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Haile Gerima's 1993 film Sankofa confronts the legacies of slavery, highlighting the ways the past constructs the present, by cinematically transporting its viewers to that era of human bondage. Indeed, the word sankofa is an Akan word that means "one must return to the past in order to move forward." The film opens with the protagonist, a contemporary African American fashion model named Mona, on a high fashion shoot at Ghana's Cape Coast Castle, formerly a holding site for kidnapped Africans before their one way departure through the "door of no return" to transatlantic slavery. It is obvious that Mona has forgotten her history as she happily poses for the photographer, seemingly detached from and oblivious to the implication of the historical context of her surroundings. Inside the castle, the spirits of the ancestors appear before her admonishing her to remember. Mona, along with the film's viewers, is then transported through time and space to a site of North American chattel slavery. This journey affords Mona, and the viewers, the opportunity to remember and to reclaim what she, and perhaps they, have forgotten or are in danger of forgetting: their "ancient properties" (Morrison 305). (1) The film's primary themes are the critical need for recovering and righting history, as well as the necessity of understanding the powerful connections between the past, present, and future. (2)

While Gerima's film inaugurated a cinematic trend in the 1990s of presenting the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved, most notably the movies Amistad (1997) and Beloved (1998), a number of contemporary African American women writers had already done so in their novels. (3) In particular, science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler creates in her fourth novel, Kindred (1979), a dialectic between two specific historical moments in American history: the period of chattel slavery and the richly symbolic bicentennial year of 1976. When Mona, Gerima's protagonist, travels to the past in order to learn about the history she has forgotten or never knew, the audience does so as well. Likewise, when Butler's twentieth-century protagonist travels to antebellum Maryland, she learns how the past shaped and continues to shape the present. Butler's readers also learn the same lesson.

Employing the device of time travel, like filmmaker Gerima, Butler offers, from a feminist perspective, a meditation on the nature of American freedom by creating a metaphoric Middle Passage between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Kindred, a novel which has not yet received a great deal of critical attention, Butler offers a bridge between the past and the present through the time travels of her heroine, Edana (Dana) Franklin, a twentieth-century African American woman. Dana's return to the past brings to mind the African's voyage of no return. "In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space," Robert Crossley writes, "Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors" (xi). Butler certainly signifies on the nineteenth-century female emancipatory narrative, specifically Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861). (4) Examining the generic affinities between Butler's narrative and the emancipatory narratives, Sandra Y. Govan observes, "Kindred is so closely related to the experience disclosed in slave narratives that its plot structure follows the classic patterns with only the requisite changes to flesh out character, story, and action" (89).

While Govan is accurate in her observation, it seems to me that Butler does more than signify on the substance and structure of the emancipatory narrative in her revision. (5) In what follows, I explain how Butler engages and revises the dominant themes of the nineteenth-century female emancipatory narrative--specifically, female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, and community--as she interrogates the construction and nature of freedom for a contemporary audience. For this reason, I read Butler's Kindred as a liberatory narrative. I define the liberatory narrative as a contemporary narrative that seeks to recuperate the past by engaging the tradition of the emancipatory narratives. The liberatory narrative is centered on its enslaved protagonist's attainment of freedom and is focused on the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free and self-authorized agent. The liberatory narrative seeks to eclipse the racialized and deterministic condition of enslavement by revealing empowering volitional strategies. (6)

Butler's protagonist, Dana Franklin, a black woman writer married to a white man, travels six times across time and space from her 1976 California home to the antebellum Maryland plantation of her ancestors. Although below the Mason-Dixon line, Maryland is often not remembered as a state of slavery, even though it is the birth state of the self-emancipated Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as well as the state from which they both escaped. By choosing the setting of Maryland, Butler reminds her readers of how widespread slavery was and that slavery was not confined to the deep South. Her choice of setting also allows Butler to dispel the notion of "deep South slavery" as the worst, when in fact, any type of slavery is barbaric and inhumane. (7) Like Harriet Jacobs's fictional self Linda Brent, Dana embarks on a journey of self-possession and self-discovery when enslavement assures her that her future as property will be both unbearable and perilous. Butler's use of the year 1976 as the contemporary setting, the year the United States celebrated two hundred years of freedom, reveals inherent contradictions in American history. This duality of settings forces the reader to consider how integral the past is in understanding the present and in constructing the future.

Dana's first journey takes place on her twenty-sixth birthday, suggesting that Dana is experiencing a rebirth of sorts. How Dana travels through time is never explained in the text. (8) Of this phenomenon, Robert Crossley speculates that Butler's implied vehicle for time travel is "the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death-ship of the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World" (xi). Conveniently, Crossley's choice of imagery, "the death ship," does lend credence to the idea that Butler's liberatory narrative is a metaphoric Middle Passage designed to take its passengers from freedom to bondage, and, unlike the original passage, back to freedom.

Why Dana travels, on the other hand, becomes quite clear. Whenever the life of her white ancestor Rufus Weylin, a great-great-grandfather, is in danger, Dana is summoned somehow to rescue him. Conversely, Dana is returned to the twentieth century when she herself perceives that her own life is in danger. Their familial "blood" tie inextricably binds Weylin and Dana. Rufus lives only because Dana saves his life again and again. By protecting him, Dana preserves her ancestry and herself: neither she nor her family would exist were Rufus not to survive to father her great-grandmother Hagar. Dana's mission as she articulates it, then, is "not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure [her] family's survival, [her] own birth" (Butler 29). It is only after Dana has fulfilled this responsibility in her past that she can have control over her own life in the present. Dana's struggle is compelling as she asserts her volition against the unseen forces which place her in slavery as well as against the obvious consequences of her enslavement. Ashraf Rushdy explains, "By becoming an agent capable of transforming history, Dana becomes to the same degree subject to history.... When she gambles against history ... she can also lose to history; moreover, she endangers not only her own future, but also those who will not live to experience that future" (145). Charged with this awesome responsibility, saving the lives of her ancestors and herself, Dana can be read as a heroic figure, even though her success is dependent upon the sexual enslavement of her great-great-grandmother.

To examine the concept of freedom, Butler centers her narrative on the most vulnerable: black women in bondage. (9) To do so, Butler creates a deliberate doubling in the characters of Dana and Dana's ancestral grandmother, Alice Greenwood, both enslaved in the nineteenth century. Of this doubling Missy Dehn Kubitschek observes, "to a certain extent, each woman feels the other's choices as a critique of her own; each sees, in the distorting mirror of the other, her own potential fate" (39). In other words, by establishing a dialogic relationship between the past and the present, Butler provides not only a view of a free, twentieth-century black woman's challenging experiences in and unpredictable responses to nineteenth-century chattel slavery, but also, as in the female emancipatory narrative, a window on the nineteenth-century black woman's life in slavery. This dialectic reveals how the past and the present influence each other. By this I mean that the present is obviously more self-conscious of the past, and the present is constructed usually either in agreement with or in opposition to that past. Not often considered, however, is what Butler offers: that the past is shaped, or constructed, by the present as to what we choose to remember as well as what we choose to forget, and by the way we choose to interpret that which is remembered. Characterizing the essential differences and similarities between Dana and Alice (regarding female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, and community) becomes the driving strategy of Butler's narrative.

In matters of sexuality, Butler portrays Dana as an empowered agent in her contemporary environment. Dana acts of her own volition. Her twentieth-century environment does not suppress, commodify, or abuse Dana's sexuality. Like Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent, Dana embraces her right to choose her sexual partner. Unlike Brent, Dana's choice of Kevin, the white man she marries despite the misgivings of their respective families, is not subversive or coerced. Their relationship seems to be mutually satisfying, particularly if one considers the emotional support they give to each other throughout Dana's rationally unexplainable ordeal. Their metaphoric bond becomes literal: because he is touching her as she leaves for her third trip to the past, he travels with her.

Butler offers two significant illustrations of Dana's erotic desires in her sexual relationship with Kevin. The first instance occurs after Dana's first trip to the nineteenth century. In a remembrance, Dana recalls her first date with Kevin and the aftermath of that date: "sometime during the early hours of the next morning when we lay together, tired and content in my bed, I realized that I knew less about loneliness than I had thought--and much less than I would know when he went away" (57). The second episode occurs when Kevin and Dana are reunited following Dana's sudden return to the present that leaves Kevin in the nineteenth century. The chronological differences between past and present in time travel are marked. When she returns to the past, they are still separated as Kevin has left the Weylin plantation. Their separation lasts five years for Kevin; for Dana, it lasts eight days. After they safely return home, Dana initiates a sexual reunion with her husband despite the pain of her recently bullwhipped back, inflicted while in the past. Of their homecoming, Dana recollects that Kevin "was so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me.... I had known he would, but it didn't matter. We were safe. He was home.... Eventually, we slept" (190). In this instance, sexual intercourse is an act of liberation, a way of confirming one's reality and grounding one's self in that reality. Dana is even willing to endure physical pain in order to reclaim the expression of her sexuality. Dana assumes complete control over her sexuality in her twentieth-century milieu. She enjoys sexual intercourse, unlike her foremother, Alice, whose sexuality produces trauma.

In contrast, when Dana travels to antebellum Maryland, her agency in terms of her sexuality is threatened by the hegemony of slavery. Vulnerability and victimization characterize the sexual experience of all enslaved black women, without exception, in Butler's fictive world. Because she is separated from Kevin, the man for whom she has erotic desires and to whom she is married, Dana must suppress her sexual desires when she travels to the past. The appropriation and alteration of female sexuality by the institution of slavery and its agents is the first lesson that Dana, like Jacobs's Linda Brent, must learn: the institution of slavery commodities black female sexuality in its attempt to perpetuate itself and to satisfy the lust of its agents. An example of the latter occurs during her second visit to the past when Dana seeks refuge at the home of her ancestors, Alice's parents; a white patroller attempts to rape Dana, a stark reminder that she and all of her sisters in bondage are sexually vulnerable.

The violent episode that Dana witnesses between Alice's parents and the patrollers further exemplifies the distortions and contortions of black female sexuality. Butler uses this narrative passage to illustrate how invasive slavocracy was to its victims. Alice's mother was a freewoman; Alice's father was one of the Weylin enslaved men. As children born of black women followed the condition of the mother, Alice was free. Because breeding men and women were considered livestock who equaled profit, Weylin disapproved of his enslaved men fathering free children who would not be his property; thus, he disapproved of the relationship between Alice's parents. Shortly before Dana's arrival at Alice's cabin, the patrollers, forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan, arrive to retrieve Weylin's property, dragging the naked couple from the cabin and beating Alice's father, who lacked a traveling pass. His capture serves as Dana's introduction to the realities of slavery. Dana remembers:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry,

every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining

against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I

had to force myself to say where I was and keep quiet .... 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. (36)

After they take away Alice's father, one of the patrollers, who has already physically assaulted Alice's mother, returns to rape her. Instead, he finds Dana and readily goes after her, hoping to satisfy his lechery. Although Dana successfully defends herself against this attempted act of violation, the possibilities for other and worse attacks exist, she realizes, at any juncture. Enslaved black women were socially constructed and defined as beasts of burden, or to use Zora Neale Hurston's oft-quoted phrase, as "de mule[s] uh de world" (29). The standards of "true womanhood" for enslaved black women, then, diametrically opposed those set by Anglo-Americans in their "cult of true womanhood." The most graphic examples of sexual assault in Kindred occurs when Evan Fowler, the Weylins' overseer, viciously strikes Dana across her breasts to punish her for her failure to work efficiently in the field. This brutality inflicted on Dana's body signals how devalued she is as a woman, as a potential mother, as a human being.

Although Dana and Kevin enjoy a mutual, exclusive physical and emotional relationship, the nature of their relationship by necessity changes when Kevin time-travels with Dana to the Weylin plantation. With their marriage legally invalid in the nineteenth century, Dana and Kevin must pretend, in order to give validity to their close relationship, that they are master and servant rather than husband and wife. Even though Kevin opposes slavery and its ideals, he is implicated by his race. When Dana has to pretend she is Kevin's sexual property, she realizes how easy it is for both of them to adhere to the constructions of nineteenth-century black female sexuality and identity. Dana remarks, "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed" (97).

In light of the miscegenation visible throughout the enslaved communities, it is ironic that Kevin and Dana are assigned and expected to maintain separate sleeping quarters since it is clear, by nineteenth-century standards, that Dana is Kevin's concubine. Some veneer of propriety, or rather a facade of hypocrisy, was then expected so that licentious transgressors would not offend the bearers of true womanhood: white women. (10) Dana and Kevin, however, take matters into their own hands by unobtrusively moving Dana to Kevin's room. Noticing their shared accommodations but pretending not to notice the enslaved children who physically resemble her own husband, Margaret Weylin, the mistress of the plantation, calls Dana a "filthy black whore" (93). Here Butler gestures toward the hypocrisies of slavery as well as to the way in which black women became the scapegoat for such practices. Dana bears the burden of misreading because she is a black woman without power in the system of white patriarchy.

In ironic contrast to her supposedly inherent virtuous nature, Margaret Weylin exhibits a strong physical attraction to Kevin. Thus, one wonders if her wrath is motivated by jealousy. Dana's unobtrusive move to Kevin's room is practical, in another sense, since Dana's departures are as sudden as her arrivals; and the couple needs to be together if they are to return home together. Equally important, they are married. Sharing a bedroom allows them some semblance of their contemporary normality; Dana and Kevin do not want the institution of slavery to destroy them, individually or collectively. However, the institution of slavery does indeterminately and perhaps irreparably affect Dana, Kevin, and their marriage since Dana makes five trips to the past alone, her left arm severed during the final trip home. Kevin is left behind in the past on one occasion during which he receives a mysterious and unexplained injury, signified by a scar, to his head. (11)

Not surprisingly, each trip to the past necessarily changes the ways in which Dana and Kevin each perceive their present lives, individually and with each other, as well as their racial histories. At one point, for example, Dana realizes how useless, and sometimes dangerous, her twentieth-century knowledge is in the nineteenth century: "[n]othing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape" (177). After his own lengthy stay in the past, Kevin's personality changes. He become introspective and less idealistic. Dana feared that "if he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him" (77). But remarkably, Kevin is able to stay true to his twentieth-century concept of freedom and equality as he participates in abolitionist work when he is left in the past without Dana.

Another example of Dana's right to choose a course of action emerges when she suppresses her sexuality in the nineteenth century. Although separated, possibly permanently, from Kevin, Dana does not desire another man. When Sam, one of Weylin's enslaved men, shows a romantic interest in her, Dana adamantly declares that for her "one husband is enough" (230), belying the supposed lasciviousness of enslaved black women. This episode allows Butler to show that enslaved black women, as Harriet Jacobs shows as well, could make choices even in their deterministic world and that their own personal codes of morality were valid and intact. Rufus's final betrayal, his attempt to rape her, forces Dana to kill him in self-defense, thus severing their unique tie, for he has already, by then, fathered Dana's great-grandmother, Hagar. Dana cannot tolerate being violated by Rufus. Killing Rufus, instead of submitting to him as Alice does, is Dana's way of maintaining her self-esteem and psychic wholeness. For Dana, to submit to Rufus would be the same as accepting his definition of her as chattel, and this she cannot do. In other words, Dana refuses to relinquish her right to self-definition. That Dana continues to protect Rufus is a function of self-preservation. That Dana works to sustain the relationship between Rufus and Alice, so that Hagar may be born, is also a function of self-preservation.

Although she could be labeled an enabler, it would be more accurate to indict the real culprit: slavery. Discussing the inevitable, killing Rufus, with Kevin before she is forced to do so, Dana offers this telling explanation of herself as a self-authorized human:

I'm not property, Kevin. I'm not a horse or a sack of wheat. If I have to

seem to be property, if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus's

sake, then he also has to accept limits--on his behavior toward me. He has

to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me

than killing and dying. (246; emphasis added)

It is noteworthy that Butler uses the word control because this is the essence of personal freedom: having command of one's thoughts, desires, and actions. Thus, when Rufus, grief-stricken over Alice's suicide, approaches Dana for sexual relations, he violates the limits of her personal freedom as well as the terms for their interaction as Dana had defined them. Recognizing the need to repossess herself in a moment of clear objectification, Dana stabs him to death.

The trait of vulnerability and the action of violation inextricably bind Dana and her ancestor, Alice, in a common bond of sisterhood. Because they are blood relatives, Alice and Dana physically resemble each other, so much so that Rufus considers the two of them to be one woman (228). Consequently, Rufus has a complexly triangular relationship with Dana and Alice. "This triangle," Beverly Friend observes, "degenerates into an extraordinarily painful relationship, one compounded by rivalry, passion, guilt, love, lust, punishment, pride, power, and implacable hatred" (93). Rufus's conjoining of Dana and Alice might be interpreted as an example of the historically monolithic way of defining black female identity, so pervasive in slavery because to acknowledge individuality or subjectivity would serve to eradicate slavery's very foundation. However perverse his love is, Rufus believes he loves both women, but in different ways. In her characterization of Rufus's complexity, Alice pointedly tells Dana, "He likes me in bed, and you out of bed ... all that means we're two halves of the same woman" (229). One is led to believe by the ways in which he tries to create a relationship apart from the act of sex with Alice that Rufus does not want to force Alice; rather, idealistically, he desires that she give herself willingly to him. Juxtaposing the two, Butler further suggests that in a different time Rufus and Alice might have had a relationship like the one that Dana and Kevin share. As she is the "subaltern" of her society, Alice's desires are unmerited and unmediated by the institution of slavery which allows, sustains, and encourages the alteration and appropriation of enslaved black women's sexuality by enslavers such as Rufus. Butler establishes this parallel relationship to highlight these differences.

Alice, Dana's freeborn ancestor, seems to possess an awareness of her individuality and of her free will when she rejects Rufus's sexual advances and chooses to "marry" Isaac, an enslaved man from a neighboring farm. Incensed by Alice's rejection of him and by her determination to choose her lover, Rufus rapes her. Rufus then mocks her choice: "`she got so she'd rather have a buck nigger than me!'" (123). Although powerless to protect or defend his wife legally, Isaac fights Rufus and seriously injures him. Shortly thereafter, Alice and Isaac attempt an escape to the North, knowing that Rufus will seek retribution against Isaac. Severely punished when captured, Alice forfeits her freedom as a result of her complicity in Isaac's escape attempt, and Isaac is sold South after he is mutilated: his ears are cut off. Rufus then buys Alice, or rather, he buys her body. In response to Dana's twentieth-century conviction that Alice's body is her own, Alice, a product of her circumscribed environment, resignedly answers, "Not mine, ... Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?" (167). Submitting her body but not her spirit (or, as Hortense J. Spillers would have it, submitting only her flesh), Alice posits her strategy of resistance: Rufus cannot buy her private self, her affections or her desires. (12) To preserve her sense of self, Alice has to separate her body from her spirit. Because Alice does not and cannot desire Rufus in the way he wishes to be desired, this bifurcation results in an irreconcilable power struggle between Rufus and Alice.

After she recovers from the injuries she sustains during her capture, Alice has three choices: to go willingly to Rufus's room for sex, to be beaten into submission and then to have sex with him, or to run again from the plantation. Because each of these choices leads to devastating consequences, Alice provisionally chooses what might appear to be the least deadly: she goes to his room and seals her fate as his concubine. Yet Alice never completely accepts her sexual enslavement, often wishing she possessed the inner strength needed to murder Rufus. Butler reveals the cost to Alice's self: Alice "adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (169). She never completely accepts her sexual enslavement. Though she seems outwardly accepting of her plight, in fact she is inwardly rebelling. Even after she bears four children by Rufus, she continues to plot her escape. Her continued acts of resistance lead ultimately to her death. Unlike Dana, Alice is both a product and a victim of slavery's deterministic environment; consequently, she cannot successfully enact strategies of resistance, as does Dana with limited success. Soon after her last child is born, Alice runs away again because she fears that she will "turn into just what people call [her]" (235). She fears that she will lose her sense of self and accept her position as sexual chattel.

Butler revises the theme of motherhood for the enslaved black woman in a novel way. Unlike Alice, Dana is not a biological mother; however, she does protect and nurture, as would a mother, her very own ancestors. She becomes, so to speak, her own ancestral mother. Because Dana has no children, her decisions and responses are not predicated on nor mediated by biological motherhood in the twentieth century. The perpetuation of her lineage, however, informs her decisions in both centuries. Additionally, Dana learns that her actions affect everyone on the plantation, family or not; therefore, the collective good of the enslaved community remains primary to Dana in the same way that a mother in similar circumstances might place the collective good of her family over her individual needs. (13)

Butler most obviously and deliberately employs the theme of motherhood to underline Dana's role as a mother when Dana nurses Alice while Alice recovers from the severe dog bites she has sustained during her first thwarted escape. Reverting to a state of infancy induced by trauma, Alice calls Dana "Mama" (153) and looks to her for support and guidance. After her recovery, Alice's relationship with Dana becomes more sisterly in nature. Later in their relationship, Alice mockingly and insultingly predicts that Dana will one day become the "Mammy" of the plantation. By referring to Dana as "Mammy," Alice misinterprets both the archetype of the mammy as well as Dana's endeavors either to improve the enslaved community's conditions or to protect it through passive resistance. In this instance, Butler rewrites the disparaging, stereotyped "Mammy" image, highlighting instead her quiet strength in making circumstances better for her family and her community.

Alice's journey of self-possession is thwarted by the institution of slavery and the experience of motherhood in slavery. Although a difficult task, Dana's charge, to keep Rufus alive until he fathers Hagar, is actually less complicated than Alice's mission, which is to continue to live in a state of bondage that offers little incentive to live. Because she is an enslaved woman who gives birth to enslaved children, Alice is not as lucky as Dana in exercising her volition. Butler shows how motherhood for enslaved black women complicates their lives in ways that are fundamentally insurmountable. Of the four children born to Alice and Rufus, the first two children die in infancy due to improper medical treatment, about which Alice has no voice. Rufus uses the remaining two, as Alice explains, like "a bit in [her] mouth" (236). The children become objects that Rufus employs to control Alice's affection and sexual behavior toward him. While Alice loves her children, the institution of slavery constricts and circumscribes her love for them. Unable to own herself or her children, Alice lives in a liminal state, always vulnerable to Rufus' whims. Recollecting Dr. Flint's virulent threats to Linda Brent in Incidents, one remembers that his most potent threat was to sell her children.

Likewise in Butler's liberatory narrative, the same callous disregard for motherhood prevails. One enslaved mother's three young sons are brutishly sold to pay for the "new furniture, new china dishes, [and all of the other] fancy things" (95) that Margaret Weylin desires. For this and similar reasons, the enslaved black mother reared her children one day at a time as their future together was indeterminate and unpredictable. Although Alice desires to escape North, she learns that she simply cannot run away because of her children. Escaping alone is fraught with numerous difficulties, as both Alice and Dana painfully discover; with young children, physical escape is virtually impossible, as Linda Brent well knew when she chose to "escape" by hiding in her grandmother's garret for seven years. Alice, then, represses her own desires and submits to Rufus's desires. She seems to forsake her right to choose, that is, her right to self-possession. Not completely resigned, she hopes that her children will one day be free. She even secretly plants seeds of hope by naming her children Joseph and Hagar, the Biblical names of formerly enslaved persons in the Old Testament because "[i]n the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn't have to stay slaves" (234). (14)

The need to repossess the self in a moment of clear objectification inspires Alice to do so by drastic means. Rufus's final act of manipulation and intimidation, pretending that he has sold their children when they have only been sent from the plantation in order to remind Alice of his dominion over her, causes Alice to resolve, like Dana, that "killing and dying look better than living" (246). However, Alice does not choose the way that Dana later chooses; she kills herself instead of her enemy. While Alice's suicide may be seen as an act of emotional weakness or an act of familial abnegation, it is not. Alice exercises her right to choose death, freedom of a different sort, over bondage. (15) She commits suicide, not because she can no longer bear to be in her untoward circumstance, but because she believes that she no longer has reason to live. Perhaps more importantly, the apparently powerless Alice is ultimately more powerful than Rufus inasmuch as she irreparably wounds him by dying and irrevocably escapes from her bondage without risk of recapture and return. In a final volitional act, Alice usurps Rufus's institutionally sanctioned power and opts to exercise her own personal power, which she does by removing herself permanently from him.

As a post-integrationist black woman, Dana possesses a clear sense of her individuality. Strengthened by her racial pride, her personal responsibility, her free will, and her self-determination, Dana embraces her ability to define herself in both her past and her present. Choosing to define herself instead of accepting the definitions of others, she eschews familial and societal gender expectations in selecting her career as a writer. In her formative years, her aunt and uncle had encouraged Dana to pursue traditionally middle-class and stereotypically gender-specific occupations such as a secretary, nurse, or teacher (56), white-collar occupations long considered to be respectable if not prestigious in the black community. Attempting initially to satisfy her guardians, Dana enrolls in such classes but consciously chooses to discontinue them and to forge her own way despite financial repercussions. Consequently, she works for a while with a blue-collar temporary placement agency that she ironically refers to as "a slave market" (52). That expression is yet another example of how Butler reveals similarities between the past and the present, particularly in economic terms. This comparison between chattel slavery and the blue-collar temporary employment agency hinges upon class-based economic exploitation. Significantly though, she later becomes a secretary, a nurse, and a teacher to Rufus and to others in the past. That Dana finds in the past a need for the skills in each of the occupations that she rejected in her twentieth-century life highlights the limited, and some might say unchanged, economic possibilities for black women. Likewise, that her present-day temp agency exploits its laborers recalls the economic structure of chattel slavery. Butler's fictive appraisal of traditionally female occupations offers real socio-economic commentary on how patriarchy shaped and continues to shape the lives of black women in both centuries.

In her twentieth-century life, Dana is an individualistic and self-reliant black woman, unlike her nineteenth-century counterpart. When Kevin offers to support her financially so that she can concentrate on her writing, Dana rejects his offer as she remembers, thinking of her aunt and uncle, that "even people who loved [her] could demand more of [her] than [she] could give--and expect their demands to be met simply because [she] owed them" (109). Abhorring secretarial work, Dana works "odd" jobs through the agency, jobs not typically identified as woman's work, to support herself while she writes. Dana rejects gender-specific societal expectations when they are forced upon her in the twentieth century. Her dislike of secretarial work also surfaces in her relationship with Kevin, her "kindred spirit" (57) who is also a writer. Kevin naively asks her at the beginning of their relationship to type a manuscript for him. The first time, she reluctantly consents out of a misplaced sense of duty; the second and third times, she categorically refuses. Being true to her sense of self, Dana chooses what she will and will not do. She refuses to accept roles that place her in a subordinate position. As a post-integration black woman, she consciously nurtures her private self and freely creates herself in ways unimaginable as well as unavailable to her predecessors as her trips to the past amply reveal. When she lives in the past, however, Dana learns firsthand why her foremothers were unable to resist overtly, with few exceptions, their enslavement and why they had to cloak their individuality. Alice's life, for example, is a cautionary tale for Dana.

For the nineteenth-century enslaved black woman, few possibilities for self-definition existed, and, certainly, the improvisation of self was tantamount to a revolutionary act. Alice's life exemplifies the typical life of the enslaved black woman for she has no uncompromising options. Even though Alice followed the condition of her "free" mother, who advises her to marry a "free" man, slavery still engulfs Alice and later her progeny. (16) After Alice's enslaved father was beaten and sold for simply visiting his family, her mother, speaking from her own experience, cautions Alice that "marrying a slave is almost as bad as being a slave" (156). Although she is freeborn, Alice forfeits her freedom by assisting her enslaved lover's thwarted escape. Rufus purchases her because of his complex feelings for her, but his overriding feelings are physical lust and bodily possession. For Alice, her concubinage causes her a plethora of emotional responses, all of which inform her perception of her personhood as a unique subject: she hates that she cannot protect herself by slaying Rufus, she loathes the fact that she recognizes and appreciates the relative advantages concubinage affords her, and she despises the possibility that she may one day become inured to her odious condition. Tragically, the opportunity for Alice's private self to develop or to find expression never materializes. This lack of personal development is indicated most obviously in the doubling of Dana and Alice, for Dana symbolically represents what Alice might have been in a freer society.

Dana finds cooperation, collaboration, and nurturing in her ancestral home. Dana's lack of community in her twentieth-century life may symbolize the state of African American communities in post-integration years. During slavery and later during segregation, homogeneous African American communities provided the necessary site for the conservation and perpetuation of generational and cultural continuity. Perhaps symbolizing the many Africans who crossed the Middle Passage, torn from family and country, Dana is literally an orphaned child. Moreover, she is estranged from her guardians, the aunt and uncle who reared her, first by her ambition to be a writer and later by her interracial marriage to Kevin, also an orphan. Other than the one cousin whom Dana calls for assistance after one of her time-travel returns, she mentions no other family. In fact when they marry, Dana and Kevin "go to Vegas and pretend [they] haven't got relatives" (112). Neither does she have a community of friends. She mentions once a friend who gives her a wedding gift. Because she has recently moved to a new and integrated neighborhood when the time travels begin, she has no communal interaction. In her twentieth-century milieu, then, there is little opportunity for the invoking of community support. As suggested earlier, Butler may be critiquing the lack of post-integration communal life for contemporary African Americans. However, Dana learns, from her experience in the nineteenth century, the supreme importance of the African American community and earnestly invests herself in its continuance..

In the nineteenth century, Dana learns to accept her communal responsibility although she is technically not one of Weylin's enslaved African Americans. Dana is self-conscious about belonging, but her color--her sign--guarantees her belonging. Dana feels compelled to find a useful niche for herself so that she can gain entrance into the enslaved community for "everyone ... will resent [her] if [she doesn't] work" (79). Dana later realizes the necessity of joining with the others through a collective endeavor where she is able to build relationships: "I need all the friends I can make here" (79). Always aware that she may return indefinitely to the nineteenth century, Dana consciously creates a place for herself in and accepts her responsibility to the enslaved community. At first, Dana's motivation to join with the community is utilitarian; her interest soon changes to one of true affection and affiliation. Sarah, the plantation's cook, her mute daughter Carrie, and Nigel, Carrie's husband, become Dana's extended family. Learning to cook under Sarah's tutelage, as daughters often do from their mothers, Dana takes an active part in the daily functions of the plantation. Of the interactions in the detached cookhouse, Dana reveals, "I liked to listen to [the enslaved] talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive" (94). By word of mouth, the primary means of disseminating information for African Americans in the nineteenth century, the enslaved community's texts of survival empower Dana in the construction of her own liberation. And, by design, the reader is also empowered through Butler's words.

Reading Sarah's life as a text reveals to Dana, as well as to the reader, an often misunderstood text of black womanhood. Sarah seems accepting of her lot, and if she is, it is because she had lost so much and does not want to lose any more. The narrator explains, Sarah

had done the safe thing--had accepted a life of slavery because she was

afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called "mammy" in

some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in

contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the

handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom--the frightened powerless woman who

had already lost all she could stand to lose. (145)

Sarah's example changes the way Dana, and hopefully the reader, has been taught to think about black women who were considered "mammy" figures. (17) Sarah acts in order to better her family's and her community's lot. In Dana's nineteenth-century life, black women play an important role in enlarging Dana's understanding of herself and of black women.

As divisiveness exists in all communities, both Dana and Alice inspire envy in some enslaved women who feel that their own conditions may be worse than those of "the master's women" (229). This mode of thinking reveals how pervasively maligning the institution of slavery was, not only to the community but also to one's self-perception. Butler's narrator, by employing such resonant diction, also indicts patriarchal capitalism and the competition it still engenders. Through strategies of resistance, the community protects itself from those members who attempt to defy or to ignore their communal responsibilities. Dana's nineteenth-century family and friends protect and defend her. For example, Alice, Carrie, and Tess physically attack Liza, the jealous enslaved woman who reveals Dana's absence when Dana attempts her thwarted escape from the Weylin plantation. In reference to such incidents and to their effects on Dana, Robert Crossley observes that "one of the exciting features of Kindred is that so much of the novel is attentive ... to [Dana's] complex social and psychological relationships with the community of black slaves she joins" (xvii). Indeed, the psychological explorations that Butler provides allow for a more comprehensive assessment of slavery's maligning influence on African American identity. Dana's official initiation into the enslaved community occurs during her fifth trip to the past. Participating in a corn husking party, Dana sincerely enjoys the camaraderie of the enslaved community, and not simply as an objective observer. The enslaved African Americans share "companionable laughter" (229) as they combine their collective energies to accomplish a common goal.

The perpetuation of the black community is the most important responsibility its members have. While in the nineteenth century, Dana attempts, idealistically perhaps in light of her limited and infrequent trips, to improve the lives of the enslaved as much as she possibly can by resocializing Rufus's attitude toward the institution of slavery as well as toward African Americans. Dana is optimistic that she can, at the very least, keep the enslaved families together for as long as possible during Rufus's formative years. Dana hopes that she will try "to plant a few ideas in [Rufus's] mind that would help both [her] and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come" (68). Dana's goal remains unrealized until the death of the elder Weylin. Because she kept Rufus alive, none of the enslaved are sold when Tom Weylin dies. If Rufus had predeceased his father, the enslaved would have been sold without regard to familial bonds. Because of Dana, Rufus lives to inherit his property, and the enslaved families remain relatively intact.

However, Dana cannot secure this effect permanently because she must return to her own historical time; indeed, seeking a permanent solution, she ultimately kills Rufus. After her final return home, during which she is horribly maimed through the amputation of her left arm in the unseen time-travel apparatus, Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland to ascertain the fates of those she had diligently tried to help. They find, in an old newspaper clipping, the text they assume that Nigel constructed of Rufus's death as well as the fateful notice announcing the sale of Rufus's property. All the enslaved, with the exception of Nigel, Carrie, Joseph, and Hagar, were listed for sale. Dana does not even get the satisfaction of knowing what happened to Hagar, other than that she survived, except to know that Hagar, at some point, recorded the family's history in the family Bible. Feeling dejected by her inability to effect unalterably positive changes for all, Dana wonders why she had even traveled to Maryland in search of closure to her experience. While Dana heroically succeeds in protecting and perpetuating her immediate family, she fails to do the same for her extended family, all of the enslaved owned by the Weylin family. She ironically muses, "Why did I even come here? You'd think I would have had enough of the past" (264). Kevin's reply, "To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane," reveals the reason, I believe, why Octavia Butler constructs her liberatory narrative (264).

Arriving at this liberatory understanding, however, exacts a price from Dana: Rufus's grasp on her arm causes her arm to be left behind in the past when she returns to the present during her final trip. One must conclude from this highly symbolic occurrence that leaving the past behind is simply impossible because history has lingering effect on the present and the future. Having endured the psychological mutilation of slavery, she endures physical mutilation as well. While his injuries are not as severe as Dana's, Kevin does not escape unscathed. He has a scar on his forehead that he acquires while living in the nineteenth century. Their disfigurements, their texts of scarring, are significant:

their wounds may help them to work together to recover and to rebuild their

strength; or these different wounds may intensify the destructive power

dynamics that perpetuate inequality and dominance, forcing Kevin and Dana

to go their separate ways.... Both Dana and Kevin are implicated. Neither

is innocent, morally superior, or passive. It is evident that the

relationship between blacks and whites is mutually interactive. (Paulin

189)

Their disfigurements may also be read symbolically: both black and white Americans have been scarred by the institution and legacy of slavery.

That Dana and Kevin, both enlightened by their individual and shared experiences, are still together at the narrative's end suggests Butler's resolution of this complex issue. Their interracial relationship can be read as a metaphor for how America may be healed. Their relationship, in other words, represents what is necessary for Americans to do to alleviate the pain of our common history: they each must confront the past. That both races must join together in coming to terms with the past, I believe, is the rhetorical purpose of this metaphor because they both have an investment in the final outcome. After Dana's second trip to the past, she tells Kevin, "I need you here to come home to" (51). Kevin's reply sums up the reciprocal nature of their need: "Just keep coming home," he said finally. "I need you here too" (51). By highlighting our mutual need, Butler's liberatory narrative teaches that both black and white Americans must confront their shared past of racism, must acknowledge the pain and the scars of that past, and must live together as kindred. Through the example of Dana and Kevin, Butler offers her readers on both sides of the color line not only the opportunity to understand slavery better, but the opportunity to explore possible collaborative solutions for contemporary race-related problems.

Butler's choice to foreground miscegenation and interracial issues is an interesting one since this creates a trope of integration one may read as a strategy to assist American society in its ongoing struggle with race relations. I am not suggesting that Butler offers miscegenation as a solution to race relations, but, rather, that she emphasizes the necessity of integrated collective engagement and coalition building across the color line as a way of solving some of our contemporary race problems. Butler's choice of science fiction works brilliantly in this regard because it allows readers to suspend their culturally constructed beliefs. To reveal the black woman's story of slavery, even from the "safe" distance of the twentieth century, Butler selects a device, time travel, that serves to advance her exploration. In other words, Butler needed an inexplicable vehicle to assist her in presenting the inexplicable institution of slavery.

By juxtaposing the past with the present through the vehicle of time-travel, Butler suggests that one can never have "enough of the past" because the past informs the present and ultimately the future. By revisiting the historical moment of chattel slavery and by engaging its indigenous literary form, Butler proffers, as Missy Dehn Kubitschek describes it, "a literal paradigm of coming to terms with a history of slavery and oppression [by] excavat[ing] history, then accumulating knowledge, and reinterpreting it from a forward-looking perspective" (51). Indeed, Butler does move beyond what we know of the enslaved black woman's life by offering her meditation on the nature of black womanhood in the present as well as in the historical past. Butler further engages our narrative imaginations by amplifying our understanding of the condition of black women in slavery as well as black women in freedom. In her analysis of Kindred, Beverly Friend concludes that "transporting a contemporary heroine into the past serves neatly to highlight the contrast between current freedom and past oppression" (50). Perhaps it also highlights the contrast between past and current oppression. Butler's liberatory narrative reminds us that feminist issues are not new issues for black women and are not unrelated to the construction of freedom. It also reminds us that history is not a static entity with little influence on the present. One must be true to the meaning of sankofa by returning to the past imaginatively as well as factually in order to live in the present and to move forward.

Notes

(1.) In Tar Baby, Morrison uses this phrase to describe why Jadine is a cultural orphan. For a discussion of this, see Hawthorne and Mobley. One's "ancient properties" are those cultural verities that give one, to use another Morrisonian term, "rootedness" as a culturally authentic being.

(2.) Sankofa, directed and produced by Gerima, has an interesting beginning. Gerima, a Howard University professor of film, and his wife, also a filmmaker, financed and produced the film. This endeavor took nine years to complete. With a single copy, they arranged showings at receptive theaters until they were able to make enough money to mass produce the film. Sankofa had a successful, albeit small, run as an independent and is now available for purchase. Many high school, colleges, and universities use it in teaching about slavery. Oddly, Blockbuster Video refuses to stock it because they do not stock movies with such graphic violence, according to one of its employees in the DC/Metropolitan area. Gerima has a production company, Mypheduh, Inc., as well as a bookstore, Sankofa Video and Books, in Washington, DC, where he distributes his film.

(3.) Other novels by contemporary black women writers that revisit the site of slavery include Walker's Jubilee, Williams's Dessa Rose, Morrison's Beloved, Cooper's Family, Conde's I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, Cliff's Free Enterprise, and Cary's The Price of a Child.

(4.) See Gates for his discussion of signifyin(g) as a mode of textual revision in African American literature.

(5.) "Emancipatory" to describe those writings traditionally known as slave narratives is a term Bambara, Traylor, and Williams have all used to shift the gaze from the objectified identity of the author to the author's impetus for writing and the primary focus of the narrative: emancipation from slavery.

(6.) While Bell's term, "neo-slave narrative," has been quite useful to our understanding of contemporary texts that revisit the historical period of slavery, I find the term liberatory narrative more appropriate. The focus, it seems to me, of these narratives by contemporary African American women writers is not on the concept of enslavement, but more importantly on the construct of freedom. For these reasons, I eschew the term "slaves" and use instead as identifiers enslaved black men and women or enslaved African American men and women. Likewise, I do not refer to the "slave narrative," but rather I refer to the emancipatory narrative to identify narratives written by the self-emancipated Africans and African Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

(7.) In an interview with novelist Randall Kenan, Butler reveals that she extensively researched slavery while writing Kindred. The setting of the novel is an actual geographic location in Maryland, Easton, which Butler visited. (Easton is not far from Frederick Douglass's birthplace of Tuckahoe.) She spent numerous hours in Washington-area libraries and historical societies; she also toured preserved plantations such as George Washington's Mount Vernon. Additionally, she read numerous emancipatory narratives. Of her research she comments, "One of the things I realized ... was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it" (497). She augments factual evidence in order to give a full rendering of the enslaved black woman's life and to give a voice to this historically voiceless woman ("Interview," Kenan 497).

(8.) Butler categorically denies that Kindred is science fiction because "there's no science" in it; rather, she describes it as a fantasy ("Interview," Kenan 495).

(9.) Ironically, Butler intended for the protagonist of Kindred to be a black man. She altered her plan because she "couldn't realistically keep him alive."

So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He

wouldn't even have time to learn the rules ... before he was killed for not

knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main

character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She

might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed

and that's why I wrote it.... That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor.

("Interview," Rowell 51)

(10.) See Carby for a discussion of the "cult of true womanhood" in relation to black and white women of the nineteenth century.

(11.) Butler intimates that Kevin was involved in abolitionist activity and was injured because of his actions. Kevin's character is very complex. Juxtaposing Kevin and Rufus, Butler suggests that the changes Kevin experiences as a result of his time travel are not all positive as he begins to remind Dana more and more of Rufus.

(12.) See Spillers for her provocative discussion of black women's bodies in terms of body and flesh.

(13.) I realize that this sentence may be read as essentializing motherhood. Sometimes I think it is as dangerous to remove all characteristics from subject positions as it is to affix specific and inflexible characteristics. The danger is, of course, that we define subject positions in ways that are reductive or untrue. These erroneous assignations should not obviate the characteristics that may or may not apply to all but certainly apply to some. Black mothers have in many instances mothered--nurtured, protected, loved, fed--not only their biological children but also adopted children and communities.

(14.) The children's names are Aaron, Miriam, Joseph, and Hagar. In the Bible, Aaron and Miriam, siblings of Moses, were enslaved in ancient Egypt. They were released by Pharaoh after God sent Moses to secure the freedom of the Israelites. Joseph, son of Jacob and Rachel, was sold into Egyptian slavery by his jealous brothers, and later he was freed by Pharaoh. Finally, Hagar was the Egyptian servant of Abraham and Sarah. Because Sarah was unable to bear children, Hagar bore a son, Ishmael, by Abraham. After Sarah miraculously conceived and delivered Isaac, Hagar was freed.

(15.) This is not unlike the choice that Morrison's Sethe makes in Beloved when she attempts, as she describes it, to put her children where they will be safe. One may recall that Sethe's plan was to kill all her children as well as herself.

(16.) I use the term "free" loosely here because Alice's mother is certainly not free in any true democratic sense.

(17.) Butler has said that she wrote Kindred as a type of instruction for black readers who suffered from a lack of their own historical knowledge and who exhibit impatience and intolerance about those in the past who were not revolutionaries in a visible sense. Kindred "was a kind of reaction," Butler explains, "to some of the things going on during the 60s when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery" ("Interview," Kenan 496).

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