Reproducing Time, Reproducing History: Love and Black Feminist Sentimentality in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

The above scene of Dana’s leave-taking is the most sentimental of scenes in Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred*. It is also the most problematic. Taken in its full length, it functions as a snapshot that freezes Alice, a black female slave, and renders her at once impenetrable and exposed. Butler develops the scene from the vantage point of her main character, E. Dana Franklin, whose memorial disposition in the scene reduces Alice to the numbing effect of labor and repetition, the “beating and beating of those pants” (185). *Kindred*’s disappointed spectacle—its uncompleted parting between Alice and Dana—paradoxically animates Alice’s lack of engagement and makes it the all-important element of emotion that carries the scene. Thus affectively positioned as the emptied variable—the token unsentimental—Alice is the gravitational nexus for a sentimental drama that wholly disinvests in her dimensionality as historical, social, and political being. In fact, the obverse might well be true. Generic variables notwithstanding, the scene’s interpretation and impact within the text and among scholars replays a host of antiblack, antifeminist tendencies that continue to embed themselves in contemporary liberal analysis.

To fully parse out the implications of the novel in these terms, I read the epigraphic scene alongside two distinct moments of racialization. The first is the material transformation of temporal experience into what I refer to as speculative time. Speculative time underscores a correlation between whiteness and futurity that is secured through contractual investments in the slave trade, investments that are sentimentalized into a historical narrative by liberal philosophy as the developmental time of the subject. The second moment of racialization is the literary and cultural (re)production of violence in sentimental and abolitionist literature emergent in the nineteenth century. Both of these formative moments rehearse the elision of material and symbolic violence in their (re)creation of the valued subject of whiteness, an elision that Lindon Barrett articulated in this way: “The perspective of the Other reveals the relativities of value as ratios of violence. . . . Violence introduces itself by way of a violent agency, which it then seeks to deny. Value is a two-fold action, a presentation and a re-presentation” (79). Through an interrogation of the racial inflections of time and its contracted promises of future security, this essay looks to understanding the ethical pitfalls of eliding present practices for a futurity that belongs only to some.

Admittedly, the epigraphic scene portrays neither the most startling act of violence nor the most egregious, given the novel’s antebellum episodes. Its form of violence is instead elliptical—a naturalization of how we sentimentalize history, intimacy, and
love to the detriment of what I call a black feminist sentimentality. Black feminist sentimentality refuses speculative time as a temporal narrative that insures “the future” on the continual violation and management of black female subjects. It is this investment in speculative time that shapes Dana’s problematic disidentification with Alice in the epigraphic scene—a disidentification that solidifies Alice’s two-dimensionality in perpetuity. Alice’s presumed emotional incapacity completes rather than disrupts the scene’s maudlin mood; her unavailable turn incites distress in the reader as the relationship between the two women escapes closure. Through a critical reframing of the sentimental alignment between Dana and Alice and between text and reader, this essay prepares groundwork for a black feminist sentimentality, a practice and recognition of affective refusal rather than incapacity.

The critical orientation of a black feminist sentimentality approaches affect and intimacy askance in light of the historical and cultural refinement of these concepts in support of the triangular slave trade and its concomitant economy of speculation and trust. The analysis here centers on the role of time as a presumptive basis for antiblack and antifeminist ideology in affective politics, and as such, names critical time as the first variable for a black feminist sentimentality. Black feminist sentimentality refuses the racist foundations of speculative time and the violence of its futurity. It likewise refuses liberatory trajectories as an effective means to black feminist social and political coalition. Current readings of *Kindred* naturalize the causal linearity between past/future relations and subordinate Alice’s abuses to Dana’s liberatory trajectory, exposing in speculative time a logic of antiblackness that materializes as history. Dana’s personal rise and fall (or more literally, her fall and rise) operates in tandem with the exploitative values of a patriarchal speculative economy, granting Rufus Weylin, a white slaveowner, the unchallenged role of bearing history and lineage to the detriment of the victims—living and passed—of the triangular trade and of male sexist prerogative.

This link between the economic and the temporal is crucial to understanding the antiblack ethics of a modern historical paradigm as it reveals the racial values inherent in notions of love and affect that emerged in liberal discourses of citizenship and the subject at the height of the African slave trade in the eighteenth century. The progressive logic of capitalism—its speculative eye on the future—served to underscore the value of black bodies as commodity valuable to the captor, trader, captain, and buyer insofar as insurance contractually promised the very nature of a secured future legally, socially, and conceptually for white persons. As a symptom of the exclusiveness of a speculative capitalist trajectory, white supremacy retains a totalizing whimsy in its acts of violence against black persons, according to Joy James in *Resisting State Violence*. This arbitrary logic to white supremacist entertainment prevents any long-term view of history as inclusive of black life. What the whimsy reveals instead is that the narration of past-present-and-future guarantees the future for whites contractually upon the insured value of black labor and life; black bodies under this rubric of speculative time are without past, without future, and after emancipation, without
capital value for whiteness. The opportunity to become a part of official history is thus an opportunity that is specious at best for slaves and the children of slaves.3

Whereas time—the mathematical pattern that gives logical reinforcement to the affective relations of narrative—varyingly shapes histories, official history, which Dana Franklin obligates herself to reproduce in *Kindred*, is animated by a temporal logic that offers no alternative, even in a context where conceptually and mathematically, an alternative is viable.

Departing from the futurism of her other works, Octavia Butler uses the science fiction element of time-travel to arrange a neo-slave narrative in *Kindred*. Dana meets personalities from her ancestral past—including her great-great-grandmother Alice Greenwood—and sutures the encounters into a linear saga of familial obligation and individual fortitude, identifying Rufus Weylin, a slaveowner, as the presumptive patriarch at history’s center. In turning to history to ground her disorientation, Dana obscures the import of her call-and-response opportunity. She misnames her caller “Rufus,” rendering Alice’s call unheard. Although a work of science fiction, *Kindred* relies on conventional increments of time to lay out the question of Dana’s obligations, providing temporal markers that Dana uses to intuit loyalties to Rufus. Even within the mathematical logic of the text, however, fissures are present that point to Alice rather than Rufus as Dana’s caller.4 The omission of these fissures by Dana and scholars opens Dana’s actions to interrogation and immediately begs the question of the ethicality of historical reenactment and the ethics of history as alibi, both of which position the enactment of violence on Alice as inherently unavoidable or symbolic.

**Speculative Time: History and Sentimentality**

Dana escapes the antebellum on numerous occasions throughout *Kindred*, each time returning to the Pasadena of 1976, the bicentennial year of U.S. national independence. She materializes in Maryland six times in the span of eight days. From early encounters she has with Rufus as a young boy, Dana intuits that the purpose of her travels is to protect Rufus and ensure the successful birth of her great-grandmother Hagar. She rationalizes, “No matter what I did, [Rufus] would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense” (29). Despite persistent uncertainty, Dana returns to the conclusion that “it didn’t make sense . . . to test it by ignoring him if I found him in trouble again” (29). Conflicting obligations to Rufus and Alice emerge when a brawl erupts between Rufus and Isaac, Alice’s husband. Her attempt to distract Rufus while Isaac and Alice escape ultimately fail: Isaac is mutilated and sold down to Mississippi, while Alice is captured and officially purchased by Rufus. With time, we witness the much-anticipated birth of Hagar and the logical guarantee of Dana’s existence. Dana thus expects her travels to end, but significantly, her historical assumptions are here proven wrong. She returns one last time to Maryland to discover Alice, suggesting that feminist rather than patriarchal attachments govern her trips to Maryland, though Dana and scholars alike miss this point.5

The relationship between Alice and Dana is the crux of *Kindred*’s black feminist politics; it is the narrative element that lays bare the promises of, and obstructions to the affective alliance of a black feminist sentimentality. Narrated from her perspective, Dana’s epigraphic leave-taking demonstrates the propensities of an unethical sentimentalism that valorizes white heteronormative romance, a romance explicitly equated with patriarchal lineage and the secured promises of speculative time. Such tendencies underscore in Dana the advantages of Rufus’s blood (for she believes that
his seed provides for the future) and her twentieth-century positioning. Rufus and Dana presumably connect “past” and “present,” and the coupling of Rufus and Alice is one upon which the connection between past and present presumably turns. In addition, readers are compelled by the narrative to compare the women’s relationships to their respective male counterparts: Rufus, Isaac, and Kevin. Having witnessed Isaac’s brutal beating and his subsequent disfiguring at the hands of slave catchers, Alice endures the finality of her separation from him when she learns he has been sold to Mississippi (149); Dana, on the other hand, enjoys elaborate reunion with Kevin after extended separation; moreover, she possesses the prerogative to leave ante-bellum Maryland with him (184).

In contrast to Dana’s narration of Alice’s inability to “stop her beating and beating of those pants,” Dana dramatically drops Rufus’s “good white shirts into the dirt” when she identifies her estranged husband Kevin as the approaching stranger. Free will animates her surprise as she metonymically expends obligations to Rufus with ease: “I opened my mouth to tell him the Weylins weren’t home, but in that moment, I got a good look at him. I dropped one of Rufus’s good white shirts into the dirt and stumbled over the fence” (183). This performance of a hetero-romance between Dana and Kevin prepares readers for the subsequent scene of separation between the women through Dana’s narration:

She was watching us—watching dry-eyed, but with more pain than I had ever seen on another person’s face. My husband had come to me, finally. Hers would not be coming to her. Then the look was gone and her mask of toughness was in place again. . . .

. . . I turned to say good-bye to Alice, called her name once. She was beating a pair of Rufus’s pants, and she kept beating them with no break in her rhythm to indicate that she had heard me. (184-85)

Narrating her separation from Alice through the lens of speculative time and its pressures for official history, Dana naturalizes the import of Rufus and Kevin to history and thereby reinforces her (future) subjectivity as contingent to violence enacted upon Alice. Her preoccupation with patriarchal history reinscribes value in the male-centered heterosexual relationship, eliding a black feminist dynamic that would indicate a critical approach to speculative time.

Such male-centered impulse is symptomatic of what Barbara Smith identified as an absence of other cultural capital for black women. Writing in 1977, she observes that: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort” (424). Critical engagement with the novel suffers on many levels from the pressures that Smith identifies, curbing our final expectations of Alice and Dana. Dana misreads her separation from Alice through the frame of male-female bonds and arrives at her defining difference: the freedom of voluntary intimate bonds and arrives at her defining difference: the freedom of voluntary intimate bonds, the right to love narrated by Angela Davis through the cultural emergence of the Blues. The privilege of voluntary intimacy distinguished freed persons from their former condition as slaves, but these relations of intimacy were not confined to hetero- or sexual union. Observing Alice, Dana situates herself externally to the ante-bellum scene, and here does not identify with Alice or the slave community, but instead memorializes them in the service of a history that elides them. Not only does the sentimental configuration elide female-female bonds by privileging heteronormative bonds, it also effectively freezes the quality of heterosexual relations possible for Alice by freezing history, and thereby discounting her power to set love as the limit of the reaches of white supremacy.

The danger of expected scripts is first that they obscure an individual’s conscious choice to perpetrate or prevent a violent act, and second, that they obstruct the radical potential of love by employing history as explanatory alibi. Ultimately, Rufus could have chosen other than to rape Alice. Her abused body, which Rufus purchases
in a confused performance of affection and ownership, marks both her refusal of him and her powerlessness to enact that claim. Intimacy and affective alignment are regularly tested in *Kindred*, and Rufus's professions of love for Alice come under intense scrutiny given the range of power at his disposal. The novel’s temporal ruptures admit the possibility of uncharted affection beyond antebellum dynamics, thereby theoretically allowing traces of love to develop from Rufus to Alice. Despite dismissing substantive changes to “history,” Dana attends to Rufus’s belief in his professed love for Alice as she struggles to acknowledge his sincerity amidst antebellum social relations. Confronted by Rufus’s persistence, she begrudgingly admits his confused attachment as “love,” while remaining skeptical that “it made no sense” (149).

The historical ruptures that allow the possibility of a radical love from Rufus to Alice—even in the antebellum period—are the same ruptures necessary for a full discounting of his intentions. The mechanism that has Rufus waiting and staving off desire in the hopes that it might eventually be returned, must be given its small credit, first, because it marks an expansive territory beyond his right as master, and second, because it disables his social milieu as an acceptable explanation for the injustices he commits as a lover. Rufus’s own contradictions and misgivings are telling: “I didn’t want to just drag her off into the bushes. . . . I never wanted it to be like that. But she kept saying no. I could have had her in the bushes years ago if that was all I wanted” (124). Indeed, Rufus presents to Dana an image of love that is at once desperate and confused, a mixture of entitlement and long-abated desire. He tells Dana: “‘I begged her not to go with him. . . . Do you hear me? I begged her!’ I said nothing. I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman—to her misfortune” (124). Frustrated and unable to come to terms with Alice's opposition, Rufus converts desire into socially sanctioned rape, engendering the conflation of lack and domination that follows him into town to purchase Alice, mangled and near-dead after a failed escape (124). The novel allows Rufus this confused yearning for Alice at the same time that it makes clear Alice’s complete disapproval and disbelief. For Alice, love can and must exist completely outside of antebellum social registers, beyond abolitionist rhetoric, and more deeply than in empty sentimental claims. Rufus’s repeated turn to power discredits the viability of his love on all counts, and history is no alibi.

Love is the absolute limit of Rufus’s power. His desire for Alice’s affection dislodges him momentarily from the social position that he occupies, conveying the furthest reaches of his privilege as white patriarch. Take, for example, the moment of reckoning in Rufus’s following disclosure: “I told her everything. Even about you and Kevin being married. Especially about that” (124). The turn away from a scripted history opens up this dialog as witness to some degree of change in Rufus, changes distinct from a presumed “prior” that existed before Dana’s travels began. Allowing the possibility of his love stalls a rendering of historical violence as unerringly repetitive, and thereby holds him accountable for his actions. In this way, Rufus’s affective potential, and that of those around him, are not simply residual of antebellum power structures, even if those structures heavily shape them. Dana overlooks the challenges such contradictions present to a predetermined history, and commits instead to a narrow adherence to history and speculative time, an adherence that stages the misguided sentimentalism of the epigraphic scene.

Faced with decisions that pit her racial identity against her lineal and conjugal proximity to whiteness, Dana’s perception of time confines the range and quality of her observations and actions both in the antebellum period and the twentieth century. Following science fiction convention, her efforts in antebellum Maryland could render her own self unborn, but the novel enlists extraordinary discrepancies to signal the fallacy of this logic, announcing in some cases the impossibility of a wholly different history. Upon closer reading, the novel’s temporal multiplicity eludes reconciliation into linear coherence, despite the efforts of Dana and critics to the contrary. Loose and multiply faceted alignments between cause/effect and past/present govern the
unscripted space of a “call-and-response” dynamic that comprises the novel’s black feminist potential. Through close consideration, one can determine that the temporal zones of 1976 and 1815 move at varying speeds. The most startling demonstration of this is that Rufus and the slaves in antebellum Maryland all mature biologically by the end of the novel, while Dana and her husband Kevin remain their initial respective ages. Nevertheless, Dana instinctively turns to temporal coherence to reconcile what she identifies as a particular past with her contemporary “future,” consequently reifying ideas of progress and developmental history that naturalize the patriarch as the epicenter of time’s movement. Dana cannot conceive of an alternative history due to perceived obligations to herself and to Rufus, obligations that she articulates thus: “If I was to live, if others were to live, [Rufus] must live. I didn’t dare test the paradox” (29). As a result, she names her great-great grandfather, Alice’s owner Rufus Weylin, as the source and focus of her mysterious travels to the detriment of a black feminist politics. This restoration of “history” through Rufus Weylin (re)stages violence (new or known) under the apology of reproduction, exposing the problematic ethics of Dana’s obligations to a contemporary future predicated on rape and the naturalization of black suffering as prerequisite for the conditions of contemporary life.

Imagine history without Rufus, or Alice without his violation. In the conceptual space provided by the novel’s time, we can imagine thus, but we do not. Mirroring Dana, Kindred scholars have consistently under-analyzed the implications of the novel’s temporal structure, granting too casually that Dana must literally recreate history in order to preserve her own existence in 1976. Her resulting dismemberment—the loss of her arm—records the strain of this perceived choice between Alice, herself, and other kin, a choice symptomatic of prohibitive notions of time, historical agency, and political impact. Dana’s final act of independence—her killing of Rufus on July 4, 1976—connects larger notions of narrative, patriarchy, and national intimacy, invoking popular sentimentalizing of American history and U.S. genealogy. July fourth, after all, commemorates the nation’s forefathers as it commemorates the idea of independence. A quintessential marker of U.S. national memory, the temporal reference is a final comment on Dana’s complicity in concretizing white patriarchal signature, a complicity grounded in her commitment to a unified, deterministic history. Even following her act of liberation from history—her killing of Rufus—Dana seeks its comfort by writing herself back into its records and reconnecting events once again into a coherent narrative of past and present. In 1976, incomplete documentation uncovered by Dana and Kevin suggests that Rufus dies in a house fire rather than from a stab wound from Dana. Reading this information, Dana infers that Nigel stages Rufus’s death as accidental, setting a house fire to conceal her act of murder. Her physical wound, however, remains beyond explanation. Given the violent nature of her dismemberment, Dana reads the trauma through Rufus, though elements in the story point to Nigel’s likely role in her wounding and subsequent release from antebellum Maryland. I provide this alternate reading, along with a rereading of the epigraphic scene, in the sections that follow.

Temporal Ethics: History as Alibi

Kindred sidesteps explicit placement within the sentimental tradition, but it is positioned widely within the neo-slave narrative canon, enjoying repeated comparison to classic narratives like Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life, two exemplars of generic manipulation and refinement, including the genre of sentimental fiction. As a neo-slave narrative,
it parallels texts of sentimental design by contriving readerly identification with Dana as a twentieth-century voyeur, reserving room for this identification to fluctuate as Dana situates herself ambivalently in Maryland.\textsuperscript{10} This configuration relies on a fixed correlation between time and history, where history reflects a strict chronological narrative of cause and effect.\textsuperscript{11} Formalized in the nineteenth century and now widely recognized as a primarily white feminist discourse, cultural and literary sentimentality manipulated a circuit of unequal power, which largely failed to produce antiracist practice. Dana’s narrative voice rehearses the affective dynamics of abolitionist rhetoric, generating readerly catharsis without disrupting actual power relations.

Black feminist sentimentality demands rigorous questioning of how racist capitalist securities in “the future” shape our understanding of history by eliding violence enacted upon black women in particular and upon black persons in general. Dana’s placement in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries divides our identification with her, producing an affective ambivalence that is replicated between Dana and Alice as dis/identification. Dana positions herself as the sentimental voyeur, alienating herself from Alice temporally and historically by insisting on their nineteenth- and twentieth-century difference as well as their past/future difference. The disidentification extinguishes Alice’s dynamic qualities and renders them (once again) illegible.

While slaves maintained emotional distance from their masters, they established strong intimate ties with each other, often arranging coded communication. In contrast to the emotional effusiveness of sentimentality, the coded communication between slaves was strategically illegible in order to escape detection by masters, many of whom manipulated emotional bonds as punishment, as Rufus does when he threatens Alice with the selling of their children to render her more compliant. In its illegibility within speculative capitalist time, this coded affective demeanor is akin to that of dissemblance identified by Darlene Clark Hine as “an appearance of disclosure, or openness . . . while remaining an enigma” (382). In both instances of dissemblance and black feminist sentimentality, illegibility is reserved for the perspective of the master/outsider. This qualification exposes Dana’s troubled dynamic with Alice in regard to time and historical reduction. *Kindred* foregrounds for a black feminist critique skepticism of the past and weariness of promises for the future, a skepticism that defines the temporal parameters of critical time. Made infamous a decade later by Sethe’s misunderstood compassion in Morrison’s *Beloved*, the critical work of black feminist agency registers as urgent and immediate, rather than deferred. The element of critical time is a nuanced attunement to time that understands that the present looks too often like futures that have failed. For Dana, critical time presents a moment to refuse history, to rewrite its violences by attending to Alice as she would to herself. Dana misses this and other opportunities when she presumes for Alice a history already told.

Finding herself likewise the object of Rufus’s desire at the novel’s end, Dana kills him. In this act, she dislodges herself from the burdens of history. Performing the symbolic embodiment of husband and father, Rufus’s claim to Dana ends when it shifts from the pressure of history to the materiality of sexual oppression. The ability to deny Rufus this convergence of the symbolic and the material illuminates Dana’s greatest difference from Alice. This difference is overlooked by scholars like Robert Crossley, who, overlooking the direct consequence of Dana’s “choices” for Alice, compares Dana to Harriet Jacobs. Drawing an analogy between Dana and Jacobs that is similarly entertained by other *Kindred* scholars, Crossley claims that Dana “finds herself in a moral trap” (xxii) when Rufus solicits her help in drawing Alice to him. Dana is “torn between absolute standards and pragmatic choices,” according to Crossley (xxii). He explains:

As [Dana] discovers the terrible link to her own past which requires her to keep the oppressive slavemaster alive until her own family is inaugurated, Dana works out the ethic of compromise which Harriet Jacobs tolerated to safeguard her children and herself. Despite personal
repugnance and culturally induced shame, Jacobs compromised the sexual standards imposed on nineteenth-century women in order to maintain a central core of integrity and freedom of will. (xxi)

Crowley’s assessment is governed by an oversight that is symptomatic of Dana’s relationship to speculative time. Positioning Dana as counterpart to Jacobs elides Alice, revealing an unethical structure of pragmatism within liberatory accounts of the novel that rehearses anti-black, anti-feminist ideology in its privileging of Dana’s speculative futurism.

The insured promise of a future dependent upon Alice’s violation parallels the speculative logic that insured the value of African bodies across the Middle Passage. In this way, history and patriarchal bloodlines subsume Alice’s sexual violation as a necessary event for Dana’s eventual benefit. Yet we know that Alice endures Rufus’s access, and Dana does not. Exhibiting what Missy Dehn Kubitschek observes as the material strength of surviving rape, Alice confronts imposed circumstances and creates meaningful and full existence, rather than mourns the loss of a symbolic individual integrity. Kubitschek unambiguously reads the difference between an abstract representation of rape and a realistic response to it as “the basic difference between the Euro-American tradition, in which the rape victim remains simply a victim, and the Afro-American tradition, in which she is a complex woman who has survived the indignity of rape.” “This difference,” she continues,

is rooted in the Afro-American historical experience. Slavery forced Afro-American culture to see that the woman raped by the master or used as a breeder did survive, did carry on with daily life; analogously, Afro-American males dealt with the issue on a daily basis because of the ever-present threat of lynching. The psychological distance which allows the Euro-American male author to treat rape abstractly simply does not exist for Afro-American writers. (Kubitschek 49; original emphasis)

Reducing such fortitude to a politics of capitulation, Dana is awed by the ability of slaves to adapt to violence and hardship, while deeming herself unfit for such adversity. She thus clarifies her advantages as voyeur by confidently setting limits for abuses that in the antebellum period are endured, but in a post-civil rights era become criminal.

Alice experiences the complexity of this negotiation, as does Harriet Jacobs. Kubitschek explains that surviving rape is often the beginning or a continuation, rather than the end, of a complex network of negotiations for African American women (46). Indeed, Alice hardly forgives Rufus, her childhood friend, for taking up his privileges as master, and finds only mixed pleasure in her children when she remembers their status as slaves. In a conclusive act of rebellion, Alice takes her own life in protest of Rufus’s staged sale of their children. Revealed at the end of the novel, Alice’s death is followed by Dana’s narrow escape from rape, underscoring that Dana—by escaping rape, which she sees as a form of death—avoids death twice, literally and symbolically. Dana refuses the condition of slavery for herself, implying that historical death was better than slavery. She narrates: “I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her” (260). Terminating her involvement in Maryland on July 4, 1976, the year of the nation’s bicentennial, Dana kills the patriarch she has until now committed herself to protecting. Her justification is a critique of slavery’s far-reaching consequences on human liberty, but its cautionary tone reminds us of Dana’s own complicity in rendering Alice a victim for the purpose of (re)producing “history.”

Dana’s reinforcement of America’s violent past serves to emphasize the extent of slavery’s impact on contemporary society. In Remembering Generations (2001), Ashraf H. A. Rushdy enlists the neo-slave narrative to facilitate his critique of racial purity, particularly within the framework of family and lineage. Rushdy examines Kindred alongside other palimpsests from the 1970s that treat slavery as the “family secret of
against the Black Power movement of the 1960s, which looked toward configurations of purity to establish a black nation, Butler's *Kindred* problematizes for Rushdy the process of acknowledging the lineal secrets of African American families, and therefore, the blood secrets of the nation as they have been marked by the event of slavery. In *Kindred*, the secret is Rufus's whiteness, a fact that astonishes Dana and initiates ambivalence over the significance of blood purity in the construction of race and family. According to Rushdy, Dana comes to align herself more with the slave community than with her white ancestors, an act that he calls “disrelating” (113, 114-15). These moments of disrelating enumerated by Rushdy, however, do not counteract Dana's most significant act of family loyalty: her unwavering investment in white patriarchy as the bearer of history and family, and her subsequent role in establishing and perpetuating Rufus's role as patriarch through his act of rape.

Dana's loyalty to official history, which directs much of her action despite periodic moments of frustration, limits her interactions with the slave community. As it is, Dana is preoccupied with Rufus's importance to history, and the terrible power that she possesses; she remains beholden to reestablishing history, while ever anxious that she may inadvertently change it. When Alice approaches her to ask whether she would submit to Rufus, Dana answers, “We're in different situations. What I’d do—doesn't matter” (168). Her response to Alice, circumscribed by the weight of history and the racial and gender politics of the antebellum moment, contradicts Rushdy's model of disrelating and reveals the tragic limits of her loyalty to a deterministic history and her own prospects within speculative time. Rufus's desire for Dana prompts tragic similarities between the two women, though the parallel is lost on Dana. Responding to Alice, Dana enumerates three options: “Well, it looks as though you have three choices. You can go to him as he ordered; you can refuse, be whipped, and then have him take you by force; or you can run away again” (167). Notably, Dana fails to mention the choice that she takes up in her own defense—the choice to kill Rufus. Focused on her obligations to lineage and the future, Dana cannot see her power to change history as an advantage to Alice.

Equally invested in her duty to lineage, Adam McKible pardons Dana through the discourse of necessity. He writes: “Although Dana resists her complicity with Rufus as much as possible, she must aid him in order to insure the birth of Hagar Weylin, the first inscriber of Dana's family history. In other words, Alice's rape and continued brutalization constitute a precondition of Dana's existence” (228). Invoking Dana's obligation to history, McKible stabilizes the event of Alice's rape and, along with other scholars, relegates Dana's and Alice's presence in the past to a condition of nonagency in this deterministic model. McKible's reading not only relies upon a coherent linearity that naturalizes past and present, but it also presumes that there is value in recasting the past as it was, a value that is inherently antiblack and antifeminist. The deterministic model, moreover, is highly at odds with the anxiety that surrounds Dana's potential to change history, exposing again the logical fracture in the novel's immediate narrative and in Dana's narrative reliability.

Angelyn Mitchell buttresses Rushdy's reading of Dana as dangerously positioned and empowered to alter history, affecting thereby the lives of past and future generations of people. “Charged with this awesome responsibility, saving the lives of her ancestors and herself,” Mitchell writes, “Dana can be read as a heroic figure, even though her success is dependent upon the sexual enslavement of her great-great-grandmother” (“Not Enough” 54). Accordingly, Dana's liberation rescues a community “even though” her heroism relies upon Alice's sacrifice. Rendered pivotal to this heroism, Alice is thrice unsaved, violated by Rufus, and deemed a necessary casualty by Dana and scholars. The horror of sexual violation is muted by a generational repetition that is naturalized by the language of “even though” rather than thoroughly critiqued, enacting what Christine Levecq identifies as a cyclical model of history (532). Alice's rape is thus treated undynamically, rendered a done deal while...
the threat of Dana’s impending violation captures our concern. As in McKible’s reading, Alice’s rape is recast as little more than a component of history, a necessity for history’s unraveling. Even more, several essays variably redirect the violence of Alice’s rape completely onto Dana. In “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s Kindred and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata,” Lisa A. Long suggests the metaphorical value of rape as indicative of history’s persistent effects on the present, thus displacing the meaning of Alice’s personal trauma onto Dana:

If the force of history is expressed through psychic and bodily penetrations, and those penetrations accrue meaning from the longstanding and deep-rooted sexual vulnerability of African American women, then the language of rape becomes a viable mode of expressing the violations of history. And if history is always familial, then the rape becomes incestuous. Kindred’s plot inevitably builds towards the climactic scene where Dana’s ancestor, Rufus, attempts to rape her. (462)

Identifying the persistent sexual vulnerability of black women, Long’s rhetoric subordinates Alice’s violation to a foreshadowing of the predictable: Dana’s impending rape. The fixity of this cycle prematurely overwrites opportunities in each presumed reenactment to interrupt or end its repetition. Such opportunities are precisely what the science fiction conceit of the novel opens up, if obliquely. Far from claiming Rufus’s good intentions, the temporal ruptures identified in this essay underscore Alice’s rape as a conscious choice made by Rufus, leaving little room to excuse him because of the pressures of a history already scripted and recorded. In contrast to the “inevitability” that Lisa Long emphasizes, temporal disunity leaves room for dynamic possibility, giving each enacted event the space for radical action. In this way, each enactment maintains accountability—though its impact is compounded by previous occurrences—and cannot be excused as the consequence of unavoidable historical sequence.

Critical Time: Black Feminist Sentimentality

Kindred begins in the late twentieth century with Dana narrating a scene in which officers are responding to an accident: the loss of her left arm, a loss literally begotten in antebellum Maryland. The mysterious dismemberment, her arm, “crushed right into the wall” (11), begins a series of remembrances that catalog Dana’s six trips to Maryland and back. The cause of her wound has been thus far obscured in the criticism. Dana’s quandary is symptomatic of a cultural inability to recognize human relations uncharted by self-preservation or the alibi of historical obligation. In contrast, Alice and Nigel refuse a loyalty to time and history that requires from them programmatic passivity and suffering. Both engage in rebellious acts that oppose a white supremacist structure, redefining intimacy and love through the political stakes of a fulfilled present that opposes the antiblack temporal economy of a speculative future legally, socially, and politically ensured for whites.

As with her misconception of the call-and-response from Alice, Dana’s reliance on historical narrative obscures the agency of the slave community and their acts of rescue and rebellion, a narrative tendency endemic of official history. Consequently, Dana continually folds Alice and Nigel back into their expected passive capacities, reinforcing them as insignificant to history and narration. In doing so, she renders undetectable moments of radical black feminist agency that rewrite hierarchical models of love and sentimentality, crucial acts of rebellion performed by Alice and Nigel that change the meaning and story of Kindred. The daily strategies and unmarked influences of black female slaves, who were unofficial “custodian[s] of a house of resistance,” served to nurture a greater culture of resistance among slaves,
according to Angela Davis (“Reflections” 207). These acts elude official narration, making them invaluable to a slave community with little room to navigate freely.

Dana’s dismemberment reflects a nexus of difficult negotiations made by Nigel, Alice, and Dana. The missing arm, much like the absent wave to Alice, resonates as the impact of pressures and solutions that comprise black feminist action and is here reread as part and parcel of Nigel’s illegible agency. His act references the specter of another timeline, of the agency of individuals whose work is not formally documented but whose movement and labor, nonetheless, have their impact upon experiences in time. Opening with her arm wounded, “crushed,” then amputated, just above the spot where Rufus had maintained his grip, the text gestures toward liberty’s dangerous proximity to enslavement (261). This undercurrent of obstructed totality interrupts both corporeal integrity and the symbolic integrity of hearth and home: “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm,” begins Dana (9). Severing her arm, Nigel prevents Rufus from returning to Pasadena by disconnecting him from Dana’s body, the apparent medium of transportation. The possibility of Nigel’s agency—his black feminist agency—exists completely beyond documentary evidence, like the fact of Dana’s travels itself. We are only told that Dana “managed to turn [her] head and see Nigel standing in the doorway” (260). Documentation, evidence, and convention, therefore, are destabilized as sites of knowledge. The potentiality of Nigel’s act, an urgent moment of choice, belies textual legibility, though it is arguably the most pivotal act of love and loyalty performed in the novel. Illegible and therefore illegitimate as a conscious act of love and good will, Nigel’s intervention disrupts our expectations of historical events, tests our loyalty to official and textual history, and refocuses Dana’s physical loss on the agency and urgency of the slave community rather than the primacy of her historical connection to Rufus, which is what persistently governs her actions.

While Dana’s missing arm and the violence of its compression reflects her struggle with history and the physicality of her near-rape by Rufus, her overdetermined patriarchal sensibility reinforces symbiotic attachments between past and future by too narrowly connecting dismemberment and sexual jurisdiction. Thus connected, the loss of her arm reads as Rufus’s last imposition, one that is demonstrative of his pervasive authority over mind, body, and history. She narrates that:

"Something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painless, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something..."

". . . I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped. (260-61)"

Dana’s arm, symbolically heavy with alignments and dis/alignments with Rufus and Alice, is literally crushed by the pressures of history, pressures that render invisible Nigel’s act of love.

Read from Alice’s point of reference, Dana’s wound resonates less as evidence of Rufus’s force than it resonates as the missed possibility of a black feminist coalition. In the epigraphic scene, Dana takes leave of her friend and ally to return to the domestic reality of 1976. Her verbal calls signal an intended wave that does not materialize, engendering an absent wave that is arguably refigured as her lost arm. The failed parting between Alice and Dana remains an enigma to Dana, and its physical manifestation as loss underscores both Dana’s failed comprehension of the call-and-response and its significance for black feminist action. Alice’s refusal of Dana’s investment in patriarchy is expressed as a physical refusal: “‘Alice!’ I called louder. She did not turn” (185). Dana’s intended wave—her missing wave—is refused by Alice’s body language. The continual dis/alignment between the two women, the most prominent being their conflicting rapport with the slave community and the Weylin lineage, respectively, is reinforced by Dana’s insistence that her travels begin
and end with Rufus. In fact, the final trip to Maryland marks us as witness to Alice’s suicide, the historical and personal impact of which seems lost on Dana in her preoccupation with Rufus. Alice’s death, unlike Dana’s dismemberment, does not reflect the pain of a partial history, but rather the consequence of a misplaced loyalty to speculative time. Given the novel’s interest in the politics of re/producing history, Alice is the predetermined victim of an overdetermined past.

Symptomatic of her temporal alienation from Alice, Dana’s under-reading of Alice rehearses a problematic romanticization of stoicism and strength, what Trudier Harris has identified as a “disease” with symptoms of “suprahumanity, introspection, and keeping one’s own counsel” (111). The epigraphic scene from Dana’s perspective suggests that Alice is unfeeling, a reductive interpretation that reflects the advantages of Dana’s position and its proximity to a conventional sentimental ethic. In the novel, love from Alice evades verbal articulation, showing up more often in Alice’s careful attention to Dana’s welfare and comfort than in effusive exchange. Discretely responsive, Alice hints to Dana the importance of dressing appropriately—“like a woman” (*Kindred* 165)—by providing her a hand-made dress to dissuade suspicious attention. While distraught over the loss of Isaac, Alice pauses to encourage Dana to write another letter to Kevin, “even if [she] has to do it in secret,” since there was “no sense in [Dana] losing [her] man, too” (165). This encouragement culminates when Alice finds Dana’s letters to Kevin unsent by Rufus, and both she and Dana understand immediately things to come: “ ‘Thanks. Be careful when you put [the letters] back.’ ‘You be careful too,’ she said. Our eyes met and we both knew what she was talking about. I left that night” (170).

Butler carefully crafts these quiet exchanges to suggest tragic irony in the similarities between Dana and Alice while also highlighting their respective strengths. When Dana fails to escape from the Weylin plantation, she finds herself under the care of Alice in a reversal of Dana’s initial care for her (177). Seconds after presenting Dana with the hand-made dress so that she could “look like a woman when [her] man comes for [her]” (165), Alice’s impatience at Dana’s intervention on Rufus’s behalf is less than gentle: “Now tell me what you come here to say... that you don’t want to say... You think I don’t know you after all this time? You got a look that says you don’t want to be here” (166). Alice’s candor marks a familiarity between her and Dana: “Do your job! Go tell him! That’s what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That’s why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years. You be running the whole house when the old man dies” (167). Alice’s words express the impossibility of her dilemma, a dilemma that requires forgoing any mourning of a loss of the “integrity” reserved for white European subjects, according to Kubitschek. She reveals a complex sensitivity in a voluntary self-critique: “‘What’s the matter with you?’ she said wearily. ‘Why you let me run you down like that? You done everything you could for me; maybe even saved my life. I seen people get lockjaw and die from way less than I had wrong with me. Why you let me talk about you so bad?’” (168). Such self-awareness and attention reveal tender concern for Dana that calls into question Dana’s reductive impression of Alice’s stoicism.17

Addressed one last time by a departing Dana, Alice does not respond. Read through conventional sentimental paradigms, we would be persuaded to agree that Alice envies Dana’s advantages, and remains inconsolable of her own misfortunes. But such a reading neglects the nuances of her mood and desires. Alice, in fact, is introspective and keenly aware of her historical placement within a nexus of racial, gendered, classed, and sexual impossibilities. Yet, as shown through her impressive attention to Dana’s needs, she maintains a space for what Angela Davis calls a rebellious practice, despite the confining ideologies imposed upon her. Negotiating anger, frustration, tenderness, and urgency, Alice’s tough exterior cannot be read at face value. Alice, after all, sews a gown for Dana to ward off suspicion. She facilitates Dana’s shocking discovery of Rufus’s deceit by uncovering hidden letters to Kevin and initiating a series of events that ultimately leads to Dana’s reunion with Kevin.
reunion and departure owe their possibility to Alice’s direct intervention as agent in generating, expressing, and facilitating love. Dana’s memorial snapshot of Alice’s stoicism, therefore, seriously under-reads Alice’s emotional capacity. Conventional sentimentality—arranged as an imposition of unequal power differentials—informs Dana’s reduction of Alice’s grief as self-focused and stern. On the contrary, much akin to Davis’s notion of an “authentic need for another” (152), the bond between Alice and Dana is central to Alice’s grief in the scene of Dana’s departure, not simply as a rehearsal of other losses, but on its own terms. Quite possibly, Alice mourns the unique friendship that emerges unscripted and unsanctioned, like the inexplicable quality of Dana’s appearances in Maryland and the possibility of Nigel’s act of rescue. Unrecognizable within a circuit of expected exchanges and relations of unequal power, but legible within a framework of black feminist agency and sentimentality, Alice’s misread goodbye raises questions about the nature of power and history in understanding affect and intimacy. At minimum, it charges history as an unethical alibi in dismissing the complexity of her dimensionality as a social and political being.

Skepticism of historical and temporal coherence provides in Kindred the opportunity to divest in a racist historical narrative and to refuse the unethical exclusivity of speculative time, which secures the future through violence enacted on black women. The parameters of critical time re-chart the political stakes of intimate exchange for an attentive present and remains critical of futures continually deferred. Under close scrutiny, the novel’s temporal structure opens up narrative, revealing ruptures where an expected pattern has been presumed, as in the case of the novel’s characters: Rufus, Nigel, and Alice. The novel’s enlargement of the way that we understand “the past” amplifies the number of voices we might hear, giving strength and authority to minority voices that rely on the begrudging evidence of “history” for reparations. Alice is no longer a two-dimensional figure of the past; she exists, effects events, and eschews patterns of affect for acts of critical love that render history and power a matter of urgent practice—a practice that does not hold out for “a future,” but that lays groundwork for the possibility of one. Her denial of Rufus’s intended love requires more of individual and political choice and moral accountability in the name of love. Her denial of Dana’s guilt-ridden departure refuses a sentimental configuration that valorizes white privilege and heteronormativity as the effective variables for black feminist practice.

Instead, Alice holds Dana accountable for an affective structure, a cycle, a history that she produces under the guise of reproduction. Given the temporal reimagining that opens history up to alternatives “the second time around,” Alice’s censure exposes a cycle of deferred rescue that rightfully implicates Dana. Time and history do not excuse empty promises of love the first time or the last time. They do not excuse Rufus’s turn to power, or the violence enacted by Dana’s ambivalence. Whether the temporal disjunctions in Kindred are purposeful or accidental on the part of Butler, they point to the seductiveness of a unified, coherent history and its role in curbing the recognition of love and affective action in the past and for the present. It highlights, moreover, the antiblack, antifeminist foundations of speculative capitalism, revealing the future as a narrative of white supremacy promised by a rigged system of secured speculation. A potentially radical element among the pressures of history, the relationship between Dana and Alice gestured toward a feminist genealogy that might have opposed Rufus’s patriarchal signature and generated crucial conversation on history and critical time for defining the particulars of a black feminist coalition.

As the friendship between Dana and Alice is facilitated by Dana’s mysterious spells, we should ask for what reasons might Dana and Alice have been brought together. Having transported Kevin between Pasadena and Maryland, Dana’s power is mysterious, but viable as a means of rescue. In fact, Dana’s unexplainable ability to “steal away” and relocate echoes the supernatural aura that was rumored to protect Harriet Tubman on her underground rescue missions. Yet Dana differs from Tubman in at
least one crucial way: she never entertains the possibility of rescue except in reference to her husband Kevin. Despite the awesomeness of her abilities, the idea to rescue Alice, Nigel, Sara, Carrie, Sam, Isaac, and Mrs. Greenwood never seriously emerges. In this way, a political dilemma emerges in *Kindred* through sentimental positioning, where Dana’s investment in speculative time and patriarchal history at the start of her travels positions her solidly within a circuit of sentimental exchange that predetermines her resolve, for neither the question nor the possibility of rescue ever presents itself to her. Moreover, while the question of Dana’s responsibility is central, we as readers should continue to be wary of our own sentimental fantasies. When Alice asks Dana, “Would you go to him?” (168), she foregrounds a complex, intimate exchange that requires attention to her depth and her contradictions rather than to a coherent narrative of her oppression or—likewise—a singular narrative of her escape.

The politics of black feminist sentimentality gestures toward critical time as an important variable for political and personal practice—a noncapitalist political practice that belies the myth of speculative time, and underscores its origins in the trade and enslavement of black individuals. To acknowledge this practice is to intervene in historical epistemology that overlooks and overwrites demonstrations of a critical kind of love that is black, feminist, and ethically sentimental. The question of Alice’s rescue echoes a set of questions asked in 1989 by Barbara Christian of black feminist criticism and black feminist critics: “To whom are we accountable? And what social relations are in/scribing us? What do we want to do anyway and for whom do we think we’re doing it?” (513; original emphasis). The effort of my essay insists upon a keener responsibility to Alice, and to a viable presence of the “personal relations” that Davis underscores (“Women and Capitalism” 152). It insists on a critical attunement to time, and to an analysis of critical time, so that at minimum, we may understand our sentimental attachment to and investments in “history” as such, and refuse without hesitation to produce its violence in the critical present.

Notes


3. This complex relationship between history, time, and blackness is most dramatically captured in the politics of the WPA’s Federal Writer’s Project of the 1930s. Blassingame contextualizes the limited candor that former slaves volunteered in interviews with white WPA journalists or historians in this way:

   The fundamental problem confronting anyone interested in studying black views of bondage is that the slaves had few opportunities to tell what it meant to be chattel. Since the antebellum narratives were frequently dictated to and written by whites, any study of such sources must begin with an assessment of the editors. An editor’s education, religious beliefs, literary skill, attitudes toward slavery, and occupation all affected how he recorded the account of the slave’s life. (474)

The nature of testimony offered by former slaves was selective, gained from decades of punitive and gratuitous abuse. In line with Blassingame’s skepticism, the singularity of history rationalizes cause/effect dynamics that have been naturalized as past/present, revealing a grand narrative that already informs our attempt to revisit history, an overdetermination exemplified in Dana.

4. In a longer version of this essay included in my dissertation, I provide the mathematical calculations that expose these temporal fissures. See also endnote 7.

5. Unfortunately, rather than challenge the reliability of her logic, scholars have thus far reproduced the narrative only as it has been told by Dana. Mitchell, for example, rehearses the plot of the novel nearly verbatim.
Why Dana travels, on the other hand, becomes quite clear. Whenever the life of her white ancestor Rufus Weylin, a great-great-grandfather, is in danger, Dana is summoned somehow to rescue him. Conversely, Dana is returned to the twentieth century when she herself perceives that her own life is in danger. Their familial blood tie inextricably binds Weylin and Dana. Rufus lives only because Dana saves his life again and again. By protecting him, Dana preserves her ancestry and herself: neither she nor her family would exist were Rufus not to survive to father her great-grandmother Hagar. Dana’s mission as she articulates it, then, is “not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure her family’s survival, her own birth.” (“Not Enough” 54)

6. For a discussion of Stowe’s insistence that domestic slaves, at least in the north, are more akin to valuable pieces of furniture than to the more fashionable, disposable variety, see Gillian Brown, Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

7. Rufus develops from boyhood in the first chapter to a socially viable subject—a slaveowner—by the novel’s end, while Dana ages, according to the temporal speed of 1976, barely a month: her travels begin on June 9, 1976 and end—presumably, since it is the last date explicitly mentioned in the novel—on July 4, 1976. Moreover, we can note at various points in the novel when the temporal exchanges between Maryland and Pasadena are not equivalent, beginning with Dana’s initial appearance in Maryland, which lasts “a few minutes,” while her husband Kevin in 1976 insists that she was gone only “a few seconds” (16). Discrepancies acknowledged, Dana’s presence in both temporal situations is the only concrete connection between the two historical experiences.


9. While affective structures have been taken up complexly and under different configurations—from Ann Douglas’s early reproach of sentimental culture to Johnson’s lateral intervention in the debate—the conversation has nevertheless remained bound to issues framed by the exclusionary binary of the subject-object relation. Douglas identified American sentimental culture as a restructuring of channels of influences that marked a shift away from Calvinist rigor toward a highly stylized method of affective suggestion; passion and intimacy became the expression of power in place of stoic reserve. The literary and cultural mode of this sentimental expressiveness shaped racial dynamics within the Northern home, positioning the commodified house slave among the sentimental heirlooms of a great aunt’s lamp or father’s favorite chair, fully objectifying the enslaved through the attachments of ownership. See Ann Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture (New York: Noonday, 1977). For a fuller discussion of this dynamic, see Gillian Brown, Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990).

Similarly, a complex blend of passion and reserve underlay the psychic exchanges between master and slave in the South. Johnson examines psychic structures that reinforce racial identification through affective appropriation, complicating the customary unidirectional paradigm of sentimentality by revealing manipulations of affect by both master and object. Johnson argues that the projection of desire from the buyer onto the commodity met with a counter-effort from the slave, who manipulated (as objects to be bought) the desires of buyers by feigning weakness, pleasantness, or irascibility in order to shape their own prospects (17). The showroom was fraught with the contradiction of stabilizing and destabilizing racial categories of black and white wherein the intimacies of face-to-face encounters ruptured the dynamic of identification and distance that sustained abolitionist sentimentality elsewhere. White men were hard pressed to deny (though they did deny) that they interacted with dynamic human slaves, some of whom donned skin as light as theirs (155). Also, for the most explicit placement of Kindred in the tradition of neo-slave-narrative, see Govan 84.

10. Long illuminates the mechanism of identification that takes place between the reader and Dana, which places Dana in the ambiguous position of being enough like us that we identify with her, but somewhat unlike us that she endures hardships and dangers that we do not actually encounter. Our identification and disidentification with her feeds our empathetic and sympathetic feelings toward her. Long observes, “As student responses to these novels indicate, contemporary Americans—both white and African American—
...all want to imagine that we would be the defiant and brave African American slave or white Underground Railroad worker. We would not be the ones maimed or killed—surely not the ones doing the maiming and killing" (463-64).

11. This is a defining characteristic of Newtonian time, though this specific concept does not figure centrally in my analysis, which concerns conceptual limits enacted through temporal/historical assumptions rather than the assertion of an accurate shape of time.

12. Dana assesses slave adaptation throughout her trips, seeing for example, slave children play at "auction." Her conclusive comparison comes at the end of the novel: “You know what I thought . . . when I saw Tess tied into that coffle? . . . I thought, that could be me—standing there with a rope around my neck waiting to be led away like someone’s dog! . . . I’m not property, Kevin. I’m not a horse or a sack of wheat. . . . I told you when all this started that I didn’t have their endurance. I still don’t. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what. I’m not like that” (Butler 245-46).

13. The date of July 4, 1976 signals a moment of historical elation for Dana, at the same time that it reminds us that Alice is still caught in the social dynamics of the nineteenth century, which explicitly strives to extinguish all possibility of joy for the black community. The bicentennial marker also pulls to a close the novel’s masculinist sentimental strain, which links Dana’s escape from Maryland with the symbolic energy of the establishment of the United States as distinct from England, and the patriarchal convention of national membership. For a discussion of national membership as it is delineated through heterosexual marriage contract, see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988) and Jacqueline Stevens, *Reproducing the State* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

14. Rushdy employs this term to refer to fiction from the 1970s that deals explicitly with the relationship between the past and the present.


16. Unknowingly capable of extending her traveling capacities to others, Dana accidentally yokes Kevin along on one of her trips, leaving him trapped in Maryland as a result of physical separation. Dana’s power to transport becomes frightful in the moment of Rufus’s death, as he leaves one hand gripping Dana during and after their struggle.

17. bell hooks identifies this capacity for complexity and self-interrogation as a defining element of love, which she argues as being a powerful testament against racist configurations of Africans and African Americans as subhuman and incapable of complex human emotions. See hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Perennial, 2001).

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