



The Burden of History and Narratives of Resilience

A Critical Analysis of
Inheritance and Trauma in
Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

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Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* is a literary crucible where the past and present converge to transport readers through time and space to reckon with the harrowing legacy of American slavery. The narrative follows as Dana, a Black woman living in 1976 California, is inexplicably pulled back in time to the brutal reality of the Weylin plantation in the antebellum South. There, Dana and, eventually, her husband, Kevin, must navigate the enduring shadows of enslavement, their ancestral and historic ties to oppression, and the intergenerational cycle of trauma they embody. This essay embarks on a critical analysis, illuminating how Butler leverages the concept of inheritance within *Kindred* to expose the identity-fracturing consequences of generational trauma. Beyond exploring the complexities of inherited trauma, Butler's perspective extends beyond individual reactions, delving into the transformative power inherent in personal and collective narratives to combat the consequences of traumatic inheritance, specifically, the historical legacy of slavery affecting Black individuals and communities within the persistently oppressive framework of the American system. Not only does Butler compel the reader to acknowledge the crucial need for historical accounting to instigate change, but she also demonstrates how the act of storytelling emerges as a catalyst for breaking the cycle of generational trauma, emphasizing resilience and empowerment in the face of an oppressive and traumatic inheritance.

In her *New York Times* article "The Visions of Octavia Butler," Lynell George presents the driving questions behind Butler's primary concerns within *Kindred*: "Are we ever free of our past? Not just of our personal choices [...] but of the uncomfortable histories we inherit and, the ways in which we are inexorably tied to them?". George's work centers on the burden of historical inheritance transferred from generation to generation. She proposes that "Throughout the novel, [Dana] is whipsawed back and forth between the two eras, dropped repeatedly into a violent landscape that she comes to understand is not simply occupied by her forebears but is, in fact, her inheritance" (George). Inheritance becomes the narrative anchor that intertwines the characters' ancestral pasts with their present and future. Dana's time travel is intricately linked to Rufus Weylin, the young heir to the plantation, future slave owner, rapist, and oppressor. Dana's connection with Rufus introduces a complex dynamic as she grapples with the revelation that he is her ancestor, her "several times great grandfather" (Butler 28). Forced into the past during life-threatening moments in Rufus' life, Dana

must navigate the ethical dilemma of saving the life of someone who perpetuates an inheritance of violence and oppression—someone who, paradoxically, ensures her own existence.

Starting with conventional aspects of inheritance, Butler paves the way for readers to comprehend the complexities of the theme. *Kindred*'s conceptualization begins with tangible examples like assets, property, or land. In particular, as Rufus grows older, he inherits property, not just the Weylin plantation's land but also all of the enslaved people on it. From there, Butler illustrates another compelling instance of inheritance—genetic traits exemplified by physical resemblance. As a boy, Rufus comments that Dana “look[s] a little like Alice's mother” (Butler 29), and as an adult, he goes as far as to insist that Dana and Alice are “two halves of the same woman” (Butler 228). Throughout the narrative, various characters remark on Dana's uncanny likeness to Alice, unaware that Dana is, in fact, Alice's descendant, proving that physical characteristics are also inherited. This exploration of inheritance extends beyond mere physical traits to encompass traditions and customs as well. Dana reflects on this when she discusses the post-funeral dinner following Alice's passing, noting, “There was a big dinner afterward. [Her] relatives at home had dinners after funerals, too. [She] had never thought about how far back the custom might go” (Butler 252). Through this investigation, Butler builds a comprehensive understanding of inheritance that bridges the gap between the tangible and intangible and exposes a nuanced chronicle of intergenerational connections. Once she establishes a foundation using material and biological legacies, she progressively expands the scope to reveal the inextricable links between inherited traits, social perspectives, and the profound emotional and psychological burdens that persist across generations to craft a narrative that transcends temporal boundaries, offering a holistic view of how the echoes of inheritance reverberate through the ages.

Building on the foundation she has paved, Butler delves into behavioral and social inheritance by providing a nuanced perspective on the impact of environment and upbringing on an individual's development. In the novel, Kevin warns Dana that Rufus' “environment will be influencing him every day [she's] gone” (Butler 82). For every critical moment that Dana spends with Rufus, he spends much more time steeped in the influence of his father—a man who owns slaves, devalues his wife, and brutalizes his son. At one point, Dana reflects, “I thought of Rufus and his father, of Rufus becoming his father. It would happen some day in at least one way” (Butler 68). As a product of his upbringing, he is inclined to inherit his father's behaviors—his

cruelty and participation in an oppressive system. To Kevin's initial statement, Dana responds that "not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be" (Butler 83). In this way, Dana introduces a sense of agency and resistance against the expected behavioral patterns dictated by inheritance—against inheritance itself. For example, "He had spent his life watching his father ignore, even sell the children he had had with black women. Apparently, it had never occurred to Rufus to break that tradition. Until now" (Butler 231). Rufus wields his agency to alter the cycle of inherited trauma by educating his son and allowing Dana to teach other slaves how to read (Butler 230, 233). However, Kevin's warning to Dana, "You're gambling against history" (Butler 83) introduces a sobering reality. The weight of history, with its deeply ingrained behavior patterns, upbringing, and conformity, emerges as a formidable force that shapes individual identity. The climax of the novel sees Dana grappling with the enduring impact of history on Rufus when she admits that "He sounded more like his father than himself [...] he even looked like his father" (Butler 214). Butler paints a complex portrait, acknowledging the potential for agency and resistance while highlighting individuals' formidable challenges when contending with the weight of history and its deeply rooted patterns.

History encapsulates much more than inherited behaviors; it includes societal norms, expectations, and worldviews—all of which have the potential to play a significant role in molding an individual's character. Dana acknowledges social inheritance when she describes Rufus' father. She says, "He wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did monstrous things his society said were legal and proper" (Butler 134). Dana recognizes the influence of societal norms and accepted behaviors on individual actions and, consequently, social inheritance shaping individual identity. The characterization of Tom Weylin as an "ordinary man" highlights Dana's acknowledgment that individuals, even those who engage in morally questionable actions, are products of the societies in which they live. This perspective aligns with the idea that behaviors that shape a person are inherited through familial lines and broader societal structures and expectations.

Rufus and Tom are not the only characters affected by their inheritance. Kevin, too, is ensnared in the web of inherited power structures and privilege. His involvement in "helping slaves to escape" (Butler 193) does not absolve him from the influence of his inherited privilege. In an essay on the novel, Robert Crossley argues that "The most problematic white man in *Kindred* is not the Maryland slave owner, but the liberated,

modern Californian married to Dana [...] he is by gender and race implicated in the supremacist culture“ (275). Kevin benefits from social hierarchies established by past oppressors like Rufus and Tom, inheriting opportunities, resources, and social advantages shaped by historical binaries of master/slave, privileged/marginalized, white/Other. Even if Kevin does not actively participate in or condone oppression, his actions and attitudes reveal the inherent privilege bestowed upon him by his resemblance and connection to past oppressors. In the past, he “complain[s] of boredom, and of having to be sociable” (Butler 97), evidencing a complete detachment from the harsh realities of the oppressed—like the slaves on the plantation or what Dana must endure. He reveals a profound ignorance and lack of empathy for the oppressed when he tells Dana, “This could be a great time to live in [...] I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country” (Butler 97). Moreover, Kevin's patriarchal tendencies underscore the impact of inherited privilege on his relationships. His suggestion that Dana “get rid of some of [her] books so that [she'd] fit into his place” (Butler 108) reflects not only a disregard for her intellectual pursuits but also an attempt to mold their relationship into a privileged man/controlled woman binary where she would conform to fit *his* expectations. He tells her that if she marries him, he'd “let her type all [his] manuscripts”—*let* her, as if it was an honor or a wifely duty, and when she refuses, he moves from frustration to anger (Butler 109). Further, the unequal division of domestic responsibilities—Kevin “stopped [unpacking the house] when he got his office in order” (Butler 12)—emphasizes the gendered dynamics influenced by inherited privilege. The crux is revealed when a young Rufus asks Kevin, “Does Dana belong to you?” (Butler 60), and he diminishes her worth and agency by responding, “In a way...she's my wife” (Butler 60). This reductive possession of Dana echoes the oppressive dynamics of Rufus and Dana's relationship. It aligns with Crossley's astute observation that “Shuttling between the two white men in her life, [Dana] is aware not only of the blood link between herself and Rufus but of the double link of gender and race that unites Rufus and Kevin” (276). The parallels between Kevin's behavior and Rufus' actions illustrate the far-reaching effects of inherited privilege, tied to both race and gender, perpetuating a cycle of dominance across generations. Butler utilizes Kevin's character to convey that even individuals who perceive themselves as progressive can unknowingly contribute to systemic inequalities through their ingrained privilege. Kevin's story becomes a poignant reminder that

breaking free from the web of inherited privilege requires not only well-intentioned actions but also a deep and introspective understanding of one's positionality within the historical continuum of power and oppression.

In a masterful progression, Butler leads the reader to reckon with an undeniable truth: that trauma—deep-rooted intergenerational emotional and psychological scars—are also inherited. By tracing the trajectories of Rufus and Kevin across generations, Butler reveals the enduring influence of their respective inheritances. It is within Dana's experience that the multiplicities of inheritance converge to expose the historical legacy of slavery that endures within the African-American community and a perpetually marginalizing system. Butler proves their persistence when highlighting the news during Dana's 1976 present when "blacks [were] rioting [...] and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government" (Butler 196). Through this reflection and progression, Butler compels readers to confront the reality that trauma, like any other inheritance, exerts a seemingly indomitable force, shaping lives—identities—across time.

Butler's exploration of inherited trauma gains additional resonance when considered within the framework of scientific studies, as highlighted in Suchismita Dutta's article "Indelible Race Memories and Subliminal Epigenetics in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." Dutta's assertion that "people of color biologically inherit the detrimental effects of white racism" (Dutta 88) serves as a bridge between Butler's fictional examination and the empirical realities faced by marginalized individuals and communities. Dutta's position stems from the broader field of epigenetics, which studies how environmental factors can influence gene expression and, consequently, be passed down through generations. As Dutta suggests, "Dana's mystical transportation to the antebellum Weylin plantation and her encounters with Alice, Rufus, Hagar, and her other ancestors echo the fact that epigenetic trauma has direct effects on the biological and behavioral ramifications of an offspring exposed to their tortured predecessors" (88). Dana's journey through time becomes a poignant lens through which we encounter the inheritance of trauma. She bears witness to the brutalities of slavery, experiencing the physical and emotional scars of her ancestors—in the past, she was beaten and thrown into the field "shaking, sweating, [and] humiliated" (Butler 212); in the present, she carries an "ache in [her] back and shoulders where Rufus' mother had pounded with her fists" (Butler 14-5). For Dana, these physical and metaphorical wounds and scars inflicted by history transcend time. She bears the scars of the whip on her back that was "cut to pieces" (Butler 112) and the memory of her left arm crushed into the wall in the "exact spot

Rufus' fingers had grasped" (Butler 261). The suffering and trauma inflicted in the past will never relinquish its grasp on Dana; she will carry the physical and psychological scars of her inheritance forever. By recognizing that generational trauma is epigenetic trauma, the reader is forced to acknowledge that the impact of historical injustices is not only social or economic but can be imprinted on the very biology of individuals and, thus, the communities to which they belong—not just Alice, Hagar, or Dana, but the entire African American community.

Furthermore, Dutta states that “historically black bodies have been contested sites of torture” (87), and Butler illustrates this torture within *Kindred*. In the novel, torture leaves its scars, both physical and psychological, on the bodies and psyches of Dana and her ancestors; trauma that is epigenetic and will be passed down from generation to generation—inherited. In an unforgettably brutal scene, Dana describes her first encounter with torture. She says, “I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on” (Butler 36). Dana’s detailed account serves as a testament to the harrowing reality of historical violence against Black bodies. Dana is not a passive observer but an active participant in the historical trauma; she is not only affected, but she bears the effects of her inheritance—the trauma experienced by her enslaved ancestors becomes an indelible part of her identity. This shared burden of historical violence shapes Dana's perceptions, altering her reactions, emotions, and perceptions. Moreover, Dana recounts,

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. (Butler 36)

The contrasting reaction of the young girl—Alice—evidences the effect of generational trauma. The relative resilience of the younger generation could be interpreted as a coping mechanism—a survival strategy developed in response to the burden of history, to the intergenerational weight of suffering. Dana and Alice become witnesses—inheritors—to the violence and the communal impact of domination. The shared experience between the beaten man, Dana, and Alice forms a collective inheritance of anguish, creating a psychological scar that transcends individual suffering and becomes embedded in the fabric of their

community. Through the narrative, Butler becomes a conduit for translating the undeniable scientific concept of intergenerational trauma into a visceral, relatable experience. By grounding the novel with the concrete implications of inherited trauma, Butler compels readers to confront the tangible consequences of systemic oppression. In this way, she reinforces the idea that the scars of history are not merely metaphorical but are intricately woven into the identities—the very fibers—of those who inherit them.

Traumas are, at their core, memories that hold the power to alter one's genetics—their very being. Memories encompass the stories, histories, and moments that collectively shape an individual's existence and contribute to the formation of their identity. In "Notes on Trauma and Community," Kai Erikson defines trauma as "an assault from outside that breaks into the space one occupies as a person and damages the interior"—an assault "outside the range of usual human experience" that "strain[s] a person's emotional resources [... and] result[s] in personality change" (455, 457). He proposes that trauma can be a "result [of] a constellation of life's experiences as well as from a discrete event—from a prolonged exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault" (Erikson 457). Each sudden flash of terror, shock, and assault that Dana endures sends her shuttling back to the present, creating a cyclical pattern of trauma that she inherits from the historical context in which she is entangled. Her trauma is multifaceted, as it stems from physical and emotional means. When Dana reflects on who she was before her experiences in the past, she says, "I hadn't known [...] what there was to fear. I had never seen a captured runaway like Alice. I had never felt the whip across my own back. I had never felt a man's fists" (Butler 171), but now, as a result of that trauma, she had "less confidence" and "felt almost sick to [her] stomach with fear" (Butler 171). Not only is Dana subject to emotional wounds, but she also suffers a profound physical loss—she "lost an arm on [her] last trip home" (Butler 9). Her reflection on the loss extends beyond the mere physicality, transcending into a narrative of profound emotional distress: "I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security that I had not valued until it was gone" (Butler 9). This articulates the interconnectedness and multiplicity of suffering—her missing arm serves as a tangible reminder of the emotional burdens she carries. Dana's physical and emotional wounds become enduring testaments to the interconnectedness of trauma, persisting relentlessly through time and generations.

Both in the past and the present, prolonged exposure to oppression and danger as a direct consequence of her marginalized identity becomes a consistent thread compounding Dana's traumatic experiences. To ensure her existence and survival in the past, Dana had to endure "Horror stories. Except that they were true, and [she] was going to have to live with them for as long as [she] was [there]" (Butler 75)—from threats to beatings to atrocities witnessed, the antebellum South became a traumatizing "sharper, stronger reality [where] the work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse" (Butler 191). An accumulation of trauma persists into Dana's present—a reflection of the perpetual system that sustains intergenerational trauma. Tethered to the discrimination of the past, in 1976, Dana endures racial and sexual harassment, comments like "poor-nography [...] chocolate and vanilla porn" (Butler 56) from her supervisor when she eats lunch with Kevin at work and racial prejudice from her and Kevin's families when they reveal their intent to marry (Butler 110-1). The same dynamics discussed previously that contributed to Kevin's inherited privilege serve to compound Dana's inherited trauma—misogyny, oppression, and marginalization. In examining Dana's experiences through the lens of Erikson's trauma theory, *Kindred* not only portrays the immediate, visceral effects of traumatic events but also delves into the lasting consequences that echo through Dana's identity and shape her narrative across time.

Shifting our focus from the origins of Dana's inherited trauma, we now scrutinize its lasting consequences on her identity, examining how the traumatic experiences intricately shape her perception of self and the world. In the article, "Saying 'YES': Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Marisa Parham explores how traumatic experiences can fragment an individual's identity. Parham characterizes this transformation as a response to the traumatized individual's adaptation to endure the tension between "understanding their bodies as their 'own' and recognizing their bodies in relation to pasts that leak into the present" (1318). This framework becomes particularly relevant when examining the consequences of Dana's inheritance—trauma that manifests as an appropriation of her personhood and agency. Butler's narrative not only thrusts Dana into the past but essentializes her identity, relegating and confining her to the doubly oppressed role of a slave woman with the sole purpose of safeguarding Rufus—a white male oppressor. Dana expresses that "It was clear that whatever power had used [her] to protect Rufus had not provided for [her] own protection" (Butler 30). The power—the agency—is not hers but is dictated and forced upon her. Parham

articulates this predicament by noting that “Dana’s obligation to Rufus’ life, which is also an obligation to her own, structures the interplay of history and morality...By putting Dana in this dilemma, Butler is able to illustrate the deep and thorny entanglement at the heart of Southern plantation slavery” (Parham 1318). Through this entanglement, Dana “becomes permanently infected with race memories” (Dutta 91)—historical traumas—and as she becomes “more and more aware of the legacy of colonialism [...] her own behavioral pattern changes upon witnessing scenes of violence at the Weylin plantation” (Dutta 89). Dana's traumatic experience becomes a literal embodiment of the past, encompassing her predetermined identity as a Black woman and illustrating how traumas inherited ancestrally and socially shape her present identity.

Dana’s memories, traumas from the past that leak into the present, become a lens through which she views the world. In conjunction with Parham’s argument, Erikson theorizes that traumatized individuals “can be said to have experienced not only a *changed sense of self* and a *changed way of relating to others* but a *changed worldview*” (466). Post-trauma, the world appears as “a place of unremitting danger” with “natural malice that lurks everywhere” (Erikson 467-68). Dana structures her life around the possibility of being pulled back into the past—around the possibility of another trauma. She showers quickly because she doesn’t want to be vulnerable (Butler 18), she refuses to leave the house to get something to eat because she doesn’t want to add the variable of a moving car into her potential trauma equation (Butler 19), and throughout the novel, we see her pack a bag of supplies and tie it around her waist anticipating what tools she will need to aid her when she faces the next inevitable traumatic event. She says, “It happened once. What if it happens again? [...] I feel like it could happen again—like it could happen anytime. I don’t feel secure here” (Butler 17). Traumatic memories come to shape her existence, casting a shadow on her interactions, decisions, and overall worldview. Dana’s traumatic experiences imprint on her life, becoming an inextricable part of her identity. Through Dana’s experiences, Butler urges us to acknowledge how memories, traumas, histories—as stories of the past—affect identities today.

As Dana’s worldview evolves, the way that she interacts with the world—her attitudes and behaviors—change as a response to the trauma that she inherits and acquires. After her initial sojourns to the past, she describes feeling like an actor, akin to an “observer watching a show...watching history happening around [her]” (Butler 98). However, subsequent traumatic visits alter her perspective, prompting an evolution

in her identity. To survive the brutality of the antebellum South, Dana abandons her modern, independent character and immerses herself in domestic chores—working in the cookhouse “clean[ing] and pluck[ing] a chicken, prepar[ing] vegetables, knead[ing] bread dough,” catering to Kevin by ensuring his “room [was] clean [and bringing] him hot water to shave with,” reading to young Rufus and eventually his elderly mother (Butler 81, 86, 218). Forced into physical labor in the fields, she is exposed to further trauma, where she confesses, “Only [the] memory of the whip [...] kept [her] still” (Butler 93)—illustrating the psychological toll of subservience. The 1976 woman who refused to transcribe her husband’s manuscripts (Butler 109) acquiesces to writing Rufus’ correspondence (Butler 227) in the past. She adopts a survival strategy of submission, suppressing and transforming her 1976 identity to navigate the violence and cruelty surrounding her.

As her adaptation intensifies, Dana questions her increasing acceptance of submission, asking, “Was I getting so used to being submissive?” (Butler 220). The profound impact of trauma on her identity is starkly evident in her realization that the person she was forced to become to endure the burden of history is now an inseparable part of her existence. Her inheritance—generational trauma—catalyzes an identity that she cannot shed and leave in the past; she is transformed and will carry this identity and the burden of history with her into the present. She says, “Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?” (Butler 220). The change becomes so drastic that when she reflects on the Weylin plantation, she says, “I’ve got no love at all for that place, but so help me, when I saw it again, it was so much like coming home that it scared me” (Butler 192). In italics, Butler prompts the reader, asking, “*See how easily slaves are made?*” (Butler 177), forcing the reader to confront the ongoing impact of inherited systemic oppression—that the resulting trauma invades, empties, submerges, and alters individuals’ identity in their attempt to navigate the system.

By intertwining the past and present, *Kindred* illustrates that the essence of life—of identity—is not merely shaped by the passage of time but is influenced by the creation, accumulation, and inheritance of memories—meaningful experiences. The threads that weave together a life include shared moments, joys, and intimate connections, but hardships and traumas also contribute to lived experience. As Dana moves back and forth in time, her life becomes a tapestry woven with the threads of the brutal realities of slavery. The

traumatic events she endures and the relationships she forges with her enslaved ancestors become integral to her sense of self. In the article, "African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Assia Djebar's *La femme sans sépulture*," Anne Donadey interprets both Dana and Kevin as Black and white representative Americans in a national allegory, proposing that they are "unprepared for their encounter with the harshness of history. When they are finally reunited in the past after Kevin has been marooned there for five years, they hardly recognize each other [...] because the wounds and marks of history have inscribed themselves on both their bodies" (68). The characters' journeys through time become a metaphor for the broader human experience, emphasizing that the traumas and complexities of life have the power to shape one's perspective, sense of self, life, and identity—their trauma irrevocably changes them. Once Kevin has returned to the present, Dana says that "the expression on his face was [...] something [she] was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly" (Butler 194)—he is no longer the Kevin she married before the plantation because he has been transformed during the five traumatic years spent stranded in the past. The experiences both characters undergo, the relationships they form, and the challenges they face in the past directly influence their understanding of self in the present. The novel illustrates that identity is not static, but a fluid and evolving construct shaped by the traumas witnessed, accrued, and endured.

Kindred proves that change is an inevitable result of trauma. The novel does not only serve as Butler's canvas for exploring the validity and identity-fracturing consequences of inherited trauma but also the diverse responses to its weight. By delving into the characters' reactions—the allure of revenge, the complexity of forgiveness, and the repercussions of denial—Butler challenges readers to reflect on their positions in the face of accountability, responsibility, culpability, and privilege. In doing so, the novel becomes a catalyst for introspection, inviting readers to consider how they grapple with the legacy of trauma in their own lives.

Revenge is an enticing reaction to trauma—the allure of revenge lies in its potential to reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator, allowing individuals to reclaim agency and restore a semblance of balance in the face of trauma that was forced upon them. Butler asks, to what end? Rufus is a character whose instinctive response to trauma is revenge. After his father beat and whipped him, marring his back with "the crisscross of long red welts [alongside] old marks, ugly scars of at least one much worse beating" (Butler 26), he tried to set their house on fire. Dana observes, "The boy already knew more about revenge than I did. What kind of man

was he going to grow up into?" (Butler 26-7). Over time, as Rufus grows into a man, he continues his pattern of revenge: raping Alice when she hurts his ego by rejecting him and breaking Dana through fieldwork because he blames her for his father's death (Butler 117, 210). When Dana reunites with Kevin in the past, and they attempt to leave the plantation, Rufus chooses revenge over abandonment. Dana realizes that "He was going to shoot [her]. [She] had pushed him too far. [She] was Alice all over again, rejecting him" (Butler 187). Rufus' trauma response was that he "just needed to hurt someone...[to] lash out at others when he was hurt" (Butler 210). Furthermore, in a moment of vengeful impulse, Rufus orchestrates a cruel plan to punish Alice—the freewoman who he alienated, raped, bought, and then impregnated—for trying to flee with her children (Butler 250). He sends away her children and deceitfully claims to have sold them, intending to inflict the deepest emotional wounds upon her (Butler 250). However, this revenge tactic backfires disastrously. Alice, unable to bear the loss of her children, succumbs to despair and takes her own life (Butler 248). Revenge fuels the cycle of trauma as Rufus then turns his attention to Dana, and she becomes the focus of his attempts to exert control and dominance. Dana observes, "He couldn't control me. That clearly bothered him" (Butler 253). Frustrated, he resorts to replicating the broader system of slavery—a system founded on the exertion of power and control over others, emphasizing the larger societal framework that encourages such behaviors. Butler's narrative masterfully unfolds the tragic consequences of revenge, revealing that it does not bring resolution or justice but perpetuates a cycle of trauma. The intense emotional toll exacted on Alice and the subsequent shift of Rufus's focus onto Dana serve as a stark commentary on the corrosive nature of revenge within the context of a system built on power imbalances and exploitation.

Dana grapples with revenge as well, but ultimately, her initial response to trauma is forgiveness—a conflict portrayed when she contemplates retaliating against the patroller beating her: "I knew I could stop him, cripple him [...] destroy him [...] But I couldn't do it [...] My chance was gone. I'd done nothing" (Butler 42). This sets a recurring pattern where Dana refrains from inflicting pain as she endures it, choosing not to perpetuate the cycle of suffering, but at what cost? Dana extends this compassion to Rufus, attributing his actions to his own traumatic inheritance, the "unlikeable marks [left] on him [...] by] his environment" (Butler 32). As a reaction to inherited trauma, she absolves others of their complicity while absorbing trauma herself. However, by the story's conclusion, Dana recognizes the inescapable truth: "[Rufus is] no good [...] He's all

grown up now and part of the system [...] Somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me. I can't hate him the way I should until I see him doing things to other people" (Butler 223). In this evolution, Dana realizes that forgiveness entails a compromise. In the end, the compromise comes at the cost of "absorb[ing] so much punishment" (Butler 42), so much trauma—at the expense of her own identity.

As the narrative unfolds within the intricate terrain of inherited trauma, Kevin emerges as an individual whose reaction to the weight of generational suffering is characterized by denial. This theme appears as early as the Prologue when Dana repeatedly asserts that the trauma inflicted upon her, literally and figuratively symbolized by her crushed arm, is solely her fault and not Kevin's. Her internalization of blame, expressed in statements like "I told them it was an accident [...] My fault, not Kevin's" (Butler 9,10), highlights a pervasive pattern where traumatized individuals bear the undue burden of responsibility for the harm inflicted upon them. In contrast, Kevin shirks any blame, creating a dynamic reflective of oppressive situations where the oppressor denies and avoids acknowledging their culpability. This pattern becomes even more pronounced as Kevin insists that Dana, a traumatized and oppressed individual, recall the painful details of her experience: "remember the way [she] had been hurt—remember the pain" (Butler 10). Despite the evident suffering and emotional toll associated with reliving trauma, Kevin demands this emotional labor from Dana. The act of "remember[ing] it all for him—reliv[ing] it all in detail" (butler 15) showcases the unequal power dynamic, where the oppressed must educate the oppressor about their experiences, even at the cost of reopening fresh, emotional wounds. Furthermore, Kevin's response of "I don't know what to think" (Butler 17) after Dana recounts her trauma highlights the discomfort and difficulty privileged individuals face when confronted with the lived experiences of the oppressed. It is easier for him to deny Dana's reality than to confront his potential complicity in a system that allowed and perpetuated past trauma, extending its legacy into the present. Kevin's uncertainty reflects the broader challenge of acknowledging privilege and culpability, emphasizing the emotional and psychological complexities involved in grappling with the harsh truths of systemic oppression. Kevin responds by urging Dana to "let yourself pull away from it [...] whether it was real or not. Let go of it" (Butler 17). He demonstrates a penchant for detachment and denial, advocating for an approach that serves to make it more comfortable for him to ignore his complicity in an oppressive system. This detachment is a manifestation of the privilege afforded to Kevin, allowing him to distance himself from

the suffering of others. Kevin's response—to deny the burden of historical trauma—resonates with Butler's overarching commentary that “It was so easy to advise other people to live with their pain” (Butler 157).

Kevin's reaction to the weight of generational suffering exemplifies a denial that is personal and emblematic of a broader societal pattern. From a position of power, privilege, and safety, the simplest solution to generational trauma is to ignore, deny, and deflect from the harsh realities faced by the oppressed. Through this exploration, Butler prompts readers to confront the implications of denial, illustrating how it perpetuates cycles of oppression and reinforces systemic injustices.

Throughout the novel, Dana and Kevin grapple with the notion that history is a fixed and unchangeable entity, a narrative already written. This perspective, seemingly grounded in the inevitability of certain events like Dana's birth—that “Rufus and Alice would get together somehow” (Butler 40)—becomes a source of stagnancy and denial—a way to avoid the responsibility of affecting change. Butler highlights this theme when Dana is disturbed by enslaved children playing pretend as slave traders and fieldwork. Kevin attempts to rationalize and deny the weight of what they are witnessing by dismissing the children's actions. With a “what-do-you-want-me-to-do-about-it kind of look” (Butler 100), he says, “The kids are just imitating what they've seen adults doing, [...] They don't understand [...] We're in the middle of history. We surely can't change it” (Butler 99-100). Kevin's perspective reflects a common mindset that invalidates the burden borne by Dana, the children, and the African-American community as a result of historical domination. He denies his privileged role as a white man with the power to address and dismantle the indoctrination, internalized shame, hatred, and societal hierarchies perpetuated across generations. He continues his pattern of denial, saying, “You know what's going to happen. It already has happened [...] I'm not minimizing the wrong that's being done here [...] but] There's nothing you could do that wouldn't eventually get you whipped or killed” (Butler 100-1). Kevin accepts the inevitability of the oppressive events by asserting that Dana already knows what will happen and that it's unavoidable. This acceptance contributes to the narrative that the unjust system is unchangeable, reinforcing the status quo. It implies that resistance or attempts to alter the course of history are futile. By suggesting that trying to change the course of events would lead to harm, he downplays the severity of the wrongs inflicted on the oppressed. He absolves himself and others of personal responsibility for challenging or changing the oppressive system. He fails to acknowledge the privilege inherent in his ability to

observe without direct consequences. His status as a white man grants him a level of safety and distance that others, particularly those directly affected by the oppression, do not have. We see this dynamic mirrored when Rufus finds Dana's American history book, and Dana contends, "I had said I couldn't do anything to change history. Yet, if history could be changed, this book in the hands of a white man [...] might be the thing to change it" (Butler 141). Dana does not benefit from that same power or safety that Kevin and Rufus wield, and she challenges Kevin's unaffected stance, saying, "You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer [...] I can understand that because [...] it's protection [...] But, [...] I can't maintain the distance [...] I don't know what to do. I ought to do something though" (Butler 101). Butler purposefully emphasizes the ease with which privilege enables individuals like Kevin to distance themselves from the suffering of others and write off oppressive systems as unchangeable. However, when Dana is transported back to the present without Kevin, he confronts the possibility of being stuck in the past, literally becoming a part of the history he initially deemed impenetrable. This pivotal moment prompts Kevin to reassess his role and choose whether to continue denying his privilege or actively contribute to positive change. He does eventually decide to wield his power afforded by privilege, risking his safety to help slaves escape to freedom—to alter history in an attempt to unburden the oppressed. This marks a crucial transformation—the trauma of history alters his perspective and identity as he evolves from observer to active participant in change. Kevin's experience shows us that individuals and collectives must take accountability for their role in history and realize that it is within our power to alter the narratives in place. Butler guides us through various reactions to inherited trauma to show us that the takeaway isn't to deny the existence or consequences of trauma, it isn't to take revenge, and it isn't to forgive and forget. Instead, she proposes that the way to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma and the hierarchical system of privilege and oppression that sustains it is to acknowledge and validate the trauma and its effects. As the characters in *Kindred* grapple with their own traumas and confront their shared history, Butler implores readers to embark on a similar journey of self-examination and collective responsibility, challenging the cyclical nature of generational trauma and seeking a path toward healing and progress.

Our *histories* are, in essence, a collective memory passed down through generations. Butler proves that memories, traumas, and histories are narratives that encapsulate the essence of our existence—individual and collective—shaping our perceptions, constructing our realities, and molding our identities. The power

behind these narratives resides in the telling of them—the narrative perspectives portrayed. One pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Rufus dismissively refers to one of Dana's American history books as "the biggest lot of abolitionist trash" (Butler 140). His reaction reflects a profound ignorance and a refusal to acknowledge the depth of suffering embedded in the history of slavery. When Dana clarifies that the book was written after slavery was abolished, Rufus's response, "Then why the hell are they still complaining about it?" (Butler 140) encapsulates a central theme of Butler's narrative. This exchange gets to the heart of Butler's argument, revealing how those with narrative power often evade their responsibility and continue to benefit from an oppressive system. Donadey categorizes Butler's novel as "metafiction" (Donadey 66). *Kindred*, as a novel—a story itself—is a meta-form of Butler illustrating how by amplifying erased or underrepresented narratives, we can acknowledge and validate our ties to the oppressors or oppressed—we can untangle the interlocking web of power and marginalization to disrupt the cycle of inherited trauma. Butler uses Rufus and Dana's conversation as a meta-critique on the privileged perspective still pervading our present that dismisses the enduring consequences of intergenerational trauma—it's still *something to complain about* because it still affects people today. Yet, the voices of those with power, of oppressors like Rufus, write our histories—stories of experiences that do not truly belong to them.

Donadey positions Butler as a postcolonial writer concerned with "rewriting the past because the dominant versions of history have left blanks, gaps, and misrepresentations" (Donadey 66). Popularized narratives of history are dictated by those with power—not by those whose lived experiences deserve amplification. On one of Dana's returns from the past, she "sat down at [her] typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before [she] gave up and threw them all away" (Butler 116). We've already seen how revisiting the traumatic experiences of the past pained Dana when Kevin expected her to recount them, and this contributes to why it is difficult for her to write down her experiences—why it is challenging for traumatized individuals to write the histories of their suffering. In preparing for subsequent trips to the past, Dana says that she "read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction. [She] read everything [she] had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject—even *Gone With the Wind*, or part of it. But its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than [she] could stand" (Butler 116). For some perspective, Margaret Mitchell, the author of *Gone With The Wind*, was an affluent white

woman from a wealthy and politically prominent family in Georgia—which explains her idealized depiction of American slavery, one that justifies and validates domination. In contrast, when Dana reads “recollections of concentration camp survivors” (Butler 116), she finds “Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation” (Butler 116). When viewing history through the lens of the oppressor vs. the oppressed, the experience is entirely different. When Dana talks about *Gone With the Wind*, she talks about the novel’s *version* of slavery—every account is a version, a narrative of the experiences. In this way, Butler holds up a mirror to the reader and prompts us to reflect on which narratives have informed our perception of history and whose perspectives—which stories—we will allow to write the history of our present. Butler herself offers *Kindred* as a meta-example of shifting the narrative as Parham posits that “With *Kindred*, Butler works toward a strategy for passing on painful histories,” narratives that portray “the life experiences of people who have suffered as many never will,” a “suffering that implicates people with whom readers can identify—their own ancestors laid bare as people, as the subjects and objects of history” (1320). Kevin restructures his narrative within the context of generational trauma when he stops denying his culpability, takes accountability for his role in history, and wields his privilege to affect change. Dana restructures her cyclical narrative, refusing to become a slave, and reclaims her agency by killing Rufus (Butler 260). In this way, Butler shows us that it is within the power of narrative to reshape our perspectives. The wounds and scars borne by the characters symbolize the collective pain and responsibility stemming from the legacy of slavery that *all* Americans—regardless of region or race—must confront in this process of historical accounting to move toward a more egalitarian future. The pulse of life resides in our memories—the moments, stories, and histories that shape our very identity. Our lives are woven from the threads of our experiences and recollections—memories that are not passive remnants of the past but, instead, are active agents that can transform, scar, and heal. They are the moments that make up a life. In the aftermath of trauma, memories become more than mere recollections—they are the forces that alter our perceptions and redefine our sense of self. Within the narratives of trauma, individuals can find solace, understanding, empowerment, agency, resistance, and a shared sense of identity, all as a means to heal, mend, and reshape the lived experiences of all members of our society. Memories, in their varied hues, not only define but also possess the capacity to heal, mend, and reshape the fabric of our individual and communal lives.

Crossley proposes that by “Leaving the book’s ending rough-edged and raw like Dana’s wound, Butler leaves the reader disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than reassured by a tale that solves all the mysteries [...*Kindred* explores] the webs of power [...] the ethical imperative and the emotional price of empathy, [and] the difficult struggle to move beyond alienation to connection” (267-68). Rather than representing history as a distant and disconnected past, Butler conjures the actualities of history, making it a palpable and ongoing presence. After scrapping her attempts to tell her story, Dana says, “Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it” (Butler 116). But we know that it’s never really over—trauma persists throughout generations, and it irrevocably changes a person. Even at the end of the novel, once Dana has killed Rufus and her trips to the past are finished, she chooses to return to Maryland to read the records of what happened (Butler 263). She can’t shake the past, she can’t undo the scars, can’t get her arm back—she is forever traumatized, affected, altered. In an interview with Randall Kenan, Butler admits, “I couldn’t really let her come all the way back. I couldn’t let her return to what she was. I couldn’t let her come back whole [...] Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (Butler qtd. in Kenan 498). By intertwining the themes of trauma narratives and literary activism, *Kindred* emerges not only as a reflection of historical accounting but also as a meta-commentary on the power of narratives to shape perceptions of history and identity. The struggle for historical truth and inclusion becomes a shared journey for both the characters in *Kindred* and readers alike. It prompts a collective responsibility to confront the cyclical nature of generational trauma and fosters critical thinking, accountability, and active engagement with marginalized narratives. Ultimately, the novel advocates for the acknowledgment and validation of trauma’s impact, whether that trauma was inflicted first-hand or through intergenerational inheritance. Butler teaches us that we can leverage the power of storytelling to break the cycle of inherited generational trauma, amplify marginalized perspectives, eliminate marginalization altogether, reshape identities, and build a future that rejects hierarchical systems that perpetuate privilege and oppression.

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