

Reading Time Travel in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* as *Sankofa*

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ABSTRACT: This article shows how the Akan concept of *Sankofa* as healing through returning to the past is engaged in Octavia E. Butler's novel *Kindred*. Based on selected close readings, I will discuss whether the science fiction element of time travel in the novel can be read as a literal representation of *Sankofa*.

KEYWORDS: African American literature; neo-slave narratives; Sankofa; science fiction; time travel

Introduction

Octavia E. Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred* tells the story of Dana, a 26-year-old African American woman living in 1970s California, who is inexplicably transported back to antebellum Maryland whenever her white ancestor and plantation master Rufus Weylin's life is in danger. During these trips, she is forced to share the fate of her ancestors and live the life of an African American slave. She repeatedly saves Weylin's life, and she is only able to return to her own time when her own life is at risk. In order to secure her own existence, Dana eventually involuntarily helps Rufus to rape her black ancestor Alice, whom Rufus drives into suicide afterward. After Alice's death, Rufus attempts to rape Dana, who kills him in self-defense, and thus regains her freedom and puts a stop to further time traveling. In contrast to the kind of time travel that focuses on the mechanics of time travel and on the adventures of the brave time traveller (such as H.G. Wells' protagonist in *The Time Machine*), *Kindred* works in different ways: the exact mechanism of Dana's travels through time is never explained and the time travel destination does not provide her with opportunities for heroic deeds; instead, it constitutes an ultimate disempowerment for her. *Kindred* thus diverts the readers' attention away from intellectual musings about time travel technology and towards an emotional investment in Dana's personal story—a use of the science fiction trope of time travel that I investigate in this paper.

Previous scholarship has already associated *Kindred* with the Akan notion of *Sankofa* in multiple ways (Donadey 77; Mitchell 52; Milatovic 97–98; Woolfork 2). As a concept, *Sankofa* originates from the Akan-speaking people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast and “in conventional translation means ‘go back and fetch it,’ ‘return to your past,’ and ‘it is not taboo to go back and retrieve what you have forgotten or lost’” (Temple 127).

Internationally, various practices have emerged around *Sankofa* in the black diaspora—in education as a pedagogical approach (134–36), in Black studies in connection with aspirations of historical recovery (140–41), or in black psychology and counseling (142–43). In this article, I will depart from these uses of *Sankofa* and employ the concept as a specifically Afrocentric way of thinking about time travel. Although *Sankofa* is originally not concerned with time travel in the literal sense, it centers on the idea of achieving healing and empowerment through a return to the past (Schramm 200). Putting Butler’s *Kindred* in direct conversation with the Akan notion of *Sankofa*, I explore whether the element of time travel in the novel can be read as a literal representation of this concept concerning in particular how the protagonist is changed in the course of the novel due to her time travel experiences.

Critics have repeatedly linked *Kindred* to questions of the cultural memory of African American enslavement: In 1986, Sandra Y. Govan positioned *Kindred* at “the junction where the historical novel, the slave narrative¹ and science fiction meet,” lauding Butler as an author who renovates the historical novel (Govan 82). Further examples of scholarly works that have discussed *Kindred* as engaging in discourses of cultural memory include Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s study *Claiming the Heritage* (1991) and Ashraf Rushdy’s 1993 article “Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*,” in which he argues that “Butler’s orphan heroine shows us how an excavation of history can provide the orphan with a family—partially by relation and partially by disrelation” (Rushdy 155). Lisa Yaszek suggests that *Kindred* puts forward “a new mode of historical memory—one that, perhaps not surprisingly, both engages with and writes beyond the ending of its more conventional masculinist counterparts” (Yaszek 1063–64). However, when it comes to examining the role of time travel in *Kindred* most scholars avoid taking Dana’s travels through time literally and prefer to read them as symbolic representations. Eva-Sabine Zehelein, for instance, regards Dana’s trips through time as “journeys of memory” and suggests that Dana’s capacity for memory is her medium of transport (Zehelein 412). To Angelyn Mitchell, Dana’s journey into the past is a “metaphoric Middle Passage” that

¹ Govan uses the term slave narrative to describe autobiographies by and biographies of enslaved or formerly enslaved black people that were published between 1703 and 1944 (80). In my article, I use the term traditional slave narrative for those texts.

transforms Dana from a free American citizen into a slave (Mitchell 43). Deborah Madsen connects Dana's time traveling to Sigmund Freud's concept of trauma as forced re-experience of the traumatic event and argues that "narrative techniques of time travel—taking the protagonist into the slave past—and haunting—bringing the past into the present—represent significant literary efforts to achieve a therapeutic witnessing of the traumatic history of slavery" (Madsen 70), while Marisa Parham claims that Dana's experiences in *Kindred* and their effects on the readers create "a memory over which one can now claim ownership, rememory" (Parham 1326). Sarah Eden Schiff reads *Kindred* as a "simultaneously fictional and metafictional attempt to make history and memory productively curative — to serve as both a recovery of repressed historical narratives and a recovery from repressed traumatic memories" (Schiff 108). Schiff regards the protagonist Dana and her ancestor Alice as "double consciousness"² personified and argues that time travel offers

Dana the impossible opportunity to go back in time to the primal scene of the original trauma, before the consciousness doubled, before the self split, before the homely became unhomely, in order to be prepared for the traumatic moment *in* time and to defend herself against it. (Schiff 110)

The 'primal scene of the original trauma' is in this context antebellum enslavement in general and Rufus Weylin's rape of Alice in particular. While Dana can ultimately not evade enslavement, she can and does stop Rufus from raping her. These examples illustrate the tendency of critics to read time travel in *Kindred* as metaphor.

In the last decade, however, alternative readings of time travel in *Kindred* have been put forth, which explicitly link the novel to the academic discourses on science fiction literature. Sherryl Vint, for example, contrasts *Kindred* with traditional depictions of time travel in science fiction in which "the emphasis is on control of the timeline, on ensuring that the dominance of one's 'kind' persists into a future associated with progress" (Vint 243). She

² The term "double consciousness" was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He writes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 9-10).

explains that this “can be associated with the Western paradigm of science as a relation to the world of dominance and mastery” (243). Vint attributes Butler’s different treatment of time travel to a specifically African American “relationship both to science and to the idea of the future” (243). She argues that “*Kindred*’s present-day setting can be understood as being in the future imagined by nineteenth-century slave narratives, a future in which slavery has ended [and that] *Kindred* focuses our attention on the fact that [this] future is not sufficiently different from the past [because] systemic racism persists in ways akin to the continuation of slavery” (243). In her article, Vint calls for “a rethinking of the relationship between African-American and fantastic³ literatures” (241)—a call that has been answered in the last decade particularly by scholars working in the emerging field of black women’s speculative fiction, such as Esther L. Jones (2015), Marie-Luise Loeffler (2012), and Venetria K. Patton (2013).

My article engages with this line of thought on black women’s speculative fiction. It brings Patton’s exploration of African cosmology and the representation of ancestral figures in speculative novels by various black female authors in conversation with the Akan concept of *Sankofa* as healing by returning to the past, arguing that this concept can be employed to analyze the science fictional element of time travel in *Kindred*. Investigating how the novel engages with the topic of healing and learning from the past through the engagement with conventions known from the traditional slave narrative, I show that *Kindred* conveys a distinctly twentieth-century perspective in centering on representations of black female resistance to enslavement. Reading time travel as *Sankofa* allows me to discuss the empowering or healing quality that the travels to antebellum Maryland develop for the protagonist, which I identify as her enhanced appreciation for the sacrifices that her enslaved ancestors had to make in order to survive as well as her newly acquired awareness of social injustices in her own present.

Sankofa

The concept of *Sankofa* has acquired a variety of different meanings. Making *Sankofa* productive for my discussion of time travel in *Kindred*, I concentrate on its main idea of

³ In this context, Vint uses “fantastic” as a generic term subsuming all non-realist works of fiction (241).

achieving healing and empowerment through returning to the past and learning from it as outlined by Christel M. Temple (127). Both Temple and Katharina Schramm observe that the adoption of *Sankofa* in the African American context is associated with African enslavement: *Sankofa* practices in the African diaspora have emerged as reaction to the Maafa which is “a Kiswahili word for ‘disaster’” that refers “to the enslavement of [black] people and to the sustained attempt to dehumanize” them (Ani n.pag.). The term Maafa is used as an alternative to transatlantic slave trade, which has been criticized as trivializing the black experience of enslavement because “[t]he category trade tends to sanitize the high level of violence and mass murder that was inflicted on African peoples and societies” (Karenga n.pag.). According to Schramm “the past appears double-layered [to members of the African diaspora]: a time before the catastrophe [i.e., Maafa] is imagined that represents a harmonious and simultaneously grand Africa. The overcoming of the catastrophe is ultimately based on the recollection of this time” (Schramm 198). The idea of healing establishes the core of Afrocentric *Sankofa* interpretations (Schramm 200). Using the example of Haile Gerima’s 1993 film *Sankofa*, Schramm illustrates how “the transformative power of the experience of enslavement and above all the consciousness of the empowerment of the enslaved in insisting on their own identity (as individuals and as Africans) are at the center of the politics of memory” in the African diasporic context; “Black identity is not understood solely as cultural essence, but instead as the result of historical processes, identifications and positionings: most importantly in opposition to enslavement” (Schramm 202). The concept of *Sankofa* in its African diasporic incarnation thus implies that healing can be achieved by mentally going back to the time of (and prior to) enslavement. In her novel *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler picks up on this healing notion of *Sankofa*; but instead of having her African American protagonist Dana go back in time mentally, she has her travel in time in her actual flesh and bones. The protagonist’s embodied experience allows Dana to become a part of her enslaved ancestors’ lives, through which she gains a deeper understanding of their lives, their tribulations, and their strategies of resistance.

Sankofa* in Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred

Previous scholarship has alluded to the intersections between *Kindred* and *Sankofa*: Donadey states that *Kindred* “exemplif[ies] the [. . .] concept of *Sankofa* and “give[s] *Sankofa*

a feminist perspective through [its] focus on women's issues and women's agency" (Donadey 77). Like Haile Gerima's eponymous film, *Kindred* teaches the history of transatlantic slavery and "how the past shaped and continues to shape the present" (Mitchell 52). Lisa Woolfork also discusses Butler's novel and Gerima's film together and points to the "bodily epistemology" that both pieces develop (Woolfork 2). In her dissertation, Maja Milatovic builds on Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember* and argues that *Sankofa* represents the "didactic dimension" of *Kindred* (Milatovic 97–98). However, none of these discussions examines the relationship between *Sankofa* and *Kindred* in greater detail through close readings of the novel; my article seeks to close this gap and examines how the concept of *Sankofa* helps to understand the motif of time travel in the novel.

The question of what Dana retrieves from the past results from my use of *Sankofa* as centering the idea of returning to the past in order to bring back something that has been lost. At first glance, it seems as if Dana is not healed but only harmed by her confrontation with the past. Thus, the first sentence of the novel focuses on Dana's losses: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone" (Butler 10). Dana's journeys through time, it seems, have left her severely unsettled, particularly in regard to her identity as an African American woman, her relationship to her Anglo-American husband, and her sense of home.

At the beginning of the novel, Dana's home is indubitably her and Kevin's new house in Altadena, California,⁴ in 1976. However, *Kindred* complicates this straightforward notion of home: The more often Dana travels to antebellum Maryland, the more alienated she becomes from her twentieth-century home. At the outset of the story, Dana and Kevin have just moved into their new house; they are still unpacking when Dana's first time travel incident occurs (Butler 13). After her first two trips, Dana is happy to be home again, but

⁴ As Donadey notes, California became part of the United States in 1850 and "was not a slave state" (48). Thus, California seems to be untainted with black enslavement. While there was no African American enslavement in California, the dehumanizing treatment of its local indigenous people is addressed and criticized in *Kindred*: "Kevin said once. 'I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true.' 'West,' I said bitterly. 'That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!'" (Butler 82).

once she has made friends at the Weylin plantation, Dana cannot help but think of the Weylin's house as home, too, particularly after she has involuntarily left her husband in the past after her third trip. Alone at their new house in California, Dana feels disoriented, she suffers from the wounds of Tom Weylin's whipping and is plagued by memories that "have no place" in 1976 (Butler 96). On her next trip, Dana nolens volens feels as if she is "Home at last" and has to remind herself that the Weylin plantation is "a hostile place" (Butler 105). In front of Rufus, Dana still insists that 1970s California is her home, while he tries to convince her that she can feel at home on the plantation: "You'll be all right here. You're home" (Butler 119).

After their subsequent return to the 1970s, both Dana and Kevin feel alienated from their home and from their time: "The time, the year, was right, but the house just wasn't familiar enough. I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality" (Butler 154). Both Dana and Kevin have come to think of the Weylin plantation as their home because they know that it would be the place of their reunion in antebellum Maryland (Butler 156). Dana's notion of home that is fixed to 1970s Altadena is thus destabilized in the course of the novel. Ashraf Rushdy notes that "'Home,' in *Kindred*, is more than a place; it signifies the liminal site where one can lose or reclaim a historically-defined modern self" and the more often Dana travels to antebellum Maryland, the more difficult it becomes for her to reclaim precisely her modern self (140): while she is only playing the role of a slave at first, Dana soon fully immerses herself in the past: "Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting?" (Butler 179). Dana's involuntary full immersion in her role as an enslaved woman in antebellum Maryland illustrates how the system of plantocracy inevitably devours all those who get caught in it.

The notion of *Sankofa* in the African diasporic context proposes that one can learn to cope with and eventually heal from the Maafa by returning to the past (cf. Schramm). But although Dana is transformed by her personal experience of enslavement, she does not feel empowered by her consciousness of her own African American identity. Rather, she regards her newly acquired "double consciousness," which gradually emerges through her trips to

the past, as a burden. In fact, the reader only learns that Dana is African American on page 23 of the novel when eight-year-old Rufus tells Dana (on her second trip to the past) that his mother (who had seen Dana on her first trip to the past) described her as “just some nigger.”⁵ At the beginning of the novel and in the interspersed flashbacks, Dana does not relate her personal problems such as her presumably failed career as a writer and the discrimination that she experiences on the labor market to her racialized identity. She dissociates herself from her African American aunt and uncle who appear old-fashioned to her with their “ideas [that] don’t have very much to do with what’s going on now”; her uncle’s disinheritance of her after her marriage, so that his property does not “fall into white hands,” seems greatly exaggerated to her (Butler 92-93). Dana regards any racist discrimination as an individual rather than as a structural problem. This attitude changes in the course of the novel, and, in the end, Dana’s lack of enthusiasm towards the festivities of the bicentenary of the United States echoes Frederic Douglass’ famous speech “What to the Slave is the 4th of July?” As H. A. Rushdy notes, because of her experiences in antebellum Maryland, “Dana [. . .] observes present social relations in terms of what she now knows of the slave history of America. She sees the connections between slavery and present street violence (33), rape (42), labor relations (52), sexual relations (97), wife beating (151), and apartheid (196)” (Rushdy 144). Dana’s journeys into the past have raised her awareness of racist and sexist social inequality in her socio-cultural environment. Dana’s changed outlook on life as a result of her trips into the past can thus be read in relation to the transformative power of *Sankofa* in which the (usually imaginary) re-experience of enslavement leads to a gain in knowledge and a heightened appreciation of the suffering that enslaved people endured and resisted against.

⁵ Due to its status as an extremely offensive racial slur, contemporary readers might be irritated by the frequent use of the n-word in *Kindred*’s historical antebellum setting, by both Anglo-American and enslaved and African American characters, respectively. Randall Kennedy notes “that by the end of the first third of the nineteenth century, *nigger* had already become a familiar and influential insult” (Kennedy 4, original emphasis). While the Weylin family’s degrading treatment of black people leaves no doubt as to what we today would call their white supremacist attitude, the use of the n-word by the enslaved characters in the novel can be read in multiple ways. Following Kennedy, it could for example, be read either as a sign of internalized racism and “indicative of an antiblack, self-hating prejudice” or as a reappropriation of the slur (Kennedy 36; 38). For more information on the history of the n-word, see Kennedy (2002).

In *Kindred*, Dana's past and present are connected through the use of time travel. As soon as Dana's journeys through time begin, her identity as a contemporary citizen of the United States is destabilized and inextricably linked to her African American heritage with its history of dehumanization and oppression. This is further demonstrated through the use of anachrony in the structure of the novel: In the prologue, the reader is introduced to Dana right after her last trip to the past, the first chapter informs the reader about Dana's first time travel journey and the following chapters relate Dana's travels through time in chronological order. They are, however, interrupted by flashbacks of Dana's and Kevin's recent past. The epilogue shows how Dana and Kevin visit Maryland in the present in order to learn about what happened to the people they met in the past—except for a newspaper article advertising the sale of some of the enslaved people whom they have met on the plantation, Dana and Kevin do not find any official records, so that the fate of most of their friends remains unclear (211–13). The structure of the novel has been related to circular concepts of history. For example, Christine Levecq reads *Kindred* as “creating the space for the development of a speculative philosophy of history. This philosophy tends to be cyclical and sees the unfolding of history as an endless repetition of power struggles” (526). Marc Steinberg argues that this “cyclical, non-linear view of history is also a non-Western vision” while simultaneously conceding that “‘circular’ does not easily or precisely describe the structure of *Kindred*, for it also very much resembles a zigzag, a movement from present to slavery days [. . .] Time becomes a confused jumble that Dana somehow traverses” (472). The non-linear-structure of *Kindred* hints at the idea that African American enslavement is not a phenomenon of a past that has been overcome, but a system that continues to have an impact on the lives of contemporary Americans in general and on race relations in particular.

***Kindred* and Traditional Slave Narratives**

Traditional slave narratives play an important role in the ways in which *Kindred* engages with actual historical accounts of black enslavement. Levecq, for instance, links “[t]he novel's engagement with history” to its “rewriting of its literary ancestor, the slave narrative” (Levecq 526). *Kindred* interacts with traditional slave narratives in multiple ways: On the one hand, *Kindred* takes up formal conventions of traditional slave narratives such as the

presence of a homodiegetic first person narrator who relates their experiences as a slave that involve the inhumane treatment of slaves by their owners as well as depictions of slave resistance and their quest for freedom that is ultimately successful. On the other hand, *Kindred* offers a distinctly twentieth-century perspective on slave narratives: when Dana witnesses the whipping of an enslaved person for the first time, she is so horrified that she can barely stop herself from vomiting in spite of having seen representations of such beatings in films and on TV (Butler 34)—reminding the readers that reading and *knowing about* the atrocities of slavery is fundamentally different than actually witnessing and *knowing them* in person; or, as Sherryl Vint puts it, the “past is not accessible through history books, TV documentaries or other historical sources such as newspaper articles or slave narratives, but it has to be physically experienced in order to be understood” (244). Due to her personal encounters with violence against enslaved black human beings in antebellum Maryland, Dana regards her fiction and nonfiction books about slavery as completely inadequate; instead, she identifies with the accounts of WWII concentration camp survivors because those “[s]tories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation” seem to describe the suffering of enslaved people more aptly than the depictions “of happy darkies in tender loving bondage” that Dana encounters in novels such as *Gone with the Wind* (Butler 97). Moreover, Dana’s attempt to write down her time travel experiences fails: “Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away” (Butler 97). This can be related to “Dana recognizing that written and filmed historical representations of slavery are static and never fully convey slave experience” (Fulton 117). While *Kindred* acknowledges traditional slave narratives as a credible source of information about the living conditions of the enslaved, the novel also admits that there are certain limits to their ability to make the inhumanity of enslavement completely accessible to readers who have never made similar experiences themselves.

When Dana is in antebellum Maryland, however, traditional slave narratives acquire an almost mystic quality. While Dana knows for certain that Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman exist(ed),⁶ she is forced to burn the history books that

⁶ Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), who survived about thirty years of enslavement, was an African

mention their names, which she has brought with her to the past, so that she does not endanger their lives (Butler 116). Dana still tells the enslaved cook Sarah about successful slave escapes as conveyed through slave narratives; Sarah, however, remains doubtful. Her socialization in an environment in which black people are deprived of learning how to read and write leads to Sarah's dismissal of the texts that Dana invokes as evidence: "'Foolishness!' she said. 'Niggers writing books!'" (Butler 119–20).

Just like Dana, the reader of *Kindred* might know about Frederic Douglass and Harriet Tubman, but will not witness any successful escape attempt in the novel itself. Instead the reader is confronted with enslaved people who are severely punished for their acts of resistance. For example, after Alice and her husband Isaac are caught, Alice is brought back to the Weylin plantation "bloody, filthy, and barely alive" (Butler 120), while her husband's ears are cut off before he is sold to Mississippi (Butler 123). After Alice's second escape attempt, Rufus takes their common children away from her as punishment, which eventually leads to Alice's suicide (Butler 201). When Nigel, an enslaved man on the plantation, tries to tell Dana about his failed escape, she goes "away from him not wanting to hear any more about running away—and being caught" (Butler 125). Eventually the readers experience Dana's own (and only) escape attempt with her. Motivated by the search for her husband Kevin, whom she involuntarily left in antebellum Maryland on her previous trip, Dana takes the risk to sneak off the Weylin plantation at night. Due to the betrayal of another slave, Dana is caught almost immediately by Rufus and his father Tom Weylin and severely whipped as a punishment (Butler 144). This experience does not only injure Dana physically but also unsettles her mentally:

American abolitionist and a women's rights activist. She became famous for her speeches, most notably for "Ar'n't I a Woman?" (1851). She also dictated her autobiography to her friend Olive Gilbert who published *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* in 1850 (Searcy 2007).

After twenty years of enslavement, African American Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) became an influential abolitionist and author. He wrote three autobiographies: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) (Ravi 2007).

Harriet Tubman (ca. 1820–1913), who survived about twenty-nine years of enslavement, was an African American abolitionist who assisted in the escape of more than 300 enslaved people through the network of secret routes and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad. Tubman's friend Sarah H. Bradford published two biographies on her: *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) and *Harriet Tubman, Moses of Her People* (1886) (Purdy 2007).

[W]hy was I so frightened now—frightened sick at the thought that sooner or later, I would have to run again?

I moaned and tried not to think about it. The pain of my body was enough for me to contend with. But now there was a question in my mind that had to be answered.

Would I really try again? Could I?

[. . .] I tried to get away from my thoughts, but they still came.

See how easily slaves are made? they said. (Butler 145, original emphasis)

Dana fears that this episode has broken her spirit and she feels tempted to accept her fate as a slave, despite her own better knowledge. Her reading of history books and traditional slave narratives has not prepared Dana for the stark reality of enslavement. While successful slave escapees such as Frederic Douglass have a solid position in African American Studies and are gaining wider recognition by the general American public, the daily suffering of those who were not among the lucky fugitives is barely present in the public discourse on the remembrance of African American enslavement.

Female Enslavement and Resistance in *Kindred*

When *Kindred* was first published in 1979, media depictions of enslaved black people had often focussed on the experiences of men—a prominent example of this tendency is Alex Haley’s 1976 novel *Roots* that was also adapted for TV a year later—whereas stories of enslaved women were still underrepresented (Ryan 114). *Kindred* addresses this gap by focusing on ordinary (mostly female) slaves and their strategies for survival. As Tim A. Ryan notes, “Butler’s text emphasizes the importance of pragmatic everyday resistance over both servile accommodation and the grand militant gestures of previous slave heroes” (Ryan 143). Whereas radical acts of resistance such as Denmark Vesey’s historic plot⁷ or Isaac Jackson’s violent defense of his wife Alice against Rufus’ rape attempt end with the hero’s execution or his mutilation and sale, the resistant attitude of the enslaved women Alice, Sarah, and

⁷ Denmark Vesey (ca. 1767-1822) purchased his freedom after more than thirty years of enslavement and afterwards organized a conspiracy with the objective of starting a slave insurrection in Charleston (South Carolina) in July 1822. Vesey’s plan failed due to the betrayal of two enslaved men and he and his co-conspirators were sentenced to death and executed on July 3, 1822 (Wharton). Vesey’s plot is mentioned twice in *Kindred*. First, in a conversation between Dana and Rufus, in which Rufus convinces Dana to burn the history books that she has brought to antebellum Maryland. Rufus explains that his father would consider Dana “to be another Denmark Vesey”, if he found those books (Butler 117). Second, in a conversation between Dana and Kevin, in which Kevin tells Dana how Vesey’s plot “scared the hell out of a lot of white people” (Butler 156).

Carrie proves to be more persistent. Dana's personal encounter with their strategies of resistance is the key to her (potentially *Sankofan*) transformation.

Sarah the cook stands out as the unofficial head of the enslaved population on the Weylin plantation. She had a sexual relationship with Tom Weylin's father-in-law (of which the novel suggests that it might have been based on mutual consent) who promised to free her in his will but broke his promise (Butler 124). Afterwards three of her four children were sold to cover for Margaret Weylin's expenses (Butler 62, 81). Sarah's remaining daughter Carrie is mute, which might be one reason why she could stay with her mother.⁸ Initially, Dana is very critical towards Sarah's apparent submissiveness:

She had done the safe thing — had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy' in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom — the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. (Butler 120)

However, once Dana becomes more familiar with Sarah and learns to respect her careful resistance, such as her insults towards Margaret Weylin or her well-meant pieces of advice for other enslaved people on the plantation (Butler 81). Sarah's daughter⁹ Carrie is exploited as a means to keep "first her mother, and now her husband in line with no effort at all on Weylin's part" (Butler 138). But she is also an important part of the enslaved community on the Weylin plantation communicating through a sign language that she invented herself: Carrie supports and consoles Dana on several occasions and attempts to learn how to read (Butler 64, 107, 88). She also manages to marry Nigel, an enslaved man on the plantation, whom she has chosen for herself (Butler 110). There is, however, no happy ending for Sarah's and Carrie's family, for after the Weylin plantation has been burned down—

⁸ The other reason is presumably Tom Weylin's plan to give Sarah a motivation to stay at the plantation and behave herself by keeping Carrie close (Butler 138).

⁹ Although Tom Weylin's father-in-law was not Carrie's father, her light skin would indicate that Carrie's father was a white man—however, this issue is never explained in the novel (Butler 108, 124). Sarah herself is also light-skinned which might hint at Sarah's mixed parentage (probably a white man raping an enslaved woman) (Butler 62).

presumably to cover up Dana's murder of Rufus—Sarah and all of Carrie's children are sold and Carrie's fate remains unclear (Butler 213).

In contrast to Sarah and Carrie, Alice Greenwood was born free, but later enslaved after her attempt to flee with her enslaved husband Isaac. After her enslavement and her subsequent abuse as Rufus's (primarily sex) slave, Alice puts up resistance against Rufus Weylin and by extension against the system of plantocracy as well. While Alice appears "quietly tolerant" on the outside, she actually wants him dead: "She forgave him nothing, forgot nothing, hated him as deeply as she had loved Isaac" (Butler 138, 146). Although Rufus succeeds in taking possession of Alice's body, she refuses to give him what he is longing for: her love. Despite her hate for Rufus, Alice is using the advantages that her status as the master's mistress involve such as a better treatment by the overseer, but she also must bear the resentment of other slaves (Butler 148, 169). Another way in which Alice takes action is by naming her children who Rufus fathered and giving them the names of biblical slaves Joseph and Hagar.¹⁰ As she notes, "[i]n the Bible, people might be slaves for a while, but they didn't have to stay slaves" (Butler 189). Alice loves her children and endures Rufus' treatment of her out of love for them. When Rufus pretends to have sold Joseph and Hagar as a punishment for Alice's flight attempt, she does not see any reason to continue to live and commits suicide, a final act of reclaiming power over her own life (Butler 199). The fact that *Kindred* does not provide any of the enslaved women in the narrative with a happy ending confirms Ryan's thesis that "Butler's novel [...] refuses to idealize the stoic endurance and quiet resistance of African American women in slavery" (Ryan 143). I agree with Ryan's observation that *Kindred* "acknowledges the potential of the slave community, but is

¹⁰ In the Bible, Israelite Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and is brought to Egypt (Genesis 37:28). There he manages to win the pharaoh's trust by interpreting his dreams and rises to power (Genesis 41:39).

The Egyptian Hagar serves the Israelite couple Abraham and Sara as a slave. Due to Sara's infertility, Hagar is forced to have a child with Abraham. During her pregnancy, Hagar is mistreated by jealous Sara and flees into the desert where she is told to return to Abraham and Sara by an angel. Hagar has a son called Ishmael (Genesis 16). After Sara has finally given birth to her own child Isaac, she throws out Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael almost die in the desert, but are eventually saved by God (Genesis 21:1-21). The story of Hagar is very popular in African American culture and a reoccurring motif in African American art and literature; Hagar also figures prominently in womanist theology (Williams 2).

pessimistic about its agency and autonomy in practice” (Ryan 140). This proposition can be further substantiated by examining Dana’s strategies of resistance.

Although Dana’s agency is severely limited in antebellum Maryland, she seeks ways to rebel against slavocracy. Dana teaches some of the enslaved people on the Weylin plantation how to read in the knowledge that this could result in severe physical punishment and possibly sale of herself and the children she teaches (Butler 82). After Alice’s enslaved husband Isaac almost beats Rufus to death, Dana facilitates the escape of the couple despite the danger that this action poses to her own family line (Butler 101–2). When Dana finds out that Rufus has not posted her letters to Kevin, she even tries to escape to be reunited with her husband (Butler 139). On her fifth trip to antebellum Maryland, Dana prevents Rufus’ father Tom Weylin from ever beating her again because she threatens to stop helping Rufus if he did (Butler 163). Dana also attempts to commit suicide after Rufus has hit her and sold away some of her friends—although Dana’s act of cutting her wrists endangers her own life, she is willing to take the risk in order to (temporarily) escape from Rufus and return to the 1970s (Butler 193). Despite Dana’s commitment to help other enslaved people on the plantation as best as she can, her closeness to Rufus also fuels mistrust against her in the slave community (Butler 193). When field slave Sam confronts Dana with the other enslaved people’s skepticism, she emphasizes the need to reach a compromise between apparent submission to the Weylin family and working towards an improvement of the living conditions of the enslaved population because her ability to help the people on the plantation is dependent on Rufus’ favor (Butler 193).

Dana’s insistence on the need to make personal sacrifices in order to survive is a motif that is also found in traditional slave narratives as DoVeanna S. Fulton notes. She links Dana’s statement to “Harriet Jacobs’s¹¹ belief that ‘the slave woman ought not to be judged by the

¹¹ Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897), who survived twenty years of enslavement, was an African American abolitionist and author. She is famous for her autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which was first published under the pseudonym Linda Brent in 1861 (Culkin).

While the connection between *Kindred* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* seems to be evident from a twenty-first century perspective, it should be noted that the authenticity of Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative was still unproven when *Kindred* was published in 1979 (Miletic 262). This could be a reason, why Harriet Jacobs is not explicitly mentioned in *Kindred* (in contrast to other African American abolitionists such as Frederic Douglass or Sojourner Truth) (ibid.).

same standard as others” and suggests that “[b]y witnessing the totality of slavery, Dana’s twentieth-century concepts [. . .] undergo a radical reconfiguration to account for experiences previously unknown and untold” (Fulton 118). As Ryan elaborates, “Butler’s novel [. . .] expose[s] and [. . .] challenge[s] the masculinism of modern black discourses about slavery [. . . and] rejects the notion that slaves were *either* militant rebels [. . .] on one hand, *or* docile accommodationists [. . .] on the other” (Ryan 142, original emphasis).

Kindred also addresses misconceptions about slave resistance: when Kevin and Dana discuss whether it might be best if Dana murdered Rufus, Dana uses the consequences of Rufus’ death—namely the uncertainty of the fate of every enslaved person on the plantation—as an argument against killing him (Butler 198). Kevin initially does not seem to realize that an enslaved person whose owner is dead is not free but will be passed on to the next of kin as property—a condition that could not only apply to the enslaved friends that Dana has made on the Weylin plantation but also to herself. In spite of Dana’s presumably superior twentieth-century knowledge, her travels through time do not enable her to arrive in antebellum Maryland like a knight in shining armor and free her enslaved ancestors. Instead, her positionality as a black woman in early-nineteenth-century Maryland completely disempowers her to the point of being forced to act like an enslaved person to facilitate her survival. While Dana’s journeys into the past do not heal her in the sense that *Sankofa* suggests, Dana gains a sound understanding of as well as an higher appreciation for the suffering of her enslaved ancestors. Learning first hand how limited the opportunities for enslaved women’s resistance were, Dana’s initial disdain for presumably submissive slaves—as exemplified by her first impression of Sarah—changes into respect for the sacrifices that her ancestors had to make in order to survive. Dana’s return to the past has transformed her views of American history as well as her outlook on life. Although her journeys have left Dana wiser than before, she is not healed by her personal confrontation with African American enslavement, but instead struggles to cope with her newly-won insights.

Conclusion

In *Kindred*, Butler physically sends her protagonists back to the antebellum era where she witnesses and eventually interacts in the everyday struggles of enslaved women and their efforts to preserve some dignity while she faces sexual harassment, rape, and the disruption

of their families. By drawing attention to this issue, the novel provides a critique of media that privilege an Anglo-American and/or male point of view about African American enslavement and provides a distinctly black and female alternative vision. *Kindred* complicates the idea of *Sankofa* by revealing Dana's investment in the past to be more complex than a simplistic matter of give (i.e., invest your time to mentally go back to the antebellum American South) and take (i.e., emerge from your mental journey as a healed and wiser person). While Dana is learning from the past, she is not healed, but physically and mentally harmed. Due to Dana's position as an enslaved black woman in antebellum Maryland, her agency is severely limited during her time travel journeys: instead of becoming an agent of change, Dana ends up reproducing the past that has shaped her existence in the novel's narrated present—a paradoxical condition that might irritate readers at first, but could also inspire them to question how their present behavior reproduces past injustices. Thus, while *Sankofa* might not be the best suited concept to describe Dana's literal and figurative journey in the novel, it can explain the impact that *Kindred* can have on its readers: if the author succeeds in her explicitly stated intent "to make people feel the past as well as understand the facts of it to understand it (the slavery experience) in [their] skin, in [their] mind, in [their] emotions" (Weston n.pag.), *Kindred* leaves room for a socially transformative interpretation of the novel by increasing the readers' awareness of the legacies of African American enslavement in the United States.

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