supremacy once they have witnessed the similarity between the past and present. By comparing contemporary white people's treatment of Black people to white supremacy of the past, Butler highlights the relevance of the past on the present. For instance, Kevin's demand of Dana to type his manuscripts transforms from "a little favor" to a racially insensitive demand (Butler, *Kindred* 109). Dana, too, sees the similarity between the past and the present when she calls her workplace a "slave market" (Butler, *Kindred* 52).

> I was working out of a casual labor agency—we regulars called it a slave market. Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway. If you wanted them to think about using you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and sat down to wait. (Butler, *Kindred* 52).

In this passage, Butler implies that in some ways white supremacy has only become more efficient in abusing its victims and has expanded to encompass other groups. With slavery, the lives of Black people were at the very least valued for their monetary value, but Butler suggests in this passage that Dana's workplace is apathetic toward its employees because everyone is expendable due to the high demand for work.

Therefore, I argue that Butler's Afrofuturistic depiction of Dana and Kevin at the conclusion of the novel is predicated on the confrontation of white supremacy. Butler suggests that it is only with a thorough understanding of the past that Americans can truly understand the present. Contemporary abuses become clearer with the context of the antebellum period, and once there is mutual understanding of this past between Black and white Americans, the destruction of white supremacy and racial binaries can begin. As Butler has shown through the

development of Rufus into a white supremacist, white supremacy is a cycle, and Butler proposes the only way to break this cycle is through a confrontation of white supremacy. Once the cycle of white supremacy is broken through this confrontation, Butler's vision of anti-racialist Afrofuturism is able to take root, as shown by the depictions of Dana and Kevin in the epilogue.

ANTI-RACIALIST AFROFUTURISM IN *KINDRED*

Considering the representations of whiteness in *Kindred*, I suggest Butler's Afrofuturism envisions a future in which Black and white Americans recognize the history and the mutual repercussions of white supremacy. Dana and Kevin's marriage can be read as a symbolic representation of Black and white Americans' relationships, and an Afrofuturistic reality cannot take place without both characters recognizing historic and contemporary white supremacy. In the end, both experience the consequences of white supremacy, and it is with this mutual understanding, the novel ultimately suggests, that a better future can unfold.

In the epilogue, Dana and Kevin visit 1970s Maryland to investigate the antebellum past after their direct experiences with the past end with Rufus's death. In this section of the novel, Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturistic imaginings become apparent, as she blurs the line conventionally presumed to separate a Black past from a white past. Butler represents the unification of Blackness and whiteness when the couple actively seek out the past together by combing through historical records, visiting the remains of the Weylin plantation, and searching for Rufus's grave (Butler, *Kindred* 263). Notably, Butler describes the Maryland Historical Society as one of the couple's "haunts" (Butler, *Kindred* 263). This description implies that Dana and Kevin have an abiding concern with the past even after Rufus's death brings an end to their personal experience with history. This extension of their literal time travel supports my argument that Butler is calling on Black and white people to inspect popular conceptions of history more closely.

However, Butler is not suggesting a return to popular conceptions of history like those that Dana and Kevin find in historical records. In fact, Butler suggests contemporary depictions

of history inaccurately reflect the realities of slavery. When Dana witnesses Alice's parents' being beaten by patrollers, she contemplates her experiences with historic representations in film.

> 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 in front of me. (Butler, *Kindred* 36)

In this instance, Butler is suggesting that the reality of slavery is lost when translated to film. Although audiences can visualize the beating of a slave in a film, there are small details, like the "too-red blood" and "well-rehearsed screams," that fail to authentically represent history.

Butler also disparages the inadequacy and inaccuracy of published history when Dana tries to prepare herself between her trips to the antebellum setting: "I read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction. I read everything I had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject—even *Gone With the Wind*, or part of it. But its version of happy [anti-Black slur] in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand." (Butler, *Kindred* 116). *Gone With the Wind*, in particular, is a striking choice for Butler to mention because it undoubtedly romanticizes the antebellum South. The novel has been protested since it was adapted to film in 1939, and after recent public backlash against its "racist stereotypes and whitewashing of the horrors of slavery," the film now includes an introduction providing historical context for its romanticized depictions of the antebellum South (Schuessler). Seeing that Dana finds the historical accounts available to her in 1976 unhelpful when faced with the reality of the antebellum period, Butler seems to dismiss popular depictions of history, particularly depictions of slavery, as unrepresentative of historic realities.

Instead of regarding these texts as fact, Butler calls upon the "modern person" to confront the "reality of history" ("Conversations" 207). Butler's reimagining of history is most closely seen in Dana's speculating on the fate of Rufus's children after his death. As she and Kevin are investigating historical records to see what became of the Weylin planation after Rufus's death, Dana considers a variety of historic possibilities: "Margaret might have taken both children. Perhaps with Alice dead she had accepted them. They were her grandchildren, after all, the son and daughter of her only child. She might have cared for them. She might also have held them as slaves" (Butler, *Kindred* 263). This speculative historiography considers all perspectives in a way that favors neither Blackness nor whiteness. Dana recognizes that Margaret could have felt a family bond with these children, especially considering the loss of her only child, but Dana also recognizes that she could have sustained white supremacy by holding them as slaves.

This interest in both Black and white perspectives reveals Butler's denial of separate racial histories. She neither sides with Black Arts theorists who advocated for a purely Afrocentric approach to history nor follows the mainstream approach, which is of course no less committed to notions of racial purity in its centering of whiteness. Joe and Hagar, Rufus's biracial children, complicate the idea of separate racial histories because they are themselves both Black and white. Although most Americans of the past considered people Black if they had any Black ancestry, Joe and Hagar's genealogical connection to their Blackness died with their mother, and the only kin they have left after Rufus's death is their white grandmother. Their history cannot easily be separated into the categories of Black and white, and the children thus stand as a challenge to racial binaries.

Dana's hopeful resolution of Joe and Hagar's being accepted by their white grandmother also represents an Afrofuturistic possibility because it reunites an interracial family separated by

white supremacy. It suggests that Margaret could overcome white-supremacist pressures modeled by her husband's rejection of his illegitimate children and embrace Joe and Hagar. Her acceptance of her grandchildren creates an interracial beginning for her family, which would not be accounted for in popular conceptions of history. At the same time, Dana finds it equally plausible that Margaret could have "held them as slaves" (Butler, *Kindred* 263). Dana's suggestion that Margaret might have accepted them as her grandchildren aligns well with Morgan's definition of Afrofuturism as "remembering, recalling, and restating the past otherwise" (20). Butler offers her readers a reimagined past that complicates the narrative of separate racial histories.

Kindred does not ask for white Americans' complete adoption of Black perspectives at the expense of white perspectives; rather it shows that a complete understanding of history hinges on the representation of both Black and white perspectives simultaneously. Butler provides ample evidence to indicate this unification throughout *Kindred*. For example, Dana's and Rufus's fates are depicted as intertwined. She must keep him alive so that he can father Hagar, her ancestor, and he must keep her alive so that he can be rescued from his own fatal self-destructiveness. If one abandons the other, they both suffer, and this interdependence insinuates a unification between Blackness and whiteness for the betterment of both perspectives.

However, this is not to say that Blackness must embrace or celebrate white supremacy. As I explained earlier, Butler tends to punish white supremacy, as we see when Rufus is killed in his attempt to exercise a white-supremacist prerogative. Instead, Black Americans are asked to recognize their ancestral ties to whiteness and white supremacy but to reject the perpetuation of white supremacy. In interviews, Butler speaks to this anti-racialist concept I attribute to her Afrofuturism. In *Kindred*, even the slave-owning Weylin is not depicted as wholly evil. In fact,

when Rufus lies to Dana about sending her letters to Kevin, it is Weylin who forces him to send the letters as he promised (Butler, *Kindred* 181). "I don't like it," Butler told an interviewer, "when people talk about my work in terms of good guys and bad guys—this kind of simplicity—because it happens often and I never write that way" ("Conversations" 156). In light of this statement and the complexity of even the novel's unlikable characters, white supremacy becomes the antagonist in *Kindred*. Although Weylin is eventually consumed by white supremacy, Butler demonstrates that even the white supremacists of the past were not quite the absolute antagonists they are made out to be in traditional conceptions of history. Although their cruelty to Black people is inexcusable, Butler provides a nuanced glimpse into an anti-racialist interpretation of history by showing the relationship between master and slave was a bit more complex than the coldhearted figures found in traditional depictions of history. Overall, Butler challenges popular conceptions of history by showing how even slave owners, seemingly the staunchest white supremacists, had moments that revealed their humanity, which in turn allows for anti-racialist moments to happen. In short, this view of history allows for the partial acceptance of multiracial ancestry and the rejection of white supremacy.

This idea is also particularly evident when Dana ponders her relationship with Rufus as he attempts to rape her: "I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover" (Butler, *Kindred* 260). In other words, she can accept that they share an ancestral connection, but she refuses any relationship that would cast her in subservient positions to him. Afrofuturism also becomes relevant in this passage because some of the ways in which Dana is willing to accept Rufus imply futuristic conceptions of Black and white relationships. Particularly, the descriptions "younger brother" and "friend" evokes the image of an interracial family or friendship. As shown by the rejection of Dana and Kevin's

marriage by their families, interracial families were still taboo even in the 1970s. Yet, Dana has a willingness to accept Rufus as "younger brother" and "friend," and these relationships suggest that Butler envisions a future in which interracial families and friendships are seen as the norm —indeed a future that overcomes race.

I argue that white Americans, as the perpetuators of white supremacy, are the ones who must do the most work to achieve this unification of Blackness and whiteness. Kevin does not learn from Dana to turn away from his white-supremacist tendencies; rather, it is through his own volition—most notably, by becoming a conductor on the Underground Railroad—that he confronts white supremacy. I regard Kevin's independent choice to confront white supremacy as Butler's call for whiteness to join Blackness. It seems that, for Butler, this unification hinges on not only Black Americans' recognition of their ancestry and historical ties to whiteness but also white Americans' reciprocation of this recognition *and* their investigation of the historic realities, thus opposing white supremacy.

By confronting white supremacy in antebellum America, Kevin is able to achieve increased understanding within his interracial marriage. After murdering Rufus, Dana is "grateful" that Kevin "asked few questions" (Butler, *Kindred* 263). Through their shared experience with white supremacy comes a shared understanding of the trauma it inflicts, an understanding that is highlighted by Kevin's acceptance of Dana's act of self-defense. Additionally, their shared understanding is amplified through their mutual need to visit present-day Maryland; Kevin tells Dana, "'You probably needed to come for the same reason I did. . . . To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). This need for reassurance symbolically connects the past to

the present by having Dana and Kevin construct a new history built upon their experiences instead of popular conceptions of separate Black and white histories.

Kindred's intertwining of Black and white pasts allows Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism to take root. Dana and Kevin, having faced white supremacy and learned from their confrontations with it, point to a drastically transformed future. When the couple arrive in modern-day Maryland, race relations are improved but still imperfect, indicating more work to be done. There are interracial schools, but at the same time, older people do double-takes when they realize Dana and Kevin are in an interracial marriage (Butler, *Kindred* 262). Dana and Kevin, in their unique time-traveling confrontation with white supremacy, constitute an Afrofuturistic microcosm that must be replicated by contemporary Black and white audiences to achieve Butler's anti-racialist vision of history and a future that moves beyond the social construct of race.

However, Butler is not suggesting that Americans must directly experience the past in order to overcome white supremacy and achieve an Afrofuturistic society. Black Americans, *Kindred* seems to suggest, must consider their historical ties to whiteness, as Dana does with Rufus, and white Americans must unite with Black Americans in opposition to white supremacy, as Kevin does during his time in the antebellum past. It is through these actions that the overthrow of white supremacy and the making of an Afrofuturistic society becomes possible. In the final lines of the novel, Kevin mentions that, with the death of Rufus, a symbol for the corruption of white supremacy, the couple has "'some chance of staying [sane]'" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). The novel here begins to imagine a future in which white supremacy has been confronted and defeated through dual acknowledgement of the deep and inseparable connections between Black and white history.

However, historical white supremacy should not be forgotten. It is notable that Kevin is the one who says he needs "evidence that those people existed" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). Dana, for her part, also explores the past with him, but she bears daily reminders of the white-supremacist past, as indicated by her touching "the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on [her] face" and her "empty sleeve" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). By contrast, Kevin continues to remind himself of white supremacy despite not being subject to racial subordination. This continual work seems to be a key element of the Afrofuture that Butler imagines for them, for a world in which Dana is the only one resisting white supremacy would be problematic in their interracial relationship and, more broadly, for a liberated future.

Overall, the Afrofuturism in *Kindred* reestablishes the kinship between Black and white Americans through the exploration of the white-supremacist past that has unjustly separated them. Although white supremacy has reciprocal consequence for both Black and white Americans, Butler demonstrates how uncovering shared, albeit not identical, experiences with the past can lead to racial equality. As Butler portrays them in *Kindred*, Black experiences are inherently inseparable from white experiences because Black and white American histories are interdependent. There is no Black history and white history in Butler's Afrofuturism; there is simply the reality of history that acknowledges the shared experiences of these racial groups that were historically separated by white supremacy's construction of race.

Interestingly, Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturist vision is not confined to *Kindred*. In fact, I find this idea in many of Butler's other works. Although *Kindred* is Butler's only novel that centers around slavery, she often employs allegory to represent Blackness and whiteness. By writing in allegory, Butler is able to communicate her message through fiction instead of theoretical exposition, a genre largely only read by academics. Although her other works of

fiction do not use direct terms like white supremacy, Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism is still communicated through fictional representations of Blackness and whiteness (e.g., aliens and futuristic settings). Fiction also allows her message to reach a broader audience than the narrow academic audience of theoretical exposition.

ANTI-RACIALIST AFROFUTURISM IN BUTLER'S OTHER WORKS

Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism seems to be a career-long project. In one of her more well-known short stories, "Bloodchild" (1984), a non-human race called the Tlic uses humans as incubators for their offspring, and the story is often read as an allegory for slavery. In spite of the prevalence of this allegorical reading in the existing scholarship, Butler claims "Bloodchild" is not about slavery, and she asks her audience to consider her depictions of power in their interpretations ("Conversations" 66-68). I agree with Butler that characterizing "Bloodchild" as simply an allegory for slavery fails to acknowledge crucial pieces of the narrative, but many of the overarching concepts within the story are applicable enough for it to be read this way. Kristen Lillvis finds several motifs in her explication of "Bloodchild," among them "love, maturation, pregnancy, parasitism, and compromise" (138), and many of these same motifs are found in *Kindred*. For example, Rufus's love for Alice is similar to the Tlic's love for humans. Specifically, Rufus's raping of Alice is comparable to the Tlics' coercing the Terrans (humans) to carry their offspring. The protagonist of "Bloodchild," Gan, does seemingly have a choice to deny the implantation of the Tlic's offspring, but if he denies the implantation, his sibling will have to endure the gruesome process of Tlic birth in his place (Butler, "Bloodchild" 25). Neither Alice nor Gan have any real bodily autonomy, and just as slave owners used their female slaves to breed more slaves, the Tlic bred humans to incubate their future offspring. Moreover, the power imbalance in "Bloodchild" leaves the humans subordinates, just as white supremacy's power imbalance left Black people enslaved. Although "Bloodchild" can be read generally as a story about power imbalances, this motif is particularly applicable to slavery.

This approach that considers power imbalances in Butler's writing is useful in my interpretation of *Kindred*. *Kindred* is very much about slavery, as she shows it to be the social formation in which white supremacy begins. However, *Kindred*, like "Bloodchild," seems at the same time to be about the dynamics of power. In *Kindred,* Butler seems to suggest capitalism is a problem in similar ways that contemporary white supremacy is a problem. This similarity between capitalism and white supremacy is not coincidental considering slavery, the foundation of white supremacy, is itself a capitalistic labor regime. For instance, while describing her workplace as a "slave market," Dana explains that she has to compete with "winos," "poor mothers with children," and the mentally ill in order to get picked for the day's work (Butler, *Kindred* 52). Butler's comparison of Dana's workplace, which employs people from a variety of backgrounds, to a "slave market," which references the historic suffering of Black people, highlights how capitalism affects groups other than Black people in much the same way white supremacy affects Black people. Through Dana's comments, Butler is again linking the experiences of others to Black experiences to show that all of these people belong to a single history, and it is only through historical context that their connections can be understood.

Throughout her body of work, Butler remains interested in representing Blackness, but she also often speaks of two groups coming together. She thus reveals an ongoing commitment to an anti-racialist Afrofuturism. Although *Kindred* is the most direct of her works in its representation of Black history, Butler's perspective as a Black American is certainly influential across her writings. When asked if her identity as a Black American woman has influenced her works, Butler responded, "All writers are influenced by who they are. If you are white, you could write about being Chinese, but you would bring in a lot of what you are as well" ("Conversations" 73). Butler's thoughts here are reflected in her own writing because she

chooses Black protagonists in nearly all of her works, and many of her works confront racial inequality either allegorically, as with "Bloodchild," or explicitly, as with *Kindred*.

Although Butler contends that "Bloodchild" is not an allegory of slavery, she openly admits to addressing slavery in three of her novels: *Kindred*, *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Mind of My Mind* (1977) ("Conversations" 66). Both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*, the first two novels in her *Patternist* series, represent an anti-racialist Afrofuturism. In both novels, Doro, an immortal bodysnatching being born in ancient Nubia, indiscriminately possesses both white and Black bodies. As he recounts his origin to one of his descendants, she is surprised to discover that Doro was born Black because he often possesses white bodies (Butler, *Mind*, 95). He replies, "'It doesn't matter because I haven't been any color at all for about four thousand years. Or you could say I've been every color. But either way, I don't have anything more in common with black people—Nubian or otherwise—than I do with whites or Asians'" (Butler, *Mind*, 95). After refuting his descendant's insistence that he is Black, he is asked what race he is, and he replies, "'None that I have a name for'" (Butler, *Mind*, 96). Thus, I argue that Doro, despite his Black origin, is an anti-racialist manifestation of Afrofuturism because he transcends race through his millennia of bodysnatching and interacting with people of different races. Overall, Doro seems to rebel against the idea of racial constructs born out of the era of slavery.

Although Doro never occupies a futuristic setting, I characterize him as Afrofuturistic because his immortality allows him to develop beyond the typical constraints of a human lifespan. He has personally experienced history from all racial perspectives, and his experiences allow for a more widely informed world view. With his millennia of wisdom, Doro is indifferent to the race of the body he possesses beyond how it allows him to move throughout the world. For instance, Doro tells Anyanwu, a younger immortal African shapeshifter, that the reason he

possesses white bodies in antebellum America is because he is "not interested in trying to prove to one suspicious white man after another that [he] owns [himself]" (Butler, *Wild Seed* 84). He also seems "pleased" when Anyanwu decides to remain Black in America instead of shapeshifting into a white person to conform to American racism (Butler, *Wild Seed*, 84-85). Overall, Doro's bodysnatching abilities and immortality have made him anti-racialist, for he has no qualms about the races of the bodies he possesses, and he only selectively chooses white bodies to safeguard his humanity rather than to bow to racist pressures, as suggested by his pleasure at Anyanwu remaining Black in his majority-white American colony.

However, race is rarely explicitly mentioned in the *Patternist* novels as it is in *Kindred*; nevertheless, Butler seems to imply a connection between American race relations and the power struggles between telepaths in *Mind of My Mind*. As the telepaths begin building an empire among themselves, they begin calling non-telepaths "mutes," a name that Emma (known as Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*) says is comparable to an anti-Black slur (Butler, *Mind*, 169-70). She tells Doro that the telepaths look down on non-telepaths, and her comparison of "mute" with an anti-Black slur suggests Butler is inviting her readers to draw connections between the corruption of power in the telepaths and the comparable corruption of power in white Americans. By the time the last installment in the *Patternist* series, *Patternmaster* (1976), takes place, "mutes" are essentially slaves to the telepaths as they are controlled by a "muteherd" telepath (Butler, *Patternmaster* 1,519), thus proving Emma's suggestion that the telepaths were behaving like white supremacists.

Interestingly, Butler also comments on power imbalances in *Dawn* (1987), the first installment of her *Xenogenesis* series. *Dawn* is a post-apocalyptic story in which the warring United States and U.S.S.R. cause a nuclear winter that nearly leads to human extinction.

However, survivors of the nuclear warfare are rescued by an alien species called the Oankali, who investigate and edit human genes. In their investigations, an alien reveals to Lilith, the novel's protagonist, that "[Humans] have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. . . . [T]he two together are lethal. . . .You are intelligent. . . .You are hierarchical" (Butler, *Dawn* 39). The Oankali then work to correct the hierarchical nature of humanity by selectively interbreeding with humans.

Kitty Dunkley reads Butler's *Xenogenesis* series as posthumanist, arguing that Butler destabilizes "the hegemonic monolith that constitutes 'Humanness'" (96). Dunkley points to the Oankali's three genders (99-102), their mixed-species offspring's ability to pass as humanoid (102-08), and both of their broadening of humanness as providing a solution to confining constructs like gender, race, and natural humanhood through her *Xenogenesis* series.

> Butler's solution? Expansion of selfhood. Binary oppositions, she argues, offer a reductive and myopic lens through which to view the plurality of the universe; such tiny categorical boxes were never intended to be capacious enough to house the immensity of life, but rather to curtail its wayward heterogeneity. Unlike her inflexible and obstinate Humans, Butler's Oankali instead of expelling the Other, see the Other within themselves and actively choose to accommodate this disparity. (Dunkley 113)

In short, Dunkley explains that the concept of humanness that the humans in the *Xenogenesis* series uphold is too narrow to account of the complexity of life.

I agree with Dunkley's analysis of the *Xenogenesis* series as posthumanist, but I also argue that Dunkley's posthumanist reading can be extrapolated to read the series as an anti-racialist allegory. Anti-racialism and posthumanism are foundationally similar. If not for negative connotations stemming from media outlets' insisting that America is already beyond race, I would have used the term "post-racial" in place of anti-racialist because Butler seems to speak of a future after racialization while recognizing how historic racialization has affected

Black and white Americans. Nevertheless, both my and Dunkley's assessments point to Butler's dismantling of social constructions. As Dunkley notes, the Oankali are portrayed as the Other because their belief systems do not include hierarchy (100). The same could be said for the marginalization of Black Americans by white supremacy and its social construction of racial hierarchies. Therefore, reading the Oankali as a representation for Blackness is tenable.

Returning to the Oankali's assessment of humanity's hierarchal tendency, I believe Butler is in some ways alluding to white supremacy, a hierarchical system that subordinates Black people. Dunkley's posthumanist analysis encompasses such a reading while also broadening the interpretation to other hierarchies like gender and sexual identity, but when we consider Butler's other works, Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturist project seems to be further developed in her *Xenogenesis* series. In fact, the Oankali's treatment of humans is reminiscent of how Black people have been treated under white supremacist structures.

Throughout the series, the humans resent the Oankali because of their keeping humans in captivity, experimenting with their genetics, and looking and behaving differently. The humans' resentment mirrors white supramacists' resentment of Black people. Throughout much of American history, Black people have been held captive on plantations and ghettos. They have been used in medical experiments against their will, such as with the Tuskegee Syphilis Study that infected Black people with a dangerous disease without their informed consent. Moreover, Black people have been demeaned for centuries by racism and their cultural practices have been demonized through characterizations like "thug" (Smiley and Fakunle). Although Dunkley's posthumanism aligns quite nicely with the *Xenogenesis* series, I argue that there is sufficient evidence that can also be attributed to a narrower anti-racialist Afrofuturist reading.

This narrower reading of *Xenogenesis* is further supported when the conflict between the Oankali and humans comes to a head when the Oankali are testing the humans' ability to survive in nature so that they can place them back on Earth. The hierarchical trait the Oankali attribute to humanity is put on full display when a group of surviving humans turn against Lilith and her human mate because they are genetically altered by the Oankali. The leader of the non-genetically altered humans, Curt, kills Lilith's human mate and then segregates her and the Oankali from their camp: "'This is a human place! . . . It's off limits to you [the Oankali] and your animals [the genetically modified Lilith]'" (Butler, *Dawn* 242). This statement is strikingly reminiscent of segregationist thinking under Jim Crow, which dehumanized Black people by comparing them to apes.

It is in the aftermath of this standoff that Butler begins to replicate her anti-racialist Afrofuturism. Despite her overall resentment of the aliens throughout the novel, Lilith decides to help her alien mate to heal from the injury it incurred during the standoff by allowing it to burrow into her to use her genetic material to heal itself, even though this burrowing causes her pain (Butler, *Dawn* 247-48). Had she not voluntarily allowed her alien mate to burrow into her, it would not have been able to reproduce: "'Without your gift, it [her genderless alien mate] could not have regained full use of the sensory arm. It could not have conceived children'" (Butler, *Dawn* 252). In the closing chapter of *Dawn*, Lilith's Oankali mate reveals that Lilith is pregnant with a hybrid of her, her human mate, and her Oankali mate's genetic material (Butler 261), a child who will inherit the best traits of both species: "'Our children will be better than either of us. . . . We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations'" (Butler, *Dawn* 263). In other words, the next generation of Oankali-human hybrids

will be free of the humans' hierarchical nature, which I have characterized as Butler's representation of white supremacy.

This mixing of species to overcome power structures is similar to Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism in *Kindred*. Whereas *Kindred* deploys experimental historical fiction to suggest that Black and white Americans must confront white supremacy, *Dawn* deploys allegory to the same end. The struggle between the Oankali and humans can be read as representative of the struggles between Black and white Americans. *Kindred* several times represents white slaveowners' rape of enslaved women, and it is Dana's resistance to being raped that leads to Rufus's death, symbolic of the destruction of white supremacy. Rape also figures prominently in *Dawn*. Lilith is told that she cannot become pregnant after another human captive attempts to rape her (Butler, *Dawn* 103). She assumes that until the Oankali force her to have hybrid children, she will be sterile, but her Oankali mate corrects her and emphasizes that she can have children when *she* is ready (Butler, *Dawn* 101). This denial of a human children, who would perpetuate the hierarchal nature of humanity symbolic of white supremacy, underscores Butler's vision of an anti-racialist future because it eliminates any possibility of humanity's continuing unchanged. It is only through the acceptance of the Oankali, the perceived Other, that humanity is allowed to progress.

Yet, Lilith's Oankali mate impregnates her without her explicit consent, and she protests having to bear an Oankali-human hybrid: "'It will be a thing. A monster'" (Butler, *Dawn* 262). Her Oankali mate, who by this point seems to know all of Lilith's true feelings and intentions, tells her that she is lying to herself and that the child will be a beautiful mixture of their genetics (Butler, *Dawn* 262). Seeing that prior to this instance her Oankali mate has not done anything without Lilith's explicit consent, I infer that it takes her aid as her expressing she is ready to

accept the Oankali and to interbreed. Lilith's protests mirror Kevin's difficulty with white supremacy. As I have previously explained, Kevin's resistance of antebellum white supremacy is difficult for him, just as it is difficult for Lilith to express her readiness to accept the Oankali's otherness. Lilith's impregnation could be taken to mean that Blackness and whiteness have finally accepted one another. It allows for an Afrofuture in which white supremacy's hierarchy is shed though the mixing of the self with the Other.

Butler also creates a multicultural community that seems anti-racialist in her *Parable* series. The first of this series, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), takes place in California in the 2020s, which, at the time of her writing, was in the not-so-distant future. This dystopian novel depicts a world ravaged by climate change and drugs, and the American government has all but collapsed, with companies essentially getting by with treating their employees like slaves. Lauren, the novel's Black protagonist, must relocate after her community is burned and her family is murdered by criminals. Along the way, she meets people from various backgrounds: Black, Asian, Latino, and white. She convinces these people to form an Earthseed community, a religious community founded on the principle that "God is Change" (Butler, *Sower* 8).

The second novel in the series, *Parable of the Talents* (1998), sees Earthseed take shape after Lauren establishes the first Earthseed community at the end of *Sower*. *Talents* is told from the perspective of multiple characters: Lauren, Bankole (Lauren's husband), and Larkin/Asha Vere (Lauren's daughter). In *Talents*, the first Earthseed community is overtaken by Christian nationalists, who then put Lauren and her community members in slave-like conditions. Lauren eventually escapes this group, but she is separated from her family and community in the process. She then spreads her Earthseed religion, which eventually takes root across America, and she watches as the first Earthseed community launches into space.

Chriss Sneed takes an Afrofuturist approach the *Parable* series, citing Butler's representation of the past to enlighten the future. Sneed observes that Bankole, who is decades older than Lauren, helps Lauren shape Earthseed by theorizing that society is a cycle of turmoil and normalcy (Sneed 189-90). However, Sneed points to Lauren's hyperempathy, a disorder that causes her to feel the suffering and pleasure of others, as a catalyst for Butler's Afrofuturism. Because she shares the suffering of others, Lauren cannot wait for a return to normalcy and romanticize the past while people in the present suffer (Sneed 188). In light of her hyperempathy, Sneed suggests Lauren's persistence to fix the present and create a better future through Earthseed in spite of her own pain and the loss of her loved ones is Butler's Afrofuturistic depiction of breaking the cycle of the past to improve the future. He concludes that "Butler's attention to the intersection of self-making through a black woman's lens . . . along with her refusal to leave the past unexamined (even in fiction), is a critical component of the Butlerian alternatives to human rights found throughout the [*Parable*] series" (190). In other words, Sneed believes that Butler's writing often examines the past to create new perspectives that undermine harmful perceptions.

The *Parable* series also contributes to Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturist project. Sneed's framework is supportive of this interpretation. He suggests the pitfall of society in the *Parable* series is "rooted in the racialized, sexualized, and gendered chasms of everyday life" (187). Envisioning a radical transformation of society, Lauren combats these social constructs through her Earthseed religion. In part, her hyperempathy is what makes her anti-racialist. She does not feel only the suffering of Black people, although she does note that Black people tend to struggle more, but instead she experiences the suffering of everyone. Her unity with the pain and pleasure of others is the catalyst that causes her to write Earthseed, and with Earthseed's leaving behind

the world at the end of *Talents*, Butler proposes an Afrofuture that escapes the social constructs that Sneed points out. Thus, the anti-racialist Afrofuturistic project Butler began relatively early in her writing career is developed in her writings until her sudden passing in 2006, leaving *Talents* as her final novel.

However, two of Butler's short stories, "A Necessary Being" and "Childfinder," were posthumously published in a collection titled *Unexpected Stories* (2014). Butler's literary agent, Merrilee Heifetz, believes "Childfinder" to have been written in the 1970s, the same decade in which Butler was writing *Kindred* (95). "Childfinder," in particular, seems to express Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism quite directly. This narrative tells the story of Barbara, a Black telepath (or psi) who leaves an organization of telepaths and begins creating a "segregated black-only group" of telepaths (Butler, "Childfinder" 85). The story opens and closes with excerpts from the fictional "Psi: History of a Vanished People," and these excerpts frame the story as the failure of two groups to achieve a possible anti-racialist Afrofuture.

> *Standardization of psionic ability through large segments of the population must have given different peoples wonderful opportunities to understand each other. Such abilities could bridge age-old divisions of race, religion, nationality, etc. as could nothing else. Psi could have put the human race on the road to Utopia. . . . Historians believe that an atmosphere of tolerance and peace would be a natural outgrowth of a psionic society.* (Butler, "Childfinder" 79, 92).

Butler here again represents an opportunity for an anti-racialist Afrofuture by suggesting that the psis' telepathic abilities could help Black and white telepaths understand one another and overcome "age-old divisions" like white supremacy (Butler, "Childfinder" 92). However, Barbara seems uninterested in unifying with the white telepaths. She does quite the opposite by not only segregating her group of telepaths but also crippling white children's telepathic abilities (Butler, "Childfinder" 85-6). When she is forced to return to her previous telepath organization,

she tells her all-Black group of telepaths to carry on her work of finding and training Black telepaths, and she erases her memory of her group so the other telepaths cannot identify members of her all-Black group (Butler, “Childfinder” 90-6). It is this failure to unify, Butler seems to imply, that ultimately leads to the extinction of the psi civilization noted at the story’s close. Overall, Butler’s anti-racialist Afrofuturism persists today through the posthumous publication of her unpublished work and, more recently, through multiple adaptations renewing her work for contemporary audiences.

THE LEGACY OF BUTLER'S ANTI-RACIALIST AFROFUTURISM

Although Butler died in 2006, her groundbreaking work in Black science-fiction has left a lasting legacy. In 2017, *Kindred* was adapted into a graphic novel that remains true to Butler's novel. In fact, it draws heavily and directly from the novel while other details are expressed visually. Dana and Kevin's confrontation with the past becomes even more harrowing in the visual format, especially the artist's choice of depicting blood gushing from Dana's mouth as Weylin whips her (Butler, Duffy, and Jennings 98-99). The graphic novel adaptation also brings Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturist message to a wider audience. As a high school English teacher, I often recommend the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* to struggling readers who are intimidated by a full-length novel, and I have regularly included it in my library "book talks."

More recently, in December 2022, FX debuted the first season of a TV series adaptation of *Kindred*. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, the director of the series, loosely follows the plot of Butler's novel, but there are several notable differences. For instance, the present-day setting in the series is 2016 as opposed to 1976. Mallori Johnson, the actress portraying Dana in the series, says, "[2016] is a time, an era in history where we are talking about things. We are talking about race. We are talking about gender dynamics. We are talking about everything that's been difficult to socially discuss" ("First" 00:02:44-48). In this statement, Johnson highlights the relevance of Butler's message in *Kindred* to audiences today.

There are hints that the series will replicate Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism even with Jacob-Jenkins's changes. For instance, in the TV series, Dana discovers her mother, Olivia, is alive but trapped in the antebellum setting after having mysteriously time-travelled just as Dana has. This change might indicate Jacobs-Jenkins's attempt to reiterate Butler's focus on

multigenerational experiences. Kevin is also given white-supremacist tendencies, although Jacobs-Jenkins updates these tendencies from the typist remarks made in Butler's novel. In the series, Dana and Kevin are not married; in fact, they hardly know one another, meeting for the first time at a restaurant in the pilot. He then sexualizes her on a dating app by telling her he "gives all kinds of rides," insinuating his intentions are carnal and not romantic ("Dana" 00:15:17). With the later portrayal of Weylin's treating Winnie, an enslaved woman who appears only in the TV adaption, as a sexual object, Jacobs-Jenkins replicates Butler's depictions of multigenerational white supremacy.

However, at the time of my writing, only season one of the show has been released, a segment that, Jacobs-Jenkins says, covers "only a third of Butler's book" (qtd. in Goldberg). Unfortunately, audiences may never know if Jacobs-Jenkins would have replicated Butler's anti-racialist Afrofuturism because FX cancelled the series in early 2023 (Goldberg). Jacobs-Jenkins had hoped to adapt the novel in at least three to four seasons (qtd. in Goldberg), and the further development of the series could have allowed him to develop anti-racialist Afrofuturism in the series.

Regardless of the TV series' fate, Butler's *Kindred* proves itself to be relevant more than forty years after its publication. In fact, the school district I work for has, without my prompting, added *Kindred* to its English curriculum for the 2023-2024 school year. I am thrilled that *Kindred* is available to young people in my district, particularly in the wake of states' banning books that represent Black and marginalized voices. *Kindred* provides the perfect answer of resistance to the "anti-Critical Race Theory" movement sweeping the nation: anti-racialist Afrofuturism. In her unification of Black and white perspectives, Butler does not shame white readers for America's white-supremacist history; she instead shows how they are also victims of

white supremacy and offers her audience, Black and white, an opportunity to break the cycle if they will look closely at the reality of history rather than perpetuate the white supremacist notions that separated them.

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