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# REVISING TRAUMA IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *KINDRED*: AN AFROFUTURIST READING[1]

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse how identity is formed in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) while using Afrofuturist techniques to connect the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries. The analysis does not only focus on the contemporary period but also on the antebellum period, as the main character, Dana, must face and endure difficulties that will make her question who she is and where she belongs. The paper draws from Afrofuturist and sociological studies, as well as literary criticism and feminist theory. The study explores how the influence of experiencing slavery through forcibly time-travelling to the past shapes Dana's identity and personality, making her betray what is morally correct in the twentieth century and adapt to opposed conventions to survive during the antebellum period. The identity analysis in *Kindred* will be conducted through the lens of Afrofuturism to assess its connection with the novel and the Afrofuturist technology present in the work.
Keywords: Octavia Butler; *Kindred*; Afrofuturism; antebellum; trauma; identity

# REVISITANDO EL TRAUMA EN *KINDRED* DE OCTAVIA BUTLER: UNA LECTURA AFROFUTURISTA

Resumen: Este artículo trata de analizar cómo se forma la identidad en *Kindred* (1979) de Octavia Butler, utilizando técnicas afrofuturistas para conectar los siglos XX y XIX. El análisis no solo se centra en el periodo contemporáneo, sino también en el periodo prebélico, ya que la protagonista, Dana, debe enfrentarse y soportar dificultades que la harán cuestionarse quién es y dónde pertenece. El artículo partirá de estudios futuristas y sociológicos, así como de crítica literaria y teoría feminista. Este estudio explora cómo la influencia de experimentar la esclavitud mediante viajes forzados en el tiempo al pasado moldea la identidad y personalidad de Dana, haciéndola traicionar lo moralmente correcto en el siglo XX y adaptarse a convenciones opuestas para sobrevivir en el periodo prebélico. El análisis de identidad en *Kindred* se realizará a través del prisma del afrofuturismo para evaluar su conexión con la novela y la tecnología afrofuturista presente en la novela.

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Palabras clave: Octavia Butler; *Kindred*; Afrofuturismo; prebélico; trauma; identidad

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Kindred*, written by Octavia E. Butler in 1979, expresses the importance of acknowledging the antebellum past, a period that belongs to the "pre-Civil War" era, to understand the present. The main character, Dana, shifts between her present time in 19776's Los Angles and the 1815's antebellum Maryland, in which the life of her slaveholder ancestor is in danger. Through the use of time-travels, the protagonist is able to explore her origins and face the adversities her ancestors had to endure during the 1815s in Maryland, and the only method Dana has to travel back to the present is by jeopardising her existence. The time-travels cause the protagonist to be trapped in a time and space that makes her question her identity and values, affecting "Dana's conception of her individual and collective identities, compounding the trauma of experiencing her family's violent past" (Kimber L. Wiggs 130). The question of identity is directly related to the trauma the protagonist suffers while being in the antebellum Maryland and being a victim of different types of violence, and to the unfulfilled expectations her family has on her in the present time, which "forces Dana to question the construction of her social ties and her racial hybridity" (Wiggs 130).

Octavia Butler uses time-travels to explore Dana's identity by at the same time showing the contrast between the two periods, making the character face adversities. As concluded by Beverly Friend, Dana "is not educated to survive" (qtd. in David LaCroix 112) despite carrying with her different contemporary instruments and knowledge that should make her journey easier. It is arguable that Butler uses time-travel to create a disruption between present and past times, making these the key to understanding, not only the history of Dana's ancestors but also the history of a specific period, such as Maryland in the 1815's.

The use of different Afrofuturist techniques is key to understanding the novel's structure, which aims to break with the traditional structure of the slave narrative while exploring slavery through the point of view of a contemporary character. The first part of this analysis focuses on the definition of Afrofuturism, the different speculative devices used by Butler, and the key role it plays in the understanding of the argument of *Kindred*. The understanding of Afrofuturism as a genre is key for the second part of the essay, which focuses on an analysis of Dana and Kevin, how they experience trauma differently,

and how the trauma developed because of being trapped in the antebellum period shapes their identities throughout the novel. Dana becomes a direct victim of slavery, while Kevin is a spectator who does not directly become a victim of the violence and oppression involved in slavery. The third section will analyse Dana's adaptation to the antebellum period and how her identity, morality, and survival techniques are transformed by the violence, gender roles and non-linearity presented in the novel. Finally, I conclude that the author's transformation of the traditional slave narrative through the use of different Afrofuturist features challenges the established canon to explore history, ancient trauma and identity, positioning *Kindred* as a neo-slave narrative.

## 2. AFROFUTURISM IN *KINDRED*

The term "Afrofuturism" was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in his essay "Black to the Future," and emerged during a period in which, as stated by Karyn L. Hixon, science fiction was aimed at white people and excluding black characters from the works (7). Even though the publication of Dery's essay was posterior to *Kindred*, the definition fits in the methodology used by Butler "to depict egalitarian futures unimpeded by racism" (Hixson 8). Dery defines "Afrofuturism" as:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture —and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future —might, for want of a better term, be called "Afrofuturism." (Dery 180)

In *Kindred*, Butler uses time-travels as "the most prominent device of speculative fiction" (Nadine Flagel 218), making the shifts in time to the slave state of Maryland key to considering the novel a "neo-slave narrative" (Adriano Elia 23). This technique, as stated by Marc Steinberg, highlights the possible consequences the past has on the lives of the African American community in the present time (468). In *Kindred*, this can be appreciated in Dana's oppression of the antebellum period for being an enslaved black woman while at the same time being a free woman born in the twentieth century. It can be argued that the use of the speculative device of time-travel in *Kindred* is essential to show how "different worlds abide by different rules" (Marisa Parham 778). While experiencing being black during the antebellum period, Dana also explores her own identity by meeting her ancestors and attempting to implement the contemporary mindset in Rufus' behaviour (Hixson 9), a character whose identity has been shaped by the

surrounding violence from his father towards the slaves from the plantation and himself. Butler blurs the temporal line, remarking on the relevance of the antebellum past into the present and future lives of the protagonists. This strategy coincides with how Ingrid LaFleur perceived Afrofuturism as a medium to "encourage experimentation, reimagine identities, and activate liberation" ("Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism" 01:20-01:28).

Dery refers to African-Americans as "the descendants of alien abductees" (180), equating alien abductions with slavery. Slaves were taken away forcibly from their places of origin, their customs, traditions and families, who live in a fictional "nightmare." Moreover, Dery questions if a future is possible, even though the African-American community's past has been eliminated (180). In "Black to the Future," Dery also refers to fiction as "a pulp genre in Western literature" (180) as in said genre the focus was placed on white characters, marginalising the black community and lacking representation and acknowledgement, not only of slavery and the violence suffered by African American people, but also of contemporary concerns. Following a similar line, Dann Broyld states that Afrofuturism "challenges Eurocentric motifs and asks critical questions of alienation, colonialism, racism, sexism, and wealth exploitive '-isms'" (171), breaking with the canon established in Science Fiction, "liberating Blacks from nonexistence and background positions" (171). According to Ytasha Womack, the use of technology can be a medium to "empower creators" (10). Genres like fantasy and science fiction oppose to the canon established regarding black identity, which should not be shaped by the stereotypes surrounding the community through a "dystopian view of race," portraying black characters as powerless, and their stories being modified to show "hardened realities," contradicting the notion of blackness as fatalism (Womack 11).

Afrofuturism redefines "culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" through the combination of diverse elements such as "science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-western beliefs" (Womack 9). As noted by Womack, some Afrofuturist works revisit the past and create possible futures (9), serving *Kindred* as an example of Afrofuturist work that revisits the past through Dana's time-travels to critique how the oppression of the black community is still present in the twentieth century, which points out that history is not linear but cyclical, by creating a past time and a present time that can become "interchangeable" (Steinberg 467). The non-linear structure of the novel is key to understanding how ancestral trauma can shape the present and the future development of an individual

through the reconstruction of the past by experiencing the violence and the oppression suffered by Dana's slave ancestors, creating what Steinberg defined as an "inverse slave narrative" as history is presented in a "cyclical" way (467), not imposing the past on the present but blurring linearity, making Dana travel to the past to experience slavery. It can be appreciated that, when Dana refers to her job as "a slave market" (Butler 51), she later refers to it as "the opposite of slavery" (51), she shows awareness of the history of the nation where she has grown and how her situation differs from slavery but is still similar in terms of discrimination and precariousness. According to Dubey, it can be interpreted as a sign of continuity in history (349). Not only is history presented as something cyclical, but also is the structure of the novel, as it starts with Dana having already lost her arm due to her last confrontation with Rufus, meaning that the end of the novel is in the beginning, starting in 1976 and ending in the same year.

Through Dana, Butler portrays a free black woman who is not entirely free, and by inserting elements from the slave narrative genre. As noted by Flagel, by inserting elements from the slave narrative genre, the protagonist's contact with slavery turns out to be "typical, credible" (218). During her stay in antebellum Maryland, Dana's survival depends on the wellbeing of her white ancestor, Rufus, leaving the main character in between freedom and slavery "to show that Black freedom is always circumscribed by white fear and dependency" (Fiona-Elle Maurissette 32). The first time Dana travels back in time to 1815 is in chapter one to save her white ancestor from drowning in a river, unaware of the forced temporal shift that has taken place. The signs that anticipate the time-travel to the past are beyond her control, and she is unable to identify them, as it is the first time it has happened. Dana appears on the Weylin's plantation when she hears that someone is drowning. She tried to rescue the child, but Mrs Weylin took him "and carried him the rest of the way, feeling and examining him as she did." (Butler 7). Mrs Weylin accuses Dana of having tried to kill Rufus, assuming that she is a slave, reacting violently towards the saviour. The reaction the Weylins have towards Dana's attempt to save the child fits in the 1815 mindset, which is opposed to what could be expected in the contemporary period. The travel ends when Dana's life is in danger: "[I] found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy's life. I was going to die" (7-8). This first travel to the past serves for Dana as an introduction to what she's going to

undergo throughout the novel, foreshadowing the dangers and violence of being a black woman in antebellum Maryland.

Butler's *Kindred* opposes the Afrofuturist notion in which, according to Rasheedah Phillips, enslaved people time-travelled to a future where they could "live emancipated and seek equality" (qtd. in Broyld 172). By combining elements from the slave narrative and the shifts of time, from present to past, *Kindred* places the focus on the possible consequences the oppression from the past might have had in the present-day African-American community (Steinberg 468). Dana lives in the twentieth century, a period in which slavery did not exist anymore, and she travels back in time to a slave state to experience the oppression of being a black female citizen. Instead of imagining an alternative future where, according to Broyld, black enslaved people thought of themselves as free, having control over their desires and imagined a better future (172-173), Dana revisits slavery, exploring her identity, and enduring the loss of the freedom she had while living in twentieth-century Los Angeles, serving the past as a mirror of the future (Eileen Donaldson 99). Butler uses Dana to explore the past while showing resistance towards slavery, portraying the effects the travels to the past have on her and her husband when travelling back to the twentieth century to the extent that these create "defamiliarization with one's own body" (Maurissette 15) and surrounding spaces. Butler inverted the use of Afrofuturism to, instead of creating a fictional and ideal future, relive the past to show how history moves in a cyclical way, and nothing can be done to change past events. However, Dana tries to improve the living conditions of the slaves from the plantation at the same time as she tries to change Rufus' view of slaves, in particular his way of treating Alice, to make sure she will be able to give birth to Joseph and Hagar, to ensure her birth (Donaldson 99). Dana not only has to explore her own identity and lineage, but she also has to betray her community to ensure her existence, making. As stated by Madhu Dubey, this makes her travels to the merely moved by self-interest, betraying her ethical values (347).

By defying the traditional conventions of Afrofuturism, Butler portrayed in *Kindred* a victim of slavery in the twentieth century. Afrofuturism is present throughout the novel in different ways despite not all of them being conventional ones. As stated by Angelyn Mitchell, the novel takes the influence from the traditional slave narratives that recalled the stories of the brutality suffered by slaves showing the impact on the narrator's life and their surroundings (81). Butler portrays Dana as a contemporary woman who

wants to be a writer, and to show that history cannot only be acknowledged through reading, Butler forces her to experience slavery through action rather than "as a matter of abstract historical knowledge" (Dubey 350). Dana tries on diverse occasions to change the course of history by intervening with her contemporary knowledge, but as she is the only one who can recognise the patterns that must be broken, the change is not possible. The main character's failure to change habits in antebellum Maryland can be seen, as stated by Caroline Rody, as a way to show that history cannot be changed (74). However, because of her extraordinary situation, Dana can escape her fate in 1815 by being able to teleport herself to 1976, saving her life every time she is in danger. Butler's aim through the publication of *Kindred* can be understood as a tool to show how history needs to be acknowledged and how it cannot be changed once it has happened, but it will always be reflected in the actions carried out in the present time. With the use of Afrofuturism, Butler can make readers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries engage with a slave narrative and recognise how ancient trauma can shape one's identity because of the remaining residues of said trauma: the oppression and the violence involved in it.

## 3. Ancient Trauma and Identity in *Kindred*

As *Kindred*'s main character, Dana, is forced to explore the past as a slave to continue with her current life in the present time, she becomes a victim of extreme circumstances that oblige her to abandon what is morally correct, going against the twentieth-century values and being aware of the betrayal she is committing against her own family. The main character's identity depends on her ancestors, including "distant ancestors, such as Rufus and Alice; closer relatives, such as her mother, aunt, and uncle; and her spouse, Kevin," who are fundamental for the development of her self-perception and identity (Wiggs 130), becoming the protector and "symbolic mother" of Rufus (Lisa A. Long 473). Throughout the survival in the nineteenth century, Dana is also able to understand what her ancestors had to undergo, at the same time as she explores her origins and the sacrifices the black community had to make to manage to be alive for another day:

> As Dana's narrative unfolds, the text seeks to negotiate how her sense of self can be reconciled to the competing yet related historical constructions of 'race', gender, and sexuality that inform black femininity in both the 19th and the 20th centuries and, indeed, whether or not she is able to transcend these often limiting paradigms. (Sarah Wood 85)

The ancient trauma, slavery and the inheritance in the present time of oppressive behaviours towards the black and female communities, experienced by Dana and Kevin in first person makes them lose the identity they had formed until 1976 to adapt to the circumstances undergone during their visits to the antebellum period. By being forced to modify who they are, Dana and Kevin are forced to adopt the behaviour and conventions of the nineteenth century to fit in that society, having to change their roles in their daily life not to get caught or put themselves in a dangerous situation they are not prepared to endure. Because of these modifications in their personalities, they will experience trouble understanding and having in mind who they truly are while at the same time trying to use the previous knowledge acquired in the twentieth century to make their stay in the nineteenth century safer and easier. Throughout the novel Dana is portrayed as a character in between two worlds, not only regarding her time-travels but also because of her skin colour, her knowledge and the ancestral trauma that haunts her surrounding environment, aligning with Wiggs' statement about the adversities Dana must face in *Kindred*: "Struggling against the broad social forces of slavery and antebellum racism as well as the consequences of her own decisions, Dana must construct an identity that will enable her to survive encounters unthinkable in post-Civil Rights America" (135). In order to survive, Dana must abandon who she is to adapt to 1815 Maryland, to ensure her existence in the twentieth century.

Dana is an orphan black woman who was raised by her aunt and uncle, so the time-travels are the only way she has to establish a "connection" with her ancestors (Megan Behrent 803). This way, Dana can understand not only her hybridity, as in her, the "blood" of the oppressed and the oppressor is present (Thelma Shinn Richard 120), but also why her relatives behave the way they do towards her life choices; she can be considered a hybrid character as she shares blood with the Weylin family, who are white, and with Alice, her slave ancestor. Dana and Kevin met at work, which means they both perceived the other as equal, not having in mind any prejudices based on their skin colour. After Kevin proposes to Dana, she asks him: "You, uh . . . don't have any relatives or anything who'll give you a hard time about me, do you?" (Butler 118). Kevin's sister reacted in a similar way when he decided to introduce his relationship to her after having proposed to Dana, rejecting his fiancée and stating that "she wouldn't have [Dana] in her house" (Butler 118). Kevin justifies his sister's behaviour by stating that she must have reacted like that because of her husband's mindset, as he "would have made a good Nazi"

(119). The reaction of Kevin's sister was not what he expected, "finding himself experiencing his race in evidently surprising ways, such as when he confronts his sister's bigotry for the first time" (Wiggs 137). Nevertheless, Kevin is not the only one that has to face the disapproval from his family. Dana's relatives, who she grew up with, only approved of her relationship with Kevin because of the superiority they saw in dating someone white. Dana's aunt only accepted her marriage because Dana and Kevin's children would be "light," as she had "always said [Dana] was a little too 'highly visible'" (119). Both reactions can be understood as the inheritance of racial stereotypes and ancient trauma in which white people were believed to be superior to black people, perpetuating the stereotypes and mindset from the antebellum period that, as stated by Richard, are a result of "hierarchical tendencies" (121). This episode can be examined as one of the manifestations of the interconnection between ancient trauma and identity in *Kindred*'s present time.

Dana is the main victim of the ancient trauma and how it shapes identity in the novel. Nevertheless, Kevin can also be considered a secondary victim for his accidental travel to the past for perpetuating and performing the pre-existing gender roles while being in the year 1976. Because of this, Kevin cannot be analysed as a victim of discrimination but as a victim of the mindsets from both centuries, as he sometimes perpetuates patriarchal behaviours. As argued by Donaldson, Butler created a parallelism between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to reveal that Dana is not as free as a black woman as she believes to be in neither of the centuries as "she is still treated as subordinate in the future/present, partly because of her race and partly because of her gender" (98). Furthermore, the novel does not only focus on the exploration of racism and sexism present in the antebellum period "but foregrounds the fact that, because white men have continued to exercise power through that period in history into the present, Dana's present experience is limited" (Donaldson 98). An example of Kevin perceiving Dana as someone who must do something for him can be when, in "The Fight," Dana talks about a memory in which Kevin got mad at her for not wanting to do his job for him. Kevin has no control over Dana's actions, so that is what makes him react that way:

> He really had asked me to do some typing for him three times. I'd done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing, how I did all but the final drafts of my stories in longhand. That was why I was with a blue-collar agency instead of a white-collar agency. The second time he asked, though, I told him, and I refused. He was

> annoyed. The third time when I refused again, he was angry. He said if I couldn't do him a little favor when he asked, I could leave. So I went home. (Butler 117)

Kevin perceives Dana working for him as a favour she must do for him, but he gives her no choice. Kevin's actions and reactions can be perceived as the attitude of a contemporary slaveholder, as "it is possible to trace the progression of certain ideologies and behaviours from the past into the present" (Donaldson 98) as Dana appears to be a dehumanised black woman that must do what her master, in this case, Kevin, wants her to. However, despite their physical differences, as stated by Gregory Jerome Hampton: "Dana is able to love Kevin as an equal" (12).

Kevin not only behaves to some extent as a slaveholder in the twentieth century but also during the time-travel to antebellum Maryland. In the second part of "The Fall," Dana begins to feel dizzy, and knowing what is to come, Kevin holds her so both travel to the past, highlighting "the stark contrast between their historical fates" (Long 474). Kevin, knowing the privileges he has in contrast with Dana, is sure that if he travels with her, she will be safer than if she travels alone. This time Dana was called by Rufus after having fallen, breaking his leg as a consequence. Once Rufus was safe, he asked Kevin: "Does Dana belong to you now?" (Butler 60), reflecting the impossibility in the nineteenth century for a black woman to be married to a white man. Rufus could only conceive a master-slave relationship between Dana and Kevin because it was what society imposed. At the end of the passage, Dana reluctantly agrees with Rufus, being aware of the dangers of presenting themselves as wife and husband and decides that Kevin must play being her master: "We're going to have to fit in as best we can with the people here for as long as we have to stay. That means we're going to have to play the roles you gave us" (65). As noted by Wiggs, Dana's relationship with Kevin is portrayed based exclusively on a nineteenth-century model, influenced by their physical traits. This relationship serves Dana as a medium to escape from traditional slavery, giving her the chance to experience freedom despite still being trapped in the role of slave she must play:

> Her association with Kevin must be presented to the Weylins as a master-slave relationship to obscure the truth of their time traveling origins, yet at the same time, the lie gives Dana freedom from traditional slave labour and the ability to move about the house as she pleases. (Butler 137)

Dana has to abandon the identity she had previously developed to fit in with the antebellum period. The previous knowledge she uses during her stays in the antebellum makes people believe she is a literate person. The people from the plantation always remind Dana that she is not equal to white people, and even Rufus does: "'You think you're white!' [Rufus] muttered. 'You don't know your place any better than a wild animal'" (Butler 180). As noted by Wood, Dana's previous knowledge makes her stand out not only among the slaves but also among the white slaveholders (85). The same happens with her family, for whom she is physically too black. The following section explains Dana's adaptation to the antebellum period, exploring how time-travelling forces her to alter her identity, behaviour and appearance.

## 4. DANA'S ADAPTATION IN 1815 MARYLAND

It must be remarked that when Dana travels to the past she wears clothes from the twentieth century, which include pants, that in the nineteenth century were only used by men. Nigel is the first character to pay attention to this detail: "'How come you're dressed like a man?' he asked me" (Butler 60), showing how Dana's identity must be modified to fit the female canon established for slaves during the nineteenth century. Once Dana and Kevin arrive at the Weylins' plantation Dana finds Carrie, a slave who worked for the family. Carrie points at Dana's clothes to make a similar remark to the one Nigel had previously made, to which Dana answers:

> "They're the only clothes I have right now," I said. "My master will buy me some better ones sooner or later." Let it be Kevin's fault that I was "dressed like a man." It was probably easier for the people here to understand a master too poor or too stingy to buy me proper clothing than it would be for them to imagine a place where it was normal for women to wear pants. (Butler 137)

For Dana is easier to justify her clothing by insinuating that her master "will not buy her a dress" (Wiggs 137) because he was "too poor or too stingy" (Butler 73) to buy her women's clothes, rather than understanding where they come from and that they are a married couple. In this case, Dana uses her previous knowledge to try to justify herself based on the context she is in. This obliges both, Dana and Kevin, to lie and create a new reality not to put themselves in danger and to allow Dana to be as free as she can considering her status. However, Dana's behaviour resembling the conventions of the twentieth century leads her to be discriminated by the rest of the slaves, not only for her looks but also for her speech and education (Dubey 349). As noted by Wiggs, Kevin must

be close to Dana while both are in Maryland for her to be safe; this means that Dana is "subjected to the power of white men" (137). Despite the knowledge both of them have of the antebellum period and how slavery worked, they are unable to put into practice what they have read, finding themselves "profoundly unfamiliar" (Parham 1323) with the functioning of the antebellum period.

Kevin, unable to reach Dana before she goes back to 1976, gets trapped in antebellum Maryland for five years, the equivalent of two days in the present. During the time-travels to the past, Dana and Kevin experience time in a way that differs from the present; in the past, time goes faster than in the present. According to how time passes in the past, Dana and Kevin spent in the antebellum two months in which they had to behave as slave and master while trying to educate other slaves from the plantation. The difference in the perception of time depending on whether the character is in the nineteenth or twentieth century can be analysed as "the difference between the time of living and the time of reading" (Parham 1322). For the person in the twentieth century, the travel only lasts minutes and can be interpreted as the time it takes to "read about what transpired in the other's life in the past" (1322). Nonetheless, for the person in the nineteenth century it lasts months, as the suffering being experienced is real. This Afrofuturist approach disrupts linearity in the novel and as stated by Parham, "there is no possibility for an experience of the past outside of first-person experience" (1322). *Kindred* is therefore not a novel about reading about the past but a novel about actively experiencing the past to have knowledge in the present.

Only eight days after Dana arrives in 1976, she gets called back by Rufus. When she gets there, she discovers that her ancestor, Alice, has got married to a slave, Isaac, and tries to help them escape. The attempt fails and Isaac is sold to another slaveholder while Alice gets to go back to the Weylins' plantation, but this time as a slave after Rufus gets to purchase her. Dana figures that Rufus raped Alice and realises that her attempts to impose the mindset from the twentieth century in the nineteenth century had been a failure: "Kevin had been right. I'd been foolish to hope to influence him" (Butler 133), this serves as a confirmation of the impossibility to impose the present into the past, in this case, reflected in Rufus, who has become an adult whose personality has been shaped based on the nineteenth-century mindset.

After this episode and after Alice has healed, Rufus wants Dana to cooperate in Alice's rape, as he perceives Alice as an object of his property, and he expects Dana to

validate his actions. Rufus blackmails Dana by telling her that if she doesn't talk to Alice to convince her to have sex with him, she is "going to watch while Jake Edwards beats some sense into [Alice]!" (162). The rape has to happen for Dana to exist, as her existence in the present and survival in the past depends on Alice's rape to conceive Hagar, leaving Alice with the choice between trying to escape and risking her life or submitting to Rufus' desires, that, as stated by Hampton, leaves Alice as a widowed slave and not a free woman anymore (14). This is a crucial point in the narrative for Dana since she will have to choose between sacrificing herself or Alice, leading to a conflict with her values, for she must perpetuate the slave system, as noted by Donaldson, escaping from becoming a slave by ignoring Alice's suffering (104).

Once Alice has partially recovered from the attacks while trying to help Isaac escape, Rufus insists Dana on persuading Alice to be with him: "'Talk to her, Dana,' he said once he'd brushed aside the matter of my letter. 'You're older than she is. She thinks you know a lot. Talk to her!'" (Butler 178). At first, Dana seems to be reluctant: "I can't stop you from raping the woman, Rufe, but I'm not going to help you do it either" (Butler 178). However, she decides to tell Alice Rufus' plans, learning that "the black female body is a location of presumed powerlessness and insecurity in 1815" (Hampton 12). The powerlessness of Alice and Dana over Rufus can be reflected when Dana tries to convince him not to rape Alice. Rufus threatens Dana by stating that if she refuses to talk to Alice, she will have "to watch while Jake Edwardsbeatd some sense into her" (Butler 180). Here, it can be seen that none of Dana's efforts to educate him by using the twentieth-century mindset are useful. Dana, aware of what she is about to do, becomes a perpetrator of white patriarchy by enabling Rufus to rape Alice to conceive Hagar: "I had helped her to heal. Now I had to help Rufus tear her wounds open again" (Butler 181). "Alice's refusal to run away," Hampton claims, "is an overt example of passive resistance" (15), as she chooses to stay on the plantation, despite the risks it involves. This leads to Alice adapting to Rufus, "becoming a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (Butler 185). Alice's suffering becomes unbearable after Rufus makes her believe that he had sold their children after she tried to escape: "When he took away her children, I thought she was go' die right there. She was screaming and crying and carrying on" (Butler 279). By committing suicide, Alice ends not only with her suffering, but it is also "an act of resistance" towards Rufus' mistreatment experienced throughout the novel (Hampton 23).

As pointed out by Behrent, Dana's conflict is not only "an act of family preservation" but also "an act of self-preservation" (819), accepting fate so she does not get to experience said violence. Furthermore, Rufus manipulates Dana by making her believe that Kevin has not responded to her letter because "maybe he threw the first letter" (Butler 179) and "maybe he got like Alice – wanted to be with one of his own kind" (Butler 179). Rufus continues his attempt to persuade Dana by using Kevin's absence to insinuate that he had spent more time in the antebellum period than he had spent with Dana as a married couple. Rufus, talking to Dana, tells her that Kevin would not have waited that long if she were not the only option he had to travel back to the 20th century, adding that: "But now… who knows. The right woman could make this time mighty sweet to him" (Butler 179). In this passage, Rufus tries to wound Dana by using words, reminding her that she does not have the protection of Kevin during this trip and by trying to make her believe that Kevin will come back to her, not because he loves her, but because she is the only means he has to travel back to 1976. After having been lied to by Rufus and finding the letters he had not sent to Kevin, Dana decides to escape. However, she gets caught and later beaten by Mr Weylin "until [Dana] tried to make [herself] believe he was going to kill [her]" (Butler 198). Regardless of Dana's betrayal by trying to run away, Mr Weylin sent a letter to Kevin to let him know that Dana was on the plantation, which was handed by Rufus when Dana recovered.

Once the couple can travel to 1976, Dana becomes aware that Kevin communicates similarly to the Weylins after having spent in antebellum Maryland the equivalent of five years in the past, making real her concern about Kevin adopting traits from the slave period to survive:

> But he'd be in another kind of danger. A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn't want to talk to him about. 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. He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. (Butler 80)

Nevertheless, even though Kevin had to adopt traits from the nineteenth century, because of the privilege involved in being white that "had saved him from much of the trouble [Dana] had faced" (Butler 211), he manages to be safe during his stay in the antebellum period, being able to help slaves escape: "I fed them, hid them during the day, and when night came, I pointed them toward a free black family who would feed and hide them the next day." (Butler 214). This, as noted by Hampton, reflects how Kevin's gender and race

were key in his survival, as he got to experience "a freedom and mobility that Dana's black female body could not have afforded her in the early 1800s" (16). Kevin's ability to survive and even help other slaves serves as a contrast to the dangers Dana has to face during all her travels. Kevin is free despite being trapped, while Dana is treated as property even though she can escape whenever her life is in danger. The couple is an example of the different treatment people received in the antebellum period based on their skin colour.

During her last trip to the antebellum Maryland Dana finds out that Alice has committed suicide because of Rufus' punishment after she tried to run away. This is a consequence of Dana's refusal to question "the direction history must take" (Donaldson 104) as she prioritises her survival over the possibility of risking her existence by helping Alice. As stated by Hampton, the loss of Alice leads Rufus to develop a desire to own Dana "physically and permanently" (16). Dana has a privilege that Alice did not even though both share the same status: if Dana ends Rufus' life, she will not have to face the pertaining consequences, and by stopping Rufus' rape attempt, Dana is highlighting an unsurpassable limit that "prevents [her] from completely becoming a slave in antebellum America" (Hampton 17). To defend herself from Rufus, Dana attacks him with the knife she was carrying, being her task to murder her ancestor "to whom she has become disturbingly attached-rather than submit to his sexual advance" (Long 469):

> I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once. I twisted sharply, broke away from him. He caught me, trying not to hurt me. I was aware of him trying not to hurt me even as I raised the knife, even as I sank it into his side. (Butler 291)

Even though Dana can travel to 1976 after having freed herself from Rufus, she gets permanently injured: "From the elbow to the end of the fingers, my left arm h ad become a part of the wall. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped" (292). As stated by Long: "Thus the loss of her arm-cut off where Rufus grasped her in his death throes-symbolizes the drag of family history, the complicated nature of Dana's relationship to her white and African American ancestry, and the permanent, disabling wound that slavery leaves on individuals today" (469). This loss serves as a symbol of the wounds, physical and psychological, that experiencing slavery has left on her, and can also serve as the ending point of their relationship.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In *Kindred*, Butler presents an Afrofuturist work about reliving the antebellum period to understand the influence it has on the development of an identity. Butler's work is not a conventional slave narrative as it breaks linearity through the Afrofuturist technology of time travel. This research has analysed how encountering the antebellum period influences the characters and modifies their personalities after having experienced slavery and after having met Dana's ancestors, allowing her to know her origins. The use of speculative devices such as the rupture of a linear evolution of time, the use of time-travels and the incorporation of contemporary knowledge in the antebellum period make *Kindred* a neo-slave narrative that challenges the traditional structure of previous slave works.

Dana's identity develops throughout Butler's work, playing a key role in her visits to the past, not only when she travels alone but also on her trip with Kevin. The couple serves to create contrast and to show the oppression towards black female characters as opposed to white men. Both must abandon their previous knowledge and identity due to their uselessness in the nineteenth century, as well as creating a fictitious relationship portraying Kevin as a slaveholder and Dana as his slave to create a safe space for her. During her stay in the nineteenth century, Dana realises that she is "horrifyingly unprepared" for surviving on a Southern plantation (Wood 90). The antebellum past has a negative influence on Dana's morals, forcing her to betray her ancestor, Alice, to protect herself and escape from being raped by Rufus.

The figures of Dana and Kevin are essential to the understanding of the differences encountered by them during their stay in the antebellum Maryland. Both experiences are different, thus Butler explores slavery by using opposing characters in terms of gender and physical traits. For them, it is fundamental to experience the past to understand the present oppressions towards the main character, Dana, based on her origins. Dana and Kevin experience the impossibility of changing history and become aware of the cyclical structure it has, as many of the ways in which Dana was oppressed in the antebellum can be adapted to a contemporary context. *Kindred* can be analysed as an innovative slave narrative that focuses on the importance of acknowledging the past to understand its relevance and influence on the present, and how it cannot be changed, but it can be stopped from happening again.

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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