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**“A Slow Process of Dulling”:
Slavery and Science Fiction in
Octavia Butler’s *Kindred***

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Table of contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Methodology	2
3. Revising Science Fiction and its Characteristics.....	3
4. About Neo-slave Narrative and its Characteristics	7
5. Octavia E. Butler: The Author	10
6. <i>Kindred</i> (1979): The Novel	16
6.1. The Story.....	16
6.2. Dana and Kevin: A Mix Couple	20
6.3. The Journey: From <i>Black is Beautiful</i> to Slavery	24
6.4. Sarah: The Mammy.....	27
6.5. Alice: The Abused Black Woman	31
6.6. Dana: The Survivor.....	33
7. Conclusions	34
8. Works Cited.....	36

Abstract

Science fiction has historically been associated with white male Anglo writers. However, in this essay I focus on an African American writer, Octavia E. Butler, and her pioneer science fiction novel *Kindred* (1979) because she not only revises the characteristics of traditional science fiction, but she also offers criticism of racism in slavery times as well as in nowadays America. Basically, I analyse time travel as a device to revisit racist standards. Through Dana and Kevin, a mix couple, Butler travels back in time to show the horrors of a racist society both in the past and in the present

1. Introduction

This essay deals with the novel *Kindred* (1979), written by African American author Octavia E. Butler. *Kindred* –as well as most of Butler’s novels– belongs to the vast genre of science fiction. As far as I can remember, I have been interested in science fiction, thus, my choice. Given the fact that I was born in the 1990s, I have been a witness to the revolution of special effects, 3D technology and more. I have always been surrounded by films and TV series of this kind, from *The X-files*, *Fringe*, to *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. However, the relationship between Butler and science fiction shows a different shade that will be discussed later on. *Kindred* is not only a science fiction story, but also a slave narrative. In fact, *Kindred* can be included in the category of neo-slave narratives, whose characteristics I will detail in a section of this essay.

Besides my interest in the science fiction genre, there are other reasons that have pushed me towards choosing this topic. One of them is the fact that Butler was the first African American woman to ever write and publish a science fiction piece of writing, be it a novel or a collection of short stories. Writing about her seemed quite original and refreshing and even though I am not going to provide an in-depth research on her and her work, I do want to focus on one of her novels. From my point of view, many of them sounded very interesting and entertaining: the *Xenogenesis* trilogy or *Lilith’s Brood* as well as the Parable series (*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*). However, I rooted for *Kindred* because of the way it deals with slavery, a topic that has been dealt with in class and discussed throughout the English degree. Slavery was an outrageously shameful part of American history and it still affects today’s society. Many films have been made about this topic, but most of them contemplate the cruelty suffered by black men. However, *Kindred* focuses on women (both black and white) and their roles in society. Moreover, *Kindred* proves the point mentioned

before: that slavery still affects today's society, and science fiction helps to highlight its current relevance.

2. Methodology

My main objectives are, on the one hand, to study to what extent science fiction accommodates to women's issues; on the other hand, the target is to interpret the time of slavery in US from a different perspective. For this purpose, I will first consider the principal characteristics of science fiction as they appear in the white Anglophone tradition; I will then analyse Octavia Butler's own approach to science fiction, and I will later interpret Butler's novel *Kindred* to finally focus on the female characters.

In my search for information about the author, I have noticed a surprising lack of documentation. Being Butler a canonical author as she is, one would expect to find more articles and books written about her and her literary work. However, the search for articles that dealt with *Kindred* in an extensive way was very unproductive. Some of them spoke of science fiction in Butler's novels in general. Some others brought up the sense of community in her works while some adventured inside the complex world of time travel and its impact. Unfortunately, not all of them were useful to my writing. However, one article –Gavin Miller's "Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. The Third World as Topos for a U.S. Utopia"– in particular helped me see the American society, both past and present, in a way I had not considered before. Miller's work has not only helped me perceive imperialism and racism in a different light, but it has also smoothed the way to *Kindred* and its characters and themes.

My search has also covered the cinematographic field. Although there is not a film version of *Kindred* yet, only some visual material made by Butler's fans, I nevertheless have found video interviews with Butler, and I incorporate some of them in my paper. On one of

them, Butler is a guest at the show of well-known American journalist Charlie Rose. The other takes place in a science fiction convention where Butler and other authors discuss a new science fiction film that has been recently released: *Dune*. Butler is not only the sole female at the table, but also the only black member. Those are the only video recorded interviews that I managed to find. However, there are also written interviews that I will be using as well.

3. Revising Science Fiction and its Characteristics

There exist different opinions about the origin of science fiction. Some say that science fiction comes from ancient times, from the Classical and Hellenistic Period. They assert that there are Roman and Greek stories that could fit there. Nonetheless, others prefer to defend that the origin of the genre takes place sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Many stories that were written in those centuries can easily be placed into the science fiction shelf. However, most scholars agree that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) was a crucial novel in the evolution and definition of Western science fiction literature. After this first experiment carried out by Victor Frankenstein, where the results were not the ones desired, the genre settles down and makes a place for itself among universal literature. From then onwards, science fiction grows. The next two authors who helped give the genre prestige are Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

French author Jules Verne's (also popularly known as the inventor of science fiction) works, set on a hypothetical present time, describe the invention of gadgets that could allow mankind to reach scientific knowledge previously unknown. Verne turns out to be a prophetic author, for some of his prognostications did end up happening, such as the landing on the moon. He wrote about journeys to unimaginable places or on vehicles yet to be invented, which widened up the vision of the genre of science fiction. His writing led other authors to try and go beyond what was known to the human kind at the time, or even now.

The stories we know about nowadays, the ones that involve the exploration of space or the coming of aliens to Earth were inspired by Jules Verne's wild imagination.

Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), on the other hand, wrote a different kind of literature, but still within the boundaries of science fiction. His life as a convinced British socialist influenced his writings deeply. Some of his works treated social injustice from a non-realistic point of view. *The Time Machine* (1895) deals with time travel and the evolution of mankind, and shows that, even in the distant future, the differences between social classes would not disappear. Furthermore, he has also written novels that deal with the topic of science and its ethical limits, as in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). He has also treated the appearance of aliens (invaders from Mars) on the surface of planet Earth in his novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898)

Following the line of the limits of science, we find Isaac Asimov's *The Foundation* (1951-1953), where he shows the success of humanity in the distant future as well as its decay. In a similar way, his robot-related stories and novels deal with the misuse and abuse of science and its possible consequences.

Having briefly introduced some important pioneer science fiction writers and works, it is time to present the main characteristics of the science fiction genre. Not all of the aspects need to be in one story at the same time. Some stories deal with certain aspects, some others deal with different ones. All in all and for the purpose of my research on Butler's *Kindred*, I would like to refer to the following.

- Aliens: They can appear both in and outside the Earth. Their appearance on Earth is usually justified by an invasion and the inhabitants of Earth consequently start a war in order to retrieve the planet. However, there are cases in which the invasion is successful and humanity is absolutely dominated by the alien race. The most notable exception to this aspect is Neill Bromkamp's film *District 9* (2009). In

this movie, about a million aliens have to settle in Johannesburg due to a failure in their mother ship, and need to live in deplorable and are forced to live in deplorable conditions, in shacks, while humans have an absolute control over them. This film is inspired by the apartheid, and it is possible to see the level of segregation the aliens are put through. In the cases where aliens are found outside the Earth, we find another characteristic of science fiction: space travel. The encounter between humans and aliens in other planets (where, ironically, the humans are the real aliens) is followed by an attempt of invasion by the human kind. These stories of exploration of the universe are usually based on the principles of imperialism. The humans in those stories, usually white and Anglophones, try to colonize another planet and justify their actions with imperialistic arguments: the colonies' lack of technology, their lack of political or social security, etc. However, Octavia Butler should be mentioned here for, in her *Lilith's Brood* novels, the relationship between the Oankali (the aliens living on the planet) and the humans living with them is one of gratitude, fear and interest. Humans are saved by the Oankali, physically disgusting beings that seek to create a new species of hybrids between themselves and humans. In the short story "Bloodchild", though, their relationship is an interdependent one. The Tlics need humans to foster their eggs until their birth and the humans need their permission to live in the colony. However, and despite the fact that they belong to different species, there are love stories.

- Space travel: As said before, it can be used in order to conquer other planets and spread the human empire, but it can also be used to, simply, explore the universe and, in this type of space travel, we might not find aliens. The BBC science-fiction television programme *Doctor Who* is a good example of all these aspects of space travel.

- Time travel: It is usually based on little known scientific theories that would make this type of travel possible. Time travel narrative is used for two purposes: a) to get a glimpse of the future and know what awaits the human race or b) in order to, through personal experience, know about and better understand history. Travels to the past can be used in order to change history. However, this usage is widely avoided by pure science fiction since it would create certain paradoxes¹. *Kindred*, although lacking the scientific element, is an example of a time travel novel. Time travel is a crucial element in Butler's work. The author makes the protagonist Dana travel back to nineteenth century Maryland, and it allows the readers to see history being made. It is also the story of Dana trying to change history, or at least trying to make it less harmful for her loved ones. This aspect of the novel will be discussed later.

- Advanced technology. It is also a very important aspect of science fiction. It refers to the existence of advanced technology or to its creation. Most science fiction films include spaceships, robots, laser sabres, nano robots that can heal any injury, etc.

- Alternate history or futuristic setting. Parallel universes would be included here. Also stories of changes in the past are found in this section, for they create a new history. Typical stories of alternate histories are the ones that start with the early murder of Adolf Hitler, or Mussolini or any important person that changed the course of the world. *Kindred* could be said to be an alternate history novel to some extent, although Dana does not change the course of universal history, she intervenes in the history of the plantation and takes part of her own by repeatedly saving Rufus.

¹ in the TV show *Futurama*, the protagonist Fry travels back in time and accidentally makes his own grandmother pregnant, causing the paradox that he would have not been born if it were not for his own actions.

- Dystopia. It is used for exploring societal problems and is normally focused on the misuse of technology. Wars, social control from the government, scientific experiments that turn out wrong are some of the elements appearing in this type of science fiction literature. *1984* by George Orwell, published 1949, is a clear example of a dystopia.

These are some of the main characteristics we find in science fiction. Thanks to the versatility of the genre, there are many possible combinations. Thus, it is safe to say that Butler's *Kindred* mixes some of these aspects, for the novel includes time travel, space travel –as in traveling from one place to another– and a bit of alternate history. However, *Kindred* is not only a science fiction novel, but also a neo slave narrative.

4. About Neo-slave Narrative and its Characteristics

Some of the elements of science fiction present in *Kindred* have already been shown and now it is time to explain in what ways Butler's novel is a neo-slave narrative. For this purpose I shall provide some introductory notes on the characteristics of this relatively recent literary genre.

Within the tradition of African American Literature in the United States, there is an easily recognizable genre known as slave narratives. Its most representative works are the stories of Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) and Frederick Douglass (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*), which share many elements in common at the same time they show notorious differences. Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) wrote his autobiography as a slave and, later, a free man. The life of a male slave, though hard, was not as troublesome as that of the female slave. A male slave would do as he was commanded by his master; he would take care of the plantation or attend at the master's

house. Surely he would be punished severely and unfairly—he will be whipped and beaten, but he would not have to worry about much more. In contrast, the life of a slave woman involves further dangers. Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897) writes about the horror of being young, and a woman slave: her problems with her master, sexual abuse, the half white (mixed) children she had with the free white man of her choice and her need to hide herself and her children from the evil plantation owner. These are known as slave narratives because they were written by former slaves (both men and women) during slavery times. However, from the 1960s onwards, and the 1970s, in particular, some African American authors tried to revisit a horrendous historical period, and re-write the literary discourse of traditional slave narrative. There was a flow of people, at the time, who tried to ignore the fact that because the African American community had suffered slavery, and judged inferior, they were still discriminated and segregated. It was the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the time of going “back to Africa”, the time to highlight the community’s African roots and forget about slavery. American white historiographers had overlooked the history of the African American society. To many, African American history was not important because the African American society was also unimportant to the reality of the United States. To many members of the African American society, slavery had been a period that was not worth remembering. This was because the treatment that blacks had received from whites had been inhumane and degrading, and that fact made blacks look still inferior to whites. They were looking forward to going back to their roots, their origin before the Middle Passage; they wanted to go back to Africa and what Africa meant: the myths, the rhythm, the closeness to nature and, most of all, their own dignity. Nevertheless, ignoring such a large period of history was not going to make it disappear. This is where the role of neo-slave narratives enters. The authors’ purpose is to look back into slavery and to seek reconciliation with the past and to give the slaves the dignity they deserve.

Neo-slave narratives are contemporary forms of writing, unlike slave narratives. They are stories written by contemporary authors who seek to look back into the dark past of the United States. These novels share characteristics with the autobiographical novel (or pseudo-autobiographical), and with the novel of remembered generations. They also show some aspects of the historical novel but they adjust it to their aims. As Giuliano Bettanin asserts in his article “Defining a Genre: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Women's Neo-slave Narrative”:

Simply by rewriting (after a century or more) the stories of lives and events of the past, the neo-slave narratives intend to assume a special historical value. In addition, they explore the closely woven bilateral relations between individual history and national history, which is typical of the historical novel. But contrary to the traditional historical novel, neo-slave narratives do not conform to official historiography or support any conservative vision or bourgeois ideology. These novels mean to be innovative as they seek to rediscover and rewrite a significant part of history that was deliberately forgotten and denied by the winners.

Bettanin both summarizes and highlights some of the particularities about Butler's *Kindred*. Although it is not an autobiographical novel, Dana mirrors Butler's own personal working experience. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Butler states: “my character is a new writer, and she has lots of horrible little jobs: cleaning, warehouse factory, office, you name it [...] all jobs I've done.” Dana makes use of a first person narrative when she tells her story. However, it is not only her story, but also the story of her ancestors, which leads us to the remembered generations novel. They are novels set in the present time that introduce the past of a family through the memory of one or various members of that family. Within African American literary tradition, besides *Kindred*, we find Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), which

is a neo-slave narrative that also deals with the sexual abuse perpetrated on black women by white males generation after generation, as *Kindred* does. Regarding the historicity of the novel, there is not much to say *a priori*. It deals with US history: it is set in the past and it is about a period of the American history. However, as we get into the novel, we can see that it is far more complex than that. As quoted before, Bettanin asserts that neo-slave narratives deal with history in a different manner. They do not abide by the laws of white historians, they do not follow their rules and, for this reason, they deal with slavery from the point of view of the slaves. To this point, *Kindred* meets all the requirements to be a neo-slave narrative. Nonetheless, *Kindred* gives history a different treatment than the one expected. In her work, Butler merges the two sides of history: the neo-slave narrative black point of view and the white-washed history that present time Americans are being taught. This is shown by Dana's prior knowledge of slavery and her subsequent experience of slavery. It shows to what extent the winners are the ones who write history and the ones who decide which facts are deleted. Dana herself admits that her knowledge of the world had not prepared her in the slightest to what she was experiencing in the nineteenth century.

5. Octavia E. Butler: The Author

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in 1947 in Pasadena, California and died at the age of fifty-eight in Washington. Although she might have been unaware of the facts that occurred in the year of her birth, it is a funny coincidence that she was born the same year that the Roswell² incident happened. She was raised by her mother and grandmother after her father died. She was known to be extremely shy and her introspective character led her to reading

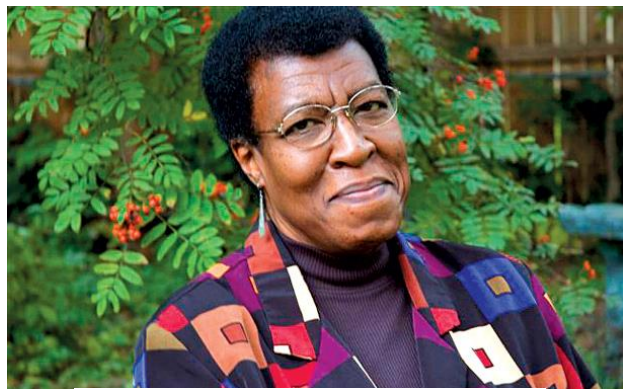
² The Roswell incident is believed to be the first known attempt of contact made by extraterrestrial beings. Supposedly, a spacecraft crashed into this region of New Mexico and from then on, this incident has been surrounded by controversy.

stories, more specifically, science fiction stories. She then began writing at the age of 12. When asked, Butler frequently tells the same story:

I was writing my own little stories and when I was 12, I was watching a bad science fiction movie called *Devil Girl from Mars* and decided that I could write a better story than that. And I turned off the TV and proceeded to try, and I've been writing science fiction ever since.

She enrolled in different programs at several universities: Pasadena City College, California State University, and UCLA. She was life-long faithful to her interests and wrote science fiction novels and short stories. In the introduction to this essay, it was stated that Butler meant a change in the dynamics of the genre, and these are the main reasons: on the one hand, Butler was a woman and,

on the other hand, she was black. Science fiction at the time, and even nowadays, was a field for white men only. She made a space for herself and other women by writing science fiction that was not only presentable,



Octavia Estelle Butler

but also different. Her writings, despite having female protagonists, are not targeted at females. Naturally, they discuss female issues such as equal rights, sexuality, consent, ambition and how to shine in a men's world. However, they cover a much wider set of themes and the female issues dealt with are buried under a layer of magnificent creations. In short, even though science fiction is believed to be a genre where only white men can operate, Butler's works prove that a black woman can also be a part of it and become one of the greatest writers. Nonetheless, Butler does not deal only with the issues of women, but she also deals with the issues of a more concrete collective: black women. In the 1960s, during the

civil rights movement, many collectives (feminists, gays, Chicanos, etc.) threw themselves unto the streets and claimed rights for themselves. At the time we had two major groups: the feminists and the African American. However, the African American group claimed rights for the men and forgot, in many occasions, about their women. Something similar happened in the feminist group: they proclaimed the equality of men and women, but they referred to white women only. The literature that came from these communities showed the reality of the time. In the 1970s, when Butler publishes her first novels, some African American female authors realize that they need to have a voice. Butler is one of these authors and she gives the protagonist role to female characters, usually of colour or of a different species. At one point in her interview with Charlie Rose, Butler remembers that at a science fiction convention someone said that there is no need to include black people in science fiction in order to talk about race, because it can be done through the inclusion of aliens. She obviously disagreed and although she did write an article about it, her works speak for themselves more than any given article. Of course race can be dealt with by including aliens, but that is the point, the spoke person found no problem in comparing non-whites to aliens. What Butler and many writers of her time do is to put white people and people of other races at the same level. Butler does not give relevance to the empire members but to the colonized. Perhaps, to put it better, she gives the powerful position of the imperialist to the races and species that would play the part of the colonized in white science fiction.³⁴ This might be the main reason why science fiction is useful for African American literature: both the African American community and science fiction share an interest in history. In the article “Saying ‘yes’. Textual traumas in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*”, Marisa Parham talks about the impossibility of reliving the past.

³ In *The Patternist*, the powerful end of the story in this case is formed by the immortals and telepaths Doro and Anyanwu. They are the representation of the oddness that white male science fiction would place as a target. On the other hand, Doro is known to have been born in Africa, which makes him a non-white person, a type of person that would be colonized (or even “saved” at the eyes of the colonizer) in white science fiction. However, he and Anyanwu are the masters of their world.

⁴ In *Lilith’s Brood*, the humans are the ones who are colonized and submitted to power, a position that does not appear frequently in white science fiction. In the short story “Bloodchild” something similar happens. Humankind needs the Tlic in order to survive. However, there is love between the two species.

Thus the relationship between the reader and the text can never be compared to the real experience of the past in one's flesh. The same applies to the author. The writer cannot have access to the past. The past is gone and it is not possible to feel it in the same way as the inhabitants of that time did. This is exactly the reason why science fiction is important to communities who suffered in the past: science fiction can help the reader feel the past, even if it is in a remotely similar way as to those living back then. Butler expresses this concern through the character of Dana in *Kindred* in the many-times-cited quote:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. At one point, this last cowardice even brought me something useful. A name for whites who rode through the night in the ante bellum [sic] South, breaking in doors and beating and otherwise torturing black people. (36)

Butler uses time travel, one of the main aspects of science fiction, to make up for the impossibility of actually traveling through time and to show the readers the reality and brutality of slavery.

She was able to change white science fiction's perspective on power balance. As said above, white male alien-related science fiction had become the epitome of imperialism. When space travel appears, the resulting narrative echoes that of colonialism: white people travel to other lands in order to conquer the territory and subdue the inhabitants, normally with the

excuse of helping them in religious or technological matter. The balance of power has always been inclined in favour of the humankind: whether the narrative includes a journey to outer space or an alien invasion, humans (whites) are always the good ones and therefore, the ones who deserve to win the battle –a battle that is a must in white science fiction. However, in Butler’s work, there is no need for a battle, nor is there always a winning side and most of all, it is not always the humans who win. Butler does not write stories about the colonizing adventures of the human empire, quite the opposite, she writes stories about the coexistence of different species. Both in *Lilith’s Brood*, *The Patternist* and in “Bloodchild” there is a stable relationship between at least two of the members from different species. In *Lilith’s Brood*, for example, there are two recognizable species: the humans and the Oankali. Human beings arrive in the planet of the Oankali searching for refuge after the nuclear war destroyed the Earth. The Oankali welcome them by establishing a pact: the humans would have the genetically modified children of the Oankali. Although it is not an ideal relationship, they do not fight each other. The humans are guests in the Oankali’s home planet and they do not try to become its owners, something that in white science fiction would rarely happen. In the last volume of the series *The Patternist, Survivor*, there is a group of humans who flee from Earth to another planet, where an intelligent species of extraterrestrials already lives. The group of humans is welcomed by one of the tribes of the planet, and they live in peace until a rival tribe appears and captures some members of the first tribe and of the human group with them. Even in this extreme situation, one member of the human expedition, Alanna, manages to connect with the rival tribe and, finally, she even marries their leader. We can see here how Butler can create love between two different species. In the short story “Bloodchild”, we see more of this interspecies love. As said before, the Tlics introduce their eggs into male humans until they hatch, a process that might result in the human’s death. However, even though this practice started as a pact between the Tlics and the humans (same as in *Lilith’s Brood*), the

relationship between them has grown since the arrival of humans to the planet. The boy that is presented to the reader in the story as the protagonist, Gan, is suffering from second thoughts. He is reconsidering the fact of becoming pregnant by his Tlic lover, T'Gatoi. The narrative explains the relationship between these two inhabitants of the planet and the evolution of their love.

As explained, one of the main recurrent themes in Butler's narratives is the love between two different species or races. Interspecies love has already been shown through some of her works but it is time to explain interracial love. As Rebecca Holden and Nisi Shawl argue in their introduction to their book *Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*,

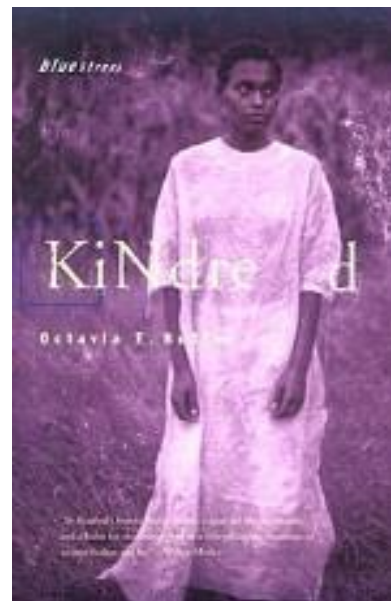
A mating between a human and a dolphin is far from the strangest of the strange matings in the fiction of Octavia Butler. Butler writes about matings between humans and a large variety of other beings ... and perhaps strangest of all, matings between all the varied categories of humans that we have divided ourselves into. (1)

In *Kindred* we see the loving relationship between a black woman and a white man, both of them human. It is interesting to highlight that there is a much broader acceptance of the love shared by a human and an alien than that of the relationship Dana and her husband Kevin have, which agrees with the use of the adjective "strange" used by Holden and Shawl. *Kindred* shows us not only the relationship between Dana and Kevin, but also society's reaction and reception of an interracial relationship, both in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth centuries. This topic will be dealt with more deeply in the next section.

6. *Kindred* (1979): The Novel

6.1. The Story

Kindred is the story of Dana (short for Edana), a black independent woman living in Los Angeles in 1976 who is suddenly transported to the slaveholding Maryland in 1815. She travels back in time several times, every time his ancestor Rufus Weylin is at risk. The first time she ends up in a riverbank and sees a white child about to drown. She saves him and receives, in return, the furious mother's beating and a rifle aimed at her head. When in real danger and about to lose her life, she is transported back to her home in Los Angeles, where her white husband Kevin is awaiting her. She travels to antebellum Maryland again only a few minutes later, but when she arrives there, some years have already passed. She helps the boy once again and then leaves his house to find help from a free black woman and her daughter Alice. Dana sees the predecessors of the Ku Klux Klan beat and take her slave husband from her. Dana suffers the anger of one of the men when he comes back to beat the woman, but Dana is not either a slave, or a woman living in the time of slavery, and she fights back. When the feeling of danger overwhelms her, she goes back to Los Angeles. Back at home, she realises that Rufus and Alice are her ancestors, parents of her great-great-grandmother Hagar⁵.



Kindred (1979)

⁵ Hagar is a biblical name. She was a slave property of Abram and Sarai. Because of Sarai's infertility, she offered the slave to her husband, so that they could form a family. However, when Hagar got pregnant, the relationship between the slave and her mistress became intolerable, so Hagar fled from Sarai. She is the mother of Ishmael.

The third time she returns to Maryland, Kevin holds on to her arm and travels back along with her. They find Rufus who has broken his leg accompanied by Nigel, a black boy. They carry Rufus back to the plantation, where Kevin gets to meet the Weylins. Dana is sent to the cookhouse, where she meets Sarah⁶, the cook and Carrie, her daughter. Dana and Kevin stay in Maryland for a few months. Dana becomes close to the house slaves and both she and her husband watch as cruelty is distributed by the Weylins. This journey ends when Tom Weylin sees Dana reading a book and proceeds to whip her until she goes back to her home, leaving Kevin trapped in Maryland for five years. Reading was absolutely prohibited for slaves, as well as writing. There existed rules and regulations regarding this topic. A slave that was caught doing one of these activities could receive various kinds of punishment, from losing one finger to being whipped one or two hundred times. The ability to read and write in a slave was thought to be dangerous for the institution of slavery. As in every moment in history, ignorance makes people easily manipulated. For a slave, to know how to read and write could mean freedom. In *Kindred* we see how Dana intends to write her own freedom papers but, unfortunately, neither she nor Kevin know how what said papers looked like. Instead, she tries to write a pass for herself. She later teaches some of the house slaves with the intention of giving them the necessary weapons to escape their submissive lives. As Frederick Douglass exposed in his biography, literacy was a quality that no master would want in a slave. The following quote corresponds to a moment in which Mr. Auld (Douglass's master) surprises his wife reading with Douglass:

"if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

⁶ Interestingly, Sarah is also a biblical name. Sarah was the name given by God to Sarai. She was the mother of Isaac, second child of Abram, now known as Abraham.

From that moment, I [Douglass] understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

The Life of Frederick Douglass (78)

Besides punishing slaves for their knowledge, the authorities also penalised their teachers. In an extract of a South Carolina act of 1740, we find the following:

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

It comes as no surprise that Dana felt in danger after being caught reading. The loss of a finger or a toe, or a hundred whippings is not a desirable thing. After eight days of waiting in 1976, Dana is finally summoned from the nineteenth century by Rufus. This time he has been beaten up by Isaac⁷ Jackson, a slave of the plantation and lover of Alice Greenwood, the girl whose father was taken away by the predecessors of the Ku Klux Klan. She is now an adult young woman, and Rufus has tried to rape her, which made Isaac beat him. Dana begs for Rufus life to be spared, and Isaac and Alice run away. Dana returns to the plantation and takes care of Rufus until he recovers. A few days later, they bring back Alice, who has been beaten, ravaged by dogs, and enslaved as punishment for helping Isaac escape. Following Rufus's commands, Dana tries to help Alice to heal. She spends a long time with Alice, and they become close. Dana learns that Kevin left the plantation to go North and she has no way of contacting him. In the meantime, Dana teaches some of the slaves how to read and write. She is engaged with the lives of the slaves by to the extent that Rufus asks her to convince Alice to

⁷ Again, a biblical name. Abraham and Sarah's son.

sleep with him. He clearly states that Alice has two options: to come in peace and let him do his job, or to be his by force. From here on out, Alice and Dana realize the duality of their connection. Dana is the intellectual partner that Rufus needs and Alice is the sexual partner (objectified by him) that he seeks. He knows that he cannot sexually harass Dana and he does not seek to have an equal intellectual relationship with Alice due to the mistakes he made in the past. Sadly, Alice is the one who suffers most.

Kevin finally appears and he and Dana go back home. Dana's stay in Los Angeles does not last long. She finds herself in the rain in front of the Weylins' house and she finds Rufus lying face down about to drown in a puddle. Dana learns that Rufus and Alice have had three children since she last left. She also learns that two of them died and only one, Joe, is still alive. She also learns that Alice is pregnant with Dana's ancestor, Hagar. In this journey, the relationship between Dana and Rufus gets tenser and harder for Dana to manage. Rufus trespasses the boundaries of their relationship when he hits her, and Dana slits her wrists in a desperate attempt to go back to 1976.

In her last journey to antebellum Maryland, Dana finds out that Alice hung herself after Rufus told her that he had sold their children. Finding himself alone, Rufus tries to replace Alice with Dana and attempts to do to Dana what he has done to Alice: rape her. As Dana had once said to Kevin, an attempt of rape from Rufus was all it would take for Dana to decide kill him: "He has to leave me enough control of myself to make living look better than killing and dying." (246). She finds her knife and stabs him twice. As a result of his death, Dana goes back to 1976, but there is something wrong: she finds her arm joined to a wall in the spot where Rufus was holding it. She loses her arm to history. Thus, both psychologically and physically, a part of her will always remain in the past.

6.2. Dana and Kevin: A Mix Couple

I think it is necessary to say that, complex and detailed as it looks, this is just a brief summary of the novel and that innumerable significant issues are left out. Consequently, it is important to add that although Dana's real life husband does not appear frequently, he is nevertheless a very important character in the story. This necessarily brief summary deals with the story of Dana in the nineteenth century, but *Kindred* tackles other relevant subjects such as the complexity of mixed couples in the racist United States of the seventies. For example, the journeys that Dana makes to the past appear mixed with memories of her relationship with Kevin. We learn how they met, how they decided to get married and the reactions of their respective families. Butler shows us the loving relationship between these two people and the reader does not, for one moment, question their love for each other. However, their relatives do not react in the same manner. Compared to the open discrimination existing in the nineteenth century, one could think a white man and a black woman could openly walk hand in hand in the streets. One could also think that one and a half century later relationships between African Americans and Caucasians might have been normalized. But this is not the case in Butler's novel. Although there has been a change in mentality, the issue of racism is still there, and more devastating than one would imagine. Dana's aunt and uncle, apart from asking Dana to choose something womanly as a career (nurse, librarian, secretary), they also deprive Dana of their love when she decides to marry a white man. Her aunt goes even farther, and rejoices in the fact that their children will be whiter than the mother, which, according to the aunt, is a blessing⁸: "I think my aunt accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light. Lighter than I am,

⁸ The obsession of Dana's aunt is not an isolated case. There is a desire among blacks to bleach the race as we can still see in contemporary times with the marketing of skin bleaching products. This way, the black race becomes more respectable and desirable. Michael Jackson was just one earlier example, followed by many other well-known African American artists like Beyoncé or Whitney Houston.

anyway. ... She doesn't care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks”
(111)

Kevin's sister, on the other hand, is a woman who would normally accept everybody. Her best friend during childhood was a black girl, but unfortunately their paths separated when they grew older. However, what made her reject her brother's black wife was her own husband, who was a very racist man. Nonetheless, their opinion on interracial relationships is part of a larger scheme and the result of living in a culture that discriminates black people since slavery times. As Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson state, the view of interracial relationships has evolved since then, but discrimination and racist attitudes are still present in contemporary society. Racist people marginalize relationship, such as Dana's and Kevin's, which are based on consensual interracial desire. Instead, they favour abusive and unequal mixed affairs.

White racists abhor mix couples as a result of the fetishization of black sexuality, a stereotype that comes from slavery times and which serves as an excuse for the abuse of the black race. A white man can have sex with a black woman, but he should not marry her. On their side, African Americans still remember the abuse that their race has suffered at the hands of white men and women from slavery times up to nowadays. Thus, when they are presented with an interracial relationship, they associate it with the historic domination of whites over blacks. This feeling of disgust increases when the black part is a woman. Then, the horror of rape is the first thought that crosses their minds.

As the relation between white Kevin and black Dana shows, Butler means to change racist attitudes both in literature and culture. She presents an interracial bond based on love and trust, and she places it next to the abusive interracial relations experienced by black slave women in order to call our attention on the matter. Butler shows that things have changed, that there is an evolution towards progress but, at the same time, she presents the world Dana

and Kevin's relationship is immersed. The author introduces all the parties involved in a racist ideology: Kevin's sister and brother-in-law, Dana's aunt and uncle and the way each character reacts when confronting Dana and Kevin's mixed relationship. While, over all, readers accept the love-based marriage of these two people, they are also exposed to the contrast between Dana and Kevin's home and the opinions of the outside world. By setting the story in two different time periods, Butler shows us the differences and similarities between them. The past has led to the present, society has evolved. Slavery is now forbidden, all people are equal before the law; African American people are now respected citizens of the United States as can be observed in the day-to-day life of Dana Franklin. However, more than a hundred years after the abolition of slavery, it still has a repercussion on the present. The supposition of the excessive sexual desire of the black race and the fear and respect for the power of white people still prevail.

On a different note, *Kindred* very closely reflects the experiences narrated in slave narratives. It shows us the life of slave children who later become adults, and it describes their growing up. It focuses more on the life of house slaves rather than field slaves, but still it covers some of the issues of field slaves. It covers the pressure, the exhaustion, the constant whipping, the harvesting and the hatred they receive from the overseers. Life in the house of the master is not as fatiguing as the work in the fields. House slaves take care of the cooking, the washing and the cleaning. They have a direct connection with the master as they work in close contact with him and his family. It was not unusual to see the master's children being taken care of by one of the slaves. It was also very usual to see his children playing with the slaves' children. This situation happens in *Kindred* as we can see. Rufus used to play with Alice when they were very little. When Dana asks Rufus if he knows a girl called Alice he responds "She's my friend". In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs tells us that her master's children played with the other children in the plantation, and that they would

grow up being friends until one of them realised that there was a power relation: one was the owner; the other was the slave. In *Kindred*, Rufus grows to be a man who thinks that black people are inferior and therefore usable by him. After becoming friends with Alice for their whole life, he develops a special affection for her, and when he is not loved back, he decides that Alice has no choice but to be with him, so he abuses her sexually. Rape is a recurrent theme in slave narratives. Harriet Jacobs subtly refers to sexual harassment in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and points at the innocent bastard children born out of rapes. They are born slaves, they will probably play with the rest of the master's sons and daughters and they will grow to be adult slaves who will work for the heir of the plantation but they will also be despised by the master's wife. The masters' wives receive a privileged treatment and they are seen as the representatives of true womanhood. They are known to be refined, elegant women who must be treated as goddesses. According to the society of the nineteenth century, white married women should not be corrupted by the men that surrounded them, for they were the purest beings: wives, mothers and sisters. On the opposite side of this belief, we find black women. In the slave holders' opinion, black women were to be treated like beasts, like mules. While white women were untouchable, black women were made to be used and abused by white men. In 1976, Dana embraces her right to choose her sexual partner. However, when she travels to nineteenth century Maryland, her sexuality is threatened by slavery from the very beginning when the white patroller tries to rape her. Even though we are led to believe that Rufus is a much better young man than his father ever was, he belongs, unfortunately, to a slave holding family. Thus, after failing to convince Alice to be his sexual partner, he decides that a "nigger" does not have the right to deny him sexual intercourse. For his whole life, Rufus has wished Alice to want him and love him back, but her refusal does not stop him even once.

6.3. The Journey: From *Black is Beautiful* to Slavery

Dana's involuntary journey to 1815 Maryland reminds the reader and herself of the kidnapping of slaves from Africa to America. None of them has any control whatsoever over their fate. Major forces drive their lives, both Dana's and the slaves', and that lack of control over one's own life is felt throughout the novel: Dana is moved through time and space without her consent, slaves are afraid that the master will separate their families by selling some of the members⁹, and they all fear the random whippings they might receive if the master or the overseers are in a bad mood.



Dana's journey from California to plantation in Maryland

Dana is carried from Los Angeles, in California, to Maryland. The election of Maryland as the setting of the story had several reasons. Maryland is a state that belongs to what many would call the north of the United States. Butler seeks to eliminate the misconception that slavery only took place in the south of the country. When picturing slavery times, one pictures the heat, the sand and the yellow fields all mixed with blood and sweat. *Kindred* reminds the reader of the extension of the shame and suffering caused by slavery. Butler stated in an interview that another reason to set the story in Maryland was that she wanted to give Dana a

⁹ Sarah's children were sold away by Tom Weylin, she was only allowed to keep Carrie with her, her mute daughter. The male slave Sam is also sold away and separated from his family when Rufus thinks that he has been flirting with Dana.

fair chance of escaping. She did not want Dana to give up hope or the readers to give up on the idea that Dana might escape from the Weylin plantation. The last reason to why Butler set the story in Maryland is the historicity of this state. Two well-known former slaves were born in this state: Frederick Douglass (author of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*) and Harriet Tubman (c. 1822 – 1913), an abolitionist who, after escaping from slavery, helped hundreds of slaves run away to the free north. Dana herself pays tribute to the hero and heroine respectively. In the section called “The Fight”, after showing Rufus a history book from the twentieth century, the author allows Dana to get lost in her thoughts in the form of an interior monologue:

And there was other history that he must not read. Too much of it hadn't happened yet. Sojourner Truth, for instance, was still a slave. If someone bought her from New York owners and brought her South before the Northern laws could free her, she might spend the rest of her life picking cotton. And there were two important slave children right here in Maryland. The older one, living here in Talbot County, would be called Frederick Douglass after a name change or two. The second one, growing up a few miles south in Dorchester County was Harriet Ross, eventually to be Harriet Tubman. (140)

The year 1976 would be very different without people like Tubman, Douglass or Truth. Interestingly, 1976 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the independence of the United States, a year to celebrate the iconic freedom of the country. However, Butler shows, again, that the United States has gone a long way in the path to equality, tolerance and freedom; but she also shows there is still a long way to go. Once more, this is illustrated by the world in which Dana lives: her family, her jobs, etc. It might be a coincidence but Kevin, white and male, seems to have it much easier when it comes to publishing his works, while Dana, black and female, tries every day to make her writing better at the same time that she works badly

paid jobs. Dana also complains about the racism shown by some members of the white community towards blacks when she tells a story about her mother. Kevin mentions that his sister lives now in a place called La Canada, to which Dana responds: “My mom’s car broke down in La Canada once,” I told him. “Three people called the police on her while she was waiting for my uncle to come and get her. Suspicious character. Five-three, she was. About a hundred pounds. Real dangerous.”(111) If the case were that of a white woman, she would probably be considered a victim, people would most likely approach her to see if she needed help. Unfortunately, Dana’s mother was black, and therefore, she is an immediate suspect of a non-committed crime. Again, white women are thought to be pure and innocent, while black women are still believed to be evil.

Despite all the prejudices that blacks have had to confront, some African Americans place the blame on their ancestors. The younger generation are aware of how difficult it is to live in a racist society that tries to make one feel inferior and despised, however, they cannot possibly imagine how their slave great grandparents could simply abide. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, young black people blame the old generation for not fighting back social oppression. In an interview, Butler refers to this generation gap when she mentions a conversation with a classmate:

I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age as I was but who had apparently never made the connection¹⁰ with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behaviour on the part of employers and other people. He said: “I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d

¹⁰ In the same interview, Butler expressed her impressions on what her mother did for a living:

Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behaviour, but I blamed my mother for taking it. ... As I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. This is when I started to pay attention to what my mother and even more my grandmother and my poor great-grand mother, who died as a very young woman giving birth to my grandmother, what they all went through.

have to start with my own parents.” That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. (1320)

In the same thread of thought, Parham reflects on Butler’s starting point, discusses trauma in *Kindred*, and argues that “shame hearkens towards death, as the shamed believes that only death can erase the mark” (1320). Killing one’s ancestors, Parham adds, might seem therapeutic, but one also kills him/her self—as this seems to be *Kindred*’s overall message.

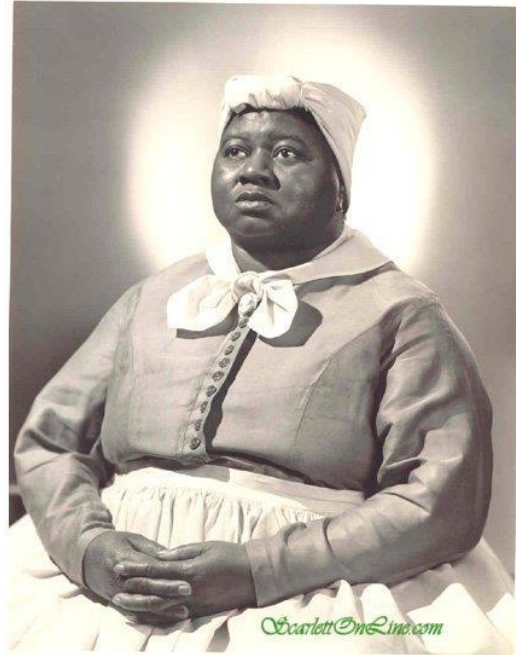
Butler takes advantage of Dana’s numerous journeys back to slavery and introduces readers to the world of antebellum Maryland. The journeys in time also help as the perfect excuse to lead us through the different stages of a white boy’s life as well as to show a glimpse of the daily life of slaves. Through Dana, readers are informed about Rufus (the white boy), and the slaves’ routine. The tiring and backbreaking work, the constant fear of upsetting the master or the overseer, and the brutal and unfair punishments take a toll in any human’s life. The young boy and classmate that Butler mentions in the interview above blames his ancestor for not fighting back, for letting the whites use and abuse them. However, Butler is aware of the feeling of impotence both slaves (in the Past) and the black community (in the Present) have experienced. A slave could rebel and try to fight back, but whites always had (and still have) more power, both physical and legislative. If we focus on *Kindred* we are witness to the several times various members of the plantation attempt to escape, but not one is successful. Perhaps with the intention of teaching the history of the black community in the United States, Butler recalls the life of a black heroine, Harriet Tubman, who not only run away from slavery but she was also able to free hundreds of black brothers and sisters in chains in the plantations of the South. In contrast to the historic protagonist, Butler introduces the character of Isaac Jackson whose attempt to escape brought a double punishment: Isaac

remains a slave and his wife Alice is enslaved and tortured. Nowadays people remember only those who have a successful story, Butler seems to highlight as Tubman's heroic story shows. However, we will never know how many black people tried and failed in their attempt to reach a freedom that was denied to them. How could thousands of people of African descent (men, women and children) be kept under the "peculiar institution"—as slavery was called? The institution depends heavily on the masters (quite intelligent people) who knew how to control their (human) property. The easiest way to keep a slave under control was to separate them from their beloved ones, and they acted accordingly. In doing so, even the physically and psychologically strongest would give in and behave as expected. In this line, Dana mentions at one point that "slavery is a slow process of dulling" and the process of annihilation applies to three important female characters in the novel: Sarah, Alice, and Dana herself.

6.4. Sarah: The Mammy

Sarah is the chief of the cookhouse. She is in charge of fixing the masters' meals and of taking care of the household. Even though Dana does not meet Sarah in her first visits, Sarah was already working in the plantation house when Dana first appeared in Maryland. As a privilege house slave, Sarah cleans and helps Mrs Weylin with the house chores. She serves also as Rufus's nursemaid since he is little. Despite her smiling face and her always subservient and respectful attitude Sarah is not a happy slave. She just pretends. Deep in her heart and despite the hatred and resentment she feels towards the Weylins for selling her children away, Sarah takes care of the little white boy Rufus and shows motherly love for him.

Probably, Butler creates the character of Sarah with the intention of showing the other face of Mammy figures. Apparently integrated in the white plantation society, the Mammy took care of the children of the white family. In some occasions, she would even take care of two different generations. Contrary to field slaves, the Mammy is accepted as a member of the family as long as she stays in her place. In contrast to field slaves, the Mammy has access to better food, quality clothes, and even to the family's sorrows and joys. The stereotypical image of the Mammy is that of an overweight



Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* portraying Mammy

woman, with broad shoulders and large arms, dressed with drab clothing and a white bandana. Deprived of her right to nurture her own children and her own sexual life, the mammy figures are, according to feminist critic bell hooks, “masculinized sub-human creatures” (*Ain't I a Woman* 1981, 71). Thus, the Mammy is the antithesis of the white standard of femininity and she is also completely desexualised.

This persona, the stereotypical Mammy has traditionally been despised by the African American community. Why? In general, some perceive her as a “betraying slave,” whose fidelity was with her brutal and inhuman white owners instead of aligning herself with her black brothers and sisters. Most often than not, the Mammy is portrayed by the white American media as a happy member of the white family, even when as a matter of fact she is just another slave. From my point of view, one can read Butler's creation of Sarah (representative of the traditional Mammy) as a way to contest and fight the hatred that this figure inspires among the black community. Butler's Sarah is inspiring compassion. It goes

without saying that Sarah is the perfect Mammy cliché: she takes care of Rufus and works for the masters at the big house for a while. However, she has never been happy with that role. Out of necessity, Sarah has been “domesticated” by her master Tom Weylin the moment he sells all her children except for

Carrie. As it is easy to understand, for Sarah, the separation from and the selling of her children is the final blow. From here on out, she becomes a resentful woman who silently despises the Weylins. At the same time she nevertheless fights



Aibileen and Minny from *The Help*

every day for the only child who has been

left by her side, her daughter Carrie—Sarah’s only reason to stay alive. To keep Carrie by her side, though, Sarah must obey and pretend to be content with her master’s orders. Sarah’s subservient attitude resembles those of Aibileen and Minny, from Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help* (2009). They are black maids working for white families in the early 1960s. In Stockett’s novel readers learn about the discriminatory treatment they receive on the part of their white bosses (white male and females), and the domestics stamina.

As a black woman slave, Sarah also undergoes the so-called “slow process of dulling.” That is, the mining of the mind and the process of desensitisation to physical and emotional pain. This long and painful process allows slaves, like Sarah, to survive and bear their horrid situations. As we have already mentioned and in spite of the fact that Sarah has lost her own children to slavery, she does take care of the other slaves in the plantation and, in particular, the ones who work at the big house. Thus, though a childless mother herself, Sarah acts as a

mother to Luke, Nigel, Alice and Dana—she not only feeds them but also shares her love with all of them.

6.5. Alice: The Sexually Abused Black Woman

Alice Greenwood is Dana's ancestor, the daughter of a slave man property of the Weylins, and a free black woman. During slavery, the status of the child was that of the mother, consequently, Alice was born free. As former slave and abolitionist Harriet Jacobs writes the children of the master would play with those of the slaves. This is the case of little Alice and little Rufus who became friends when they were little. Although they grew up together their relationship went through different paths. Since Rufus was the only white boy in the plantation, he had few friends and Alice meant the world to him. However, Alice was black and was surrounded by children who she and her family hold equal to her, so she grew having more friends than Rufus did and, for young Alice, Rufus was just another boy. A boy that also becomes the son of Alice's master. Furthermore, their respective view of their friendship differed as years passed: Rufus fell in love with Alice, while Alice only felt indifference for him.

As a free woman, Alice is not used to obeying the master's orders. She rejects Rufus freely because she thinks she has power over her sexuality. Rufus tries to take that power from her by attempting to rape her, but he fails and Alice runs away with her chosen partner. Unfortunately, Alice lover (Isaac Jackson) is a slave and when they get caught both are not only severely punished but also Alice becomes a slave. From this heart-breaking episode onwards, Alice is transformed into the stereotype of a female slave. She works at the cookhouse with Sarah, and serves in the house of the master. Unlike Sarah, Alice is now perceived as a sexualized black slave woman and Rufus decides to have her even against her will. In a dramatic scene, Rufus asks Dana to help him get Alice:

“Help me, Dana.”

“I can’t.”

“You can! You and nobody else. Go to her. Send her to me. I’ll have her whether you help or not. All I want you to do is fix it so I don’t have to beat her. You’re no friend of hers if you won’t do that much!” (164)

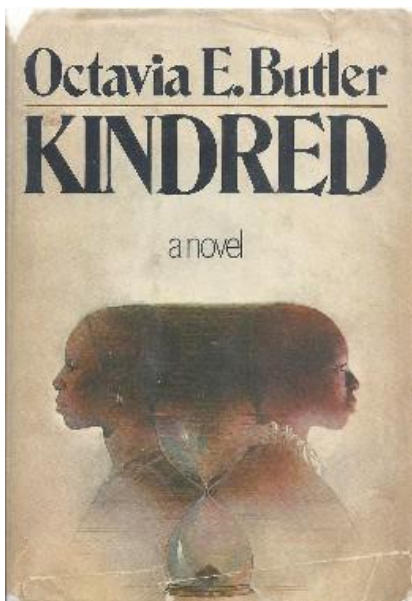
Rufus’s petition is answered, and Alice surrenders to him much against her will. I personally think that Rufus and Alice relationship echoes that of Patsey (Lupita Nyong’o) and Epps (Michael Fassbender) in Steve McQueen’s film *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), based on Salomon Northup’s own autobiography (1855). In Butler’s novel, Alice is raped in several occasions for a long period of time. Rufus and Alice have four children together, but two of them die due to a medical error. It is thanks to Dana that Alice and Rufus’s unofficial family have a brighter future than that of most children from mix couples. Dana tries to make up for turning Alice in to Rufus when she attempts to give their children a better life. For example, Dana gets permission to teach Joe (Alice’s boy) how to read and write, and tries to make Rufus accept the boy (Joe) and the girl (Hagar) as his children, and finally set them free.

Despite Rufus’ unthinkable transformation, Alice still remains submissive to Rufus, feels how the desensitisation grows on her, and decides to fight it. She confesses Dana that she wants to run away with her children because she seems not to hate Rufus as much as before. She does not want her feelings for him to change or to accommodate to her miserable life, as Sarah (the Mammy) did. She wants to be as free as she once was and be able to take her own decisions. However, in the end Alice does not get the freedom she has longed for. Instead, Rufus pretends to have sold their children, and Alice hangs herself and ends her life. Dana’s words can be applied to Alice as well: “He needs to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying” (140) Although they are separated by time and geography, this thought summarizes Dana’s and Alice’s duality as well as their somewhat parallel lives. Dana decides to kill Rufus as an act of freedom. In turn,

Alice decides to punish Rufus by killing herself and thus depriving him of her company. Alice dies tragically, but Dana learns her lessons.

6.6. Dana: The Survivor

Dana is the survivor of the story. She is transported from her comfy home in Los Angeles to slave holding Maryland, and she manages to find her way through that chaotic and brutal period without being killed. She adjusts herself to the circumstances and plays her cards the best she can. Dana is able to make Rufus follow her instructions when she faces complex situations, despite the fact of her being black and him being the son of a white plantation



Cover of *Kindred* showing the duality of Dana and Alice

owner. However, sometimes she fails to avoid the evil of that period of history. For example, Dana gets whipped in several occasions and has to live with the physical and psychological scars of such a dehumanizing punishment. She also suffers from emotional pain which added to the physical, only makes her numb to the calamities she will later encounter. Like Alice, Dana stops being aware of the tragedy of her slave life. As it is easy to understand, Dana and Alice share many aspects in common: their (black) blood, their physical appearance, their closeness to Rufus,

etc. However, they are two sides of the same coin. Rufus uses Alice to satisfy his sexual desire and Dana serves him as his intellectual partner. Rufus himself gets confused some times as it is the case when one night he arrives home drunk, and he tells them that they are only one woman. Luckily for Dana, Rufus has Alice to be his sexual partner, and she spares Dana that suffering. Unfortunately, when Alice tragically dies, Rufus feels the need to replace her and chooses Dana. However Dana does not submit as Alice had to in the past, and at Rufus's attempt of rape, Dana kills him.

As we can see, Sarah, Alice and Dana represent three different types of women who are part of a plantation in the antebellum United States. Sarah, the Mammy, held with contempt during the 1960s, is a woman who cares for the children of the house and submissively obeys the masters. She is not a person who foolishly believes herself at the same level as her white masters, but a person who does her best to survive and keep her mental health in shape. Alice, in turn, is the stereotypical female slave who suffers from sexual abuse at the hands of the white men—whether they are masters or not. She fights the need of taking revenge over those who inflict her pain and tries to go on with her life. Finally, Dana comes from the future and travels back to slavery where she becomes a slave. However, thanks to her life experience, education and intelligence, she manages to avoid the pain of being sexually abused. Untrained as she is, Dana works as hard as the other slaves, but because of her clumsiness she receives the punishment that whites think she deserves for her actions. Through Dana, Butler allows her black modern woman to get acquainted with the brutality of slavery. In doing so, Dana learns from her awful experience at the same time that she teaches the readers about the terrible time in the history of the United States.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to analyse Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* from several points of view. Since it is a work of science fiction that deals with slavery, I have first provided the main characteristics of the science fiction genre and included a brief description of the most common elements we find in this genre. While in other works by Butler we can find aliens, dystopia and futuristic settings, in *Kindred*, in particular, we find time and space travel and alternate history. As stated before, *Kindred* is also a neo-slave narrative and this is the reason why I have referred to the main characteristics of this new genre. Butler, an African American author writes a science fiction novel that travels between the past and the present, which

allows the reader to experience hardships of slavery. For Dana, the protagonist, the journey makes her immensely value her current accommodated life with her beloved white husband.

As a neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* takes us to the past in order to better understand the present. Through *Kindred*, Butler also fights some of the prejudices that black people maintain about their own black ancestors: weakness of character or passiveness. To dismantle the long-lived stereotype, Butler chooses to focus on the most vulnerable collective of the time: black slave women. By introducing Sarah, Butler fights the negative opinions attached to the Mammy figure. Butler also empowers and foresees the possibility of interracial relationships based on love and trust, contrary to the domination and submission that historically have plagued mix couples. Through time travelling, Butler achieves her goals when she contrasts the one unhealthy interracial relationship (Rufus and Alice) *versus* a healthy one (Dana and Kevin).

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