A Side Taken
Relating to Slavery in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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We're not all here –
the drowned are missing.[1]

What does it mean, "to take sides"? While the first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen not only many governments of both the global North and South overtaken by right-wing conservative to right-wing populist parties but also a radical turn in polarizations during political debates, the urgency of taking a stand has dramatically increased for liberals, the left-leaning, academics, and all who have long managed to keep themselves out of such debates as well. Calls for restitution,[2] demands for the return of pillaged cultural goods through to reparation payments for the destruction of countries, if not even continents, due to the abduction and enslavement of 60-100 million African people,[3] and for the genocide

1 Slogan from demonstrations for saving refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, 2018, in Germany and elsewhere ("Wir sind nicht alle, es fehlen die Ertrunkenen").

2 On the issue of the sum of reparation payments, based on surveys by the United Nations' Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent 2015, Kehinde Andrews writes: Reparations were paid to the slave-owners; the enslaved received nothing and fell into new relations of dependence at former slaveholders' operations as a result of exploitative paid labor; nations that had been released into "independence" from the colonial powers were forced to pay enormous sums for the colonial powers' legacies, something which they are still doing to this day (between 1825 and 1947 totally impoverished Haiti paid 90 million francs to France). Andrews 2017: n.p.. If solely the wages of enslaved persons in the USA were calculated, the sum would be 6-14 billion dollars. Historian David Olusoga cites the research by University College London/The Wales Office, "The Legacies of British Slave Ownership Project", and a Slave Compensation Commission: From 1834, compensation equivalent to 17 billion pounds today was paid out to 46,000 Britons (refinanced through the increased value-added tax, which in turn affected the poor disproportionately; slaves were forced to continue to work without payment for years, those in the house for four years, field hands for six), Olusoga 2015. "Slavery Reparations Could Cost Up to $14 Trillion, according to US Surveys", Craemer 2015: n.p. See also Shanahan 2019.

3 Between the late fifteenth and the end of the nineteenth century, 12.4 million Africans were kidnapped (two thirds of them between 1700 and 1808). It is not known how many people

committed against aborigines in Australia as well as in South and North America, are beginning to send shockwaves through the European colonial states. On paper, taking sides seems feasible for a major proportion of white Europeans: We condemn the crimes of the past. But deducing from this history today's extreme differences between prosperous and impoverished countries, or among population groups within western nations, and taking action accordingly is less of a smooth procedure. There are films such as *13th* by Ava du Vernay, which traces the continuity of, for example, US slavery and persistent racism into the jail system and up to Black Lives Matter;[4] there are exhibitions on the history of the wealth of specifically named British merchants and their families due to the slave trade, as at the Bristol Museum, the Museum of the Docklands London, the Museum of Slavery in Liverpool, and others; there are numerous fine art works and projects that work through the complicated connections between global and individual history up into the here and now. A rethinking is demanded by the specific relationships between today's extreme imbalances and subjectivities: How are we as individuals, in the present day, to take sides within a history of violence, and how much of this history has been adopted in the things we take for granted, not only consumption habits, but also language and worldviews, emotions, and structures of desire?

A further reaching potential of taking sides examines the part of the self as part of the 'side'. Privileges and spheres of influence can be in play in this context. After taking sides, you are not the same. Octavia Butler writes it thus in *Kindred* (1979), the novel that connects the US present day with the US history of slavery,[5] as the

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died on the inner-Africa route to the ships; researchers assume one tenth to up to one half of all captives. A conservative estimate of 15% yields a further 1.8 million dead in Africa. 1.8 million died en route on the Middle Passage. 10.6 million survivors became forced laborers, mostly on plantations. A further 15% (or more) died in the first year of forced labor. Across categories, 5 million people died. In other words, 14 million people were enslaved, and 9 million forced laborers survived (Rediker: 2007, 5). This is also recorded by Michael Zeuske (1495-1880: 12.5 million abducted; 11-12 million arrived in the Americas alive) (Zeuske 2015: 19).

4 In 2016 Ava du Vernay's Film *13th* (named for the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution on the prohibition of slavery) illustrated present-day intersections of race, justice and mass incarceration in the United States in order to demonstrate the hypothesis that slavery has been perpetuated in practices since the end of the American Civil War through such actions as criminalizing behavior, disenfranchisement, lynchings, Jim Crow, and the prison-industrial complex. Today there are 2.3 million detainees in the USA, the highest percentage rate of any national population in the world. Today more black US citizens live under criminal surveillance than there were slaves in 1850.

5 Prior to American independence, the majority of African enslaved persons (approx. 300,000) was abducted to the British colonies of North America, followed by a further 100,000 enslaved persons between the American War of Independence and the War of Secession. In the Southern states the figure grew to approx. four million enslaved persons by the end of the War of Secession in 1865. "This forced migration [of the Atlantic trade in people]

new German translation of the title, *Verbunden* ('connected') (2016, in Berlin's publishing house w_orten & meer) suggests, and not only in respect of kin, or relatedness, although this latter becomes a component of the complicated novel structure. We are descendants of slaveholder-societies, children of the children of profiteers and/or victims, not necessarily blood-related, but part of societies that are founded thereon in economy, culture, and ideology; these lines of descent become tangled, do not always deliver clear sides and positions, but at the same time they issue a persistent call to answer for the consequences, even for sides that we have not sought out for ourselves. These days, presumably, taking a stance on the situation also means getting engaged in the situation ourselves.

But how fictitious is the involvement of abstract temporal expanses? That Afrofuturism formats, with their own understanding of time and historiography by and for Blacks, African people, and people of color, are becoming so popular in the late 2010s[6] is perhaps owed partly to this invitation to take sides. Does this history's vast scale not surpass individual agency?

Kindred 1976/1815

Dana vanishes in her living room and reappears a few feet away, covered in mud, just seconds later. As she tries to explain to Kevin what she has experienced, we the readers are initiated into their relationship, the shocking nature of the event, and the place where Dana was. The feeling of nausea marks her transition into the world of the Southern states during the period of slavery, to a farm in Maryland in the early nineteenth century, far away from the new apartment in California, of which the couple is currently taking occupancy in 1976. Amid shelves and typewriters the two intend to try and write their books; that Dana is Black and Kevin white becomes clear only through descriptions of the way people react to their

made America. Between 1450 and 1830 6-8 million people came from Africa to America, but only 2-3 million people came from Europe. The indigenous population of approximately 60 million in circa 1600 had shrunk to some 5 million and did not grow to 15 million again until circa 1850. In the nineteenth century, post 1819/20, another 3-4 million people were abducted from African regions via the Hidden Atlantic [...] and an unknown number was smuggled (estimates assume up to one million)." In 1840-1940 more than 30 million "coolies" were transported from India and China to North America. There was no mass migration of Europeans to America and Oceania until 1830. (Zeuske 2012: 42. Cf. Baucom 2005)

6 For comments on the popularity and the "strange attractor" Afrofuturism, see: Greg Tate, Rise of the Astro Blacks, 199-201; Anna Everett, Afrofuturism On My Mind: Imagining Black Lives in a Post-Obama World, 251-277; John Akomfrah, Kodwo Eshun, The Secessionist Manifestos of Certain Received Wisdoms, 363-369, and others in: Henriette Gunkel, kara lynch (eds.), 2019.

wedding.[7] For the Black Lives Matter movements of the 2010s, Dana's time travels would be exactly the plot to form a backdrop for persistent racism. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the Black Power movements were formulating clear positions, Octavia Butler becomes a voice of Black literature and the civil liberties movement – and simultaneously she thinks through existing complicities with the history of oppression. The sci-fi mechanism of time travel is employed for the protagonist's transfer back to the slavery era, and as we read we are led to confront a history of violence we are reluctant to see, reactions (shock, defense, the attempt to influence the casting back) are played through for us, and various genre-typical variants are reworked. During a time when the black civil rights movement in the USA was ever more clamorously denouncing the persistent discrimination, Octavia Butler wrote a novel which, for all its critical positioning, also investigates complicities and such things as 'minor kinships' – between present day and past, between black heritage and white heritage. Where Dana, an independent, feminist woman, lands, she is considered a slave. Once, when she accidentally takes Kevin along with her, he is regarded as her owner. Both of them learn how to deal with the horror of being cast back and the atrocity of slavery society, but are unable to influence the time travel deliberately – in this instance, taking sides has as its cause no free decision, no courageous planning out of conviction. But there is a trick.

Dana finds herself in the past whenever Rufus is in mortal danger. First she saves him, a four-year-old white boy, from drowning; she is almost shot dead by his father, and lands back in her living room a few minutes later. After the second and third trip, during which she is obliged to come to the ever-older boy's aid, she recognizes the pattern: He seems to call her – and she can return home only when her own life is in jeopardy. Written from the perspective of the astonished time-traveler, who attempts to come to terms with what she perceives, with the emotional confrontations, Dana tries to figure out as much as possible about the historical slavery context, in order to survive within it. The reader gets entangled in an exemplary, violence-steeped setting of a specific family history, in an abyss of ownership structures, contempt for humanity, and acts of rape, and has to reflect this confrontation: How are we to apply ourselves to this cruel past? Dana has no choice, she cannot look away, and she realizes that the boy whom she saves is going to have a child with a black slave, a child who is to be her own great-great grandmother. Here, what is a typical figure in the genre of science fiction literature – the 'grandfather paradox' (would I have been born had my father not been conceived,

7 For more about the *burden of interracial romance*, see Parham (2009): 1327: "The couple will always draw black looks, the black gaze: Don't you know that they raped our women?". The various consequences of the trips for Kevin and Dana are discussed by Donadey 2008. More about the relationship in Paulin 1997, and about the role of books within the relationship in Levecq 2000: 528.

can I influence the course of history, would I ever come 'back'?) – reveals itself to be most profoundly political: as a reference to another unspoken element of history (slaveholders raped female slaves, even for years; the conceived children were de jure their property and were often sold on, which once again ruptures the enslaved's lives socially and psychically;[8] also, women as slaveholders are only recently coming into focus[9]); but it is also political in the sense that these impure affinities depict relationships between oppressor and oppressed, relationships from which it is impossible to liberate history right to the present day. Dana is not simply an opponent of slavery, and she is not only a victim in the house of the slave-owning Weylin family in 1815. She observes Rufus, who as the son and heir is set to assume the role of plantation master one day, and attempts to weave notions of humanism and justice into this structure. To do this, she herself must adapt to the structure of the house and turn collaborator, in order to secure her own life in the nineteenth and the twentieth century at once. She will persuade Alice to let Rufus enslave her also sexually, which saves Alice's life at first, but Alice goes on to see her husband and children sold, to give birth to two children forced upon her by Rufus, and to hang herself when the latter (she mistakenly believes) are likewise sold – and Dana had hoped that Alice would live until the birth of her great-grandmother. This story exudes complicity from every pore.

Complicity / On Not Taking Sides

Though Octavia Butler was involved in Black Power activism, she was unable to espouse the anger directed by that movement toward the generations who had not emancipated themselves, who despised the stereotypes of conformist Uncle Toms and mammies while in their resentment restated such figures; while Butler works equally on the erosion of these figures and on the ideals of heroic resistance (Dubey 2013: 34). She prefers to reference the slave narratives that openly professed their

8 The "abolition" of slavery was not only fought for for a very long time, it was also drawn out over decades and left the wealth with the slaveholders and the servitude with the enslaved. At first, it was not actually "slavery" that was prohibited, but initially (1808) only the import of "new slaves" from Africa. The four million enslaved in America largely remained where they were at first (and the "40 acres and a mule" promised to them were never realized). One of the consequences of this was the enslaved went on to produce more children, who automatically were slaves; it is a largely unknown fact that there were at least two large camps for this purpose in the Southern states, in which women were raped; enslaved men were forced to this end, sometimes the women's own relatives. "Two of the largest breeding farms were located in Richmond, VA, and the Maryland Eastern-Shore", writes Spivey 2019: n.p.

9 North 2019: n.p.; see also Jones-Rogers 2019; see also Dietze 2013, about white feminism's relations to Black struggles.

restricted agency, as did Harriet Jacobs, who was able to hope not for genuine liberty, but for "something akin to freedom" (Jacobs, in Dubey 2013: 34); skeptical toward a rhetoric that focused solely on revolutionary agency, Butler formulates, rather, an "ethics of compromise". (Crossley, in Dubey 2013: 34)

Complicity means that Dana does not cut a heroic figure; she is no savior, no liberator of the enslaved, by whom she is even insulted as a "white n*". (Dubey 2013: 347) When she, the uncompromising and emancipated author of the present day, subjugates herself to the violent rule of the plantation and notes her inner conflicts, it becomes clear in the novel's "double-voicedness of the discourse" (Donadey 2008: 70) that the present-day reader would probably do the same thing.

Practiced neither in subordination nor in survival skills and constantly exposed to the inner struggle between rebellion and fear, Dana jeopardizes herself repeatedly, almost dies of a punishment by the white master, is betrayed by a slave who is afraid of the consequences of Dana's forbidden reading and writing lessons to the black children, and is herself ultimately obliged to fend off attempted rape by Rufus. Her ruse is to slit her own wrists, in order to set off the mechanism of time travel when her life is under threat – which absolutely means risking death, since the journey through time cannot be scheduled with precision.[10] Time travel is often associated with vehicles, with devices or magical places, and the journey itself is never a matter of life and death. But *Kindred* is about heritage and descent, no longer about 'what if…' thought experiments and potential variations, but about one single shared history. Devotion to this past, which has not passed and is embedded in the present, does not lead to a symmetry, but leaves you one-sided.

It is the minor considerations – will I need to take my toothbrush? – the minute practical considerations concerning clothing, the introduction of aspirin to early-nineteenth-century medicine before its invention, that lend the novel its force of conviction. What would I do if I found myself in a situation like that? Historical novels not featuring time travel also draw the reader, for as long as she is reading, into another world, but here the state of being drawn is itself a constant theme. This world is, and is also not, different; it is mine without my knowing it, without my having decided whether or not I want to see it. Colonial crimes and crimes against humanity are part of the history that defines my culture, my prosperity, my everyday life.[11] I cannot decide against it, the question is only what do I do

10 Of course, what Dana and we as the readers can not experience is the "Social Death" of slavery described by Orlando Patterson 1982. I thank Anja Michaelsen for pointing Patterson out to me.

11 This also applies for epistemological forms after the European Enlightenment, see on the relation between European philosophy and the slave trade Buck-Morss 2009; Därmann 2009; Diefenbach 2018 (about Hobbes' Anthropology of slavery); Därmann 2018; Därmann 2020; Sonderegger 2018a; Sonderegger 2018b.

about that circumstance; I barely need to take sides, for the side has already taken hold. This spatial, physical metaphor is played out in *Kindred*: Dana will lose her arm at a particular location.

> "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone." (Butler 1979/2018: 1)

Thus begins the novel. In the face of the inexplicable history, it is language and storytelling that yield a meaning. "Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently." (Butler 1979/2018: 9) Dana tells Kevin everything with such precision that she even remembers things she had not been consciously aware of noticing in the first place. Other media from the Gutenberg galaxy are able to assist (historical books, printed maps, forged passage papers), may be insufficient (such as the absent documentation of Black life in the official archives, the covering up of crimes), or are accessories (*Gone with the Wind* remains intolerable; a biography of Sojourner Truth must fall victim to a book-burning), but they are better than television. Experiences afforded by the latter remain second-hand; the first trips feel like something that Dana has seen on television,[12] and no movie has been able to prepare her for witnessing a whipping (Butler 1979/2018: 32) or getting whipped herself.

Writing Slavery

Christina Sharpe retraces these connecting lines between slavery and today's life reality also in her own family. "I include the personal here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people in the wake; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery." (Sharpe 2016: 8) The afterlives signify the persistent racist exclusion of Black people and people of color from areas of society associated with prosperity, from education systems through residential districts to workplaces, career opportunities, and the chance to build up material security over several generations, which is linked with improved health, higher life expectancy, and a lower likelihood of ending up in jail, for example. 'The wake' means: "the track left on water's surface by a ship, the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow" (Sharpe 2016: 2) – Blacks in the USA are in the wake of slavery up to the present day. As Saidiya Hartman did before her, Sharpe employs her autobiographical examples "to

12 "[…] like something I got second hand", Butler 1979/2018: 11.

tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction." (Sharpe 2016: 8) Here speaks an I that feeds off negation, off the absence of kin, genealogy, and anchoring in the world.[13] The objective is that 'we' "encounter the ways we are positioned through and by them, the ways we occupy the 'I' of Hartman's '*I am the afterlife of slavery*'" (Sharpe 2016: 33) – here, people of African descent are primarily addressed in the We, but whites will be obliged to face this issue too.[14] This issue of addressing, being concerned by, and responsibility for this persistent history is complicated by the fact that the historical lines therein cannot be defined so easily. Individual family histories may have been preserved that combine abduction, slavery, and the enslaved's descendants and provide exemplary narratives; and no less powerful, in a different register, are the statistics that have mapped the distribution of wealth, life expectancy, social segregation etcetera across the twentieth century and are able to deliver, in figures and graphics, the probabilities with which a Black or a white person will land in which part of the pie chart.[15]

At the same time Christina Sharpe formulates, "terror has a history and it is deeply atemporal." (Sharpe 2016: 5) Something does not add up in the spoken narratives, or in the mathematical proofs either. They come up against blanks, the un(re)countable, and these are not only the millions of undocumented abducted dead, the absence of archive material or of people who might remember the dead. It is also the unthinkable aspect of the whole history, the inhumanity as part of the normal.

The non-representability of cruelty meets the non-portrayability of temporal relations in trauma.[16] A traumatic event cannot be repeated in the recollection; it has a lingering presence, but it cannot be taken into consideration directly. For her book *Lose Your Mother* Saidiya Hartman bore down as closely as possible on the traumatic condition of slavery; her writing goes into its interweaving of individual

13 "We are the descendants of Middle Passage survivors. […] It was the tribe created by the rapacity of African elites, the territorial expansion of strong states, and the greed, cruelty, and arrogance of white men possessing the world. It was the tribe of those stolen from their natal land, stripped of their 'country marks', and severed from their kin. […] A philosopher had once described it as an identity produced by negation." Hartman 2007: 103.

14 "This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and of slavery." Hartman, cited in Sharpe 2016: 33.

15 "White Americans have seven times the wealth of black Americans on average. Though black people make up nearly 13 percent of the United States population, they hold less than 3 percent of the nation's total wealth. The median family wealth for white people is $171,000, compared with just $17,600 for black people. It is worse on the margins. According to the Economic Policy Institute, 19 percent of black households have zero or negative net worth. Just 9 percent of white families are that poor. Today's racial wealth gap is perhaps the most glaring legacy of American slavery and the violent economic dispossession that followed." Lee 2019: n.p. See also: Desmond 2019.

16 For "the central paradox at the heart of trauma literature", see Donadey 2008: 70.

history and history of the Atlantic, into both archives and the craving for absent persons and into the present day. "My journey along the slave route is a device, a vehicle for posing a relation", a hybrid form comprised of "personal narrative, a historical meditation, and a metadiscourse on history." (Hartman 2011: 111) There is no other way of witnessing. Hartman spends a year in Ghana, visits the slave jail Elmira Castle, and attempts to imagine the thousands of captives in the dungeon there (Hartman 2007: 119) or even individuals, and since this does not work, she describes herself as a "failed witness" (Hartman 2007: 98), in an impossible time again, because how could she have witnessed enslavement. Simultaneously the present day is full of racism, people enslaved in jails, people held back at school, people receiving deficient medical care, people affected by HIV who possess only three cents of every dollar etcetera, and that is the present day of slavery: "I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it." (Hartman 2007: 133) "My present was the future that had been created by men and women in chains, by human commodities, by chattel persons. I tried hard to envision a future in which this past had ended and most often I failed." (Hartman 2007: 233)

Saidiya Hartman's book is a self-experiment. (Hartman 2007: 118) It speaks (out) of an I that is at once constituted and undermined by what it describes. It learns, it is self-critical, it sees itself with the eyes of others. It dissolves its own boundaries with the history of the dead, it links itself with the dead, not in the mode of the visual but, at crucial points, via hearing. "[W]hat could I remember after hundred years of forgetting?" is an impossible question that equates the I with a part of the enslaved We and ignores the temporal leaps. (Hartman 2007: 157) An impossible combination of the unmanageably big and the subjective. The necessity of representing what we cannot represent must be affirmed as the impossibility that conditions our being able to know something about the past.[17] Storytelling is crucial for this undertaking, because it produces a relationship between past, present, and the futures. (Hartman, 2008: 13) Hartman's writing does not intend the text functions of objectivity and subjectivity as narration in the sense of the closed form of exposition-climax-dénouement (and not the narration reconstructed by Elahe Haschemi Yekani as the medium of bourgeois class identity[18]). A journal is an identity-giver; a historical record refers to the truth; an account means: report, reckoning,

17 "The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future." (Hartman, 2008: 13)

18 The slave novel is part of "the emerging novel of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The act of reading as empathetic identification with Others – accelerated by the technical revolutions and increased literacy at the time – becomes the principal means of emotional access to this middle-class identity […]", Yekani 2016: 117-134; among other points she refers to the convention of describing atrocities (as marker of authenticity and affectivity

perhaps counting of slaves, counting of dead. *Lose Your Mother* counts/recounts all of that (under an imperative that does not address all in equal measure). Hartman describes her writing method as "critical fabulation" (Hartman 2008), in a combination of historical research, critical theory, and fictional forms.[19]

Historians, too, problematize the limitations of scientific writing, the forms of representation for information, for things past, for facts gleaned from documents. Marcus Rediker's book "The Slave Ship" (2007) begins with a scenic description of an abducted Black woman; his book too alternates between facts, analysis, political categorization, and narrative elements, while his repeated notion of 'drama' is less a critical reflection on his own writing than a marker of the combination of universal and individual, and it functions metaphorically: 'it was a drama', in the sense of: 'it was bad'. Between his extensively researched passages on the "global history of the slave trade in the Atlantic region", as well as on what he described as the "Hidden Atlantic", Michael Zeuske also works repeatedly with biographical passages, kept more sober than empathic, in order "to complement", as a contrast or a juxtaposition, a "history devoid of people" (Zeuske 2015: 235) with the method of "microstoria", for, he writes, the history of slavery is not narratable (also not filmable) – not, for instance, for lack of documents, but because these are disparate, form no narrative, and are "decaying" (Zeuske 2015: 1).[20]

White male representatives of the discipline of history consider slavery in a different time than Black female scholars do. For Hartman and for Sharpe the past has not passed, it is captive in our time; what they miss (rootedness, life, equal rights) is here and now. The one time has passed and has consequences for the present day; the other time is always with us, like the call from a dying family member can come at any moment. Christina Sharpe depicts family photographs, deploying captions like this one: "Everyone in the photograph is now dead." (Sharpe 2016: 23) Saidiya Hartman says of the museum in Elmira Castle that, amid all the objects and documents of the slaveholders, the slaves were missing. (Hartman 2007: 116) If she ever does succeed in placing herself in relation to the past, then it is not via

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trigger), to forms of self-representation in reaction to prejudices (125) as well as to the role of the genre in the construction of British nationality (123).

19 She also sees a tool for dealing productively with the given ruptures and leaps in working scientifically; cf. Hartman 2008: 11. Cf. Hartman 1997. For an attempt to think and write the non/reification of human beings, see Moten, in: ibid./Harney 2016; for the question of violence and academic writing see Bergermann 2020.

20 Zeuske 2015: 1. Cf. by contrast: "Schauen wir - indem wir uns vorstellen, wir stünden in einem imaginären Raumschiff mit riesigen Panoramafenstern etwa über dem Zentrum des Atlantiks - auf die räumlichen Strukturen des Meeres, so ergibt sich eine klare Gliederung." ("Let's have a look – imagining ourselves standing on an imaginary spaceship with enormous panorama windows approximately above the center of the Atlantic – at the spatial structures of the sea, a clear structure thus emerges.") (Zeuske 2012: 39)

the eyes but while hearing. Her book (although it comprises photos) ends with a song, which she hears with her eyes closed. (Hartman 2007: 235) This is the time of the present day. Hartman thinks and feels her way to the others' position, the slaves' position, against the background of kinship, of genealogy. Here, the empathic woman is the depicting/writing woman herself. Reading can appeal to or alter one as a subject, and this I is also never complete, it can remain characterized by an open desire, as Hartman formulated it in relation to the historical crime and the ever-absent slaves: "[…] missing the dead was as close to them as I would come." (Hartman 2007: 135) Despite this, with these unreachables she forms a we in a common country: "We may have forgotten our country, but we have not forgotten our dispossession." (Hartman 2007: 87) An exhortation to all of us whose kinship with the past is yet to be comprehended.

Kin and the Nation

In the 1960s and 1970s critical historians and the Black Power movement applied themselves to a "history from below" and to antebellum fugitive slave narratives. (Dubey 2013: 346) Subjective testimonies of slaves were pronounced to be historical evidence for the first time, and there were heated debates over who in the literary field may speak on behalf of the slave. Movies and television shows offered a specific perspective on slavery, usually filtered by white narrators. The most popular shaper of national remembrance of slavery was Alex Haley's neo-slave narrative *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (published 1976), which was translated into more than twenty languages, received the Pulitzer Prize, sold almost nine million copies and was adapted into an eight-part, ABC television miniseries (1977) that attracted more than 130 million viewers from all over the world. (Mitchell 2002: 33) Madhu Dubey opines that *Roots* "established slavery as marketable material for mass entertainment" and crucial for "the post–1960s process of national reconciliation."[21] Nadine Flagel considers it an irony that *Roots* aimed at "genealogical and psychic completion and wholeness, achieved though contact with and knowledge about one's ancestors"[22], while *Kindred* stages a wounded, disfigured, unwhole character. Where most neo-slave narratives dealt with healing, *Kindred* dealt with maiming – getting close to the past is dangerous, and the wounds of slavery are still open. (Flagel 2012: 232) Additionally, *Kindred* alternates between familiar scenes of the modern

21 "Haley's genealogical saga fed black nationalist pride through its recovery of African origins for contemporary African American identity, while his 'up from slavery' narrative endorsed the promise of the American Dream, impressing upon viewers the long distance traveled from slavery to the post-civil rights present." (Dubey 2013: 347)

22 Flagel 2012: 232, and she quotes Butler: "I couldn't let her come back whole", 233.

present day and a defamiliarization of American life: "Sharing the bleak view of racial progress that impels the neo-slave narrative genre, Butler revisits slavery in order to dispute dominant public narratives of the civil rights movement as inaugurating a postracial phase of national history." (Dubey 2013: 360) Numerous dates in *Kindred* refer to the national historiography of the USA, the self-conception of the USA as a white nation, in an "intersection of a science fiction of the body with American history" which Benjamin Robertson read as a biopolitical one. (Robertson 2010: 363) Dana embodies a history of the nation based on rape (she is alive only because Rufus raped Alice), she is unable to change the course of things, she involuntarily assumes shared responsibility for a violent history that causes her problems to this day ("that she is white as well as black; that she is American and not American"),[23] although Dana's final trip takes place on July 4, 1976 and hence on the day on which the bicentennial of the founding of the USA is to be celebrated, the independence of the thirteen British colonies. (Mitchell 2001: 52f.) Is slavery, are the slaves' descendants part of this history, of this nation? It can be a nation only if it embraces its entire history, and US-citizen Dana "cannot become fully American through synthesis or by ignoring that part of her that is understood as an impurity in a nation defined by whiteness." (Robertson 2010: 375) But at the same time it can be argued that precisely "[t]his split between competing forces within one's own body conditions what it means to be American."[24] Hence it would be precisely Dana who is American, and the true America will have only one arm, being obliged to regard its maimed state. Dana is as little capable of dissuading Rufus from committing his crimes as a trip from the American present day into his story is capable of changing the course of history, but the trip can accomplish a turn to taking responsibility for the crimes. Anne Donadey read *Kindred* as a "national allegory" and found further allegorical dates, for instance the year 1819, the period of Dana's third trip back in time, another bicentennial since, after all, the first enslaved persons arrived from Africa in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619; and she indicates Juneteenth, June 19, 1865, which is regarded as the day slavery ended, African American Emancipation Day

23 Robertson 2010: 374. "When I got into college [...], the Black Power Movement was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. [...] He said, 'I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents.' [...] That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary not only for their lives but his as well." (Octavia Butler, cited in Parham 2009: 1320)

24 Ibid. "(In some sense, Butler here offers a solution to the problem of e pluribus unum, the individual within the collective.)" (Robertson 2010: 376)

(Dana comes back for the final time on June 19th, 1976). (Donadey 2008: 67) Moreover, Dana's and Kevin's last name, Franklin, is a reference to Benjamin Franklin, one of the founders at once of the nation and of the history of slavery (he "owned" two slaves, granted them freedom, and advocated for the abolition of slavery and education of the freed in 1790). Finally, Donadey asks why California and Maryland were chosen as plot locations; after all, they cannot be so easily located in the "Northern states v. Southern states" contrast (California did not become a federal state until 1850 and was not a slave state; in many Americans' perceived geography, Maryland is more of a state of the North or the East than of the South); Donadey posits that it can be interpreted that all Americans are addressed, from coast to coast: "By choosing states that cannot be easily identified today as North/Yankee or South/Rebel, Butler is intimating that the entire country is implicated in the need to confront the history of slavery. In particular, racism should not just be seen as something other regions can easily eschew responsibility for by blaming it only on the Deep South."[25] A feminist reading will be obliged to note in addition that the two defining people in Dana's life are male and white – allegorically, the instances of agency remain more immutable than the institution of chattel slavery.

A Side Taken

Dana realizes that she and Kevin are able to adapt to plantation life because they feel like actors who can return home at some point.[26] The year 1976 seems to be a kind of 'cushioning', and yet Dana states that she is not always able to maintain this double consciousness.[27] What is more is that she feels herself, in a certain

25 Donadey 2008: 68. Angelyn Mitchell offers a slightly different interpretation: "Although below the Mason-Dixon line, Maryland is often not remembered as a state of slavery, even though it is the birth state of the self-emancipated Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as well as the state from which they both escaped. By choosing the setting of Maryland, Butler reminds her readers of how widespread slavery was and that slavery was not confined to the deep South. Her choice of setting also allows Butler to dispel the notion of 'deep South slavery' as the worst, when in fact, any type of slavery is barbaric and inhumane." (Mitchell 2002: 52)

26 "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." (Butler 1979/2018: 104)

27 "… 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 […] I can't maintain the distance. I'm drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don't know what to do." (Butler 1979/2018: 107)

manner, drawn toward Rufus; at any rate, she does not hate him on account of his cruel conduct – until, ultimately, his proprietorial ambition extends to her as well, whereupon she demurs as in veiled intimacy before she stabs him. Then, her side is taken.

> "He lost his hold on my hand for a moment, but caught my arm before I could get away. Then he brought up the fist of his free hand to punch me once, [...] he collapsed across me, somehow still alive, still holding my arm. [...] I pushed him away somehow – everything but his hand still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching sickness. Something harder and stronger that Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it – painlessly, at first – melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving.
> Something... paint, plaster, wood – a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home – in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it – or growing into it. Form the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped. I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed." (Butler 1979/2018: 291f.)

Kevin, who is unable to return without Dana and is obliged to stay in the past for five years by his own time calculation, comes back not physically, but psychically 'maimed'. Turning to (even one's own) history leaves scars. Why is it the loss of the arm, in Dana's case? To what purpose serves the disfiguring transition? Not only the white man Rufus, the past too has Dana in its grip. She loses a limb. Arm and hand, which she could use to make a grab, are lost precisely where a separation is accomplished, in a wall between two rooms, in a presumably white wall, dismembered. Does one grow into history, does one grow out of it? How is one absorbed, how is one melted, meshed into it? Screams cannot explain; written language plays a role in the novel's epilog, when Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland in order to research the plantation's history in archives.[28] They reconstruct one more small piece of history, the demise of the farm, the covering up of Dana's murder, and Hagar's path, but all in all the violent nature of the history of slavery remains largely undocumented – and in a certain manner, unwritable. What remains is a side taken.

28 Donna Haraway uses the term Plantationocene (alongside Anthropocene, Capitalocene and Chthulucene) for her concept of *Making Kin*, in order to emphasizes the plantation system as a historical era that is just as significant as the oft-mentioned Anthropocene. (Haraway 2015: 160; Haraway 2016)

Marisa Parham offers the following interpretation for the fact that time passes at different speeds in the two rooms: While one person is in the past, for the person in the present as much time passes as is required to read the history of the past.[29] On all levels, *Kindred* thematizes the unavoidable mediacy of conjointness, the body as archive, but within it also the "privileging of daily, bodily, lived experience [a]s central to the African American expressive tradition: Shit is real." (Parham 2009: 1322-1323.)

Mediality of Genres

For perception of the novel and for perception of slavery equally, realism plays a major role. Its markers are physical pain and the portrayal of pain. Pain guarantees testimony, both Dana's and ours. Long passages are devoted to the constant threat of whipping,[30] the witnessing of whipping and of one's own experience of pain: Dana has arrived in slavery, and Butler never dismisses us from the presence of

29 A "[...] radical temporal disjuncture between the two timespaces. When Dana and Kevin are together in either timespace, they experience time in the same way. But when only one is in 1815, for instance, the one left behind in 1976 experiences the other's absence as roughly equivalent to the amount of time it would have taken for him or her to read about what transpired in the other's life in the past, thus illustrating within *Kindred* the difference between the time of living and the time of reading. What to Dana feels like two hours in 1815 feels like just minutes to Kevin, feels just as long as it would take to read this page." (Parham 2009: 1322)

30 Recent research links the exploitation strategies and biopolitical economies of the plantation system with the factory and the history of management. Here it is not yet about bodies having to adapt to machines, but about measuring and notation systems. During a recording process not yet appraised to its full extent, daily notes were taken for every single slave of how much cotton he or she had picked, thus gauging individual performance that yielded a personal "quota"; this taking of measurements by the overseers very quickly transitioned into a penal system, for after weighing of the daily yield per person, every downward deviation was punished by a defined number of lashes; then the master transferred the yield to a ledger and the slate was wiped clean again (ledgers and slates were produced in the Northern states, which indirectly also profited from slavery in many ways), and a new quota was set for the next day. Quotas rose and rose, and between 1800 and 1860 plantations' productivity grew to meet the increased demand for material by the new spinning machines in Manchester. The complexity of measuring bodies (also noted according to age and gender), measurements, accounting, whippings, and mutual inspection levels is viewed by Desmond as a vast test bench for the future violent subdivisions of capitalism. "During the 60 years leading up to the Civil War, the daily amount of cotton picked per enslaved worker increased 2.3 percent a year. That means that in 1862, the average enslaved fieldworker picked not 25 percent or 50 percent as much but 400 percent as much cotton than his or her counterpart did in 1801." (Desmond 2019: n.p.; Ott 2014)

violence,[31] the effect of which is all the stronger for Dana's repeatedly asking herself how she is meant to shift and manage the translocation from her time into the present of the past, which is likewise our question when we apply ourselves to this journey as we read – in the to and fro between experience (it must be "real", Dana insists, because "it hurts too much not to be", Butler 1979/2018: 44) and mediality ("As real as the whole episode was, it's beginning to recede from me somehow. It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about – like something I got second hand", Butler 1979/2018: 11). Although *Kindred* is comparatively Butler's most realistic novel, she employs time travel and, with it, a means for a reflection on distance and the necessity to translocate that allows neither progressive storytelling nor other forms of illogical conclusion.[32]

Timelines are suspended, while even identities appear no longer clear-cut (in Rufus's eyes, Alice and Dana seem to be one being; Dana sees similarities between Rufus and Kevin) and desire and descent move into proximity with incestuous relations when Rufus tries to rape Dana, but has conceived her great-great grandmother prior to that…[33] What kind of temporality is that meant to be? Neither

31 "I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip … 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. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping." (Butler 1979/2018: 33 (original ellipsis). Cf. Flagel 2012: 235f., Dubey 2013: 351)

32 One illogical conclusion is performed and immediately rejected again: Now and again, with critical irony, Dana's colleagues call their Californian workplace a "slave market". "Yet the novel contains several tricky moments that elicit, only to then cast doubt on, reading procedures that too neatly conflate past and present. In a much-cited passage that appears early in *Kindred*, Dana carelessly uses the phrase 'slave market' to describe the casual labor agency through which she seeks employment. Critics have unanimously interpreted this analogy as evidence of historical continuity between antebellum chattel slavery and the late twentieth century, but Dana immediately corrects herself: 'Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway' (52). Clarifying that the labor market in Dana's present is marked not by shortage, as it was in the antebellum era, but by the existence of a vast pool of surplus workers, this passage highlights the critical shifts in the dynamics of inequality that get obscured when the present is viewed as essentially continuous with the past." (Dubey 2013: 349)

33 "The sexual encounter between master and slave is necessarily a rape, evacuating erotic and loving desire. Additionally, Dana expels the thought of incest. While genealogical relationships can be creatively reinvented and inverted in Kindred, incest needs to be avoided at all cost. The novel is full of genealogical reversions and new offshoots that turn descendants into ancestors, and twohundred-year-old elders into same-age siblings." (Loichot 2009: 44)

linear nor non-linear, no straightforward continuity but still, a deep entanglement of centuries – linear slave narratives interrupted by the unpredictability of science fiction time travel.[34] The blending of genres shakes up the individual genre's conventions; the realism of the biographical slave narrative is opposed by the fantastical aspect of science fiction. An array of authors wrote in this new genre of the 'fantastic neo-slave narrative' in the 1970s; *Kindred* ranges between identification perspectives for readers (through the first-person perspective) and distanced reflections.[35] *Kindred* tells the story of a Black American who has ancestors among both the enslaved and slaveholders, the great-great granddaughter of a *métissage*; the book itself is a *métissage* of two popular forms, slave narration and the sci-fi novel. (Flagel 2012: 217) *Kindred* hybridizes genres. (Cf. Loichot 2009: 40)

In the early twenty-first century several literary critics drew a link between *Kindred* and African and Afro-diasporic traditions, for instance the West African concept of *sankofa*, which says, "one must return to the past in order to move forward." (Donadey 2008: 77; Mitchell 2001: 51) Stella Setka recently situated the novel in a "phantasmic reincarnation" of Igbo cosmology and claims that Dana corresponds to the Ogbanje figure, a spirit that journeys between worlds. Thereby, Setka proposes, Butler refers to African traditions, rejects the Western concepts of descent and linear time,[36] and utilizes Afro-centric epistemological forms that have

34 "Crossley argues that Dana's unexplained time travel may be 'the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death ship of the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors' [...] [Dana's] disorienting nausea and fears of her travels owe as much to speculative fiction as they do to slave narratives." Flagel 2009: 1321. Toni Morrison wrote that authors of slave narratives such as Oladuah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Ann Jacobs were obliged to address a white audience, in her view; however, she sees her task in representing even sexualized violence and other unpopular topics regardless of a white audience's expectations. (Morrison 1995: 91)

35 "The 1970s marked the emergence of a new genre of African American literature – the fantastic neo-slave narrative, which draws on nonrealist devices such as time travel and supernatural possession to revisit the history of slavery. This genre includes literary as well as mass-market novels by writers including Stephen Barnes, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Ishmael Reed, and Frank Yerby and is generating a proliferating body of critical scholarship. According to critical consensus, contemporary novels of slavery disrupt realism in order to challenge established norms of historical representation but nonetheless retain a stable sense of their referent – that is, the historically specific institution of American chattel slavery." (Dubey 2013: 345)

36 Setka 2016: 93f. She refers to two Black scholars, who however do not write about Butler: Christopher N. Okonkwo, A Spirit of Dialogue: Incarnations of Ọgbañje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature, Knoxville (University of Tennessee Press) 2008. Okonkwo teaches African American and African literature at the University of Missouri. See Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, An Abiku-Ogbanje Atlas: A Pre-Text for Rereading Soyinka's *Ake*' and

been oppressed, Setka writes, by the European Enlightenment (Setka 2016: 95).[37] But Butler does not simply side with a Black heritage. Just as little is time travel a "metaphoric Middle Passage" (Mitchell 2001: 52).

Re-membering

"Allegorically, Dana's severed arm can also be interpreted as a reference to limbs that were broken off family trees through the discontinuities caused by slavery, both because of the silences of history around the prevalence of white male rape of enslaved black women and because black family members were purposefully severed from one another through being sold to different owners", writes Donadey (2008: 74), thus aligning with the common interpretation that sees the arm as a 'member' and speaks of a dismembering[38] or also disarming[39] in reference to *Kindred*. While the destruction of Black parenthood by white slaveholders effects 'amputations' in the illustrated family tree on the one hand, trees are generally no longer fitting symbols since "slavery troubles the clear distinction between blood

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Morrison's *Beloved*, in: African American Review 36.4 (2002), 663-678, idem., Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1996. Onguyemi analyses Nigerian women's literature. The Black scholars produce no link to *Kindred*; a white researcher undertakes that a decade later.

37 Setka 2016: 95. Regardless of the fact that no statement on the subject by Butler appears in her numerous interviews, this interpretation seems to be very deliberate and there is not really any evidence for it in the text, unless the Igbo figures were to be expanded so that ultimately, one could use them to explain every time-journey in every novel or movie: "Traditionally understood, *ogbanje* is an Igbo term used to signify spirits who manifest themselves in human flesh by taking over or causing a pregnancy, are born into the human world, and die young, only to begin the cycle all over again." Setka 2016: 99. "The sense of connectedness through time and across generations that arises from Dana's ogbanjism reflects the African cosmological view that all entities are rooted in a 'cosmic totality' that links everyone and everything together as inextricable parts of a cosmic whole" (Setka 2016: 98f.). Strictly speaking, the character of Dana does not at all correspond to the more detailed description of the Ogbanjes, this embodiment of a mischievous being who is "not him/herself human and who has little interest in committing to a human lineage"; the rebirth of *ogbanjism* always completes a full life cycle (with reference to Christie Achebe idem.), which is not the case here, etcetera. However, one can interpret the desire for such a reference as a symptom.

38 "The slave family is marked by a series of amputations: an immense and abrupt severing from original African roots and memory; a dismemberment of family units by practices of kidnapping or selling; literal amputations of limbs of fugitive slaves; splits between bodies turned into economic tools of production and mind; substitution of mothering and fathering by breeding; and attempted disassociation of humanity from black subjects." (Loichot 2009: 41).

39 "The loss of Dana's arm [... shows] that history can disarm the present." (Flagel 2012: 224)

and law in kinship constructions because biological filial relations between masters and slaves, for instance, are complicated by the master's legal position as owner." (Loichot 2009: 42) Rather, new terms take effect in this situation, such as "fictive kinship" (Patterson) or "plantation kinship", creating a "w/hole" (Brathwaite)[40] and, often enough, offshoots from the severed limbs. Valérie Loichot even speaks of a "poetic of limbs" (which she even sees visually reflected on the cover of the first edition, right down to the typography, see fig. 1).[41]

One part of 1976 stays in 1819. Dana and Rufus remain connected through a dead limb. Organic and inorganic fuse in the wall, they are unable to fully detach themselves from the past, the arm is not here and not there, not inside and not outside, it is on no side; but the wound also opens the body to new growth, a possible "bidirectional movement: growing out and growing back in." (Loichot 2009: 45) Where there is no written archive of slavery, Dana's body remains the 'the primary signifier', marked by the whip and by amputation in the 'hole' of the 'w/hole', the 'whole' paradox of which is sketched as a "matching strangeness" (Butler 1979/2018: 24). Dana looks at Rufus and asks herself what their connection consists of.

> "Looking at him confused me. But he had to be the one. There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related." (Ibid.)

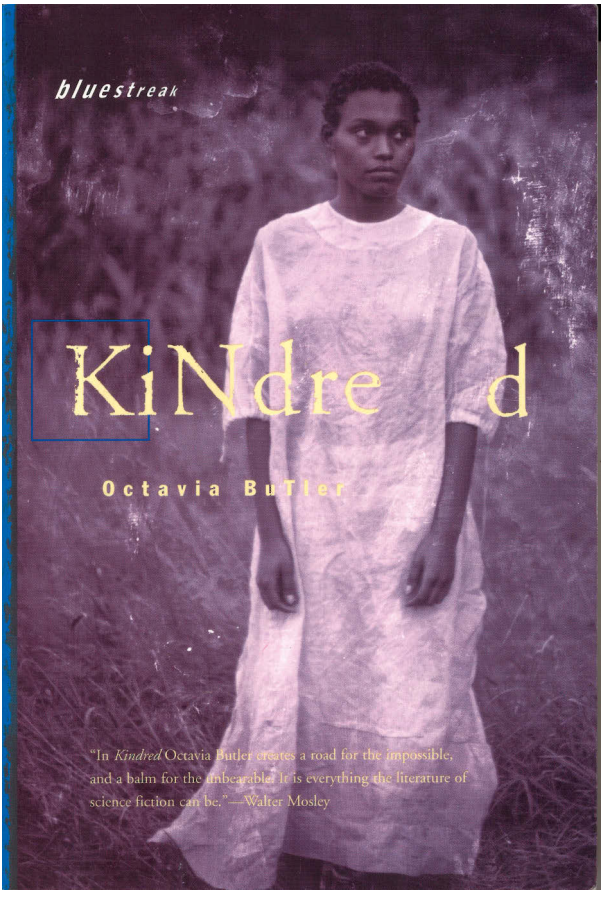
Here the rejoining of limbs, 're-membering', the capability of remembering are one with the experience of dismemberment, according to Therí A. Pickens. (2015: 170) The arm with no place links anniversaries that are meant to celebrate founding myths of freedom and equality, but Dana's disability marks these myths as wrong and dangerous. (Pickens 2015: 171) National belonging relies on a normalcy that excludes missing members and needs this exclusion to function.[42] Whereas, as a

40 Ibid. Loichot quotes the notions from Kamau Brathwaite and from Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (2018).

41 "Butler's oeuvre, from Kindred to Xenogenesis, is also traversed by this poetics of limbs, which are severed from an original body, or which, by growing back again, create unexpected links. Images of dismemberment and of regrowth of amputated bodies abound in Butler's science fiction novels. The title of *Kindred* itself performs a severing. On the cover of the 1988 edition, "Kindred" graphically appears as 'KiNdre d'. The title itself therefore textually contains the severing that is at the basis of the family reconstruction". (Loichot 2009: 43)

42 "Given that enslavement is historical fact and disability a natural corollary thereof, the conclusion would be that the integrity of the nation requires disability to function as whole." (Ibid.)

Figure 1: Kindred, book cover of the first edition



rule, national allegories are represented by white women's bodies, it is a disfigured Black woman who is genuinely able to symbolize the nation.[43] Or better: who has thwarted the nation of white lines of descent. Who conceives kinship out of different blood, violence, and responseability.

Translated by Alexandra Cox

43 "Dana's traversal of both worlds on the eve of the bicentennial, prompted as it is by nationwide remembrance of America's origins, positions Dana's particular racialized, gendered, and abled experience at the crux of any memory of the nation-state." (Ibid.)

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