

Chasing the Spector of Traumatic Slavery: Poetics of Postmemory in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

Issei WAKE

Abstract

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) employs time travel, one of speculative fiction's traditional premises, where stories about American enslaved experiences stage slavery as a locus of inventory of ultimate horror like violence, pain, and death as well as communal bondage and resilience. Dana Franklin (the protagonist of *Kindred*) shuttles between the two times and spaces against her will; between her present-time 1976 Los Angeles and a Maryland plantation in the antebellum era. The most imperative recent disputes in African American literary studies entail the significance of the enslaved past experiences to understand our contemporary moment. This paper first defines her as a diaspora, and then looks at an overview of the neo-slave narrative genre, especially in regard to the poetics of postmemory and the function of testimony as affect. Then, I discuss how the narrative form of time travel as a narrative formulation is particularly suited to a better understanding of traumatic memory as subject to afterwardness which allows to "retrospective reinterpretation once occluded material" to be recovered through mourning (Roger Luckhurst 88). Finally, I would like to suggest that Dana's repetitive visits to the site of slavery and the subsequent injuries she suffers function as trope for slavery memory and also for the evidence of lived experience. By these means, Butler engenders in Dana and readers of this novel contemporary memories of and identification with traumatic incident of slavery.

Keywords

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979), trauma, postmemory, slavery

What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? If so, what should history mean to someone like me? Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and, if so, when I come across these true and precise details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?

Jamaica Kincaid (1)

The plots of trauma narratives can belatedly and magically reconfigure entire life stories.

Roger Luckhurst (88)¹

Introduction

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) employs time travel, one of speculative fiction's traditional premises, where stories about American enslaved experiences stage slavery as a locus of inventory of ultimate horror like violence, pain, and death as well as communal bondage and resilience. At the outset of the novel, when Dana, the protagonist of the novel, and her white husband Kevin are attempting to shelve fiction and non-fiction books separately, Dana's grim fantasy starts. She shuttles between the two times and spaces against her will; between her present-time 1976 Los Angeles and a Maryland plantation in the antebellum era. As a speculative fiction, this novel portrays such characters as slaves and slave holders as individuals to whom readers can project their empathy and hatred.

This paper engages with the issue of refusal against covering up or to "banalize" (in Edward Said's terms) the violence of displacement and de-citizenship (179). Discussing the surfeit of violent imagery of the Holocaust,

Alice Kaplan, Geoffrey Hartman, and Susan Sontag have expressed serious concerns and warnings of a saturation point of the surfeit of violent imagery. Our visual landscape, in which these dreadful images become too familiar, Hartman insists, has “desensitized us to horror,” with the photographs becoming “no more than decontextualized memory cues,” losing their function as vehicles to convey and provoke memories.²⁾ A hypermediated postmodern “society of the spectacle” anesthetize and alienate us for the real, leaving us inured to what we see on television (Sontag 105). In the same manner, the transmission of slavery memory shares the issue of the surfeit of violent imagery, against which this paper emphasizes the significance of not banalizing the slavery issues but galvanizing them despite the continued circulation of atrocious images which might impede historical understanding.

The most imperative recent disputes in African American literary studies entail the significance of the enslaved past experiences to understand our contemporary moment. In a passage of her essay “In History,” Kincaid emphasizes the fact that the United States has been “founded on slavery or disregard the wealth created by enslaved laborers.”³⁾ Kincaid’s questions bring to the fore the focal point where subjectivity and national identity has been invoked and conceptualized in the metaphor. The wounds inflicted by slavery play a huge role in forming the present. By the same token, her questions echo Saidiya Hartman’s argument “The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present” (emphasis original, *Lose Your Mother*, 133). In the case of *Kindred*, Octavia Butler provides a riveting

anecdote and reminds us of how we cannot let the painful stories of our past happen again. Before we delve into the ideological function of *Kindred*, one needs to heed to the term “neo-slave narrative.”

In what follows, this paper first defines Dana Franklin (the protagonist of *Kindred*) as a diaspora, and then looks at an overview of the neo-slave narrative genre, especially in regard to the poetics of postmemory and the function of testimony as affect. Then, I discuss how the narrative form of time travel as a narrative formulation is particularly suited to a better understanding of traumatic memory as subject to afterwardness which allows to “retrospective reinterpretation once occluded material” to be recovered through mourning (Luckhurst 88). Finally, I would like to suggest that Dana’s repetitive visits to the site of slavery and the subsequent injuries she suffers function as trope for slavery memory and also for the evidence of lived experience. By these means, Butler engenders in Dana and readers of this novel contemporary memories of and identification with traumatic incident of slavery.

1. Dana Franklin as a diaspora

In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman depicts her experience traveling to Ghana to retrace the route of the Atlantic slave trade. Investigating the issue of the contemporary residues of ideological effects of enslavement, Hartman intertwines her own personal experience of visiting Ghana with those of Black Atlantic diasporic subjectivity. Placed side by side, both *Lose Your Mother* and *Kindred* highlight singularities of Dana’s experiences. Hartman’s detailed depictions of traveling to Ghana overlap those of the traces of the slave trade, while the visitors’ journey into the past traces

harsh realities of those enslaved.

Time travel functions as a medium for reconsidering the roots of the historical wounds and exploring sociopolitical ideologies. Narrative films like *Sankofa* by Haile Gerima (1993) and *Antebellum* (2020) starring Janelle Monáe appropriately engage with a controversial theme of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery through such spatio-temporal migration topics in them, leaving the viewers questioning the enduring effects of slavery in present days. The figure or figuration of trauma hovers around these stories with their presence resonating and echoing in the narratives. The focus is not limited to just one generation, but the ghostly presence of trauma, whose horrors of history persist today, is a trigger for each protagonist to unveil the violent experiences of the enslaved and their subsequent physical and psychological wounds from generation to generation.

In *Kindred*, Dana, who does not travel forward but travels back into an ancestral past via layers of collective memory, can be regarded as diaspora. During her frequent compulsory relocations to the slave system in the South, she is supposed to witness her ancestors' harsh experiences, even physically and psychologically suffer acts of traumatic injury which are painfully carved onto her body through such whippings and shackles. As Rogers Brubaker points out, in current discussions, the term "diaspora," associated with such terms as "globalization" and "transnationalism" (where one's identity is considered as fractured, fragmented, multiple and fluid), invokes the descriptions of a "postmodern, uprooted, mobile, deterritorialized world" (461). Seen in this context, as Dana's (in)direct traumatic experience fragments her sense of identity through the journey into the past, she keeps seeking to find where to settle herself, which makes

her a typical diaspora figure. The issues of identity and the absence of a specific home/belonging inherent in diasporic subjectivity are brought to the fore throughout the text. In diasporic experiences, the diasporic subject takes over the locals' suffering and their history. As for Dana, by aligning herself with the enslaved ancestors, she witnesses, their experiences, and inherits their pains via negotiations of the personal and political implications.

This binary opposition of shared trans-generational inheritance and concurrent isolation/ostracization signals that this pilgrimage is a transformative medium through which Dana claims both the bondage and the excavation of the wounds caused by this estrangement. Indeed, though Dana's inevitable pursuit of witnessing the past differs that of Hartman's, who is consciously attached to this notion of "inheritance," Dana's incessant claim for the past memories also highlights the gravity of her interrogations of history, inheritance, and belonging. Hartman emphasizes the continuity of time: "Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on" (100). Then, one can argue that the inheritance of slavery and its effects have both been inscribed into her through history, but it also functions as a critical aspect of her identity that she repetitively gets to retain.

The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about what happened then, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present. (Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 133)

For Hartman and Dana, the traumatic memories of enslavement are inescapable constituents of the present and thereby are the inheritance of the Black Atlantic. The past is her inheritance as a diasporic subject, but is also the very fabric of her identity; as it sustains her, it also creates her.

The issue of history, diaspora, and trauma is vital in this study and they are irrefutably intertwined not just because of physical/psychological experiences of suffering or pain, but as a means through which diasporas can reclaim, reframe, and rewrite their pasts. In exploring diasporic trauma among literary narratives, the renegotiation of the terms of Black Atlantic experiences can lead to foregrounding the lived experiences of those who endured the trauma. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman writes, “Writing the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamations of archival material for contrary purposes” (10). Butler’s *Kindred* aptly engages with such a task as forcing readers to face repressed anxieties about racial disparities and slavery’s traumatic aftermaths through a fantastical medium of time traveling and a reclamation of history through imagination. This critical practice attempts to both undermine the master narrative of American history and unveil repressed and traumatic memories of the past, rewriting and reincorporating that narrative into a malleable scheme.

Dana’s loss of her arm symbolizes her inability to enact control over writing history. At the outset, Dana and Kevin are contrasted as writers, with the latter successful and the former not. Yet after the journey into the antebellum past, Kevin finds it impossible to write and fully represent what he has “experienced,” horrific and traumatic experiences. Initially Dana

has also difficulty in writing her personal but also national, collectively repressed experience of being enslaved: “Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it” (116). This way, she struggles to translate and historicize her trauma into narrative, as it is contested, fractured, fragmented, and fluid trauma, all of which is symbolized by her lost arm. On this point, *Kindred* assumes a role of testimony. What Dana seeks to translate and narrate is a directly experienced gruesome aspect of American slavery that has been silenced. This repressed memory corresponds to “textual silence,” the places in slavery literature “where meaning is found in what we cannot access precisely because of its tacit presence as what remains unspoken and uninterpreted” (Jessica Lang 17).

Thus, *Kindred* foregrounds the story of Dana in order to disentangle the centrality of diasporic trauma of African American subjectivity. The novel delineates the history of Dana’s ancestors alongside that of slavery, entrapping each within the other to highlight the multilayered influences of colonial inheritance. Drawing on the narrative form of time traveling, Butler situates Dana’s experiences back in the pre-civil war periods as an arena forged through colonization and enslavement. Not literally located in a Black Atlantic context, the venue can be regarded as such since its root is tethered to the diasporic traumatic experiences of slaves. Dana and her ancestors’ experiences, which vacillate across time and deconstruct notions of present/past and her/there, work as the fractured self-image of African American diasporic subjectivity. This is how Butler excavates repressed memories of American traumatic past via Dana’s frequent visits to there as diasporic subject.

2. *Kindred* and Neo-Slave Narrative

In *Kindred* (1979), Dana and Kevin have recently moved to a new house in Altadena, a suburb of Los Angeles. This interracial couple experience slavery through time-traveling. On June 9, 1976, which marks the Bicentennial 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and Dana's 26th birthday, when she is unpacking boxes and settling in, Dana abruptly feels an extreme sense of dizziness and falls unconscious, later finding herself kneeling on the bank of a river in the early 1800s at a Maryland plantation of a slave owner who is her distant ancestor (she discovers this on her second visit to the past). The memories of the past enslaved experiences haunt the text like ghost, which are seemingly absent from it. The enigmatic terrifying transportation from one place to another occupies the first six episodes of varying periods that structure the main part of the novel. Each time she is taken back into this era (which happens several times), she is supposed to save the life of her slaveholding great, great grandfather Rufus (the brutal son of a white plantation owner) from danger. Rufus later grows up and rapes Dana's great-grandmother, Alice. Sometimes Dana is transported alone, and on other occasions Kevin also ends up transported to the past. Dana's visit to the past constitutes a few minutes or hours in her present time in 1976, while Dana's time spent in the past antebellum era is equivalent to much less time in the present. During this stay, she observes and suffers the excruciating field work, and endures the psychological and physical abuses including whippings and brutal sexual atrocities of slavery. At some time Dana and Kevin need to play both "master" and "slave" to adapt, stay alive, and survive according

to the era's racial codes in the midst of harsh and oppressive environment. This experience gives the couple an acknowledgement of historical racial dynamics deeply imbedded in their marriage even after they get pulled back to their 1970s present.

Her visit to the past is closely tied to saving Rufus Waylin, who Dana first rescues from drowning. It turns out that whenever his life is in danger, Dana is snatched from the present to the past. He becomes more and more violent and perilous as he grows, yet Dana has no choice but to keep Rufus alive so that his slave Alice (a free Black woman who is enslaved by Rufus later) can deliver Hagar. At the end of the novel, Dana kills Rufus as he attempts to rape her. This epitomizes Dana's longing for freedom and self-respect. Like this, the past realities are told to readers in fragmented forms.

As Luckhurst points out, *Kindred* constitutes one of the exemplary traumatic works because they share a specific trauma aesthetic.⁴⁾ Due to traumatic events' overwhelmingly devastating impacts on the subjects, they disrupt narrative knowledge and such works tend to entail various kinds of temporary disruption. On this point, Anne Whitehead writes:

One of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression." (86)

By using repetition of each word or structure, these repetitive elements emphasize the character's mental anguish. Based on Dominick LaCapra's

notion of “working through,” Whitehead rephrases this function as “the discharging of emotion cathected to loss and the subsequent reformulation of the past” (87).

Each visit by Dana (and Kevin) to the past differs and repetitively tells us readers different harsh aspects of slavery. By evoking painful struggles of slave lives, Butler canvases a vivid image of how they fight against the evil enslaving forces of the past. Dana re-experiences how her ancestors accept the burden of the work, suffer cruel psychological and physical brutalities, and live the extreme horror of slavery. Their lives are filled with terror and fear that they might always be punished. Also, Dana’s six trips back to antebellum Maryland provide a lens through which Butler explores issues raised by both the Black Power movement and unearths a long tradition of resistance,

Kindred belongs to “neo-slave narrative,” which refers to a wide range of post-Emancipation re-counted representation of slavery. The term was coined by Bernard Bell in 1987 as an umbrella term to designate a vast number of African American slave-related literary works since the late 1960s. Bell identifies some traits of new-slave fictions; “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). As for these literary works, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu writes that the African American female experiences are featured while most of slave narratives tend to focus on the male experiences⁵⁾: Contemporary authors have incorporated “the details of the enslaved existence” and “a reverence for the past and its attendant hardships” (xiv). Beaulieu underscores Black feminism and the oral tradition in forming neo-slave narratives by female authors. Ashraf Rushdy highlights the historical and political background of the emergence

of neo-slave narratives and stresses the significance of the Civil Rights Movements. In Rushdy's remarks (1999), neo-slave narratives correspond to "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). Indeed, Butler's employment of time travel enables her protagonist to politically confront her enslaved ancestors' harsh experiences, and at the right moment, this representation is being read/witnessed by another witness of such history by us readers who witness her present-time struggles to reclaim the veracity of her experiences. This paper regards slave narratives as key testimony, as significant works of historical archives. Time travel offers a vehicle through which the protagonist can physically "witness" slavery and reclaim her narrative authority and authenticity while problematizing and contesting the process of informing truth by capturing foreclosed documentation and historical representation.

To this, Timothy A. Spaulding adds that neo-slave narratives originate in the postmodern milieu of the 1960s, and calls into question and redefines traditional notions of history and subjectivity not just by rewriting the genre of 19th century slave narrative form but by "revitalizing the historiography of slavery" (4). In proposing "a subjective, fantastic, and anti-realistic representations of slavery," neo-slave narrative authors "force us to question the ideologies embedded within the 'realistic' representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction" in order to probe the potentialities of alternative mnemonic modes (2). Such aesthetic negotiation and politicizing strategy problematize the fixed boundaries between historical archive and testimonial document, requiring critics

to reconsider the interconnected notions of “linearity, verisimilitude, and the relationship between fact and fiction” (Stefano Bosco 168). Through this way of representation, the novels can offer readers critical acumen which nineteenth-century autobiographical slave narratives could not provide. Thus, as Rebecca Wanzo writes, “neo-slave narratives address and complicate the tropes of slavery in narrative and representations, filling in gaps of the archive, representing what could ‘possibly be,’ an enterprise that sometimes relies on the fantastic to do its work” (85).

Allison E. Francis notes that slave narratives, including the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (1847) are concerned with exploring a slave’s physical emancipation and the individual’s journey to freedom along with the systems of the escape, while neo-slave narratives like Butler’s *Kindred*, Sherley Anne William’s *Dessa Rose* (1986) can provide us with fictionalized analyses of enslaved black protagonists’ psychological and emotional reactions to liberation. Because “their characters employ sentiments as both the language of feeling and the language of judgment—without censure, the novels enable the protagonist to recount the excluded and suppressed enslaved experiences from former slave narratives, not just relying on traditional usages of sensibility and sentimentality of this genre (14). As *Kindred* is predicated on fictional accounts of slavery with history and tradition, the anecdote of slave escape can be explored and exploited. Butler politicizes “interracial relationship, the psychology of violence, and nontraditional modalities of escape” to invigorate the meaning of “escape” for black female slaves. Like Butler, many authors of neo-slave narratives engendered their work based on slave narratives and other historical

materials of slavery.

In her essay “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison described the difficulties in the complex narrative representation of the African American slave past experiences.⁶⁾ Because of censorship and distortions in historical records of black people, she stressed the urgent importance of creating historical narratives that could explore and extend belated recognition to the “unwritten” lives of the former slaves. *Beloved*, which Morrison mentioned in the essay, reflects her authorial motives to retrieve and represent the traumatic history of the slaves.

James Olney writes that “[i]t is in the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being,” so that “events are lifted out of time to be re-situated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance” (47). He continues:

Thus the ex-slave narrator is debarred from use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative. (48)

For Olney, memory does function and recount the past memories in the slave narratives, yet it could be compromised during the process of writing.

Guy Mark Foster argues that, like Paul Gilroy, neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* do not just re-imagine the history of slavery but re-shape memories. Writing neo-slave narratives becomes a medium of negotiating the historical significance of enslaved experiences and their memories.

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. (147)⁷

While this paper aligns itself with Foster's argument (a caution against the "reductive approach of most literary critics to neo-slave narratives" in Francis's words), as Francis indicates, Butler recreates "idealized memories based on their readings of previous slave narratives," and *Kindred's* protagonist Dana "enacts these speculative memories based on the author's ability to shape the future progression" (15).

Furthermore, what Rushdy (1993) has shown as African American literature's historical turn has much to do with Morrison's idea of the "unwritten interior of life" of the slave. Morrison claims that "memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior of these people. Only act of the imagination can help me."⁸ Criticizing conservative historiographical methods, New Left historians deconstructed objectivist perspectives on the slave past experiences and exposed the partiality of documentary and archival evidence. These critics introduced such an epistemological reorientation that has enabled the subject of the slave past to be speakable and accessible.⁹

To sum up, while in traditional slave narratives, where authors sought to employ personal narratives to advocate the abolitionist cause, neo-slave narratives attempt to recuperate or re-experience various features

of those experiences of the enslaved that could not be fully represented in the previous ones. Despite the marginalized positions of slaves and limited access to archival research, neo-slave narratives utilize history to recover formally excluded experiences of slavery and affectively recouple contemporary individuals to experiences in slavery. Madhu Dubey indicates as follows.

Refusing to regard the past of slavery as history, speculative novels [like neo-slave narratives] suggest that the truth of this past is more fully grasped by way of an antirealist literary imagination that can fluidly cross temporal boundaries and affectively immerse readers into the world of slavery. (785)

Traditional slave narratives depend on concepts of continuity, chronology, and causality that retain the character of narrativity.¹⁰ Neo-slave narratives, however, depend on speculative fictional devices for replacing traditional narrative modes and for discarding traditional assumptions of the real. These literary devices “are obviously intended to reveal the persistence of the past in the present and to ensure that their readers as well as characters feel the discomfort of straddling two time zones, of keeping one foot squarely in the present while traveling to the past” (Dubey 791). By unsettling temporality and narrativity, neo-slave narratives are forged to reveal certain truths about slavery that are “inaccessible through the discipline of history” to have their characters and readers “feel ill at ease in the present” (ibid).

3. Critique of Historical Turn in Trauma Study

Ranging from the late sixties to the eighties (post-Civil Rights Movement eras), a large number of fiction, poetry and plays that seeks to retrieve and rediscover the traumatic memories in African American literature and criticism emerged. To avoid national amnesia of the suffering and resilience of African Americans, literary trends were re-gearred toward giving critical insights into restoring historical truth based on extensive research of verifiable facts along with creative imagination.

In *How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation*, Aida Levy-Hussen tackles the critical debate over the significance of “historical turn” (2016a, 3-4). In a couple of the final decades of the twentieth century, the study of historical memories has surfaced in the field of African American literature and criticism. Authors like Morrison have approached the issue of the enduring effects of slavery as the dominant mode of post-Civil Rights black writing. This “historical turn” emerges as a result of a complicated grief reaction to the decline of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Levy-Hussen criticizes this sort of “historical turn” which primarily focuses on the questions about the relevance of the past to evaluate and implicitly solidify the value and power of the stymieing past in shaping and forging present-day cultural and political agency. In order to appreciate our contemporary moment, how to reconsider the significance of the enslaved past experiences in African American literary studies is one of the most imperative recent critical debates. The question she raises is whether one’s heart-tearing involvement with the antebellum traumatic past can heal

our harsh political present and bring out some healing or such arguments triggered by a historical consciousness that denies both the historical truth and the inaccessibility of past narratives. For the analyses of historical representation of slavery, critics face a “central dilemma, the need to remember and to forget the past” (Joanne Chassot 32).

What she criticizes is that there are two typical critical modes of literary practices predominant in contemporary African American studies without any room for other interpretive approaches; therapeutic and prohibitive reading. Rooted in psychoanalysis, memory studies like trauma theory, and affect theory, Levy-Hussen divulges “how social injury and collective grief inhabit and drive” post-Civil Rights African Americanist narratives (2016a, 7). In therapeutic reading of post-Civil Rights era novels, especially in the form the neo-slave narratives (where present-day protagonists are seized back in time to the periods of an antebellum slave plantation), the experience of reading others’ traumatic past experiences by immersing oneself in such tales can be considered to provide readers with cathartic feelings and “self-knowledge, authenticity and psychic healing” (3). It is anchored in the belief that working through historical trauma will lead to psychological healing in the present. Meanwhile, “prohibitive reading” predicated upon the notion that views such literary practices of historical returning to the past are dangerous and to be avoided. Then, Levy-Hussen claims that one must develop another method of interpretive practice; a critical strategy that “works neither to discipline nor to cure but to contextualize and decode narrative patterns that emerge from world-shattering psychic experiences” (2016a, 24).

Instead, Levy-Hussen attempts to propose new possibilities to grapple

with what she identifies as an “[i]ncreasingly obdurate critical impasse in black literary studies” (2016a, 16). This reading strategy “operates as a *literary figure*: inviting decoding, engendering a diverse range of direct and indirect psycho-affective responses, and accommodating a variety of competing interpretations” (6). Though she does admit the “value of periodization as a way of knowing and encountering the past” and the importance of the “idea of a future-oriented, progressive chronology gets at an enduring and compelling sense of historical truth,” she attempts to focus on “how—and with what kinds of anxieties, desires, admissions, and foreclosures—periodization organizes and asserts the truth claims of prohibitive reading” (29). In doing so, one can re-trace the process to recognize an inaccessible history and to represent a represent the slave past.

4. Poetics of Postmemory

When asked about her approach to history in her novel *Kindred*, Butler explains “I was trying to get people to *feel slavery*. I was trying to get across the kind of emotional and psychological stones that slavery threw at people.”¹¹⁾ What is noticeable in her explanation is her implicated emphasis on feeling an indispensable component of historical knowledge in dealing with traumatic events like slavery. Butler underscores the significance of “producing feeling through narrative” (Levy-Hussen, 2016b, 197). Thus from the critical viewpoint of trauma theory, recent debates over the African American enslaved past experiences and psychological, ethical, and political aspects of affect theory can be bridged.

In the *Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch conceptualizes the

poetics of memory as a referential point from which one can scrutinize the workings of intergenerational transmission and work through and, without forgetting, move beyond residual traumas passed down by Holocaust survivors.¹²⁾ Trauma causes rupture in past memories as they were once lived and linger with other forms of rupture like isolation and discontinuation from the future. Then, the fabric of postmemory elucidates the way multiple ruptures and breaks induced by trauma and catastrophe impose intra- and transgenerational inheritance. Postmemorial work “strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (33).

To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happen in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch 5)

This way, even less directly affected participants can be involved and engaged with the generational postmemory that could linger after all (more or less) direct participants and those involved in the incidents are gone. Critics have suggested that postmemory can be applied to other social events such as slavery when it is redressed as “the inter- and trans-generational act of transfer and the resonant aftereffects of trauma” (Hirsch 4).

In *Bridges to Memory: Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, Maria Rice Bellamy traces the development of an emerging genre in contemporary American literature. Drawing on Hirsch's notion, Bellamy indicates that the study of "trauma's ghost" sheds light to unrecorded, unrepresented, and repressed histories that "haunt American society" (2). This traumatic memory entails various struggles in American history ("the civil rights, feminist, and ethnic empowerment struggles of the 1960s and 1970s") following World War II and epitomizes "a critical historical, generational moment" (4). Furthermore, Bellamy emphasizes the importance of the function of trauma and the ghost of slavery. Butler's employment of "supernatural means" enable "their contemporary protagonists to experience the physical as well as the psychological pain of slavery" (45). Unlike *Beloved*, there is no ghost in *Kindred*, yet, the presence of Dana and Kevin through supernatural time travel allows "convergence of trauma, memory, and history" as "the most effective means of eliminating the distance between the contemporary individual and her ancestors" (51).

In such a postmemory writing, authors retrieve and contemplate the traumatic experiences of earlier generations. This critical approach does not view historical past an arena of absolutes but as a complicated fabric of uncertainties in which facts and imagination intervene and readers'/critics' ethical commitment conflate. It reinvigorates and reconfigures our understanding of history as a terrain which is not just linked to the past but is recalled by our imaginative investment, projection, and creation. These transmitted views of past are not monolithic but is constituted of residual memories of repressed struggles. One needs to reconsider the affective functions of grieving (mourning) and honoring the traumatic past, while

remaining aware of the varying responses to trauma of the subsequent generations. Bringing together the literature on diaspora, trauma, and postmemory allows for a better understanding of the variation in a way that Dana engages and makes meaning of the past “experiences.”

Indeed, Hirsch writes postmemory functions “through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after.”¹³⁾ As Hirsch emphasizes, postmemory foregrounds the function of transmission. It is engendered by the subsequent generations’ lack of memory as well as the reactive narratives of deconstructing that exist earlier and “interpellate the postmemorial subject.” The trans-generational mediation of trauma cannot be described as “fixed, transparent, or predictable” where post-traumatic participants endure and suffer immutable past memories. Rather, because of the “ever-muting force of history,” it creates new participants in history “constrained by and straining against the ascribed terms of their legibility.”¹⁴⁾

5. Postmemory and Affect

Dana’s witness, her experience of living in the enslaved past, and her presence itself can be regarded as an “‘inscriptive’ (archival) memory practice that retain an ‘incorporative’ (embodied) dimension” (Hirsch 117). This particularly displace critical attention from questions of representation and literary production to the practice of reading itself, conducting essential inquiries about how traumatic narratives can be read. Philip Miletic reads Dana’s historic role and argues that “Dana has to witness and, in Alice’s case, facilitate the abuse and mistreatment of

black women and their children in order to preserve her existence” (272). In this archival document entailing traumatic past memories, aspects of past are constantly inscribed; when one looks at them, its fragmentariness engenders narrative elaboration and embroidery. As Jill Bennett argues, in this procedure sight is closely linked with “affective memory.” As Bennett writes, “images have the capacity to address the spectator’s own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion”¹⁵⁾ Thus, one’s traumatic pasts and transgenerational participants themselves, onto whom traumatic memories are transmitted, trigger to readers affect shared across generations. As Hirsch explains, as heavily symbolic and over-determined sites of consternation,” they can transmit and reproduce the “political, economic, and judicial claims of dispossession and recovery that often motivate return stories” (206). Dana transforms herself into the “testimonial object” that signifies “how we inherit not only stories and images from the past, but also our bodily and affective relationship to the object world we inhabit.”¹⁶⁾

As for Walter Benn Michaels, poststructuralist historiography distinguishes itself in that posthistoricist historicism is “more interested in experiencing the past (if only by talking to it)” rather than “they are in having true beliefs about it” (140). Toni Morrison and Stephen Greenblatt, Michaels assert separating “knowledge from experience” and prioritizing “experience to knowledge.” Michaels writes:

In fact, from this perspective and with respect at least to certain events, knowing about the past instead of experiencing it may come to look not

like an impossibility but like an easy way out, a way of trying to avoid the reality of slavery or the Holocaust, and we thus see the emergence of a certain hostility to the idea that the Holocaust is the sort of thing that can be known. (141)

Based on poststructuralist/posthistorical ideas about history, historians presuppose the assumption that history is no longer fully represented. Michaels takes for example Claude Lanzmann's insistence that the purpose of his documentary film *Shoah* is "not to transmit knowledge" and instead portrays the film as "an incarnation, a resurrection" (qtd. in Michaels, 141). Then, what the representation of slavery entails is a way of transmitting not the normalizing knowledge of the horrific experiences but the horror itself. What is significant in this transmission corresponds to, as Michaels suggest, "testimony" in Felman's terms.

6. Trauma and Testimony

[O]ne function of reading is a process of replication, one that serves— even if inadvertently—to erase or mute, to the point of extinction, the subject of the text read. (Lang 19)

Butler draws our attention to time travel as a vehicle through which the narrator can witness slavery, as a key element of the story that provides a political framework to read *Kindred*.¹⁷⁾ *Kindred* functions as testimony in more than one regard. Both Dana and Kevin are symbolically writers, and it is at "a casual labor agency" called "slave market" that both of them meet (52). Judging from how casually Dana uses the term "slave market," she cannot recognize the horrific experience of being enslaved (though for

readers, this signals a ghostly haunting image of slavery in 1976 present-time). In the present, as Kevin is getting more and more successful, he asks Dana to do some secretarial work for him. In the past, this episode is repeated in the time when Dana was asked by Rufus to be his amanuensis. The present and past both function to foreground the writing and gender dynamics in writing and in Dana expressing her own voice.

That both Dana and Kevin are both writers who find it frustrating enough to write something after the return from their respective transportations to the past matters. Their hardship meta-fictionally epitomizes their inability and impossibility as reader/writer to fully understand and represent the slavery past. All they can do is have readers experience past memories that are “not proper to one’s self,” yet that “nonetheless resonate” with something in the self affectively (Marisa Parham 1326). Parham is correct in her interpretation that *Kindred* offers us “a transmutation of history into an *experience* of reading, into a memory over which once can now claim ownership, rememory” (emphasis original, *ibid*).

When Dana encounters a brutally beaten man hung on a tree (who turns out to be Alice’s father), the harsh violent reality of slavery exceeds Dana. Dana comes to understand what she learned through reading books and watching movies is not enough to fully know what it is like to live in an isolated time and place in an antebellum era.

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their

families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (36)

In terms of violence, Dana's loss of her left arm after her final trip to the past bears a physical and obvious reminder of the burden that her genealogical offspring of slaves deliver throughout her genealogy.

I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn't mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. (176)

Though Dana read a lot, she only finds herself unable to know the everyday details of lives of the enslaved including her own attempted runaway and that of Harriet Tubman. In the following excerpt, Dana resorts to the "future" in historical past for comfort; "Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom" (177). In this metafictional part, Dana's referring to the historically cited facts echoes readers' reading of *Kindred* going between fictional tales in the novel and the historical facts of slavery. Though at the outset when both Dana and Kevin are taken back to the past, they thought they could endure life in the past.

And I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While

we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting. (98)

Dana herself emphasizes her position as an actor in events in the past, while she feels a distance between themselves and the events in front of them. Critics like A. Timothy Spaulding interprets this distance as a medium which “allows her to come to terms with her own past” (133). This is partly true, but, for this paper, what should be noted is that both Kevin and Dana recognize that they cannot fully articulate history: “We’re in the middle of history. We surely can’t change it. If anything goes wrong, we might have all we can do just to survive it” (100). Dana continues to emphasize her status as a helpless observer:

“You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer,” I said. “I can understand that because most of the time, I’m still an observer. It’s protection. It’s nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then, like with the kids’ game, I can’t maintain the distance. I’m drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don’t know what to do. I ought to be doing something though. I know that.” (101)

After some time, Kevin mourns that “It’s over There’s nothing you can do to change any of it now,” while Dana tries to refute him by saying “You . . . you haven’t already done anything, have you?” (101). In contrast to Kevin, Dana reiteratively stresses the importance of acting. This is repeated in the

following section.¹⁸⁾ When Kevin asks Dana whether she is raped in the past or not, she also asks Kevin what happened in the past. She adds: “‘One more thing. Just one.’ She asks him if he was ‘helping slaves to escape’” (193). Finding out that he was, Dana smiled and said nothing. To quote the phrase from the text, what Dana prioritizes is “gambling against history”

“You’re gambling. Hell, you’re gambling against history.” “What else can I do? I’ve got to try, Kevin, and if trying means taking small risks and putting up with small humiliations now so that I can survive later, I’ll do it.” (83)

Indeed, though initially the inaccessibility of history is highlighted, Kevin and Dana come to understand each other more and share their present lives more abundantly than before their journey into the past. She feels a tight bondage with Kevin through sharing her past experiences with him.

The separations hadn’t been good for us, but they hadn’t hurt us that much either. It was easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences no one else would believe. It wasn’t as easy, though, for us to be with other people. (243)

Even though they are both alienated from the present when they return, they do not “have to grow back into each other.” They find it “easy to be together, knowing [they] shared experiences no one else would believe” (243). As Dana kills one set of relations, she also aligns herself with another. Her past and her future have met, and her future has been salvaged at the core.

As Parham points out, from the perspective flow, this insertion of historical parts (like references to Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, 141) is one example of *Kindred's* abrupt insertions out of context. Parham writes:

Neither narratively nor emotionally does the statement fit the text's momentum, but it is nonetheless an absolutely fascinating moment because it marks Butler's attempt to recuperate personal loss via historical citation. On the level of the text, this replacement feels like an intrusion, the place where, if Dana were on a therapist's couch, one would find an obdurate screen memory, a psychic panacea that attempts to move the reader away from the truth of the protagonist's reality. (1323)

In this respect, Parham reads "reading's virtual satisfactions and the limits of such satisfaction," by which she means "[t]hrough her experience, Dana comes into memory while we, mere readers, are left only with history, really finding ourselves in the text only through our sympathy with Dana's dissatisfaction with her own book learning" (ibid). Dana's repressed longing for learning and writing what she as a witness has experienced is significant. What is more, one should be attentive to the impossibility of historical representation highlighted in the above excerpt, which the readers are left with.

Based on Shoshana Felman, Michaels discusses "how can texts transmit rather than merely represent "horror"?" As Felman puts it, this can be paraphrased as how "the act of reading literary texts" can be "related to

the act of facing horror.” In this regard, an act of reading could “assume a form of witnessing.” Yet, due to the inaccessible and inexpressible nature of trauma, to experience horror and to read about it would be totally different. It is only dealing with represented experiences in narratives, not with the experience of horror. Felman writes;

Since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness—in spite of his or her alignment with other witness—is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden. (3)

The reader/ listener/ viewer’s role of witnessing testimony comes to be all the more important whether it is either “oral, visual, or in the written word.”¹⁹⁾ Drawing on Michael Levine’s definition, who refers to witnessing as limited to “a performative speech act . . . open to the possibility of failure, to the possibility of not reaching its destination,” Lang emphasizes performative aspect of testimony (19). Witness constitutes a complicated “fluid space of transmission opened between the precariously fluctuating positions of the witness and the witness to the witness.”²⁰⁾ Following their arguments, this paper underscore a dialogic relationship between the protagonist, the text, and the reader, where critical readers heed to the textual gaps and silences; because of the inaccessible, illegible and unreadable room in the text and witness, this theoretical explorations of the act of reading performatively create “a space and position where reading is interrupted and finally impossible” (Lang *ibid*). In this sense, unreadability and its following creativity can be regarded as a typical aspect of texts about

slavery. Meantime, Michaels remarks, “for testimony to avoid losing its proper function,” it must be “performative.” Hence, the role of “the reader of the ‘performative’ text will be in the position not of someone who reads about the “horror” and understands it; he or she will be in the position of ‘facing horror.’” (142)

Conclusion

The past matters only to the extent that it makes you who you are today, to the extent that you use it to create what you have today . . . and that is what I want to share with every African American—don’t let slavery embitter you, but let it truly free you, because you have been through and survived the worst.

Oprah Winfrey, *Journey to Beloved* (23)

By having Dana in a dilemma on several decisions such as whether she should kill or keep alive Rufus or not, Butler incites contested readings, offering readers a multi-layered meditation on political questions that dodge definite resolution. *Kindred* works to mobilize their repetition of representing issues of slavery from a different perspective with the protagonist taken back to the pre-civil war plantation to witness the very moment of her origin. This repetition, including both *Kindred's* theme of dealing with slavery and the protagonists frequent visits to the past, has the power to “enable a deeper historical understanding and a responsible and ethical discourse” among readers. Dana’s lost arms, her witness of the traumatic experiences of the enslaved, and postmemorial response to an inherited trauma in the text, instead of acting like empty signifiers, affectively re-traumatize distant readers/viewers into surrogate victims who, also having witnessed the atrocity so often with the protagonist,

become able to memorize, mourn, and work through such events. As our memory does not entail events themselves but of representations and reenactments, this reading experience of repetitively confronting horror does not desensitize nor anesthetize us to it, or prevent us from shock, thus demanding an endless escalation of disturbing imagery, as survivors might fear.²¹⁾ Conversely, repetitive witness of inheritance of slavery triggers the trans-generation postmemory to produce the effect of reliving trauma that was lived as compulsive repetition by survivors and contemporary witnesses.

Kindred is a novel that interweaves histories in which Butler pursues to narrativize and recover from invisibility, with the reverberations of the antebellum South resonating among readers. The transportation of Dana to the past necessitates her testimony to be read, heard, and viewed, making the inaccessible accessible by making Dana a living archive able to reinstate the historical legacy of slavery. When Dana “pulled the book down” so that “she could see the page he [Rufus] had been reading,” “[a] photograph of Sojourner Truth stared back at me [Dana] solemn-eyed” (141). We are not just reading the past; the past is reading us too.

Notes

- 1) This work is supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (c) [19K00460]. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from *Kindred*.
- 2) Geoffrey H. Hartman, 152. I also referred to Marianne Hirsch, 104.
- 3) Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 166.
- 4) Luckhurst, 88.
- 5) Beaulieu, xvi.
- 6) Morrison (2019), 70 and 71.

- 7) For this discussion, I referred to Francis.
- 8) Morrison (2019), 238.
- 9) Levy-Hussen, 2016b, 197
- 10) Sami Schalk, 37.
- 11) I referred to John C. Snider.
- 12) In contrast to Morrison's "rememory," Hirsch theorizes "postmemory" as "moving from the familial and embodied workings of rememory to the mediated structures of postmemory" (2016a, 23).
- 13) Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 10.
- 14) I referred to Levy-Aida for this, 28.
- 15) Quoted in Hirsch, 117.
- 16) This approach correspond to the terms Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has employed, "reparative reading." As Hirsch clarifies, reparative reading differs from "paranoid reading" by which one attempts to expose a "true knowledge" with an anticipatory, monopolistic, and demystifying attitude. Instead, reparative reading focuses on "contingent" and "mutable" elements to bring multi-layered contradictions to the surface (24).
- 17) As to the aspect of the novel which reflect the contemporary era's second-wave feminism political slogan "the personal is political," see Megan Behrent.
- 18) Rushdy, "Families of Orphans," 154.
- 19) Lang, 17.
- 20) This is also quoted by Lang, 17.
- 21) I referred to Hirsch, 108.

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