

## “Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?”: Re-Mapping Interracial Anxiety in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

Although Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel about slavery and time-travel, *Kindred*, occupies a privileged position within the African American literary tradition, at its center is what we would have to admit is a rather unconventional portrayal of a black female–white male sexual relationship. In fact, I suspect that such a portrayal would compromise any other literary text’s canonical standing. In the case of *Kindred*, however, just the reverse occurs. Butler’s portrayal of a black female–white male coupling is unconventional not only because the primary interracial relationship survives the novel’s closure. It is unconventional also because the couple’s mutual love for one another is not depicted, at least on the surface, as psychologically unhealthy—two things that do not generally occur in black literary works after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Just how is it that Butler is able to create such a portrayal while at the same time continuing to garner praise for what many in the African American literary community regard as her novel’s invaluable contribution to the antiracist operation implicit throughout much of black letters?<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues that *Kindred* manages to conceal the subversive nature of what initially appears to be a genuinely loving, healthy interracial relationship between a black female writer and her white husband by shrewdly masking the cultural and political implications of that relationship behind a rather sophisticated narrative ruse. That ruse happens to be, in this case, a graphic and harrowing portrayal of a historical scenario that would normally represent within African American literary and cultural discourse what Claudia Tate would call a “sanctioned social plot” of racial oppression—namely, the sexual degradation of enslaved black females by white slave masters and other white men (12). Because the latter narrative, to borrow another phrase from Tate, “safeguards readers’ racial expectations” (14) by faithfully depicting a well-known black victimology narrative (albeit one that centers a black female rather than a black male), it successfully satisfies the group demand “that a black text explicitly represent [black readers’] lived experiences with racial oppression” (3). Put differently, the novel’s “realistic” depiction of an enslaved woman’s physical and sexual torture at the hands of her “owner” Rufus Weylin, and her eventual suicide, both of which are witnessed by the novel’s modern-day narrator, distracts readers critical of literary and cultural narratives of interracial intimacy that deviate from conventional portrayals. These portrayals are often grounded in what scholars refer to as “surrogacy.” In an invaluable essay titled “Representing Forbidden Desire: Interracial Unions, Surrogacy, and Performance,” Diana Paulin defines surrogacy as “multiple levels of substitution in representations—white bodies standing

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in for black ones, romantic relationships standing in for social conflicts or even the past standing in for the present—that trouble the identities and subjects they depict as well as those they indirectly invoke” (417). I argue that by adopting this complex representational strategy for depicting consensual black/white desire (an approach Paulin ensures us yields “*reconstructed*” models that revise and contextualize rather than replicate” that which they stand-in for), Butler’s novel destabilizes and undermines key assumptions regarding the supposed causal relations between race, politics, and sexuality that have been a stubborn, if historically variable, feature of African American cultural discourse (417-18; added italics).

Even the most cursory reading of *Kindred* could not fail to recognize the deep anxiety that circulates in the novel around interracial sex and intimacy. Because of the narrative’s unusual dual plot structure—with action taking place simultaneously in 20th-century Los Angeles and in 19th-century Maryland—this anxiety is both the same *and* different from what we might usually expect from a black-authored literary work of the late twentieth century. I contend that in Butler’s novel, this anxiety, while linked historically to the forced sexual relations between enslaved women and white men in pre-Civil War America, actually has *more* to do with the experiences of the text’s modern-day interracial couple and the difficulties they face as a result of oppositions to their relationship. In general, this opposition takes the form of remarks of anti-interracial bias that a handful of black and white peripheral characters direct towards Dana and Kevin Franklin, both separately and when they are together. The cumulative effect of these remarks introduces a palpable tension into the couple’s relationship that they each hesitate to address. I argue further that the silence the couple exhibits around “race” when they are in their own time mirrors the silence around this subject that was characteristic of the entire nation following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Scholars have since referred to the 1970s as the decade in which colorblindness first emerged as the dominant US philosophy around “race.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, Dana’s and Kevin’s travels through time and space to the Weylin plantation open up an alternative cultural landscape where, covertly, the couple is able to confront issues having to do with the history of racial oppression and, in the process, tentatively begin the work of resolving the anxieties that are slowly undermining their marriage. Since Dana is not only the novel’s protagonist but also its narrator, the anxiety that the novel inscribes around interracial sex may initially appear to be linked exclusively with her. However, closer scrutiny of the text reveals that as a contemporary white man, one whose wife is a black woman, Kevin is not totally immune to his own forms of anxiety on this matter. In fact, the quotation that serves as this paper’s title is originally a question that Kevin cautiously poses to Dana just after she returns from her second journey into the past, and it gives readers a small hint of what his own concerns might be regarding his wife’s repeated trips into an historical past where people whose complexions match his own regularly oppressed blacks with impunity. To explore such issues, I turn to the revisionist insights of contemporary marriage and family therapists and others who are trained in handling the identity concerns of interracially coupled men and women.

Briefly, the main action of the novel concerns an African American woman who finds herself repeatedly and inexplicably pulled across time and space from 1976 Los Angeles to an antebellum plantation on the eastern shore of Maryland. Before long, Dana learns that her primary purpose behind these fantastical journeys is to save the often endangered life of her white male ancestor Rufus Weylin, who, according to the novel’s Wellisian logic, must live long enough to father Dana’s maternal family line with the black enslaved woman Alice

Greenwood. If at any point during these trips Dana fails to save Rufus’s life, or if she refuses to—for that matter, if she kills him before this signal event can take place—then not only will Dana immediately cease to exist, but so will the entire “black” side of her family line fail to come into being. During one of Dana’s trips through time and space, the protagonist’s husband accidentally ends up traveling back in history with his wife. This situation leads to a series of harrowing predicaments for the couple, and at one point Kevin becomes stranded in the nineteenth century, unable to return to the twentieth century without the aid of his wife, whose power to transport herself and others across time and space the novel keeps shrouded in mystery. In the end, when the two interlopers finally do return for good to their own historical time and place, Dana has lost her left arm as a result of struggling to free herself from Rufus’s grasp, both literally and figuratively, while Kevin has physically aged five years, the exact length of time he was separated from his wife. However, despite the horrific nature of the couple’s ordeal, they return to their own time with a newfound sense of understanding and knowledge. Such insight not only concerns their separate identities as a black woman and a white man, but it also concerns recognizing how their relationship as an interracial couple is deeply entwined with the past. Most importantly, that insight finally becomes a shared one, something *Kindred* suggests was not the case when the couple’s romance first began.

### Documenting Slavery? Methodological Limitations and Considerations

The narrative trajectory of interracial romance that I describe above is not generally what critics have focused attention on in their various readings of *Kindred*. For in spite of my claim that Dana and Kevin’s interracial marriage is central to the novel’s overall organization, many of its critics, both past and present, have tended to downplay this relationship in favor of privileging Dana’s heroic struggle to ensure the safety of Alice Greenwood, who will eventually achieve their apotheosis in a 2003 essay in which the critic takes 12 single-spaced pages to argue that Dana is engaged in a “search for a mode of historical memory more appropriate to the experiences of African-American women,” all the while failing to mention that Dana is even married or that her present-day husband is white (Yaszek 1061). Given that so much of the novel’s action takes place in the distant past rather than in 1976 Los Angeles, the narrative’s present-time, this focus is at first understandable. As Joanna Russ has pointed out, the novel’s “characterizations in the past are detailed” while “Dana’s present-day marriage is sketchy,” along with other contemporary elements and characters (96). Such a lopsided presentation has led most literary scholars to tap *Kindred* as belonging to the tradition of post-Civil Rights black novels that have taken US racial slavery as their primary subject matter. A brief list of these works, dubbed “neo-slave narratives,” includes *Jubilee* (1966), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), *Corregidora* (1975), *Flight to Canada* (1976), *Oxherding Tale* (1982), *Dessa Rose* (1986), *The Chaneysville’s Incident* (1986), *Beloved* (1987), and *Middle Passage* (1990), among others. The plots of these novels loosely follow that of their historical antecedents, and like these other works, “typically extols the hero’s stalwart individuality” as he, or in some cases she, “struggle[s] . . . to overcome numerous obstacles [on his way to] the Promised Land,” which is usually located in the North (Smith 208).



Obviously lacking the sociopolitical function and urgency of these original, "classic" works, and besides more attuned to aesthetic considerations, "neo-slave narratives," critics say, nonetheless "rewrit[te] history by incorporating a familial and racial past into the received historiographical tradition" (Rushdy 136). As a result, critics often perceive these works as "novels of memory," since much of the action they dramatize takes place in an era before their authors were born (Rushdy 136). As Christine Levecq puts it, Butler's novel offers a "very realistic account of life under slavery" (528). Throughout its eight, tightly plotted

**If contemporary critical paradigms for exploring interracial sex are recalibrated to acknowledge the mutual interdependence of discourses of race and desire rather than the more usual practice of viewing them as separate and unrelated, then scholars would also recognize *Kindred's* protagonist as queer.**

chapters, *Kindred* consistently exhibits what Levecq calls a "documentary streak, depicting a large, panoramic slice-of-plantation life" [including] information about various aspects of slave life such as living arrangements, the distribution of tasks, slave breeding, forms of punishment, marriage ceremonies, secret religious meetings, the selling of slaves, as well as 19th-century life in general, with its deficient nutrition, poor hygiene, and incompetent medicine" (528-29). In his insightful essay "Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Ashraf Rushdy argues that Butler's novel "most fruitfully is seen as part of a movement in recent African-American fiction to produce the conditions of historicity by reconstructing the past to endow the present with new meaning—especially by implementing what Mary Frances Berry and John Blasingame call 'long memory'" (136). This "memory" is most often concerned with the historical degradation and abuse that African and African American captives suffered at the hands of racist whites from the seventeenth century to the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century and is therefore chiefly concerned with monitoring how the lingering effects of this past has continued to impact the lives of slavery's modern descendants, both black and white.

As far back as 1925, W. E. B. Du Bois stated that much of African American writing has been built on "the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that sprang from emancipation, on the feelings of revenge, despair, aspiration, and hatred which arose as the Negro struggled and found his [sic] way upward" (qtd. in Gates 155). More recently, Hazel Carby has referred to "the economic and social system of slavery . . . as a pre-text to all Afro-American texts" (126), while Hortense Spillers regards literary narratives in which slavery is the predominant focus as a "primarily discursive" event, one that posits the "textualization" of slavery as a "test case" for contemporary African American readers ("Changing the Letter" 29). That *Kindred* features a black female protagonist has further helped to ensure its prominence during an era in which novels by black women authors gained popularity, and in some cases notoriety. For example, Marjorie Pryse sees *Kindred*—along with other novels by black women writers of the 1970s and 80s, such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker—as a work that "contains strategies by which individual black women overcame every conceivable obstacle to personal evolution and self-expression" (3). It is not difficult to grasp, then, why Butler's novel is so frequently linked with Harriet Jacobs's 19th-century autobiographical work

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), a black literary text that, according to Valerie Smith, "encapsulates the slave woman's sexual victimization and vulnerability" (207). As Angelyn Mitchell has noted, "Like [Jacobs's] fictional self Linda Brent, Dana embarks on a journey of self-possession and self-discovery when enslavement assures her that her future as property will be both unbearable and perilous" (52). For Sandra Govan, *Kindred* produces such an authentic portrait of slavery that to compare it with *Incidents* "may make Butler's [novel] even more credible" (92). Furthermore, just as *Incidents* portrays Linda Brent as a figure who is somewhat larger than life, even mythic, *Kindred*, say these critics, likewise portrays Dana in similar terms; for Mitchell, Dana is nothing less than a "heroic figure" (53). The same is true for Jewelle Gomez, who argues that Dana responds to her many challenges in ways that, as with Jacobs's heroine, exhibit "acuity as well as strength," "logic and cunning," while "never cast[ing] others in the role of her protector" (11-12). While there are also some crucial differences between *Kindred* and *Incidents*, many scholars seem less willing to draw our attention to them in their understandable enthusiasm to fit Butler's novel within preexisting critical frameworks.

This critical gesture is unfortunate. For if it is true that a focus on slavery is the reason that so many contemporary critics and readers of African American literary texts celebrate Butler's novel, then I would say that slavery itself is overdetermined within the tradition, since *Kindred* is not so much *about* slavery as it is about how black Americans learn to renegotiate the history of slavery within their present-day circumstances. The present-day circumstances of Butler's novel circulate around issues and concerns that are relevant to Dana in the development of her relationship with her white husband, Kevin. What would happen if critics, without erasing slavery from their interpretive frameworks, as if they could, were to decenter its importance in analyzing *Kindred*? What other narrative content might we see emerge in the text? Despite what Russ concludes about the novel's handling of its antebellum scenes versus its 1976 scenes—namely, "that Dana's present-day difficulties in being black are nothing [compared] to her past ones" (96)—I'd say that quite the opposite is the case. It is Dana's blackness that has created the conditions for both black and white characters in the novel to demean and infantilize her on the basis of her decision to become romantically involved with a white male. Critics like Paul Gilroy have already acknowledged that, in spite of their historically remote settings, neo-slave narratives are far more concerned with "present conditions" rather than with those of the distant past (220). Overlapping Gilroy's insight is a similar insight by Lewis Gordon, in which the Fanonian scholar provocatively states: "The victimological narrative on both rape and lynching are so focused on white females for the former and black males for the latter in the Americas that an invisible history of predatory white males reaping the advantages of legally rejected black female bodies became the organizing principles behind any social consciousness of interracial realities" (58). By focusing on these two racial and gendered historical brutalities, rape and lynching, Gordon exposes the common appeal to an undiluted memory that some contemporary blacks rely on when issuing their vehement objections to sexual unions such as Dana and Kevin's. These men and women often lay claim to an uncritical identification with the abuses suffered by their black ancestors before them; in so doing, their arguments basically come to rest on an intentional fallacy of time, place, and identity, one that asserts the primacy of historical continuities between past and present.

In her own boldly revisionist work *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Somerville applies critical pressure to 19th- and early 20th-century notions regarding the mutual exclusivity of racial and sexual discourses. In the process, she exposes the hidden intercon-

nections between cultural discourses of homosexuality and miscegenation that open up challenges to "the cultural understanding and deployment of race and sexuality as separate and unrelated" to one another (3). One conclusion Somerville reaches is that "[the] critical focus on race has created a blind spot around the possibility that questions of sexuality circulated simultaneously with race" within some black-authored literary narratives of the period (12). I am suggesting that something similar has happened with contemporary readings of *Kindred*.

My point is that critical analyses of the novel that center the historical narrative of interracial rape, represented by Rufus and Alice's forced relations, do so at the expense of marginalizing the narrative of consensual interracial desire, represented by Dana and Kevin's marriage. The continued prevalence of such assumptions has helped contemporary scholars to perpetuate certain myths that have proven comforting and therapeutic to black readers and scholars alike. Many of these myths have to do with treasured beliefs about racial identity in general and black sexuality in particular. In the case of the former, it is that "race" is a privileged term in the construction of black *and* white identity formations, often subordinating gender, class, and sexuality, for instance, as well as, correspondingly, that blackness and whiteness are historically stable, rather than historically *changing*, concepts. With the latter, many Americans assume that interracial sexual liaisons of the past and those of the present, despite being implicated within radically contrasting historical and socioeconomic conditions, are conceptually indistinguishable from one another. Such beliefs often lead many Americans to conflate the two simplistically and without nuance. The consequences of these two companion myths are two-fold: (1) They encourage the false assumption that to be white automatically means that one espouses a racist perspective, just as one's ancestors presumably did, whereas to be a person of color, especially blacks, automatically means that one espouses a hardcore antiracist perspective; and (2) that contemporary African Americans who enter sexual partnerships with whites are self-haters and racial traitors while whites who couple with blacks are, at best, politically radical, and, at the worst, sexual fetishists (see Allen and Gordon). My rereading of Butler's novel is intended to broaden the interpretive frameworks through which scholars have conventionally approached such depictions.

### "Pomotroting": Disabling Pathologizing Narratives of Interracial Intimacy

The anxieties that I read as circulating throughout *Kindred* all seem to begin for Dana with the arrival of both societal and familial opposition to her and Kevin's interracial relationship. In each case, one or two characters send home the message that mutually consenting heterosexual relationships between blacks and whites are deviant and, hence, should not be encouraged but, in fact, discouraged. A number of such incidents recur throughout the novel, but here I focus on only two. The first occurs at the auto-parts warehouse where Dana and Kevin are employed as temporary workers. The two are chatting about their writing and getting to know one another when, after several moments, Kevin returns to his warehouse duties. When Kevin disappears, a co-worker, a white man named Buz, sneaks up behind Dana and whispers suggestively into her ear. "Hey!" he says. "You two gonna get together and write some books?" When Dana attempts to dismiss this man, he says something calculated to cause her anger, embarrassment, or both: "You gonna write some *poor-nography* together!"

(54; italics added). Temporarily shaken by this unwanted intrusion, Dana manages to brush off the man and put the incident behind her, or so she believes. But later that day, Buz returns. This time, however, Dana is not alone; Kevin is present. The two are eating lunch when Buz comes up and hurls his insult in their direction. "Hey," he said, low-voiced. 'Porn!' " just as quickly as their co-worker appears, he vanishes. In Dana's retelling of the scene, Kevin apparently is unable to make out what Buz says to them, and therefore says nothing to Buz in their defense. Having no choice but to suffer her humiliation alone, Dana, who did hear what Buz said, adopts a devil-may-care attitude and brushes Buz's comment aside as insignificant. "He's crazy," she says to Kevin, then thanks him for his generosity in buying her lunch. Moments later Buz "com[es] back from the coffee machine, mutter[s], 'Chocolate and vanilla porn!' " (56). Without thinking this time, Dana reacts more strongly and squeezes her eyes shut tightly "in exasperation." Unable to contain her fury, she exclaims, "God, I wish he'd get drunk and shut up!" This outburst finally gets a rise out of Kevin. Calmly referring to Buz, who once again has conveniently disappeared, Kevin asks Dana if "getting Buz drunk will 'shut him up.'" Responding to him, Dana answers: "Nothing else will do it." "No matter," Kevin says. "I heard what he said this time" (56). But while this admission from Kevin draws him closer to experiencing a little of what Dana might have felt, as the primary target of these insults, ultimately Kevin's passivity, his absolute unwillingness to offer any words of solidarity or take any action on Dana's behalf towards Buz, serves as a foreshadowing of future conflict for the lovers.

After all, implicit in Buz's obscene associations are degrading myths and stereotypes about black sexuality in general, and black female sexuality in particular, and as such clearly target Dana more than they do her white husband. Given Buz's placement in the novel, we might say that the functional role he plays is that of agent who establishes the dominant cultural telos or belief system regarding black/white sexual intimacy as one of deviancy. Even his name, "Buz," an onomatopoeic construction that, when spoken aloud, imitates what it denotes—in this case, rumor and gossip, that is, "a buzz of talk"—alludes to this function (*American Heritage Dictionary* 222). As narrator, Dana quickly adopts a resisting stance in relation to Buz's presumptuous efforts to interpellate her and Kevin as a stereotype of black/white sex when she suddenly turns the table on Buz's (mis)naming strategy and decides to (mis)name him: she taps into her power to visually re-present the ostensible agent of what Lacan might refer to as the Father's law against "miscegenation" in an unflattering light. For instance, Dana refers to Buz as "[t]he agency clown," and draws a portrait of a man who lives a sad and lonely existence. Ultimately, she depicts him as someone who has turned to drinking as a way to manage life's troubles and who has since become an alcoholic. As Dana writes: "Wine put him into some kind of trance . . . and he just sat and stared and looked retarded—which he wasn't, quite. He just didn't give a damn about anything, including himself. He drank up his pay and walked around in rags. Also, he never bathed" (54).

Besides providing narrative pleasure, Dana's efforts at resistance, however, are only rhetorical and do little to subdue the threat to her and Kevin's relationship that Buz's words signal. For in spite of Dana's (mis)naming of Buz as an alcoholic loser, his assessment of Dana and Kevin's relationship is remarkably close to what social scientists and other scholars frequently report as the dominant societal view on interracial couples. Debra Henderson confirms this assessment in her study, "Dispelling Myths: A Theoretical Interpretation of Interracial Marriage and Marital Interaction," when she writes, "Much of society still views individuals who marry [or date] interracially with suspicion, often considering



them to be sexually abnormal, filthy and pathological" (37). Having therefore established the dominant cultural telos regarding black/white unions — that, basically, they are unacceptable — Butler's novel also establishes the terms within which the couple must ultimately navigate to achieve a successful partnership. After all, "[t]he dominant society view of interracial couples, communicated through the various media, is presented for the consumption and/or indoctrination of the mass public and impacts interracial couples as well" (Killian 91). It is not enough, then, that Dana, as narrator, has subjected the agent of that organizing telos to ridicule and caricature, for he is only the messenger; the message remains "out there," pervasive and hurtful: "[Black/white] relationship[s] cannot be built on anything other than sex" (Rosenblatt 33).

Is this attitude something that Dana has internalized as well, and has simply not yet acknowledged? Moreover, how does this incident affect the narrator's self-image as a contemporary black woman? What does it say about how other people may view her? Moreover, what do these remarks signal ahead for her relationship with Kevin? And what about Kevin? For instance, how can Dana be certain that Kevin, a white male, is not the same type of white male as Buz, that is, someone who holds stereotypical and crude beliefs about black women as "objects of display"? (Collins 168). For the "pornotroping" that Buz enacts on Dana's body is a common pastime for all white men, even those across different times and cultures, no? (Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 260).

In her provocative essay "Eating the Other," bell hooks suggests that, for some white men, "the desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other, with no apparent will to dominate, assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection. Most importantly, it establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to *become* the Other" (*Black Looks* 25; italics added). That is to say, some white men who express a desire for black women do so not as an expression of racial domination but, rather, racial submission. In such scenarios, desire for the black body functions primarily as a means not only to assuage unwanted guilt for one's own racist acts, but also for the racist acts of one's white ancestors, as well as, by extension, one's future descendants.

Does the narrative of racial submission describe Kevin's relationship to Dana more than the narrative of racial domination? And if it does, how then will Dana handle such knowledge? And if neither describes him, what then? This inquiry now brings us to the second opposition to their relationship that Dana and Kevin must face: their respective families.

Following the couple's encounter with Buz at the auto-parts warehouse, opportunities for their mutual anxieties only intensify. For instance, after deciding to marry, Dana and Kevin take steps to inform their respective relatives — in this case, Dana's aunt and uncle, and Kevin's sister. Both visits prove to be traumatizing, but for very different reasons. First, Kevin's older sister, Carol, shocks him by revealing the level of her racial hatred when he tells her of his plans to marry a black woman. Later, he tells Dana, "[S]he didn't want to meet you, wouldn't have you in her house — or me either if I married you" (110). Kevin's experience with his sister graphically illustrates what Heather Dalmage has called "rebound racism." In her book *Triping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World*, Dalmage describes rebound racism as a form of racism that whites who are coupled with people of color are prone to experience:

In these cases, racism is directed at the black partner but also affects the white partner. . . . The effect can be financial, emotional, or physical. While the white partner is not the intended victim, she or he is in a relationship with someone who is. For example, if the black partner does not get a fair raise, this affects the financial well-being of the white partner. If the black partner is given unfair traffic tickets or treated badly at work, this spills over into the family. The white partner with emotional, financial, and familial ties to the black partner gains a sense of the pain and disadvantage doled out to people of color in a system of whiteness. (63-64)

Following Dalmage's analysis, we can see that Kevin's experience of rebound racism causes him to want to place distance between himself and his sister, but to do so in a way that does not implicate her as racist. For example, not wanting to believe that someone he was raised with could hold such heinous views, Kevin initially tries to blame his sister's beliefs about blacks on his brother-in-law. "It's as though she was quoting someone else," he says. "Her husband, probably, Pompos little bastard. I used to try to like him for her sake." When Dana asks Kevin if his sister's husband is prejudiced, he answers, "Her husband would have made a good Nazi. She used to joke about it — though never when he could hear" (110). What these comments illustrate is Kevin's effort to deflect racism away from a close relative, someone he loves. However, Dana's response challenges Kevin's rationalization, and puts the blame for being a racist squarely with his sister, not her husband: "But she married him," Dana says flatly (110).

Although Kevin certainly hears Dana's last statement, he is not ready to accept what it may imply: this detachment is perhaps for fear of what it may also say about him, having been raised in the same household as his sister. To avoid facing the truth of his wife's statement, Kevin utters a rambling story about a friend whom his sister had in high school, an individual who at the time was overweight like his sister. This girl, Kevin makes the curious point of saying, was African American, which for Kevin seems to temporarily absolve his sister (and therefore absolve himself?) of the charge of harboring racist beliefs. But does it? Once more Kevin attempts to link his sister's marriage, and therefore her racism, which he experiences on the rebound, to class aspirations, since marrying the man she did has allowed her to "live in a big house in La Cañada." From where, as he puts it, she "quotes clichéd bigotry at me for wanting to marry you." Dalmage writes: "For many whites, rebound racism makes them more aware of white privilege" (66). If this is true, such knowledge can be either politically galvanizing (spurring righteous activism) or debilitating (which can lead to inertia and, in some cases, bitter resentment). Initially, most whites may experience this awareness as profoundly destabilizing to their racial identities, leading such individuals to question who they are. It is evident, for example, that Kevin's encounter with his sister has made him deeply uncomfortable inside his own skin. For Dalmage, this discomfort leads some whites to the essentialist conclusion that "if all whites are racist, then *all* must include themselves." From there it is but a short step to such whites wanting to reject being white altogether, so that "attempts to describe their own identities as antiracist become convoluted." As Dalmage puts it, "The lack of available language to describe racial identities outside of the black-white dichotomy coupled with the essentialist thinking that all whites are bad leaves some interracial married whites with no option other than claiming a black identity. This is one way in which individuals contend with and get caught in essentialist language and thought" (67).

While Butler's novel does not verify whether this analysis correctly describes Kevin's own predicament, it does offer readers an interpretive framework within which to make sense of the anxieties that Kevin may be experiencing as a result of his own interracial marriage. I have been arguing that these anxieties can be discerned between the lines of the narrative, especially in those scenes between the couple that are set in the novel's 20<sup>th</sup>-century context. While it is

true that Kevin does not claim to be black, his inability to resolve his internal conflict with his sister's racist beliefs and her childhood friendship with a black classmate does lead him to mirror the convoluted behavior of those whites who do. After all, on the surface there is little to connect Kevin's reference to the racial identity of his sister's friend with the story of his sister's husband, or with racism *per se*, except as a possible way for Kevin to exonerate his sister, as well as to exonerate himself, of the charge of racism.

But such a strategy is inherently problematic since it is based on the flawed assumption that whites who are friendly with people of color, or who are coupled with them, are automatically free of racism. The truth-effects of such claims can be tested by simply applying the same logic to blacks who are friendly or on sexually intimate terms with whites. In the post-Civil Rights era, contemporary Americans have tended to enlarge the interracial dynamics of sexual relationships between black men and white women until those dynamics are seen to determine those relationships (or, as Frantz Fanon might say, *overdetermine* them). However, in the case of sexual relationships between white men and black women, those same dynamics have tended to be downplayed or suppressed, thereby characterizing such whites as people who are less predisposed to racist beliefs than whites who do not have black acquaintances or intimates. Consider the 1995 O. J. Simpson murder trial, in which some cultural commentators used the psychoanalytic model referred to as the "Othello Syndrome" to describe how Simpson's sense of racial inferiority may have led him brutally to take the lives of his ex-wife Nicole Brown and a male companion (Kellerman). In contrast, when New York City police officer Justin Volpe, who is white, was accused and eventually convicted in 1999 of sodomizing black Haitian immigrant Abner Louima with a night-stick, his lawyer argued that Volpe's engagement at the time of the attack to a black woman, Susan Lawson, was a reason that he could not have attacked Louima. Such logic implicitly assumes that there is a causal link between a person's racialized sexual object-choice and this person's likelihood of causing harm to someone of the same race. But this schematization has contrasting outcomes for whites and blacks. In other words, while a white man who is romantically involved with a black woman is automatically immune to the charge of harming other black people or of hating them because they are black (as bell hooks suggests, such men may be popularly narrativized as engaging in a form of racial submission rather than racial domination), a black man who is romantically linked with a white woman is believed to be not only *more* likely to harm other white people, particularly white *men*, he is also more likely to be mentally unbalanced due to his profound sense of inferiority in relation to white men more generally.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Kevin's effort to absolve his sister of racism because she was once close friends with a black woman, and perhaps indirectly to absolve himself of racism because he is married to one, must be seen to partake of the same convoluted logic. Otherwise, what reason would Kevin have for mentioning the girl's racial identity at all?

As with Kevin's experience with his sister Dana's experience of telling her aunt and uncle about her upcoming nuptials leaves her feeling unexpectedly shaken. Although she had been fully prepared for them to be disappointed at hearing the news, which they were, something about the experience had unnerved her. What was it? As she explains to Kevin, "My aunt accepts the idea of my marrying you because any children we have will be light. Lighter than I am, anyway. She always said I was a little too 'highly visible' . . . She doesn't care much for white people, but she prefers light-skinned blacks" (111). When Kevin looks at her with confusion, unfamiliar with such views, instead of giving her then-fiancé a history of how some blacks have internalized the one-drop rule, Dana simply says that her aunt and uncle are old. This explanation seems

to satisfy Kevin temporarily, and so she goes on. She tells him that, unlike her aunt, her uncle has taken Dana's news "personally." When Kevin asks what this means, Dana tries to explain to him the role her uncle has played throughout her life. "[H]e's my mother's oldest brother, and he was like a father to me before my mother died because my father died when I was a baby. Now . . . it's as a though I've rejected him. Or at least that's the way he feels," says Dana. "It bothered me, really. He was more hurt than mad. Honestly hurt. I had to get away from him" (111). When Kevin expresses surprise at the uncle's hurt ("he knew you'd marry some day. How could a thing as natural as that be a rejection?"), Dana states the obvious: "I'm marrying *you*," and "reach[es] up and twist[s] a few strands of his straight gray hair between [her] fingers. 'He wants me to marry someone like him,'" she tells Kevin, "someone who looks like him. A black man." Kevin's response, as if such a thing never occurred to him, is simply to say, "Oh" (111; italics added).

What "bothers" Dana is in part the seductive logic of her uncle's views, the belief that perhaps he is correct to feel the way he does and that, on some level, she is the one wrong for going ahead with a marriage to someone her uncle so opposes. Although when Dana said to Kevin that her aunt and uncle had the kind of beliefs they did because they were "old," she avoids giving a more elaborate answer to Kevin. But on another level she said it, too, because she believed it. After all, the belief that blacks and whites should not form intimate attachments with one another is one that Dana finds personally abhorrent, because Butler constructs her as someone who, although African American, is primarily an individualist. And yet, as the descendant of black ancestors for whom racial oppression was far more totalizing than it has been for her—at one point Dana tells a story about racist whites in 1960 calling the police after her mother's car broke down, apparently concerned over their safety: "Five-three, she was," says Dana. "About a hundred pounds. Real dangerous" (111)—she also appears to harbor some sense of betrayal for her decision to marry "outside the race." What also begins to "bother" Dana, I would say, is that Kevin appears uninformed with respect to how racism functions in US society, a point to which I will return shortly. Rather than consider either of these scenes to be incidental to the novel's overall preoccupations—those Dana and Kevin have with Buz, and those with their respective relatives—I suggest that their placement in the narrative is strategic and serves as the primary impetus for the anxiety that inspires the more fantastical events that shape the novel.

Let's return, for a moment, to the scene where Kevin finally admits to having heard Buz's insult. At the end of this scene, when Kevin admits to Dana that he heard what Buz said about them, he is in effect communicating to her that he will not leave her to suffer Buz's racist insults alone. In finally acknowledging the racist obscenity of Buz's (mis)naming, "Chocolate and vanilla porn," Kevin is in some tentative way also coming face-to-face, apparently for the first time, with his own racialization as a white man presumed to be sexually involved with a black woman in a society that is overtly race-conscious. As I have already argued, he comes face-to-face with it again later, and much closer to home, when he meets with his sister.

Although *Kindred* was published long before the early 1990's emergence of critical pedagogies of whiteness, I would say that the novel's depiction of a non-pathologized interracial relationship between a black woman and a white man anticipates many of the insights derived from this body of writings. As Kyle Killian notes, "Ideologically speaking, 'whiteness' is frequently constructed as a de-racialized and monolithic dominant and ethnic. Such an ideology tends to subjugate and make invisible both racial and ethnic difference and the ways in which racism operates among whites, not just between whites and persons of color.



While race does serve as a potent positioning device among white persons in the majority culture, the functions and influence of race and racism go largely unnoticed by many whites because whiteness is not a self-conscious racial identity or social signifier in most white people's minds" (101). However, as in many African American literary and cultural texts more generally, *Kindred* graphically demonstrates that much of the anonymity that whites enjoy is effectively problematized when someone white becomes linked with a person of color in ways that are socially proscribed, such as in the case of marriage or any other intimate partnership. After all, "[c]rossing borders by marrying [or dating] interracially carries personal and systemic consequences" (Killian 127).

Above I referenced scholars who have explored the consequences for blacks who cross the color line for love and intimacy. These individuals are often charged by other blacks with being self-hating or treasonous as well as being deficient in their racial identity. But as Dalmage's work illustrates, entering such relationships is no less stigmatizing for many whites. Another scholar whose work focuses on the trials and tribulations of interracial couples in a racially polarized world is Paul Rosenblatt. In *Multiracial Couples: Black & White Voices*, Rosenblatt and his research team note: "Once [whites] become linked to a black person . . . the way society defines them, as part of an interracial couple, pushes them to include race as part of their identity" (189). Such whites may frequently undergo a kind of conversion experience when they are seen out in public with their racialized partner and/or their children. At such times, these whites become "marked with 'race' and experience unique forms of racism by association with persons of color" — for example, as Dalmage argues, rebound racism (Killian 101-02).<sup>6</sup> Kevin's fear of just such a racialization is one reason that he did not hear and/or understand Buz's initial insult. In other words, if we can agree that what Buz was doing was hurling a racial slur at Kevin and Dana, then Kevin, as a white person, could not immediately grasp its meaning since, prior to being romantically involved with Dana, he could not imagine himself as the target of such bias. In effect, Buz's insult places Kevin in the unusual position for a white person of experiencing something that in the minds of most whites only African Americans or other nonwhites experience — namely, racial prejudice. This racial positionality generates its own set of anxieties, which we glimpsed in the effort Kevin made to distance his sister, and himself, from having internalized racist beliefs as children and later as adults.

Kevin's anxieties about his interracial marriage begin to surface more strongly in the text after his wife has gone back in time and returned twice. The second trip proves far more harrowing for Dana than the first, as this time she barely escapes getting raped and potentially getting killed by a white male patroller. It is her life-and-death struggle with the patroller, in fact, that ultimately "sends" her back to her own historical time. Kevin becomes spellbound listening to Dana recount in graphic detail how the patroller had brutally punched and kicked her. In fact, at the precise moment that Dana is suddenly transported from the past to the present time of the novel, she continues to see a white man's face looming over her. Psychologically disoriented, she confuses her husband with her attacker. Because of this confusion, she punches and scratches at Kevin in a frantic effort to protect herself from further harm. When Dana finishes telling him what had happened to her, Kevin, realizing the horror of his wife's ordeal, tries to speak, but falters:

"But the patroller was trying to . . ." He stopped, looked at me. "I see."

"Good."

There was a long silence. He pulled me closer to him. "Do I really look like that patroller?"

"No."

"Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?" (51)

Although Dana is quick to reassure Kevin that she can tell the difference between the white man she loves and some anonymous racist — "I need you here to come home to," she ends up telling him. "I've already learned that" — for his part, Kevin is not quite convinced. "Just keep coming home," he said finally. "I need you here too" (51).

While this scene is a tender one, the stiltedness of the conversation, reflected in part by Butler's ellipses, underscores the sense of vulnerability Kevin ultimately feels as a result of Dana's total immersion in a time and place where whites oppress blacks with impunity. As such, it is not easy for blacks to distinguish between those whites who oppress and those who might be potential allies. Although the text does not elaborate on the precise reason for his anxiety, readers can surmise from textual clues that what most worries Kevin is his fear that his wife will no longer be able to look on him and recognize his white male "difference" from the white male figures with whom she has had brutal encounters in the historical past. This anxiety will continue to haunt Kevin throughout the novel, eventually spreading to Dana and to the reader as well. We see this anxiety for the first time with Dana, for example, in her fear that by accidentally accompanying her to the past Kevin will somehow be adversely affected. "I didn't want him here," she admits, when it is already too late to stop such a thing from happening: "I didn't want this place to touch him except through me" (59). Later, Dana explains this fear by suggesting that coming to the past would "endanger" Kevin "in a way [she] didn't want to talk to him about." Butler writes: "if he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. . . . The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility" (77-78). The reason Dana does not like either possibility is the risk that each poses to the survival of their relationship. The risk to Kevin of being "marked" by 19th-century cultural norms and values might erase that which now distinguishes him from Rufus as well as from other white racist males of the period. For if there was nothing to distinguish Kevin from these other men, he would surely have been an unsuitable partner for a 20th-century black woman. For Dana, this particular anxiety will not be abated until she and Kevin are reunited after their long separation, and Dana learns, much to her relief, that Kevin had worked closely with the underground railroad, helping to take escaped slaves to the North, and therefore to freedom (193). But, as I have been suggesting, the novel's complex organization continually marginalizes the concern of Kevin's being "marked" by the nineteenth century in favor of privileging narrative content far more in keeping with the antiracist agenda of the African American literary tradition. But why?

### Concubinage as a Sanctioned Social Plot of Racial Injustice

Other scholars have argued convincingly that black female identity does not usually have the same kind of power to occupy the privileged victim status in antiracist discourse as black male identity; generally, this power results only when black women are victims of black male aggression (see Carabado). When black women are, or are *perceived* to be, victims of aggression at the hands of white men, however, black women become invested with fetishistic qualities that are then placed in the service of activating black masculinist, heterosexualized narratives of protectionism. In the post-Reconstruction era, African

Americans' efforts to rehabilitate the race through the ideology of uplift were often articulated through blacks' bourgeois class aspirations toward middle-class respectability. In his discussion of the Victorian ideals that black leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois would espouse during this period, the historian Kevin Gaines writes that concerns about sexuality, especially its "most violent aspects [which derived from] domination," were a constant preoccupation. According to Gaines, "Du Bois's recollection of southern antiblack violence illustrates the struggle of black elites to achieve middle-class status, defined not only materially, but more importantly, in the gendered terms of male protection and protected femininity that were so important to black spokespersons" (12). In his well-known essay "The Damnation of Women," Du Bois wrote: "The crushing weight of slavery fell on black women. Under it there were no legal marriage, no legal family, no legal control of children. I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgment day . . . but I shall never forgive neither in this world nor the world to come [the South's] persistent insulting of . . . black womanhood" (Du Bois 956).<sup>7</sup>

In more recent years Americans have seen evidence of black male heterosexual protectionism in 1987 when the 15-year-old black teenager Tawana Brawley claimed that she had been abducted and raped by several white men. While the incident was widely reputed to be a hoax, it nonetheless attracted wide media coverage and became a hot-button topic within most black communities. Eventually, the case drew the support of prominent black political leaders such as the Rev. Al Sharpton, Jr., and black civil rights attorneys Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason, the latter eventually disbarred for unscrupulous legal work (Barstow B1). For my purposes, Sharpton, Maddox, and Mason's steadfast defense of Brawley demonstrated, in some key respects, the same protectionist stance towards black women that black male spokespersons such as Du Bois exhibited after Reconstruction in their efforts to rehabilitate African Americans from the degradation and stigma of slavery. In the Brawley case, in particular, black male protectionism was especially noticeable given that black feminists, for the most part, remained invisible.

Clearly, black literary and cultural discourse, whether engaged in by black male or black female authors and critics, frequently reflects a paternalistic impulse with regards to its representations that runs parallel to the forms of black protectionism described above. Hence, the numerous scenes throughout Butler's novel that either refer to or depict enslaved women held in a state of concubinage by their white male paramours/rapists function chiefly as a way to "safeguard readers' racial expectations," as Claudia Tate puts it (14), and therefore to divert certain readers' attentions away from the cultural and political implications of what I am insisting is the novel's more subversive interracial sexual plot. Moreover, *Kindred* colludes in this institutional paternalism by representing Dana's gender identity as constantly in question throughout the narrative. Because Dana dresses in trousers instead of dresses and skirts when she travels back through time, characters often (mis)recognize her either as a man or as an inappropriately attired woman. The second time Dana is transported into the past, for instance, she queries Rufus as to how he saw her in his mind's eye just before she appeared. He says: "I could see part of the room, and there were books all around — more than in Daddy's library. You were wearing pants like a man — the way you are now. *I thought you were a man!*" (22; italics added).<sup>8</sup> The sheer frequency with which such comments about Dana's sartorial style appear in the text suggests that not only is the protagonist's gender in question, but since in western cultures who one sleeps with is so closely bound up with what Judith Butler would call gender performativity, so is Dana's sexual orientation in question as well. And since the novel understands human sexuality in terms of

an intraracial-interracial binary framework, rather than the usual heterosexual-homosexual framework that is more in keeping with contemporary gender and sexual ideologies (such a framework would in fact occlude the textual dynamics I have been trying to elucidate), it would seem that Dana's gender instability is linked, not to lesbianism, but to her close relations with white men, in this case with Kevin and Rufus.

In some ways, Dana's masculine identification is not surprising. Octavia Butler has admitted in interviews that she had initially conceived the protagonist as a man, but had changed this character to a woman since she did not believe that a black man, considered dangerous by most whites of the era, could have survived in the past if he were to exhibit the type of behavior that Dana is depicted exhibiting. As Butler explains it, "The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten and abused, but she was not killed. That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor. Although if you could take the character and give her life and ask her if she thought she had been favored, it would be likely that she wouldn't think so, because of what she suffered" (Rowell 51). In some ways, then, it is Dana's textual transgenderedness — one linked to an overtly racialized sex/gender system rather than one in which race is suppressed — that allows her to keep such a close guard over her ancestor Alice Greenwood. At the subtextual level, however, Dana's doubled gender identity enables her to recapitulate the type of black masculinist protectionism that has often characterized the political gestures of black men toward black women. The crucial difference in *Kindred* is that Dana, who also closely resembles Alice, eventually becomes vulnerable to Rufus's poisoned affections following her maternal ancestor's tragic suicide.

But the protagonist is not the only black woman whom *Kindred* places in the position of sexualized and racialized bondage. Other than Dana, the novel inscribes a total of four women who are trapped within the cycle of sexual and physical abuse that characterizes the daily experiences of enslaved women. They include Alice and her mother; Tess, a barren field slave; and Sarah, the plantation's cook. A brief look at the ramblings of the self-alienated house slave, Tess, provides an example. Fearful of being sent to work in the harsher conditions of the fields after the senior Weylin has fired of her and casually passed her off to the overseer, Tess is depicted as being so racked with anxiety over her fate that she is driven to refer to herself in the second-person. In complaining to her fellow bondswomen about her fate one morning, Tess cries out uncontrollably: "You do everything they tell you . . . and they still treat you like a old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain't s'pose to have no feelin's!" (182).

Simply by virtue of their content, these narratives are harrowing. However, by multiplying and distributing this cycle of abuse between four different characters, the novel stacks the deck and therefore makes it extremely difficult for interested readers to turn away from such images. This difficulty of turning away is only compounded by the fact that the novel's protagonist continually places herself in the service of rescuing Alice from Rufus's grasp. These seemingly self-sacrificing gestures lead readers to the assumption that Alice's "story" may be more vital to the novel than Dana's own narrative. Again, however, Dana's efforts are hardly altruistic; rather, they are marked throughout by self-interest and anxiety about her own identity concerns as a contemporary black woman who is married to a white man, concerns that she has been unable to confront except by traveling back in time.

But the nature of Dana's being implicated in the forced relations between what are ostensibly her "several times" great grandparents, overshadow, and conceal not only the heightened self-interest that I suggest lies at the center of



Dana's actions. They also overshadow and conceal those scenes in the novel that take place in the historical present of 1976, which, in a conventional reading, appear to be important only insofar as they help to propel the plot. After all, given the combined narratives of interracial lust, betrayal, runaway slaves, violent fistfights, whippings, and so on, that characterize the scenes of the nineteenth century, scenes that take place in the twentieth century, seem tame by comparison. In order not to be swayed by these depictions, however, it is vital that contemporary readers be willing to exhibit a degree of skepticism with regards to their emphasis in the text as a whole. Given the centrality of slavery to African American literary traditions, as well as the analyses that critics have thus far generated on *Kindred*, it seems especially doubtful that most readers of the novel would be able to exercise this type of self-restraint.

Moreover, the novel's dual plot design—one whose constant back and forth movement between different time zones and geographies lends it a dialectical dimension—is dizzying for many readers, and often imparts narrative pleasure simply by the sheer novelty of the attempt of readers to maintain clear distinctions. At the same time, the novel's unusual structure implies there to be a radical separation between past and present while simultaneously also managing to suggest that the two are mutually entangled as well. The undecidability of either possibility leads one to consider the importance of perhaps acknowledging, instead, historical continuities *along with* discontinuities between these two periods. For what other reason would *Kindred* have for self-consciously establishing a series of parallel, or doubled, relationships between various characters and scenarios in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Los Angeles that closely match up with similar characters and scenarios in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Maryland, if not to toy with the historical and cultural implications of the one overlapping with, but not displacing the other?

### Negotiating "Difference": The Couple that Travels Together, Stays Together

In the novel's structure Butler distributes a series of doppelgangers in the historical past and in the present. These character-doubles involve a number of figures in the novel, including Dana and Alice, Kevin and various other white men on the Weylin plantation; in addition, they assert parallels between Dana and Kevin's marriage and the coercive relationship between Rufus and Alice, who will eventually become Dana's several times great grandparents. For the sake of space, I limit my discussion to those scenes that assert parallels between the two pairs of interracial "couples." The Weylin plantation is an appropriate textual site for locating these dual relationships because it places the novel's contemporary couple in a context that parallels the way that others see them, but not how Dana and Kevin see themselves. By traveling back and forth between these two spatiotemporal locations, one where their contemporary relationship as husband and wife is compromised by being conflated with the antebellum categories of master and slave, Dana and Kevin soon learn to fill in the gaps and silences that had seemed to stifle their interpersonal communication with one another. By the end of the narrative, not only has Kevin acquired the intimate knowledge of Dana's history that he has been lacking up to now, but he also learns the importance of developing what Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg have called "a progressive white identity," one "that is psychologically centered and capable of acting in opposition to racist activity" (10).

The novel establishes its preoccupation with interracial marriage early when Dana saves Rufus for the first time and realizes that Rufus, who is a child at this

point, is her "several times great grandfather" (28). Along with Alice Greenwood, he would father her maternal family line. When she begins to make the connection, Dana ponders, "How would [Alice] marry this boy [i.e., Rufus]? Or would it be marriage? And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white?" (28). Later, when Kevin is accidentally transported back in time with Dana, he unthinkingly tells Rufus that Dana is his wife in response to Rufus's assumption that Kevin "owns" her. This answer noticeably upsets Rufus, and he protests vehemently: "Niggers can't marry white people!" he screams (60). After Dana manages to calm Rufus down, she reminds him not to call her "nigger" and carefully explains to him that "[W]here [she and Kevin] come from, whites and blacks can marry" (61). When Rufus tries to protest further by telling Dana that such a thing is impossible, since "it's against the law," Dana knows that if she wants Rufus's help in the future, should she return, then she had better tell Rufus as much of the truth as she understands it herself. "It is here," she says. "But it isn't where we come from" (61).

By insisting on maintaining their status as husband and wife as long as they are in the historical past, although some individuals continue to know them only as master and slave (Rufus's mother and father, for example), Dana and Kevin manage to exhibit the type of subjective duality that Killian suggests is common to some interracial couples. Having to negotiate this duality is difficult at times, especially for Dana. For example, as a way to safeguard their matrimonial bond, Kevin had arranged for Dana to sleep in his room at night instead of in the slave quarters with the other blacks. One afternoon Margaret Weylin, suspecting this arrangement, corners Dana in the library: "Where did you sleep last night?" she asks. When Dana answers that she slept in "Mr. Franklin's room," Margaret, who suspects all black women of being sexually promiscuous and sleeping with her husband, "slapped [Dana] across the mouth," and called her a "filthy black whore!" (93). On another occasion, Tom Weylin catches Dana "stumbling, still half-asleep, out of Kevin's room." Instead of castigating her as Margaret had done, Weylin "almost smiled [and] winked" at Dana (97). On the surface, Weylin's reaction to Dana is different from Margaret's; within the novel's logic, however, they are identical, since both rely on myths and stereotyped beliefs about black women's sexuality. Moreover, as a slave owner, Weylin frequently uses black women to satisfy his sexual needs, as evidenced by the various mixed-race children living on the plantation itself. In a perverse way, such knowledge allows Dana to feel more secure about being able to remain in Kevin's room. As Dana puts it, "I knew then that if Margaret got me kicked out, it wouldn't be for doing a thing as *normal* as sleeping with my master. And somehow, that disturbed me. I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed" (97; italics added).

Such scenarios illustrate the anxiety that Dana has to negotiate as a result of the assumptions other people have about her sexuality. Having to refer to Kevin as "Mr. Franklin" only exacerbates those anxieties for Dana, since it not only rigidifies the male/female hierarchy of the antebellum relations, but it also rigidifies the black/white hierarchy of the era as well. Despite other people's assumptions, however, in truth, Dana is sleeping with her *husband*, and not her *master*. Margaret's and Weylin's assumptions about the nature of Dana and Kevin's relationship, and about Dana in particular, function as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century counterpart to the types of prurient assumptions that were implied earlier by their coworker's remarks in 1976 Los Angeles. Both of these scenarios, taking place across two distinct time periods, imply that black women were by nature immoral and sexually loose. Gerda Lerner has argued that notions about black people's sexuality created during slavery and after abolition, respectively, were

part of a "complex system of supportive mechanisms and sustaining myths" to maintain black people's low social status. This development was especially the case for black women. As Lerner explains it:

By assuming a different level of sexuality for all Blacks than that of whites and mythifying their greater sexual potency, the black woman would be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, and voluntarily "loose" in their morals and, therefore deserved none of the consideration and respect granted white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault her and exploit her sexuality was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behavior. (qtd. in hooks, *Am I a Woman?* 59)

Given these assumptions, it would be quite understandable if Dana and Kevin were to downplay or erase the sexual nature in their relationship. But while the narrative does not depict the couple in wild sexual abandon, it nonetheless portrays them continually struggling to affirm the sexual nature of their relationship in spite of these constraints. The couple's desire for one another is exhibited in a number of ways throughout the narrative. Consider Dana's brief comments regarding the first time she and Kevin make love after seeing a play: "I brought him home with me when it was over, and the night was even better" (57). This desire is also exhibited after Dana and Kevin are reunited after their long separation. When Dana finally sees Kevin, she exclaims under her breath: "New lines and all, he was so damned beautiful" (185). A short while later, when the couple manage to escape back to their own time, they immediately make love as a way to reaffirm their love and commitment to one another. They do so even though Dana is in a great deal of physical pain from a beating she had received for attempting to run away from the Weylins. Describing the tenderness that Kevin displayed, Dana writes: "He was so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known he would, but it didn't matter. We were safe. He was home. I'd brought him back. That was enough" (190). Because of these scenes, I have to disagree, in part, with Paulin's assessment in her otherwise astute essay "De-Essentializing Interracial Representations: Black and White Border-Crossings in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." Paulin argues that "Butler's emphasis on the desexualized nature of [Dana and Kevin's] relationship averts any overt racialization of their desire. . . . In order for Dana and Kevin's relationship to maintain its status as acceptable, their color is de-emphasized, their passion hidden, and their sexuality omitted" (179). It seems to me that Paulin fails to make a crucial distinction between the couple's actions with one another, for example, and their actions with other characters. That is to say, while it may be true that in the novel's flashback scenes Dana and Kevin downplay the significance of race—in fact, they avoid discussing the subject altogether—this avoidance does not pertain to scenes set in the historical past. In those scenes, race is an inescapable fact of plantation life and therefore the two main characters are unable to avoid it. Indeed, these discussions function *indirectly* to help the couple deal with the silence around race that circumscribes their entire relationship in 1976. On the other hand, having sex, and affirming their mutual attraction to one another functions as a way for the novel to foreground the dynamics of mutual respect and care that characterize consensual desiring relations; it furthermore helps to distinguish Dana and Kevin's relationship from Rufus and Alice's "relationship," one that is depicted in no uncertain terms as coercive. Moreover, the sexualized scenes in the present function as a way for the two to establish themselves as an ordinary couple. As social scientists explain it, "When someone in an interracial couple characterizes her or his relationship as ordinary, it may be viewed as a challenge by those who oppose or stereotype interracial couples" (Rosenblatt 28-29). Hence, "Claiming

ordinariness [for some interracial couples] may be [interpreted as] a counter [strategy] to those who see them as unnatural, strange, doomed to fail, troublesome, or otherwise inappropriate or defective. By saying, 'We are ordinary,' a person in an interracial couple is telling those who single them out as different that they are wrong and is also trying to defend against any words, stares, and so on that could have the potential to intrude on ordinary couple life" (Rosenblatt 29).

The complexities of being in an interracial marriage, in a society that deems such relationships deviant, may present unacknowledged opportunities for black women to bypass cultural strategies like dissembling that Darlene Clark Hine suggests have often constrained black female sexuality (912). By appealing to the language of "ordinariness," then, such black women may manage to affirm their sexual selves within the legitimating context of heterosexual matrimony. In other words, it is usually considered "normative" for women to express sexual desire for their husbands, not deviant. In her essay "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," Evelyn Hammonds argues: "Black feminist theorists have almost universally described black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage point of the dominant discourses, as an 'absence.'" Hammonds quotes Hortense Spillers, who suggests in a 1989 essay that "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" (qtd. in Hammonds 142). While such graphic commentary has inspired the production over the last decade of groundbreaking insights as to the contradictory and degraded ways that race, gender, and class have intersected to produce black sexuality as "restriction, repression, and danger," very little of this work has dared to take up black sexuality in terms of "exploration, pleasure, and agency" (Hammonds 144-45). As Hammonds suggests, the actual problem may lie with privileging heterosexuality in these critical explorations. Given that contemporary "discussions of black female sexuality often turn to the issue of the devastating effects of rape, incest, and sexual abuse," Hammonds suggests in her own work that "black queer female sexualities should be seen as one of the sites where black female desire is expressed" (147). While Hammonds specifically invokes lesbian sexualities, given my above rereading of *Kindred*, I would argue that the same could be said for heterosexual black women and some scenarios of interracial desire as well. In other words, if contemporary critical paradigms for exploring literary content of interracial sex are recalibrated to acknowledge the deep, mutual interdependence of discourses of race and desire rather than, as has often been the practice, viewing them as separate and unrelated, black female characters such as Dana Franklin would also be recognized by scholars as queer.<sup>9</sup> Resituating the discussion this way would entail, of course, refining one's tools of critical analysis, especially the use of the term "exoticism," a complex term that deserves far greater critical attention than given to it here.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

I have reread these passages as closely as I have because they potentially offer added insight into Butler's novel that other critics have not heretofore explored. Among other things, the narrative suggests that the challenges of being interracially coupled in a patriarchal and white supremacist society leads to certain anxieties that are not immediately apparent through interpretive frameworks calibrated to identify racialized and sexualized oppression in con-



ventional terms. The conventional terms through which most Americans currently view racial oppression involves seeing people of color as objects of prejudice and discrimination by whites. Likewise, the conventional terms through which most Americans view sexual oppression involves seeing stigmatized erotic minorities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered persons as objects of prejudice and discrimination by heterosexuals. As evidenced by the sexualized imagery that Dana and Kevin's co-worker Buz employs when he singles them out for verbal abuse, interracial couples experience forms of oppression that incorporate both racial and sexual dimensions. This awareness of dual oppression is an insight that goes unnoticed by traditional-minded critics of African American literary texts for the simple reason that—given the same-race, heteronormative assumptions of the field—sexualized oppression is invisible except when it involves the exploitation of black women by white men. Likewise, since much of lesbian and gay, or queer, scholarship remains dominated by a heterosexual-homosexual binary framework—one in which “all heterosexuals are represented as dominant and controlling and all queers are understood as marginalized and invisible” (Cohen 203)—the oppression of racially stigmatized erotic minority groups like heterosexual interracial couples is similarly overlooked. As I have already stated, the revisionist insights of contemporary social scientists who focus their research on debunking pathologizing myths about interracial coupling helps to fill in the gaps left by African American and queer scholarship. This work has allowed me to open up a black literary text that depicts interracial intimacy in ways that expose narrative content of personalized desire and longing that is deemed unworthy for critical study by other methodological approaches.

## Notes

1. Black literary and cultural depictions of black-white intimacy do not generally survive narrative closure. A character in a short story by the Pulitzer Prize-winning black author James Alan McPherson puts it this way: “According to convention, one of you is supposed to die, get crippled for life, or get struck down by a freak flash of lightning while making love on a sunny day” (269). And Little writes: “With few exceptions, post-World War II African-American fiction portrays interracial romance as an increasingly poisoned and often sensational background of racial antagonism. Reflecting the social climate of heightened racial strife, these relationships come unequivocally freighted with hatred, despair, violence, and futility, serving as often programmatic metaphors for America’s bleak prospects for interracial harmony” (142).
2. Madhubuti credits Butler’s work, along with the music of Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, the novels of Toni Morrison and Walter Mosley, the choreography of Alvin Ailey, among others, with being instrumental in helping African Americans discover “who we are” in a white supremacist culture (94). Writes Madhubuti: “If our struggle of the 1960s and 1970s taught us anything, it staled in thundering voices and imagines the necessity of taking control of something as personal and fundamental as self-definition. Our great historians and educators[,] [literary figures,] and hundreds of others who devoted their lives to informing the world about the beauty and substance of Black folks make it clear that we must be pro-active when it comes to accurately defining ourselves. And, to be careful not to buy into the feel good history of Black superiority and Black myth making, but be searchers for the unvarnished truth” (98). Similarly, Saunders singles out Butler’s fiction as especially useful to African Americans: “Butler writes from a black perspective, but her themes are universal. . . . If there were only one reason why blacks should read science fiction, it would be the writing of Octavia Butler” (30). Interestingly, neither of these writers attempts to reconcile the author’s unconventional portrayal of interracial intimacy with the strong bias against such relationships that circulates throughout black popular discourse.
3. For a useful discussion of the emergence of colorblind discourse in postwar US culture, see Cochran.
4. See Gomez, Govan, McKible, Mitchell, Shinn, and Steinberg.

5. For a more thorough discussion of Kellerman’s analysis as it relates to the Simpson murder trial, see DuCille.
6. For more on how interracial coupling racializes whites, see Frankenberg.
7. James writes compellingly about what she sees as the limitations of the profeminist impulse that many scholars have claimed informs Du Bois’s work. Although James does not engage the ideology of protectionism that I discuss, her analysis nonetheless explores Du Bois’s relation to gender issues in general and to black female radical leaders of the day in particular. See especially her Chapter 2: “Profeminism and Gender Elites: W. E. B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.”
8. Other passages where Dana’s wearing pants instead of dresses and skirts become a point of contention for other characters appear on the following pages: 23, 29, 41, 60, 71, 73-74, 114, 118, 166, and 171.
9. In his bold and original new work, Ferguson makes just such an argument about black sexuality more generally.
10. See Foster.

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