

Chapter 2

Is Love Possible?: Miscegenation, Tolerance, and Reproduction

in Octavia E. Butler

I have never lived, nor have any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape – Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement.
--- Toni Morrison, “Home”

1. Will You Resist or Tolerate? Octavia E. Butler and Her Miscegenation Narratives

“Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides within the individual and cannot be infringed on by the State.”¹ With this sentence, interracial couples in the United States became officially legal. Taken amidst the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements, the Warren Court’s decision in the *Loving vs. Virginia* case in 1967, in which the legal restrictions on interracial marriage were annulled, was symbolic for a multiracial America, and serves as a touchstone for racial relations in the United States, particularly black and white race mixing. So if miscegenation is no longer illegal and people in the United States can marry anybody (of the opposite sex) regardless of their skin color, what is the point of discussing miscegenation? The legal decision was supported by biological explanations that there is, practically, only one race: human. The decision in *Loving vs. Virginia* was a great step toward equality, while simultaneously it further complicated the issues surrounding race as rhetoric and daily practice.

One of the reasons I mention this case is that miscegenation and interracial love relations are the pivotal theme in Octavia E. Butler’s works. Having lived through the Civil Rights Era and produced works that respond to the movements both in implicit and explicit ways, Butler often depicts miscegenation in a unique way. *Kindred*, her most known and

solidary novel, features a black and white couple, Dana and Kevin, living in Los Angeles in 1976 and time traveling to the antebellum South. In the *Lilith's Brood Trilogy* we see gene traders from extraterrestrial space with humans on the Earth made barren due to nuclear war. The *Patternist* series focuses on struggles of immortal characters to propagate the community, where kinship is crucial in order to procreate with another member with extra-human abilities. Throughout her writing career, Butler's interest in biological amalgamations between groups of human beings (and sometime between humans and extraterrestrials) is prominent. Another reason is that Butler's writing career itself flourished during the time the very issue of miscegenation and race mixing were finally being discussed not only in literature, but also in legal and scientific circles. In other words, Butler and her works are situated at the kernel of the historical landscape where miscegenation is finally discussed at multiple levels of tolerance. Jeffrey Tucker notes that Butler "seems to be constantly, and skeptically, wondering if humanity will ever learn to settle differences without resorting to violent conflict" (494). By forcing one group of humans (species) to face another, Butler shows us how such differences can be worked out, often pushing them toward their extremes – miscegenation or marital relations – and questions humans' ability to tolerate.

Despite the writer's racial identity, which invites readers to make assumptions, Butler's attitude toward and questions about human nature do not result in her works of fiction being only on and about US slavery and its legacy. Of course, *Kindred* is a novel on and about slavery (and Butler has other opinion on the critical responses toward the novel). Other works are almost always not specifically about US slavery; Butler elsewhere discusses the larger framework of the master-slave dialectic. In this sense, Butler's works are involved with the discussion of literary genre and racial identity. Seemingly obviously, her works are categorized as Science Fiction and African American literature. These two genres, however,

are slightly problematic when it comes to actually labeling Butler's works, as previous scholars have already shown. It is well known that Butler rejected the Sci-Fi label for *Kindred*, for there is "no science in [the novel]." (Kenan 495) The novel is, the author claims, precisely on and about slavery. It is also well known that Butler has responded to critiques of her short story "Bloodchild" by claiming that it is not about slavery. The authorial intention Butler invokes is always slippery, so that previous studies often take it either as fact for the interpretation of her novel or something that critics can ignore and set outside of a certain methodology of literary criticism.

What is rather important here is the critical tendency toward Butler's works is often forgetful of their epistemological framework, in which the act of crossing lines and mixing races or even species is immediately interpreted as an act of transgression, the act that connotes the aggression of the one side against another. Through this reading, slavery surfaces in Butler's texts as an overarching paradigm when interpreting her novels. When the thematic focus is set on slavery, the novel's form is considered to be a vehicle for conveying not so much the message associated with the form itself but rather the theme of slavery. As Butler herself elsewhere notes, the problem with this reading is that much of the criticisms tend to ignore how much science she introduces to the readers in order to redefine and rethink human society. It is also reductive to read Butler's works only within the context of the US slavery. As mentioned, her overall goal of questioning humanity cannot be reduced to an institution in a single nation, nor can US slavery and its legacy be universalized in a way that it represents all human bondage and freedom.

This chapter argues that Butler's insistence on her literary form and rejection of a single label as a writer – an African American writer – suggests a much broader purpose of the author than previously discussed. Between the African American theme and Science

Fiction as a narrative form, Butler questions humanity itself: its ability and inability to tolerate, and ultimately love itself. This reading does not necessarily contradict former readings, indeed, Butler's focus on miscegenation and race mixing has been studied. It is more about the way we approach the issue of miscegenation itself. What I find rather problematic is that by introducing a reading strategy in which race mixing signifies slavery and its history and legacy, previous studies have overlooked that Butler is dealing not with the slavery system, but rather with human relations themselves. Butler seems to be constantly asking us whether two people (human or nonhuman) can simultaneously be intimate and non-exploitive. How can we interpret human relations after all? What is the code of reading interracial relations? If Walter Mosley invites us to investigate our own act of reading, Octavia E. Butler further challenges us on identity politics and racial realism. Her stories often depict interracial/interspecific marriage and/or sexual relationships, in which former studies find allegories of slavery. Narratives of love in Butler's works operate as a platform to examine these questions.

Furthermore, Butler's works are unique regarding the issue of tolerance since they are deeply engaged with the problems of reproduction and procreation. In "Bloodchild," the protagonist, Gan, chooses to be impregnated with an alien's eggs, which will eventually hatch within his body. *Kindred* is, as the title itself states, a story about kin and kinship. The very act of procreation as both a sexual and an emotional experience takes place in a realm where the language of race is lacking, where that language is unsuited for precisely expressing the experience of love. Although one cannot explain the phenomena of loving someone using language, love is a theme constantly dealt with in literature, and love in Butler's works is much more complex than an analogy for slavery or other social institutions. By focusing on *Kindred* and her short story "Bloodchild," this chapter explores race, love, procreation and

reproduction in relation with language.

2. Between Authorial Intension and Critical Forces: “Bloodchild”

Scott McCracken notes, “[a]t the root of all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter. The meeting of self with other is perhaps the most fearful, most exciting and most erotic encounter of all” (102). One of the various borderlines that science fiction delineates is that between human and non-human, which Butler’s “Bloodchild” strangely and convincingly depicts. The story won the Nebula (1984) and Hugo (1985) Awards, and it is included in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as well as many science fiction collections. “Bloodchild” is a very good example of Butler’s works that shows how she is concerned with issues of miscegenation, procreation, and, reproduction in terms of their being an existential foundation for humanity overall.

What complicates the story is its critical reception and Butler’s authorial intension; while Butler herself says that the story is not a story of slavery, critics of “Bloodchild” tend to focus on its racial connotation. Nothing but two words, “brown flesh” indicate one of the characters’ skin-color and it is the only signifier for racial differences/identity in the story. Criticism of “Bloodchild,” however, interestingly leans in one direction: the tendency to read the story as a reframing of antebellum slavery into a futuristic allegory. “Bloodchild” represents the conflicts and contending forces between critical expectations toward African American literature in our time and authorial intension accompanied with actual textual behavior. Reading “Bloodchild” as an example of contending forces from both critical and authorial intentions will ultimately lead us to examine a new framework for African American literature. Butler’s story challenges our critical mind with the question of value and limits of authorial intension as well as the author’s racial identity. By delineating critical

tendencies toward contemporary African American literature and and closely examining the text, I attempt to situate “Bloodchild” in a newer critical framework and ultimately suggest a way to transcend racial critical theory and read the story as a narrative of love.

Butler’s attitude toward the story’s critical reception reveals how the notion of literary genre is intertwined with a particular critical paradigm, preventing us from certain interpretations of the work while it allows us to see others. The critical tendency toward “Bloodchild” is generally to situate it within a neo-slave narrative framework. “Bloodchild” is the only story by Butler included in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, and this suggests that critics regard the story as part of the African American genre. The brief explanation for the story in the anthology reads, “[a]lthough Butler writes short fiction only infrequently, ‘Bloodchild,’ printed here, is one of her most powerful, well-crafted efforts. As do her novels, Butler’s story challenges our contemporary ideas about gender and race in a futuristic way that few African American writers have attempted” (2515). Expectations of Butler’s works are often associated with race whether the author prefers this or not. In the contrast, Butler herself clearly mentions that the story is *not* about slavery:

It amazes me that some people have seen “Bloodchild” as a story of slavery. It isn’t. It’s a number of other things, though. On one level, it’s a love story between two very different beings. On another, it’s a coming-of-age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life. (*Bloodchild and other Stories* 30)

As the author herself says, “Bloodchild” does not contain racial language. The only passage in which readers are made aware of the human beings’ skin color is when one of the

characters, Lomas appears and we learn that he has “brown flesh.” There are practically no references to (black) raciality, and this textual behavior creates one of the many complications surrounding this work. The framework of the story is, indeed, the initiation of a boy, and his awakening from false consciousness. Butler’s claim that the story is not about slavery is accurate at the textual level.

It is, however, very tempting to read the story as an allegory of slavery. “My last night of childhood began with a visit home” (3) – the story opens up with a classical initiation story plot. Gan, a Terran (human) boy is the narrator. His family has been joined by T’Gatoi, a Tlic (non-human) and he is to be the one who bears her eggs. Tlic’s eggs need to be planted into animal flesh through her ovipositor and the human male is the preferred medium to carry them. When the time for incubation comes, the pregnant man will go through childbirth together with the Tlic – the Tlic literally slits the human open, takes the fetuses out and sews him up again. Gan has been taught how to bear a child and understands it as a good thing, a labor which represents mutual cooperation and partnership between Terran and Tlic. T’Gatoi is an aunt or surrogate mother figure to Gan, and they have a good relationship – until Gan learns how violent this childbearing procedure will be when he witnesses Lomas, the “brown” human male with eggs hatching inside of him, go through it.

Taking place in an extraterrestrial location, human beings and the Tlic, a non-human species, live together in a condition described as “the joining of families” (5). After a couple of lines, readers discover a strange relationship between the “families” formed between humans and Tlic, reminding readers of the fact that “slavery of any kind foster[s] strange relationship” (*Kindred* 230). Feminist literary critic Elyse Rae Helford reads the story as a commentary on American slavery, especially on its treatments of female slaves. She suggests that “the debate over the nature of a relationship which includes dependence, exploitation,

and threats of violence conjures up a metaphoric representation of master and slave” (259).

Comparing Gan to enslaved Africans and the Tlic to white slave-owners is a highly viable way to interpret “Bloodchild.” On one level, the text offers us metaphoric images of slavery. Imagery of cage repeatedly appears as T’Gatoi’s limbs enfold Gan and other humans, and this image has often been used in slave narratives. Humans are obligated to live in the “Preserve,” where firearms are prohibited and wearing armbands is mandatory for proof of identity. The first-person narrative also gives an autobiographical impression, a narrative framework that almost all slave narrative writers, if not all of them, utilize to account for slavery.² Furthermore, Gan’s initiation itself could be seen as “a liberation from false consciousness, and emancipation of the mind that featured prominently in slave narratives” (Tucker 407). The way Gan suddenly realizes their real relationship and the formation of an extraterrestrial power dynamics is “enabling a reading of the text through metaphors of enslavement on both racial and species level” (Helford 265). Reading “Bloodchild” as a fable about American slavery is, thus, not only possible, but also compelling.

The challenge remaining here is how we are to take the huge gap between authorial intention and critical expectations toward “Bloodchild.” What is significant about this question is not the revival of analyses on authorial intention, but the way these two forces contend, conflict and provide a view of contemporary African American criticism and the challenge it is facing. And this is where most of the criticisms on “Bloodchild” do not provide an examination on what Butler means by “love story.” The textual behavior of “Bloodchild” and the author’s commentary on contemporary African American literature and slavery would give us a better understanding of this issue.

3. “Identity” is Irrelevant – How Do We Deal with Differences?

What does the gap between authorial intention and critical tendencies tell us about African American literature and its criticism? It shows the contradictory views within the African American literary field, which have yet to be resolved. What is important here is that when black authorial intention is not to consciously reframe American slavery, we lose critical compliance; the critical racial theory loses its certain validity and we are suddenly left with interpretive uncertainty. If genre-making inevitably incorporates uncompromising views and criticisms of African American literature shy away from its negative side the expectation of racial realism – this could lead to ultimate essentialism. What we are seeing in Butler’s short story will challenge, if not solve, this aspect and negotiate a relationship between “a politics of representation in the canon” and “a democratic representational politics.”³

Tucker notes that “readings of [“Bloodchild”] as a metaphor for slavery are based on extratextual reasons as much as textual ones” (408). He warns against the attitude of using the author’s racial identity as a tool to construe the story. Is it possible to read “Bloodchild” as a story not about slavery? The answer is undoubtedly “yes,” even though there are practically no criticisms that do not allude to slavery and the author’s background. Gregory E. Rutledge, Hoda M Zaki, and Sandra Y Govan more or less discuss gender formation in Butler’s work and its similitude to power dynamics under antebellum slavery.⁴ It is also difficult to define the story as a “non-slavery” tale precisely because this inevitably leads to a dilemma – you must contextualize the text within the contemporary debate on the literature of slavery in order to prove it as a “non-slavery” tale. Interestingly enough, the story has recently started being categorized as Science Fiction more often, perhaps because of this, though taking the story off the “African American” shelf and putting it onto the “Sci-Fi” shelf is not a productive solution. Is “Bloodchild” fated to be only either African American literature or

Science Fiction?

Rather than limiting the designation of “Bloodchild” to previous categorizations, reading “Bloodchild” as a narrative of love gives us a newer vision of Butler's literary imagination. Regarding the reason for Butler’s choice of narrative genre, in his essay “Political Science Fiction” Walter Benn Michaels discusses Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Considering the differences between human beings and aliens, he says:

The otherness of the alien is the otherness of its body and, in fact, this insistence on the physical difference between human and alien may be developed not only against the idea that the differences are essentially cultural but also against the idea that the differences between humans – insofar as what matters is physical difference – are in any way important. (650)

What Michaels points out here connects to McCracken’s idea of Science Fiction being a place for an alien encounter. This is also crucial when we read “Bloodchild,” for the story seems to be asking the questions about identity politics. Furthermore, it follows Žižek’s point about the premise of relativism and tolerance. What does it actually mean to be “different” from each other? For “Bloodchild” is ultimately about the difference between humans and the Tlic, and it demands us to construe the ideology underpinning when a human faces the decision-making process: whether they should accept the difference or not.

Gan, the protagonist, faces this decision-making process – he needs to negotiate with the identity politics that are gradually conceptualized toward the end of the story. T’Gatoi, the Tlic government official, is “the joining of [Gan’s] famil[y]” and Gan’s subjective narration does not reveal the power relationship between them. It is because the Tlic’s way to develop

relationships with humans is by creating a family environment with them from an early stage. Their peaceful life is disrupted by the intruder, Lomas, who is in need of help from the Tlic to take the eggs, which are hatching, out of his body. Despite everybody's warning, Gan decides to stay with T'Gatoi to help her, and sees what is actually done when the time to give birth comes. Holding Lomas down to keep him still while T'Gatoi cuts his body, Gan thinks, "I felt as though I were helping her torture him, helping her consume him" (15). Butler confuses the image of childbearing and man-slicing with imagery of blood. Gan continues;

I had been told all my life that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together – a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse. And I wasn't ready to see it. Maybe I never would be. Yet I couldn't not see it. Closing my eyes didn't help. (16-17)

As this violent and unnatural Caesarean-section goes on, T'Gatoi, whom Gan has known since he was born, becomes an alien to him. "The whole procedure was wrong, alien" (17). The childbearing/egg-hatching procedure is the moment when Gan realizes that he is different from the Tlic. However, although Gan becomes increasingly aware of the fact of T'Gatoi's being different from himself, the textual behavior is interestingly nonchalant about identity molding on a special level. Gan constantly calls the Tlic "people," not making a distinction between humans and the others (5). Indeed, what is significant here is the fact that the idea of difference comes to Gan's mind, yet it does not occur to him as a support for his part of the human species. Gan notes that T'Gatoi knows "how to manipulate people, Terran and Tlic" (24), again, including both humans and Tlic in his definition of "people." What is at

stake here is, as Michaels suggests about Butler's *Xenogenesis*, the negation of racial identity politics: "To choose between physical and cultural, fixed or mobile (or, we might add in anticipation, between pure and hybrid) is to choose between two different accounts of identity. And to choose between two different accounts of identity is already to have chosen identity itself" (652).

Once you accept the idea of identity, you need to constantly differentiate yourself from others in order to affirm your existence in a given society. What "Bloodchild" is offering us is a vision where the identity politics do not quite work as they do both in literary criticism and in our society. "Bloodchild" therefore negates racial (as well as gender) identities by distorting conventional formations. Furthermore, Butler challenges her readers again when Gan is aware of his situation: his attitude toward the difference is a key to understanding "Bloodchild." Gan's decision of whether he accepts the implantation of T'Gatoi's eggs shows how Butler takes us a step beyond identity politics. Once again, Michaels is insightful here. Michaels finds a possible next step in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy:

Xenogenesis not only insists that all differences be understood as differences in subject position, as differences between what people want rather than they believe, it makes difference itself the object of affect – the thing that is feared and craved, that is or is not wanted...Butler seeks to replace the conflict between identities with the conflict between identity and difference. (657)

And difference as the object of affect is also seen in "Bloodchild." As in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, extraterrestrial miscegenation is crucial in "Bloodchild." Lovemaking/intercourse/egg implantation is the determining factor for Gan as well as T'Gatoi in deciding how to cope

with each other's differences, not identities. The realm Gan and T'Gatoi are achieving here is Butler's version of a dreamscape, where, possibly, race does not matter. It is important to notice that this realm – a dreamscape – can be realized when a difference is regarded as an the object of affect. In other words, Gan and T' Gatoi must be involved in a love-relationship in order to create the non-racial Edenic realm, and this is where Science Fiction as a genre converges with a narrative of love.

4. “Bloodchild” as a Narrative of Love

Let us go back to what Butler says about the story: “[“Bloodchild” is] a love story between two very different beings.” The way Gan approaches this difference is to create a love relation between himself and T'Gatoi, the only and inevitable solution in the world of “Bloodchild.” After walking away from the violent scene of Lomas' Caesarean-section, thinking that one day he himself will be cut open and sewed up by T'Gatoi, he argues with his brother Qui. Qui claims that he saw a Tlic “eat a man” (20). Once the Tlic's eggs hatch, they start eating their own egg-shells, and when the shells are gone they start eating the host animals. After seeing one Tlic kill a human with implanted eggs because he was in agonizing pain (from being eaten from the inside), Qui started running. “Running inside the Preserve. Running in a cage,” Qui remarks sarcastically (20). Qui's view on the relationship between the Tlic and humans terrifies Gan, not simply because of its violence, but because it suggests the loss of his love relationship with T'Gatoi. Gan is now aware of the different interpretation of his relationship to T'Gatoi. The reason the Tlic implant eggs in human males is, Qui explains, “[t]o provide the next generation of host animals.” Gan rejects this: ““It's more than that!” I countered. Was it? ‘If it were going to happen to me, I'd want to believe it was more too.’ ‘It *is* more!’ I felt like a kid. Stupid argument” (21). What is “more”? This is a question

Gan has to find an answer to. It now depends completely on Gan whether he is actually more than a host animal or not – whether he overcomes and accepts their differences and succeeds in having a love relationship with T’Gatoi.

Toward the end of story, the text rapidly accumulates subtle yet clearly romantic language. When Gan decides to be impregnated with T’Gatoi’s eggs, he prefers this to the idea of T’Gatoi impregnating Hoa, his sister – first in order to save Hoa from the unbearable pain. Yet, in the next moment he encounters unexplainable feelings toward the idea itself:

“I will implant the first egg tonight,” she said as I put the gun away. “Do you hear, Gan?”

...

“I hear.”

“Now!” I let her push me out of the kitchen, then walked ahead of her toward my bedroom. The sudden urgency in her voice sounded real. “You would have done it to Hoa tonight!” I accused.

“I must do it to someone tonight.”

I stopped in spite of her urgency and stood in her way. “Don’t you care who?”

She flowed around me and into my bedroom. I found her waiting on the couch we shared. There was nothing in Hoa’s room that she could have used. She would have done it to Hoa on the floor. The thought of her doing it to Hoa at all disturbed me in a different way now, and I was suddenly angry. (27)

Jealousy here is clearly a lover’s feeling toward his or her partner having sex with some other. This suggests that Gan does not simply fear T’Gatoi after he learns what she could do to him. Instead, Gan’s jealousy here suggests that he is indeed possessive about T’Gatoi’s affection.

After Gan makes the decision to be impregnated with Tlic's eggs, readers witness Gan and T'Gatoi's intercourse:

Yet I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. she undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing egg from her body into mine. I held on to a pair of her limbs until I remembered Lomas holding her that way. Then I let go, moved inadvertently, and hurt her. She gave a low cry of pain and I expected to be caged at once within her limbs. When I wasn't, I held on to her again, feeling oddly ashamed (27).

Very sensually depicted is the act of spawning and in a sense, lovemaking. McCracken notes, "Butler's novels include graphic descriptions of sexual relations with the, initially repugnant, aliens" (115). In this scene of the sexual relation between Gan and T'Gatoi there are several levels of distortion deployed by the author. It is presumably T'Gatoi, the female Tlic who is implanting her eggs into Gan, a human boy, by inserting her reproductive organs (ovipositor) into his body. The obvious confusion is the gender role reversal, and this is also an example of unfixable identities. Yet, more complicated is the "love language" Butler uses here. After the act of implantation, the two converse about Gan's feelings toward T'Gatoi:

"It wasn't ... hate."

"I know what it was."

"I was afraid."

Silence.

“I still am.” I could admit it to her here, now.

“But you came to me... to save Hoa.”

“Yes.” I leaned my forehead against her. She was cool velvet, deceptively soft.

“And to keep you for myself,” I said. It was so. I didn’t understand it, but it was so. (28)

What is significantly depicted here is that the very act that is supposed to show a definite difference between T’Gatoi and Gan – egg implanting – is indeed depicted as something of a shared experience, an act of compromise and negotiation, an act of intimacy.

There is, however, still an uncompromising aspect to this love relationship. At the end of the story, when T’Gatoi says to Gan “I’ll take care of you,” it is a statement of commitment as well as a threat. There is always the possibility from Gan’s point of view that T’Gatoi will leave him alone and that he will need to suffer and die for the childbirth. Under the veil of romantic language, Butler implies an imperfect example of the negotiation of differences. This open-ending invites readers to ponder whether this is Gan’s surrender to “slavery,” as Helford and others interpret the last line, or whether it is something “more,” as Gan himself claims. At the same time, when Gan demands his right to hold onto a gun – a prohibited weapon in the Preserve – the power dynamics between them are distinctively different from those of antebellum slavery. Asked by T’Gatoi to give up his gun, Gan says, “‘Leave it here!’ I repeated. ‘If we’re not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a *partner*’” (26, emphasis mine). If the term “partner” indicates a more intimate, mutual reliance between Gan and T’Gatoi, the story converges into at least a distorted love story framework, if not a very romantic one. It could be, therefore, a

story about identity politics and its illogicality as Michaels suggests about *Xenogenesis*. Close readings of the climax can produce compelling arguments either way. Furthermore, the very illogicality of the story itself suggests this story's possibility as a narrative of love, for a narrative of love can also imply the impossibilities of a love story. Butler's view on slavery further explains some of the complication as well as confusion between those two contradictory readings:

I know some people think that [my novels are almost always about slavery], but I don't agree, although this may depend on what we mean by "slavery." In the story "Bloodchild," for example, some people assume I'm talking about slavery when what I'm really talking is symbiosis....When I was about thirteen I found out on a visceral level what slavery was; before that I hadn't understood why the slaves had not simply run away, because that's what I assumed I would have done. But when I was around thirteen we moved into a house with another house in the back, and in that other house lived people who beat their children. Not only could you hear the kids screaming, you could actually hear the blows landing. This was naturally terrifying to me, and I used to ask my mother if there wasn't something she could do or somebody we could call, like the police. My mother's attitude was that those children belonged to their parents and that they had the right to do what they wanted with their own children. I realized that those kids really had nowhere to go – they were about my age and younger, and if they had tried to run away they would have been sent right back to their parents, who would probably treat them a lot worse for having tried to run away. That, I realized, was slavery – human beings treated as if they were possessions. (McCaffery 57).

The term slavery here is slippery; while Butler denies that the story should be read as a story of slavery, her metaphoric depiction of abused children as enslaved betrays her intention. On the one hand, again, Helford and others on the “slave story reading” take this account as validation for “Bloodchild” to be about American slavery. On the other, this chapter interprets Butler’s ambiguity on this account as reflecting the critical formation of African American literary genre at that time, where the term slavery and its “ownership” were shifting, changing, and often times creating huge debates. What is important is that this ambiguity penetrates into the text, and creates ambivalence between the textual will to be a love story and the repetitive rhetoric of slavery. Thus, it is not only authorial intension and critical tendency that are conflicting, but textual behavior and authorial intention are also somewhat contradictory.

The story does not provide us with a solid solution for these contradictions. However, Butler indicates that Gan’s determination about his relationship with T’Gatoi is not out of desperation, but something of hope. After the egg-planting was done, T’Gatoi asks Gan if, in the face of this difficult choice, he would have shot himself. Gan contemplates and answers, “I could have done that. I nearly did. That’s Qui’s way. I wonder if he knows” (29). Qui, Gan’s brother, it is explained earlier in the story, is an addict of sterile Tlic eggs, which contain an intoxicant that prolongs life and mollifies human resistance. Qui is running away from the reality of his life, and Gan regards it as a death run. Conversely, Gan has made a decision to live together with T’Gatoi and with her eggs inside of him. This might not be a “love story,” ending with a happy couple, but this indefinability of Gan and T’Gatoi’s relationship in “Bloodchild” is, indeed, a narrative of love, a narrative that depicts the uncertainty of a bond between two creatures, possibilities and impossibilities of believing in each other, and ultimately the meaning of another within one’s own life. The narrative of love

in “Bloodchild” challenges the expectation of racial realism from the story, and ultimately negates interpretations based on racial essentialism.

5. Feeling Lonesome, I Found My Bond: The Shape of Love in *Kindred*

Regarding miscegenation, reproduction, and procreation, let me first look at one of the most famous passages by one of the most famous ex-slaves, Frederick Douglass:

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather. My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me. (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* 1)

This passage describes the archetype of slaves who do not know their familial origins. For a slave to be born, a slave woman, a white man (perhaps a slave owner) and their descendants are involved. This is the archetype of a slave’s birth. While “Bloodchild” is a narrative of love in which two completely different species struggle to live mutually and try to create a relationship, *Kindred* (1979) shows in a different way how the narrative of love is unattainable yet most needed. The scene Douglass depicted has been retold and reinterpreted so many times, and *legitimately stigmatizes* the love relation between two different races. *Kindred* is involved in this whole discussion on African American love relationships with other race, particularly the white race.

Kindred, arguably Butler's most read and known work, is a time travel story. The book is somewhat different from Butler's other works; an avid science fiction readers familiar with her other works will know that *Kindred* is unique because it deals directly with the history of the United States. The heroine, Dana, is a black woman living in California in 1976, who travels back to a plantation in Maryland where she meets her black and white ancestors. In her own time, her husband, Kevin, is white, and it is their relationship that complicates things for the people around her as well as for the literary critics. In order to understand the parallel between Dana's past and her 1976 reality, we read their relationship as an allegory for the relation between a slave master and his female slave under the institution of slavery. Robert Crossley explains:

The most problematic white man in *Kindred* is not the Maryland slave owner but the liberated, modern Californian married to Dana. Kevin Franklin is a good man. He loves Dana, loathes the chattel system that governs every feature of antebellum life in Maryland, and works with the Underground Railroad while he is trapped in the past.... The convergence of these two white men [Kevin and Dana's white ancestor and slave owner Rufus] in Dana's life not only dramatizes the ease with which even a 'progressive' white man falls into the cultural pattern of dominance, but it suggests as well an uncanny synonymy of the words "husband" and "master." (275)

This relation between Dana and Kevin has been analyzed in previous studies very much as an analogy for the master-slave relationship. Almost all the critics point out the discursive similarities between Kevin and the two white male characters from the antebellum South:

Rufus Weylin, Dana's great-grandfather and the cause of her time travel, and his father Thomas Weylin.

Pointing at the novel's cyclical narrative, Christine Lavecq emphasizes that Dana's relationship with Kevin after her final time-travel voyage might be unstable because it "remains unclear whether the whole experience has damaged their relationship" (539). Marc Steinberg finds the "doubling of Kevin and the oppressor" as "Butler's most significant deployment of role-playing," and "[i]t takes Dana a lifetime as a black woman and a trip back into bondage to realize fully the intractable persistence of a white, male-dominated hegemony" (471). These analyses are relevant to the interpretation of Kevin as a kind of symbol for white patriarchy and of Dana as confusing her relationship with Kevin for something other than love itself. The relation between Dana and Kevin is, however, much more touching and complicating when we focus on how Butler unites these two characters. Dana's relationship with Kevin starts in a factory, which is mockingly called "slave market" (52). Both of them are trying to be writers, Kevin has just published three novels and Dana has yet to get her first one published. This mutual interest in writing fiction draws them to each other. Yet another thing they have in common is their loneliness. Dana narrates, "I think Kevin was as lonely and out of place as I was when I met him, though he was handling it better" (52). Both of them lost their parents before their encounter, and the loneliness they feel is closely related to their lack of immediate kinship. Dana's feelings for Kevin, therefore, suggest that kinship is at the very core of their male-female attraction: "[h]e was like me – a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying" (57).

The idea of Kevin being a kindred spirit consoles Dana after they go out for the first time: "[s]ometime during the early hours of the next morning when we lay together, tired and content in my bed. I realized that I knew less about loneliness than I had thought – and much

less than I would know when he went away” (57). Loneliness is sensation that always subtly present in *Kindred*, and it is somewhat in opposition to the notion of kindred spirits in the novel. We might find loneliness to be an implausible reason for a love relationship. Yet in *Kindred*, loneliness is an important emotional protocol through which Dana interprets, construes, feels for, and ultimately loves other characters.

When Rufus tries to steal Alice, Dana’s maternal ancestor who eventually bears Rufus’ children, from her husband Isaac, Dana first blames Rufus for his “[r]ape rewarded” (124). She notices, however, Rufus’ emotions are not so easily explained. “[Rufus] turned his head toward me and peered at me through swollen eyes. ‘I begged her not to go with him,’ he said quietly. ‘Do you hear me, I *begged her!*’ I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman – to her misfortune. There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one” (124). Rufus’ anger here is typical of a slave master’s white-southern-male’s patriarchal supremacy. Yet Dana understands that Rufus loves Alice. Alice’s misfortune is an unavoidable consequence of the inequitable love which leads her to eventual death. Dana looks at Rufus’ emotional attachment to Alice from her own vantage point, the 1970s, and understands his way of love no matter that it is unattainable and oppressive.

Importantly, the unattainability of love in *Kindred* is not romanticized in any way. Rufus comments on his feelings toward Alice, “I know you Dana. You want Kevin the way I want Alice. And you had more luck than I did because no matter what happens now, for a while he wanted you too. Maybe I can’t ever have that – both wanting, both loving. But I’m not going to give up what I can have” (163). Rufus’ love is, of course, a selfish, forceful, and oppressive love, and he tries to possess Alice with the power he has as her master. The aspect of patriarchal white supremacy is not reduced to personal emotions or feelings, yet Butler complicates it with Dana’s sympathy toward Rufus. In one way, Rufus’s love here is very

crucial to Dana and Kevin in the 1970s because they could never become a mixed couple if Alice had not borne Hagar, Dana's great-great grandmother. Rufus' love is also something Dana feels for, as she discovers the nature of the human desire for others. For one thing, Dana cannot totally negate the fact that Rufus and Alice create a family and bring up children together, even if it's for a brief period of time. And for another, she gradually learns whatever its forms, love is always something similar to what is idealized as love: all the complicated emotions – jealousy, hatred, compassion, sisterhood and brotherhood and others – are all aspects of love.

As mentioned earlier, Butler highlights loneliness among those emotions. The crucial scene in which Dana understands Rufus' sufferance is when he confesses his loneliness. "I've never felt so lonesome in my life," he said. The words touched me as no others could have. I knew about loneliness. I found my thoughts going back to the time I had gone home without Kevin – the loneliness, the fear, sometimes the hopelessness I had felt then" (258). One of Dana's most touching monologues, this passage is rarely quoted by critics. This is because here Dana is not reading Rufus as a slave master, rather she is feeling for him. Dana is trying to construe the relation between Rufus and Alice not only in terms of slavery, but also in terms of unattainable love. While in most criticisms Rufus is likened to Kevin, this monologue likens Rufus not to Kevin, but to Dana. By juxtaposing Rufus with Dana, Butler complicates the human relations and the code with which it should be read, and human emotions that escape from that code.

The issue of reproduction and procreation also impede the reading of the codes. Dana's great-grandmother Hagar's birth is the result of miscegenation, yet Dana's own position suggests that she cannot reject it simply as an evil. The unexplainable complexity of emotion toward miscegenation and reproduction is symbolized when Dana remembers Hagar's family

Bible. “Hagar had filled pages of it with her careful script. There was a record of her marriage to Oliver Blake, and a list of her seven children, their marriages, some grandchildren ... Then someone else had taken up the listing. So many relatives that I had never known, would never know” (28; ellipsis in orig.).

Not surprisingly, sexual intercourse and procreation – two of the most intimate acts between human beings – are always associated with pain and mental pressure in Butler’s works. This is not only the case with Rufus and Alice, but also with Dana and Kevin. When Dana comes back from the antebellum south, she is deeply hurt. Despite this, she wants to sleep with Kevin, but their lovemaking is not smooth; “He was so careful, so careful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known he would, but it didn’t matter” (190). Dana and Kevin’s lovemaking, then, overlaps with that of Alice and Rufus in both extremely violent and the sweetest of ways. Shifting what sexual intercourse signifies from rape to lovemaking, this duality prevents the scene from being simply sentimental and sensual, but really shows the difficulties and complexities associated with love. Reading *Kindred* with a focus on the love relationship between white and black characters certainly shows the Butler’s critique of the institution of slavery and its social, economic and gender oppressions, as well as its legacies. Yet it also exposes how such a limited reading can overlook the complexities of human emotions associated with institutionalized relationships, and subtly delineates the difficulties and unattainability of love itself, thereby presenting us with a narrative of love in its own way.

6. Will Humanity Ever Love?: Writing, Procreation, and Love in Butler’s Works

Closely reading these texts, their surrounding criticisms and Butler’s own views on them provides us with a possible view of African American literature and its criticism in our

time: a will for the end of racial realism and the transcendence of literary genre. Delineating multiple levels of contention in the text, as well as outside of it, reveals how we may be entrapped by the discrepancy between a “slave reading” and “non-slave reading” of the text. In “Bloodchild” and *Kindred*, Butler attempts to escape this conflict and attain a different sphere by framing them as narratives of love. Neither of these texts simply gives us a happy ending; it presents the dreamscape Morrison describes in her essay “Home,” the home that is free from racial identity. It is still a dream, yet the remoteness of the possibility of its achievement could be lessened by constantly challenging the expectations of racial realism.

Furthermore, this is not only a challenge for contemporary African American literary criticism. Morrison also notes:

The question of what constitutes the art of a black writer, for whom that modifier is more search than fact, has some urgency. In other words, other than melanin and subject matter, what, in fact, may make me a black writer? Other than my own ethnicity – what is going on in my work that makes me believe it is demonstrably inseparable from a cultural specificity that is Afro-American? (19)

From the beginning, African American literature has been burdened with a two-fold challenge. It claims its author’s name and racial identity because of its neglected history, yet at the same time it is against racial essentialism, specifically as a source of social, historical, and cultural discrimination against African Americans.

“Bloodchild” and *Kindred* challenge this dilemma. Not only do the author’s straightforward remarks assert that the stories are not about slavery (“Bloodchild”) or Science Fiction (*Kindred*), but also a critical assessment of the stories shows how they are entangled

within racial realism. This is not to say that a non-racial reading is the most valid way to approach to Butler's texts. Of critical import here is the overcoming of expectations of racial realism and the questioning of the racial/non-racial frameworks. Moreover, what is significant about Butler is that this question of identity does not limit itself to racial identity. Tucker notes, "[Butler] seems to be constantly, and skeptically, wondering if humanity will ever learn to settle differences without resorting to violent conflict" (404). If the notion of "difference" is always likely to create conflict based on identity politics, the ending of "Bloodchild" and her treatment of love in *Kindred* imply the possibility to negation and going beyond identity politics. When we read themes of miscegenation, reproduction, and procreation as a love story, Butler's works show us a newer landscape for African American literature.

Notes for Chapter 2

¹ *Records of the general Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Forth Session*. Paris: UNESCO. 1949.

² For the attributes of slave narratives, see Bell.

³ John Guillory suggests in his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, a relationship between "a politics of representation in the canon" and "a democratic representational politics" (5), describing the ideological consistency to avoid texts that do not fit into the category of African American literature.

⁴ It is also notable that these appear in journals either specifically on African American literary criticism or on issues on history, race and ethnicity. See Rutledge, Zaki, and Govn.