REMEMBERING SLAVERY TO ENSURE A BLACK FUTURE
HOW OCTAVIA BUTLER, DERRICK BELL, AND ROBERT O’HARA UNCOVER THE PAST AND CREATE NEW WITNESSES TO SLAVERY IN KINDRED, THE SPACE TRADERS, AND INSURRECTION: HOLDING HISTORY

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Masterproef voorgelegd voor het behalen van de graad master in de richting Taal- en Letterkunde

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Introduction

Afrofuturism is a subculture of Black culture, developed in North America, that explores the possibilities of a future African culture after the African Diaspora. It is described by Ytasha L. Womack as a cultural aesthetic where artists imagine a life without racial bias (9), and aim to represent Black culture devoid of stereotypes. By anticipating the future of science, with advanced technology, as well as finding inspiration in their own traditional African culture, writers of Afrofuturism create a future world. Furthermore, Afrofuturists re-examine the age of slavery, and other racially-influenced events throughout history that had a direct influence on the present environment of Black people, seeing that those specific events shape their future. One of these works was written by Octavia Butler in 1979. Butler’s novel Kindred revises the 19th century history of slavery and explores the current racial climate of the United States. Butler herself categorizes her novel as a contemporary slave narrative, and does not see it as science fiction because the science is never explained (Kenan 495). Nevertheless, her main character travels through time and space, so there are science fiction elements in her novel. It is precisely this combination of Black slavery and science fiction within Afrofuturism that this thesis will further investigate.

To do this, I have selected three literary works, that deal with Black slavery and, as we will see, can be categorized as science fiction literature. Although, this combination is a rare one, the three works demonstrate the significance of history when it comes to preparing for the future. The first one, already mentioned above, is Kindred. This novel tells the story of an African American woman, called Dana, who travels back in time and space on several different occasions to safeguard her ancestors’ survival on a Maryland plantation. Thus, she makes sure that their lineage will eventually lead to her birth. The second source that I will analyze is The Space Traders, a short story by Derrick Bell. This story deals with the ‘second coming’ of Black slavery in the United States when the government is offered gold, alien technology to save the earth, and more, in return for all the Black people living in the United States. My third analysis will be on the script of the play Insurrection: Holding History by Robert O’Hara. The play recounts how Ron Porter and his great great grandfather T.J., a 189 year old former slave, travel back to a plantation in Southampton where T.J. was enslaved during the Nat Turner rebellion.

This thesis will be divided into two main parts. The first, more general, part will discuss Afrofuturism to provide a framework for Kindred, Insurrection: Holding History and The Space Traders. Additionally, I will discuss African-American literature, the concept of social death, the science fiction genre, and the dystopia in regard with their relevancy to the three previously
mentioned works. This first part will then provide a background for the second part of my thesis, which will have close analyses of *Kindred, Insurrection: Holding History*, and *The Space Traders*.

The first half, called starts off with an introduction to the African-American literary movement and discusses why it is necessary for both the self-representation of Black culture, and for showing outsiders what it means to be Black. Slave narratives and neo-slave narratives will be briefly touched upon, because of their importance to African-American literature, and this part ends with an explanation of Patterson’s concept of ‘social death’ and how it relates to slavery. Then, this chapter will go on to discuss Afrofuturism in depth. It is a relatively new field of research, and the themes that I will discuss do not all appear together in one Afrofuturist work, nevertheless, the themes that I mention are the ones that appear most frequently and will be needed for my own analysis of *The Space Traders, Kindred, and Insurrection: Holding History*. Furthermore, this chapter will explain how easily the Western science fiction genre is adapted to tell stories about African-Americans. This first half ends with an argument for why critical dystopias are a common way to criticize contemporary society, as well as reexamine history. It is important to keep in mind that these genres overlap on different levels, and they do not have a clear-cut demarcation, so some authors or characters can be included or excluded depending on the source.

What follows this framework are the analyses of the three works by Bell, Butler, and O’Hara respectively. Each of these works narrate how the main characters experience slavery of the past, or of the future. In *The Space Traders* the most important theme is how racism and discrimination leads to re-dehumanizing a minority people for the sake of profit. The story depicts how the immorality of Black slavery is disregarded to protect the privilege and the prosperity of white people in the United States. Butler’s *Kindred* is a novel that reminds the reader how invaluable history is. The main character’s journey to the past gives her the knowledge of what it truly means to be a slave. The play *Insurrection: Holding History* is formally and thematically a rebellion against what popular culture considers to be the norm. By questioning what is known about the past, O’Hara explores how one person’s perspective on slavery can reshape history. This thesis will be concluded with a comparison of the three works in relation to the important themes of Afrofuturism.

With the help of my selection of secondary sources and my own close analysis of the literary works, I mean to examine how Afrofuturist writers deal with their history of slavery in science fiction stories, how the characters of these works process being transported (back) into slavery, and how the past still affects the present, which will in turn affect the future. I aim to
show that by writing about slavery, Afrofuturists give themselves and their audience a way to resolve their past, and imagine a future where Black people can thrive.
1. Genre Blending

1.1. African-American Literature

Afrofuturism has its origins in the wider African-American literary genre, so it is important to mention some characteristics that Afrofuturism adopted (or inherited) from that genre. On the topic of African American Literature, Mulvey explains that, “two answers have been given for the starting point of these texts: the black slave narrative and the white popular novel” (18). The earliest African-American works are dated back to the 1850s. It is important to mention that literature shapes the images of a culture, and those images represent a certain point of view of said culture. Depending on who writes the stories, these images take a different shape (Gerald 81). This is why establishing a Black Literary movement was important. African-Americans started writing stories from their own perspectives, thus they created their own images. Before that the only representation available of Black people was written by white writers. Gerald states,

“This is why image is so important to African Americans. We are black people living in a white world. When we consider that the black man sees white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of his universe, we cannot help but realize that a very great deal of the time the black man sees a zero image of himself” (83).

She goes even further and affirms that the white man’s image of Black people is inferior to the white man’s own image of himself. This is what she refers to as a negative image. A zero image, then, is when the black man is not even represented in literature, when he simply does not exist.

The start of a Black literary movement was needed to allow Black writers to create images of themselves, from their own Black point of view. Their literature is frequently centered around black-white animosity because it is a constant part of Black lives (Gerald 84). This is the case for *The Space Traders, Kindred,* and *Insurrection: Holding History;* all three of these works feature the antagonism of white people against Black people in some shape or form. Therefore, African-American literature always implicitly undermines the zero image of Black people. It also “reject[s] white attempts at portraying black reality [because] they are valid only in terms of the white man’s projection of himself. They have no place in the definition of blackness” (Gerald 84). In other words, Gerald states that white writers are not able to write from a Black perspective. Thus, their representation of a Black person says more about their own character than it does about the Black character portrayed in their writing. Ultimately, African-American literature creates and mirrors Black culture, and narrates the stories of African-American people.
Additionally, Christian uses the term ‘monolithism’ to refer to the general and popular ideas and styles used in literature (285), e.g. the main character being a white heterosexual male who is described in all his complexities, while other secondary characters are stereotypes of themselves. Christian states that monolithism in literature dehumanizes minority cultures; and that the only way to get rid of racism and stereotypes is to allow people their complexity and write minority characters with various character traits (285). This diversity helps fight discrimination because it shows that not all Black people are the same. Therefore, an African-American literary movement is not only important to have a space where Black people can be represented, but it is also a method to demonstrate to other communities that African-Americans are more than their stereotypes.

One of the genres that is at the base of African-American literature is the slave narrative. When slave narratives first made their appearance, the narrators did not create a new style, but adopted the literary convention of the time period. In the 18th century Black authors, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs, wanted to show that they were just as intelligent as their white colleagues. They reasoned and tried to earn the respect of their white peers by showing they were not different, by showing their westernization (Foster 44-46). They needed to prove their intelligence and worth as human beings, so that white people would consider and fight for the abolition of slavery. For instance, Piccinato has done research on the similarities and differences between the slave narrative and the picaresque novel (88-98). Nevertheless, these first slave narratives still needed a preface that was written by a white author “confirming the identity and experiences of the narrator” (Wood 84), otherwise the reader could call into question the legitimacy of the text. Thus, white people still superimposed Black people.

Angelyn Mitchell refers to contemporary slave narratives as liberatory narratives, because in these stories the centralized character is the slave, not the master. Thus, she says, the liberatory narrative puts focus on the road to liberation instead of on the role of the slave as the servant of their master (Mitchell 147). Mitchell explains that the genre “reveals the unspeakable [...] residuals of slavery in the context of Black womanhood as it illumines the enduring effects of our racist and sexist American history in today’s society” (xii). Mitchell also states that the goal of liberatory narratives is for its readers to be a witness to the past (147). Therefore, the act of remembering can serve as ‘the repository of trauma’, as well as be a way to free Black people from their past (Mitchell 147). They do not have to continuously carry the burden of slavery with them, but they have a place to work through their past and to heal from their trauma. Thus, the liberatory narrative serves as a “site of memory” (Kritzman and Nora). Mitchell supports this saying...
“[m]emory allows one to acknowledge the traumas of slavery that would be otherwise impossible to acknowledge without memory. Witnesses like Butler, Morrison, Williams, Cooper, and Cart provide testimonies of the trauma of slavery in their works” (150).

This means that slave narratives serve as testimonies of the past, something Mitchell refers to as “weapon[s] against forgetfulness” (150), while at the same time they allow Black people to let go of their past, and focus on their future.

Furthermore, Piccinato sums up some of the main characteristics of slave narratives. The first being that the majority of slave narratives are told from the perspective of a former slave, i.e. a free Black person, thus, the slave story is told retrospectively with a first-person narrator (Piccinato 88). Additionally, the narrative can be divided into three parts: first, the narrator describes the society where slavery is still supported by law. The narration progresses to a point where the slave experiences a growth in consciousness, which Piccinato describes as “the awareness of the refusal of slavery” (92). The third, and final, step is the choice to escape, and actively pursue freedom (Piccinato 92). Piccinato adds that the ending of the slave narrative is both an ending and a beginning, because the slave stops being property and finally starts living as a free person (96).

With the start of the Civil War in the United States, slave narratives became less popular because readers were more interested to hear about what was happening at the war front. When the war was over “the focus of white America was upon rebuilding a nation. It wanted to forget those elements which were considered divisive or passé now that slavery did not legally exist” (Foster 60). It’s only in recent years, that slave narratives regained popular interest. Rushdy marks Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* as the first neo-slave narrative (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 87). It was published in 1966 and gave way to more works about slavery, e.g. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest Gaines, or *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones. The reason for this increase in popularity could be attributed to the rise of both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. As a result, publishers were quick to capitalize on the growing interest in Black culture (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave Narrative” 88-89).

Although the neo-slave narrative is a continuation of the slave narrative, the genre still underwent some formal innovations. For instance, Rushdy identifies three forms that the neo-slave narratives could take. First, the slave narrative can imitate the historical novel. Thus, it recounts history from the bottom up where the slave is the character through which the reader views the world. The second form—the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative—is the closest to the antebellum slave narrative. This type superimposes historical accuracy and is a continuation of the oral tradition because the story is told through a first-person narrator.
Rushdy named the third form “the novel of remembered generations” (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 90). These stories depict slaves and their descendants through generations, and shows that slavery has had lasting effects on the twentieth century (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave Narrative” 90-95). To end his article on neo-slave narratives, Rushdy surmises two main reasons as to why these authors returned to writing slave narratives. He states, “to discover the covert and overt acts of resistance that permitted those earlier generations to ensure the survival and birth of this one” (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 103), i.e. this first goal refers to the importance of honoring and respecting history. Rushdy goes on to say that “memory is how the past is recalled; memory is also how we heal from that past” (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 103). Therefore, apart from remembering what happened in the past, recounting slave narratives is a way for these authors and their readers to heal from the legacy that slavery left on the twentieth century. Additionally, Schiff states about memory and history in literature that, “[w]hen works of fiction engage historical events and historical discourse, they invite a revision of history, potentially making it, like memory, a reparative narrative” (123). This is the case in both Butler’s and O’Hara’s stories (as will be discussed in detail later). By having their main characters travel back in time, these characters are able to uncover hidden truths, or even rewrite small parts of the history that they travel through.

Furthermore, an important theory surrounding slavery, that is often depicted in slave narratives, is that of the social death of the slave. In his book, *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson develops Claude Meillassoux’ concept of how slavery initiates the social death of the enslaved person, the moment he loses his freedom, he subsequently loses his social life (38):

> “The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized. […] The next phase involves the introduction of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing” (Patterson 38).

In other words, when a free person becomes a slave he loses his identity as a social being. He has a past, but is no longer connected to it. Moreover, in his new environment, the slave is forbidden by his master to start a new community, because he has become the property of said master. He is not in charge of his own body, or his own actions. As a result, the slave is a nonbeing.

Patterson also introduces the notion that the slave is located in a ‘liminal state’ (46), which refers to the fact that the slave is a physical part of the enslaved community, but he lacks a social or cultural identity. It is not a full exclusion, however, because the slave still has contact with his master. Patterson calls this an “institutionalized marginality” (46). In a way, it is exactly this marginal state within mainstream literature that African-American literature occupies at its
conception. However, while the status of the slave as a nonbeing is the most extreme form of the liminal state, Black authors use literature to fight their way out of that restricted space. These authors use their works to come to grips with their marginalized status, and at times even embrace it.

1.2. Afrofuturism

The term ‘Afrofuturism’ was coined by Mark Dery for the first time in his article ‘Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose’. Dery came up with the word—the concept itself, however, had already been described by Mark Sinker one year earlier (Bould 180). Dery’s definition goes as follows:

“speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180).

By way of explanation, for Dery, Afrofuturism pertains to the usage of futuristic technology in African American Literature, especially Black science fiction. Moreover, this does not mean that Afrofuturism did not already exist before Dery’s article was published. On the contrary, there was a need for a term when researchers of Black culture became aware of, and discussed more frequently, the similarities between science fiction themes and the themes of African culture and history.

In recent years, the meaning of the term has morphed so that it would include any kind of art form, not only literature, but also music and visual arts, as well as the critical theory that surrounds those art forms. Additionally, in her 2013 treatise of Afrofuturism, Womack states that,

“Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (9).

In other words, Afrofuturism comments on both the past and the present through music, visual art, fictional and non-fictional literature, and more. Furthermore, by using what are generally defined as Western genres (e.g. science fiction, historical fiction, …), Afrofuturists discuss traditional African themes and provide social criticism on subjects related to race.
The critical framework of Afrofuturism has a somewhat unconventional origin in that it mostly started on the Internet. After Dery published his article in 1994, Alondra Nelson, in the late 1990s, launched an AOL Listserv, which is an early online forum, for students who wanted to discuss ideas about science fiction in contemporary culture, science, and technology (Womack 18). The forum quickly led to a website. It was a space that gave context to works that initially did not fit neatly into one genre. Works that were over half a century old were soon discovered and analyzed within the genre of Afrofuturism, and in return people were inspired by the conversation to start creating new works. Alexander Weheliye, one of the early moderators of the forum is now a professor who teaches Afrofuturism at Northwestern University. He contends that it was the Internet space that facilitated the discussion, and if it had started 10 years earlier, without the Internet, it would not have made a big impact (Womack 19). Present-day, Afrofuturists still use the Internet as their main space for discussion, e.g. the website Black Science Fiction Society serves as a world stage, and everyone with an Internet connection has access to it.

Afrofuturism extends itself to comprise more than literature alone, which means part of its origin can be found outside of the literary genre. The jazz musician Sun Ra, for instance, is considered as one of the founding fathers of Afrofuturism because he performed in futuristic clothing, and he frequently used space themes in combination with images from ancient Egypt. Although he was never able to garner much success as a mainstream artist, he was still a huge influence on later generations, such as George Clinton and his group Parliament-Funkadelic. The latter is seen as a second founding father of Afrofuturism. As for visual art, there is Punzi, a Kenyan short sci-fi film that features an African scientist living in a futuristic underground city. Another important medium are comic books; characters like Icon and Rocket were created, written and drawn by Black artists. They were important for the representation of Black people, e.g. Rocket became the first African-American superhero who is also a single mother.

Furthermore, the “third point in the Afrofuturism Trinity”, i.e. the third founding member, is the author Octavia Butler (Womack 109). She is known for mixing “women’s issues, race, sci-fi, mysticism, and the future” (Womack 110), and was a great inspiration for future Black women writers of science fiction who thought they did not have a place in what was originally considered to be a white man’s world. Apart from novels, the Afrofuturist genre extended itself to short stories, such as The Space Traders, and plays, such as Insurrection: Holding History. Additionally, Yaszek distinguishes early Afrofuturist writers, who write stories that question whether Afrodiasporic Black Americans are able to make a place for themselves in Western futurity, from later Afrofuturist writers, who “readily assume that people
of color will indeed be key players in the history of the future” (“Afrofuturism” 55). In this categorization, Octavia Butler’s work would fall in the latter group, because the narrator does not question whether or not Black people will be central figures, they already are. While Bell’s bleak ending in *The Space Traders* would place this short story in the former.

Another important figure is Samuel R. Delaney, one of the first widely published Black science-fiction authors. In ‘Racism and Science-Fiction’ he recounts how, when he first started out, he had a hard time finding someone who would publish his stories, because publishers frequently replied that their readers would not be able to sympathize with a Black character (Delaney). Rutledge comments on the same thing and states that “it was commonly believed that European-American [science fiction] readers would not pay to read about the doings of Black characters” (239). This fight for the representation of Black culture in literature is one of the main themes of Afrofuturism. Other common themes, such as mixing genres, memory and history, hope and imagination, otherness, … will be discussed next.

In order to resist stifling power structures, e.g. the white patriarchy in the United States, they imagined their own black culture into the future. Especially, because within early science fiction literature, there were not many Black characters, and if they were there, they served a minor role, which is in line with Gerard’s zero-image theory that was discussed earlier. The idea is to unchain the mind, to engage people to think outside of their preconceived notions of what it means to be black. “Whether it’s sci-fi story lines or radical eccentricity, Afrofuturism inverts reality. Afrofuturists write their own stories” (Womack 16). Reynaldo Anderson contends that,

“future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures” (230).

Which means that African American authors took control of their own narratives. They no longer accepted the caricatural versions of Black people written by white writers. Dery, in agreement with Anderson and Womack, adds that Afrofuturists write ‘other stories’, by which he means unconventional stories. About Afrofuturism, he says “it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points’ (182), in other words it is found outside of the norm. Afrofuturists write stories from a perspective that has not been seen before, and they write about stories that are not known to the wide public. Likewise, Delaney asserts that it is important for science fiction stories to be told from the margin (Dery 189). However, this trait is not exclusively Afrofuturist. Alexander Weheliye states that developing alternate ways outside of
the system of oppression is a frequent characteristic of African American literature (Womack 37). As a minority people, they write their own stories from the margin and share them to the wider public, who then has insight into Black lives. These stories do not contain stereotypes given to them by other communities, but describe Black people in their complexities.

One way to accomplish this is by using a ‘Western genre’ as a model, which they then fill with their own content, as was the case with slave narratives. Later on, Black authors still borrowed from Western literary genres to make their stories more accessible to other cultures, but they adjusted those models to fit their own narratives. One of the biggest examples of this is the novel *Kindred*. In her work, Octavia Butler uses time travel to place her main character in the antebellum South, and the story becomes a slave narrative. The use of science fiction elements, e.g. time travel, is a Western characteristic, but what is original about *Kindred* is that Butler uses those elements to tell a story about slavery.

A second theme that is frequently used is Black History, e.g. the African Diaspora, slavery, the Jim Crow Law, the authors sometimes go as far back as Egypt, and use Egyptian mythology as a source of inspiration. African-Americans have continuously been neglected by the popularized version American history. For example, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan only recently gained fame in the film *Hidden Figures*, even though they were invaluable assets to NASA. The inclusion of these Black scientists in literature and film could empower later generations to fall in their footsteps, which is why representation in popular media is necessary. Moreover, Delaney states that when slaves entered America “their records […] were systematically destroyed” (Dery 191). As such, he has no idea which part of Africa that his ancestors are from, and this is the case for many African Americans. Therefore, Afrofuturists re-imagine their own history, they question whether it is possible to imagine a future when they lack a knowable history (Dery 180). Womack states similarly that “the obvious absence [of that history] has compelled many Afrofuturists to look to the continent’s myths, spirituality, and art on a never-ending quest for wholeness” (80). In other words, Afrofuturists search the past for self-knowledge in order to visualize their future.

Thirdly, there is the importance of ‘humanity’. Womack explains that it is difficult for Black people to understand that at some point in the past they were not deemed human (30). This idea, that black people were not human, was supported by the law in the first version of the United States constitution, and therefore they did not have the same rights as white men (at the time women were also excluded). D. Scot Miller, an Afrofuturist poet, contends that Black people have always needed to prove their humanity because they came to America as chattel (Womack 30). In the same line, ‘race’ is a man-made construct that supported the idea of black
slavery, and that ultimately led to the racism that still exists to this day. White people needed a reason to justify using only Black slaves, and the color of their skin was the obvious choice (Womack 27). The goal of Afrofuturism is to deconstruct the idea of race and racism. They want to safeguard their humanity, i.e. end the dehumanization on the basis of skin color, in the development of new technologies, because it is unclear what kind of impact these changes will have on social conditions (Womack 36). They might be beneficial and correct the inequality between people of color and white people, but they just as well might further the imbalance.

Another theme, intricately linked to the former one, is the similarity between the African Diaspora and alien abduction. The idea is that black people were taken from their homeland on a ship to an unknown destination, and that this serves as a near-perfect parallel with what would happen if humans were ever abducted by aliens. Dery states that “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees” (180). Science fiction is then the ideal genre to explore these similarities, especially because of “the sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history” (Dery 180). Not only does the subject matter provide a good parallel, the treatment of the genre itself mirrors the way Black people have been treated in the United States. Afrofuturists frequently use their status as ‘the other’ in their stories, but they are not bound to the contemporary genre. This is the reason why space is a frequently used theme in Afrofuturist works. However, this does not solely refer to outer space, but to space in general (Womack 142). Within Afrofuturism, African-Americans have created a space where they can dream, and imagine themselves as they want, without stereotypes or expectations.

Furthermore, related to the theme of ‘otherness’, “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin) is a commonly drawn upon literary device in Afrofuturism. For example, with Black people frequently being referred to as not human, or even as alien, it does not come as a surprise that they would use alienation as a trope in their work. In relation, Greg Tate gives another example of why science fiction is a good carrier for Afrofuturist art, which is that the alienation in science fiction “[reiterates] the condition of being black in American culture” (Dery 212). Cauleen Smith, an Afrofuturist filmmaker, describes Afrofuturism as “the experience of cognitive estrangement as manifested through sound, image, language, and forms” (Womack 138). In other words, alienation is an integral part of Afrofuturism, because it is a way to make the audience experience what black people go through, and what their people have been going through for many decades. Parrinder says about science fiction that “[t]he estrangement-effect [...] is contained and neutralized by their conventionality in other respects” (74). Thus, in relation to Afrofuturism, it can be argued that the humanity theme (as discussed early) would
assure that the reader does not completely distance himself from the story, only that they experience a displacement to the periphery of society.

Moreover, the goal of Afrofuturism, whether implicit or explicitly stated by the artist, is to create a product that combines desire, hope, and imagination, a product that ultimately inspires social change (Womack 42). Many activists, such as Adrienne Marie Brown, Coleen Coleman, and Rasheedah Phillips, believe that “triggering the imagination through tales about the future compels thinkers to break out of their circumstances” (Womack 178). Afrofuturists imagine a better future for themselves, they try to infuse people with hope in order to believe that change is possible. It is especially important for later generations, for example the first African-American woman to go into space, Mae Jemison, was inspired to become an astronaut by Lt. Nyota Uhura, a black character in Star Trek (Womack 99). The goal is to give later generations an image to aspire to, to let black children know that their dreams can be more than dreams. However, apart from the grand scheme that is social change, Afrofuturism is also a tool for personal growth and self-discovery. Not only do Afrofuturists focus on the societal level, but they want to establish themselves as individuals too (Womack 191).

The last thing that characterizes Afrofuturism is its intersectionality1 between race and gender. Black women take up the same amount of space as black men in the Afrofuturist aesthetic. Womack states that “[i]n Afrofuturism, black women’s imagination, image, and voice are not framed by the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day” (101). Afrofuturists define Blackness, womanhood, and any other identifier they see fit, outside of the stereotypical image that is given to them by general society, e.g. dependent on the government, aspiring to beauty ideals (Womack 101). Black women are given the freedom and the space to imagine themselves as they are, as well as how they envision themselves in the future.

Moreover, Black women are not positioned opposite and compared against Black men, or against women with a different ethnic background (Womack 104). The focus is on Black women as individuals, and not on how they differ from Black men or other women, e.g. “they make their own standards and sculpt their own lens through which to view the world and for the world to view them” (Womack 104). Afrofuturists aim to create images of Black women as they appear to them in real life. Additionally, it is mostly Black women who use Afrofuturism as a device to heal their collective memory and traumas of the past. One of the more prominent examples is Octavia Butler, who examines Black slavery in her novel *Kindred*. In essence,

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1 Intersectionality is defined by Merriam-Webster as: “The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.”
Black women in Afrofuturism are women who “develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations” (Womack 101).

Finally, Afrofuturism is the subgenre that, “[w]hether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, [aims to] redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future” (Womack 9). Their goal is to create a better future in their art works, and inspire later generations to carry out their imagination in real life. It is through their art that Afrofuturists such as Octavia Butler, George Clinton, Alexander Weheliye, and others, create a world where they define their own black identity, independently of Western generalizations and misconceptions. They are inspired by their history and their African heritage and use the past to create possible futures for themselves. By adopting Western genres, e.g. science fiction and fantasy, and their literary devices, e.g. cognitive estrangement, Afrofuturists pursue social change.

1.3. (Black) Science Fiction

First, the distinction between Black science fiction and Afrofuturism is not a clear-cut one. They overlap when both genres criticize contemporary society, or when they pursue social change and the advancement of Black people in the future. Nevertheless, not all (Black) science fiction novels deal with social issues, and not all Afrofuturist novels belong to the science fiction genre. Therefore, as they are not completely convergent, categorizing one novel as Afrofuturist, does not automatically classify it as being Black science fiction as well, and vice versa. Samuel R. Delany is often indicated as the first Black science fiction author, but he himself states that there were Black authors before him. It only is harder to identify them because most of them probably used a pseudonym in what was a predominantly white world (Delaney). In the previous section on Afrofuturism, it was explained how Delaney had to fight racist ideals in order to get his work published. On the other hand, the reason why the science fiction genre lends itself so well to tell stories about African-Americans, is because both the genre and Black people occupy the same space, i.e. as the subaltern, in their respective communities (Dery 180). Furthermore, Greg Tate claims that

“[science fiction] focuses on the psychology of a society, [and] black literature moves the silence and intellectual marginalization of blacks to the foreground. Both represent an attempt to view everything through a single lens, so that we can see the specter haunting society that society doesn’t want to acknowledge” (Dery 211).
In other words, both Black literature and science fiction literature can tell the same kind of stories about otherness, because “[r]elegated early to the position of the exotic Other, Africans and their descendants have been marked as the primitive for centuries” (Rutledge 237). Similarly, Parrinder describes “[science fiction as] a mode of counter-culture, propagating visions and conceptions of altered modes of life which would normally be ridiculed or dismissed by the representatives of orthodoxy” (36). Therefore, science fiction stories, and more importantly, Black science fiction stories write about their own culture as being opposite of popular culture. It is a way for them to retaliate against what is described as the norm in Western stories. For instance, Greg Tate mentions that science fiction and African-American literature both share a redemptive quality in that “they deal with the plight of the outsider” (212), meaning that the genres do not only feature minorities, but they tell stories about what it means to be a minority.

There are, however, ways in which Black science fiction sets itself apart from general Western science fiction. The first of which is described by Rutledge, who states that Black theology and ‘hard science fiction’ do not mix well (241). By which he refers to the fact that African-American literature, and especially Afrofuturism, often writes stories that are influenced by Egyptian myths and traditional African folktales (Womack 80-83) — as was said in the previous section—. These folktales are based more on the idea of magic, rather than science. In contrast with this idea, Anderson describes that “there is historical evidence that demonstrates, via the route of alchemy, that magic is a gateway into the study of science” (235-236), and that the two are closely related. A reconciliation of these divergent theories can be found with the help of Koenraad Stroeken’s research. Stroeken explains how the concept of ‘modernism’ is expressed differently in different societies. Stroeken’s research is on witchcraft in African traditional culture. he explains that these traditional communities, which include the belief in magic—which Western people are quick to brand as ‘occult’ and ‘superstitious’— have gone through their own kind of modernization (Stroeken). He states that the Western concept of a modern society cannot transfer flawlessly onto African culture, and that different societies have different perspectives on what modernization is (Stroeken). In reference to Afrofuturism, it can be argued, then, that Black science fiction does not necessarily abide by the same rules of Western (i.e. white) science fiction.

Another way that Black science fiction breaks with Western science fiction is by writing about race. Bould attests that “[science fiction]’s color-blind future was concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects” (177). Predominantly white science fiction avoided the concept of race and racism by focusing on the dichotomy between humans and
aliens, Rutledge refers to this as “blanching of the future” (238-239). In other words, in line with Afrofuturism, Black science fictions authors write stories that include their own culture, and as was said before science fictions lends itself well to tell stories about Black culture. Bould even goes so far as to say that “[science fiction] studies, if it is to be at all radical, must use its position of relative privilege to provide a home for excluded voices without forcing assimilation upon them” (182). Therefore, he wants science fiction to use its popular position in society to provide novels that deal with marginalized groups, especially because the genre already goes against the norm.

Nevertheless, Afrofuturists and Black science fiction authors are similar in certain aspects, e.g. they do not simply write

“[t]echnicolor versions of traditional science fiction stories, making a few heroic scientists black or brown and a few evil alien others white or pink. Rather, they actively draw upon Afrodiasporic history and culture to tell complex and sometimes contradictory stories about how and why race relations might continue to matter in the future” (Yaszek, “Afrofuturism” 55). Thus, this again supports that African-American writers write about their own culture, and their own experiences. Changing the skin color of a white hero adds nothing to the story, which is why they create their own heroes with a background in Black culture. They use their history, e.g. the African diaspora, to write new narratives about the future. This way, these stories do not only provide representation for Black people, but it is also a place where people from different backgrounds can learn about Black culture.

Moreover, another device Afrofuturism and Black Science Fiction both utilize is the collapsing of time. The authors imagine stories where “ancient time and things come to coexist, which is simultaneously a very African, mythic, cyclical way of looking at time and a kind of prehistoric postmodernism” (Dery 208). This means that a story does not have to be told in chronological order, and that different times can be tangled together in one space, e.g. the characters of Kindred and Insurrection: Holding History travel back and forth in time, as well as teleport to a different place (i.e. the characters in Kindred end up in a different state as well). Here, the difference between ‘general’ Western Science Fiction and Black Science Fiction is that time is collapsed to visit a specific moment that is important for Black history.

The above paragraphs show that African-American writers modify the science fiction genre and adjust it to their own needs. This, however, does not mean that they discard all the characteristics of science fiction. For one, science fiction has been perceived as a ‘literature of ideas’. These ideas are often advanced for their times, and “the speculative form of science fiction has enabled them to avoid the censorship they would otherwise attract” (Parrinder 43).
In other words, writers could hide their revolutionary ideas in alternate realities. That way, they would not be criticized as much for their thoughts because they can always deny—truthfully or not—that the story takes place in contemporary society. Thus, African-American authors could freely discuss racism, white privilege, and more, in their science fiction works. Furthermore, Greg Tate states:

“One of the things that characterizes science fiction is the somewhat didactic way in which instruction is given about the potential for catastrophe in a society when its members don’t pay attention to the paths that either a new technology or an aberrant life form may take. In that sense, SF parallels traditional mythology, which is full of cautionary tales” (Dery 208)

Thus, these alternate realities could be a warning against the future of technology and/or different lifeforms, because the future might be shaped very differently from the present. In these cases, the narrator could invite the reader to caution, and tell him or her to be wary of the different shapes the future might take.

1.3.1. The (Critical) Dystopia

The dystopia is a subgenre of science fiction; a traditional dystopia is generally critical of contemporary society and serves as a warning for what will happen if the reader does not actively make a change. As such, the dystopia can be seen as prophesizing the downfall of the reader’s society when they are not spurred into action (Baccolini and Moylan 1-2). In respect to that, the critical dystopia is defined as;

“a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (Sargent “US Eutopias” 222).

In other words, the difference between a dystopia and a critical dystopia is that the latter includes hope. Moylan adds, however, that they are not “an entirely new generic form but rather a significant retrieval and refocusing of the most progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative” (188). As such, the critical dystopia is a continuation of the dystopia, and not a new genre.

Moreover, in critical dystopias there is still a chance to alter the course of the future, i.e. change is still possible. Baccolini and Moylan have summed up a few formal strategies of the critical dystopia, and will incorporate those that are relevant to Afrotourism. First, there is cognitive estrangement, which has already been discussed in this thesis. Second, the narrative is politically charged; which means that the narrator infuses the text with their own political
and/or ethical ideologies and those are meant to influence the reader. The third is described by Baccolini and Moylan as ‘utopian anticipation’ and refers to the possible happy ending of the story, if the protagonist is willing to leave the doomed course they are following at the beginning of the narrative. Fourth, the language is important, along with textuality. Lastly, there is the blurring of genres (Baccolini and Moylan, 4-8).

That last formal strategy is important because, as discussed before, this is also a common feature of Afrofuturism. Baccolini herself has attested to the importance of genre blurring in critical dystopias. She states that these dystopias question the generic conventions of ‘Western Genre Theory’ (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 13). Dystopias, and science fiction in general, ignore the boundaries and exclusions that Western Genre Theory has set (Baccolini, “Gender and Genre” 15); they explore the limits of genre and cross those limits if they want to. In a sense, it can be argued that they occupy the same space that marginalized groups do. Therefore, the critical dystopia is not completely outside of the science fiction genre, but not completely inside it either. It occupies the space in-between, and the same can be said about minority groups.

Additionally, the importance of history is a common theme in both the dystopia and Afrofuturism. According to Baccolini, if a dystopia is meant to warn readers against a possible future, then it makes sense that the story takes place in history (“Memory” 115). She also adds that “whereas the protagonists, in classical dystopia, usually do not get any control of history and the past, in the critical dystopia the recovery of history is an important element for the survival of hope” (Baccolini, “Memory” 115). Therefore, dystopian novels promote historical consciousness, i.e. the main character is not naïve or nostalgic because they know the outcome of their history and they know what went wrong. Thus, they can choose to remember and be accountable, or they can choose to ignore and avoid responsibility (Baccolini, “Memory” 116-119).

Furthermore, Varsam discusses parallels within female-authored slave narratives and dystopias; she states that “the concerns of dystopian fiction often coincide with those of slave narratives in their discourse on freedom, inequality, and the nature of domination” (210). It is because slavery is a form of oppression, and in slave narratives the authors fight against that oppression. Similarly, in dystopian novels the narrator fights against a system of oppression within their society. As such, in Kindred, The Space Traders, and Insurrection: Holding History the oppressive force coincides, because all three works are both narratives about slavery and dystopias fighting slavery. For that reason, both genres are generally written in first-person narrations to invoke sympathy as to manipulate and persuade the reader (Varsam 211). The
second commonality that Varsam denotes is the education of perception, e.g. by describing the violence done by their oppressors, the narrators mean to document and pass on those atrocities, and place them in history (212). In that way, their descendants can learn from history, and ensure that it does not happen again. Additionally, Donawerth states that “writers of 1990s feminist dystopias use the slave narrative to give hope to the dystopia, to give examples of choosing resistance in the worst places” (54), which means that, while contemporary slave narratives can serve as a warning against a repetition of the past, they can also be a testament of the progress that has already been made since the antebellum age. While race relations are not perfect now, the fact that there has been improvement gives hope for the future.
2. The Return of the Past in Derrick Bell’s *The Space Traders*

Derrick Bell was, first and foremost, a professor of law. He was the first African-American to receive tenure at Harvard Law School. He was one of the founders of ‘Critical Race Theory’ (CRT), which is a theoretical framework that examines the intersection of race, law, and power in American society. Before he was a professor, he was employed by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, where he worked to abolish racist laws and segregation in schools. During his life, Bell fought for the civil rights of minorities, writing critical articles, e.g. *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987), and fictional stories, e.g. *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories* (2002). After his death in 2011, he is still known as one of the most influential thinkers in civil rights discourse.

One of Bell’s fictional stories that comments on the racial climate in the United States is entitled *The Space Traders*. In this short story, published in 1992, Bell explores the circumstances under which the American government would again dehumanize Black people and revert to Black slavery. At first glance it seems unthinkable, but Bell shows that given the right opportunities, (white) people are capable of anything. In *The Space Traders* an alien spaceship lands in the United States and the aliens inside propose a trade. In return for all the Black people residing in the United States, the aliens offer gold, a solution for pollution, and fuel. The Americans have sixteen days (until Martin Luther King Day) to decide whether they will agree to the trade, and regardless of their decision the aliens will leave Earth peacefully at the end of those sixteen days. The president holds a special cabinet meeting, and the attendees discuss the morals, the benefits, the risks. There is a referendum so that the citizens of the United States can vote. In the end, the trade is approved and all the Black people are placed onto the alien spaceship, their future unknown. That image, of Black people loaded onto ships and sent to an unknown new world, echoes back to the African Diaspora of the seventeenth century.

2.1. Back to the Beginning

In order to understand how something like this could happen again, it is necessary to analyze the beginning of Black slavery in the past. Duncan Rice’s *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* gives a detailed account of how white people enslaved black people during the 18th and 19th century of the United States. When the New World was discovered, its purpose was to bring more profit to Europe, and Rice attests that “the most convenient and obvious way of
boosting such profit was through slave labour” (1). At that time, slavery was not a new concept, indenture goes back to the Roman Empire. The difference with the servitude that existed before, was that,

“they came to restrict their activities to Indians and latterly to Africans, that is to alien races who had not previously done them any harm. The construction of a slave system based so strictly on race was a new development” (Rice 3).

From then on slavery was uniquely assigned to people of color. Africans were said to be lesser beings, they were dehumanized by white people, who thought they were the superior race. Similarly, Womack explains that racism was created to justify slavery, and that race and racism, as social constructs, are the result of black slavery (27).

Moreover, at that time “the West had no fully formed religious or cultural tradition militating against slave labour itself” (Rice 4). There was also no universal opinion on slavery, even the social structures themselves were different in different regions. The reason that Northern Europe had less slave labor was because “the static labour demands of the feudal system seldom made the sale and resale of workmen necessary” (Rice 4). Meanwhile, to the Southern and Western regions, slaves were still valuable, not so much in Europe itself, but in the Americas. Thus, the reason that servitude stopped in Europe was not because it was immoral, but because there was no more profit to be made off serfdom (Rice 4). Furthermore, Rice confirms that Christianity sanctioned slavery. The Christian religious tradition was against the abuse of power by the masters, and they wished to improve the physical treatment of slaves. Nevertheless, they did nothing to stop slavery itself (Rice 7). Additionally, the reason why Africans specifically were chosen for enslavement was because they already had experience with agriculture (Rice 23). Africans were also favorable, because British indentured servants had inconvenient customary rights, and Indians died too soon, thus were not profitable enough. It helped as well, that Africans “had nowhere to appeal to in the event of maltreatment” (Rice 23), and they were easily recognizable because of the color of their skin. Therefore, on all accounts, using Black slaves was the most beneficial.

In the same manner that slavery ended in Europe, the movement to abolish slavery appeared in the northern parts of the United States:

“The economic change did not ‘cause’ the intellectual one, or vice versa. However, the two developments are closely interconnected. It was the weakening of the economic buttresses of the plantation regime which allowed the change in Western attitudes towards slavery to take effect, first in abolition of the slave trade and then in emancipation” (Rice 155).
Thus, it was a change in the economy combined with a change of mind that fueled the abolishment of slavery. Nevertheless, the impact that Black slavery had on the future society was enormous. Even though, it was “an extension of the old European systems of unfree labour” (Rice 22), the fact that it was slavery based on skin color meant that there were major repercussions for the future social condition of Black people. The effects of indenture are no longer visible in Europe, primarily because there is no way to identify the offspring of those people who were enslaved. In the United States, however, this identification is still possible, because a Black person cannot hide the color of their skin. Rice states that “large sections of the Americas can still identify their ex-slaves as a group whom they consider separate and inferior” (23), so although slavery was abolished, the aftermath, i.e. racism, never disappeared from the social hierarchy.

2.2. The Space Traders

It is exactly this consequence that Derrick Bell analyzes in his short story The Space Traders. He questions whether, under the right circumstances, a reversion to Black slavery could still be possible in this day and age. With The Space Traders, Bell shows that the danger of dehumanization still exists. The story opens on January 1st, 2000, aliens had previously announced that they would touch down on earth, and a delegation is waiting to meet them. To everyone’s surprise, the aliens speak English and they have come to make a trade (Bell 160):

“Those mammoth vessels carried within their holds treasure of which the United States was in most desperate need: gold, to bail out the almost bankrupt federal, state, and local governments; special chemicals capable of unpolluting the environment, which was becoming daily more toxic, and restoring it to the pristine state it had been before Western explorers set foot on it; and a totally safe nuclear engine and fuel, to relieve the nation’s all-but-depleted supply of fossil fuel. In return, the visitors wanted only one thing—and that was to take back to their home star all the African Americans who lived in the United States” (Bell 160-161).

In other words, the aliens offer gold, fuel, and new technology to fight pollution, and what they want in return are all the Black citizens of the United States. From this excerpt, it is shown that what the aliens are offering are things that the Americans are in dire need of. It is made clearer in the following pages that the earth is on its last breath; with the description of the beach containing dead seagulls, the oil slick in the water, and the ever-there smog (Bell 161). Moreover, the gold and the fuel were much-needed goods for America because
“[d]ecades of conservative, laissez-faire capitalism had emptied the coffers of all but a few of the very rich. The nation had […] given itself over to greed and willful exploitation of its natural resources. Now it was struggling to survive like any third-world nation” (Bell 162-163).

Thus, from the first pages Bell makes it obvious that this offer will be almost impossible to turn down, because agreeing to the aliens’ terms would mean saving the United States from its financial crisis and safeguarding the earth’s survival for many future generations to come. It begs the question though, whether these materialistic goods are worth the lives of twenty million Black human beings. To answer this question, the president calls his cabinet together the following day. Smith states that “it is clear by Day 2 that the President and his cabinet have already made up their minds” (213), because of the first comment that is given. This is what the Vice President says after the President opens the meeting: “I would venture, sir, that the balance of your term will be known as ‘America's Golden Age.’ Indeed, the era will almost certainly extend to the terms of your successor” (Bell 165). Immediately, the Vice President mentions the future fame that will come from this deal, as if it is already a done deal, without first going over the arguments.

During the cabinet meeting, only a few arguments are raised against the trade. The first comes from the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who states that the mental trauma, e.g. the survivor’s guilt, of the (white) people left behind would create new costs for her department. However, she first mentions that a lot of Black people live off welfare money, and their departure would mean that that money could be invested somewhere else (Bell 165-166). This makes it seem as if the African American people are already a burden to the country. In short, depending on the Health Department the advantages and disadvantages cancel each other out. Either way there will be expenses, so this would not sway their decision in any direction.

The next argument in favor of the trade comes from the Secretary of the Interior. He says, “if I could guarantee prosperity for this great country by giving my life or going off with the Space Traders, I would do it without hesitation” (Bell 166). This Secretary refers here to an act of patriotism, meaning that every real American would sacrifice himself for the good of the country. What he does not explicitly say, but the implication is there, is that if the African Americans do not offer themselves up for their country, they cannot be called real Americans, and thus, the government would not owe them anything. Therefore, the government would be free to do want they wanted with the Black people. In any case, the African Americans would willingly or unwillingly leave onboard the alien spaceship.
It becomes clear that the meeting is a ruse to make it seem like a difficult deliberation, while in actuality they are trying to figure out how to legally round up and ship off all of their African American citizens:

“I think we could put together a legislative package modeled on the Selective Service Act of 1918. Courts have uniformly upheld this statute and its predecessors as being well within congressional power to exact enforced military duty at home or abroad by United States citizens.” (Bell 166)

From the above excerpt, it is apparent that the Attorney General will establish a law that would legally allow the government to force Black Americans unto the alien spaceship under the guise of military duty. This is agreed upon on the first day that the cabinet is sitting together. Without explicitly making the decision, they are preparing the country to trade with the aliens. Implicitly, the trade has already been set in motion, e.g. a team of scientists found that the gold is genuine, the fuel is safe to use, and the antipollution chemicals work (Bell 167). Additionally, on January 7\textsuperscript{th}, not even half way to the deadline, a constitutional convention in Philadelphia passes the Twenty-Seventh Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, that reads as follows:

“All without regard to the language or interpretations previously given any other provision of this document, every United States citizen is subject at the call of Congress to selection for special service for periods necessary to protect domestic interests and international needs” (Bell 186).

Thus, after the ratification—scheduled for January 15\textsuperscript{th}, the government would be free to ‘call upon’ their African American citizens and send them off to ‘serve’ in outer space. Moreover, the new amendment is not specific to Black people, nor to what can be defined as ‘special service’, which means that this opens the door to enlisting any person, minority or not, for whatever service that is in the interest of the government, e.g. human test subjects during a future virus outbreak. This new amendment can be used in many different ways, and even though it can be applied to all citizens, this case shows that it is meant to be applied to the minority people within the United States.

Moreover, there were no black people in the president’s cabinet. When he won the presidency a few years earlier, he did not get a lot of minority votes, and so the president felt he did not owe them anything (Bell 163). Further on, the narrator also states that the president had “successfully exploited racial fears and hostility in his election campaign” (Bell 164). This last quote shows that he had never cared about the ‘Black vote’ to begin with. In fact, he used the fear against African-Americans in his favor to have more white people vote for him. However, for this occasion the president had invited a Black man, the academic Gleason
Golightly, to attend the cabinet meetings as an unofficial member, because “[h]is mere presence as a person of color at this crucial session would neutralize any possible critics in the media” (Bell 165). Thus, the only Black person in attendance, is only there to cover their bases in case their final decision is opposed by the minority they are trying to ship off.

Nevertheless, Gleason Golightly is granted time to speak. The narrator emphasizes again that this is only to keep up appearances. Golightly, however, sees this as his final chance to have any influence on the decision. First, it must be said that Gleason Golightly “has supported [the administration’s] anti-affirmative action policies as well as its efforts to repeal civil rights organizations” (Smith 213), so his status as a conservative is what gave him access to the president’s inner circle. This is also the reason why the black community thinks of him as an “Uncle Tom”, i.e. a Black person who wants to win the approval for white people (Bell 168), so his being there would only placate the general (i.e. white) public, and not the African-Americans. To the latter group he is not considered to be an ally.

Although the president is only interested in trying to find a way to make the decision more accepted by the wide public, Golightly still tries to appeal to the cabinet’s morals. He makes the comparison that if the aliens had asked for all “the white women with red hair and green eyes” the trade would be off the table at a moment’s notice; he mentions his wife and children, and asks the cabinet whether they would condemn their family as easily as they’re condemning his (Bell 168). While his claims against the trade are well-argued, and even though the president needs his support, Golightly’s attempts at persuading the cabinet are fruitless. Furthermore, the Secretary of the Interior interrupts him twice, once to say that Golightly should not question their patriotism, and the second time to say, “perhaps they have selected [the Black Americans] to inhabit an interplanetary version of the biblical land of milk and honey” (Bell 171). Thus, the Secretary of the Interior seems to think very little of Golightly’s intelligence, when he assumes he can make the inferior Black man believe in a happily-ever-after fairy tale story.

When the cabinet meeting is concluded, Golightly is left in the room by himself, and the reader receives more insight into Golightly’s character. He is not well-loved by the Black community, but he claims that he “had done more for black people than had a dozen of the loud-mouthed leaders who, he felt, talked much and produced little” (Bell 172). By playing the role of the inside man, he had made sure that Black universities were given scholarships and that certain Black people received positions of power (Bell 171-172). This demonstrates that Gleason Golightly is an intelligent man, who understands how the game of politics is played, and manipulates it from the inside. Golightly then realizes that he failed to change their decision
because he tried to get “the whites” to do the right thing by appealing to their morals, when instead he should have attempted to outsmart the cabinet (Bell 172). At this point in the story, it becomes clearer and clearer that the politician will not be persuaded by moral arguments. They have shown that they do not care about doing the right thing. This echoes back to how the abolition of slavery was not accomplished by merely arguing the ethics of slavery.

Golightly’s character traits become even more transparent when he visits “[t]he Anti-Trade Coalition – a gathering of black and liberal white politicians, civil rights representatives, and progressive academics” (Bell 174). There he is reluctantly given the floor by the coalition, because politically they are his adversaries. Golightly presents an idea to the group that he assumes will stop the trade:

“[H]e pitches an unusual scheme to play off the invidiousness of those in favor of the Trade: by giving up all opposition, and cultivating the rumor that the Traders are saving blacks from interminable prejudice, the infuriated pro-Traders will believe that African Americans are on their way to an alien paradise and reverse their stance.” (Smith 213).

In other words, he heard what the Secretary of the Interior said to him, and he uses that idea, but reverses it. By spreading the rumor that African-Americans are going to the Promised Land, Golightly hopes to make white people jealous enough to turn them against the trade. He bets on the assumption that white people will never allow black people to have something that white people are more deserving of (Bell 176). It is hard to believe that this strategy could work, but the reader never finds out, because the coalition opposes his idea. For one, they do not want to accept a racist policy, and secondly, they are unwilling to lose their integrity: “[W]hat this country is ready to do to us is wrong! It is evil! It is an action so heinous as to give the word betrayal a bad name” (Bell 178). Thus, unlike Golightly, and the president and his cabinet, who use manipulation to get what they want, the members of the coalition do not want to stoop down to their level. They want to win because they are on the right side of the conflict, and not because they cheated the game.

Moreover, the third faction that holds a gathering are the “leaders of Fortune-500 businesses, heads of banks, insurance companies, and similar entities” (Bell 181), because they do not believe the president’s ruse, and had figured out that the decision to approve the trade had already been made. They had convened to discuss what the trade would mean for their businesses, and ascertained that it would not be in their favor for the following reasons: black people consumed more of their income than white people, coal and oil companies saw their profit decrease at the sight of the inexhaustible alien fuel, the total loss of income for businesses based in black ghetto communities, the value of money would lessen because of the extra alien
gold, the disappearance of the Black minority would hugely upset the class system (Bell 181-182). Thus, the corporate leaders decide to change the public’s opinion through advertisements in the media that were anti-trade. Nevertheless, all of the arguments mentioned above are based on the fact that corporations would lose money if the trade with the aliens would come to pass, and morality is not even a factor in their decision. And, again, it is through manipulation, by the media this time around, that they attempt to sway the vote of the public. One billionaire even says, “everyone says that money talks. Well dammit, let's get out there and spend some money. If this thing goes to a public referendum, we can buy whatever and whoever is necessary” (Bell 184). Thus, it goes to show that they are willing to do everything it takes to stop the trade, even if it means using extortion to change the mind of the people. Again, the reasons for stopping the trade are based on economic benefits, and not on moral grounds.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to discuss that the aliens are treated better than the African-Americans. Smith states that, “white America does not conceive of these beings as aliens but as *people* from another world” (214). For example, this is the way the aliens are perceived by the white population:

> “Most white people were, like the welcoming delegation that morning, relieved and pleased to find the visitors from outer space unthreatening. They were not human, obviously, but resembled the superhuman, good-guy characters in comic books; indeed, they seemed to be practical, no-nonsense folks like regular Americans” (Bell 162).

This shows that the Americans do not fear the aliens, as a matter of fact they think that the aliens are superior beings. Meanwhile, more than half of African Americans have become outcasts that live confined areas, similar to the Jewish Ghettos of World War II:

> “High walls surrounded these areas, and armed guards controlled entrance and exit around the clock. Still, despite all precautions, young blacks escaped from time to time to terrorize whites” (Bell 164).

While the aliens, who have never been to earth before, are welcomed with open arms, the Black people that have been living in the United States for centuries are still feared and discriminated against. The Black people have been alienated by white people for decades, so in this story they are the real aliens that do not belong. Thus, as Smith says “the moves to ‘undo’ black citizenship in order to bring about the Trade are of form, not substance” (214); the black Americans were already living separately in ghettos, so in practice this new law does not change anything. Additionally, there is even a split in the way white people look at the aliens versus the way black people perceive them, because the African Americans are more hesitant in welcoming the aliens:
“[M]any American blacks […] had seen the visitors as distinctly unpleasant, even menacing in appearance. While their perceptions of the visitors differed, black people all agreed that the Space Traders looked like bad news — and their trade offer certainly was — and burned up the phone lines urging black leaders to take action against it” (Bell 162).

This shows that the African Americans are more suspicious of the aliens, and the deal they are trying to make. The irony is that Black people are mocked for their “silly superstitions” by the white people (Bell 162), even though those same white people have been discriminating against African-Americans based on superstitions and stereotypes since the latter were brought to the United States.

The previously described actions following the proposal to trade reveals how racist the white people in the United States still are. Moreover, the supporters of the trade have no qualms about referring to Black people as inferior or unwelcome, e.g. they are full of “primitive fear and foolishness” (Bell 162), they are “overly opportunistic” and “not very smart” (Bell 163), “[t]he Framers\(^2\) intended America to be a white country” (Bell 188), and it would be “a better country without Black people” (Bell 184). At every opportunity those people in favor of the trade throw insults at black people. Therefore, in the end, it does not come as a surprise that the result of the referendum is 30% against versus 70% in favor of the trade (Bell 193).

Furthermore, the government started to prepare the transfer of all the Black people, and even though the White House had allowed Golightly safe passage to Canada for all his services over the years, the Black man is betrayed by the Secretary of the Interior and is taken to the alien spaceship (Bell 194). This shows how hateful the Secretary actually is, because although Golightly supported his agenda throughout the years, he could not let the Golightlies, this single family, go free.

To conclude this analysis, racism is behind every decision that the government makes in support of the trade with the aliens, and that same racism is also the fuel that alights the public to vote in favor of deporting all the black people living in ‘their’ country. If African Americans were perceived as human beings of equal worth as white people, this would not have been possible. Even a government census official is surprised at the amount of people supporting the trade:

"the real attraction for a great many whites is that it would remove black people from this society. Since the first of the year, my staff and I have interviewed literally thousands of citizens across the country, and, though they don't say it directly, it's clear that at bottom they simply think this will be a better country without black people. I fear, gentlemen, that those of us who

\(^2\) ‘Framers’ is synonymous term for ‘Founding Fathers
have been perpetuating this belief over the years have done a better job than we knew” (Bell 183-184).

This shows that the media and the government have been actively alienating black people from the public, to make sure that they are separated, as if segregation was still in effect to this day. And although they know they have been doing this for decades, they are still surprised that the general public was so heavily influenced by their propaganda, which is what Afrofuturism tries to fight by creating a positive representation of Black culture in the arts and the media.

Furthermore, to incorporate the previous section about the origin of Black slavery; in the same way that there was no moralizing force that stopped slavery the first time around, morality could not save Black people from their fate. Slavery was created for profit, and now, profit is also the reason for accepting the trade. Therefore, Bell demonstrates that centuries later, Black slavery still has consequences on our modern-day society.

2.3. Science Fiction and Afrofuturism

The chapter on Afrofuturism shows that within the genre the alien abduction metaphor is frequently used by Afrofuturists to mirror the African Diaspora. This is also the case in Bell’s short story. Bell, however, does not use alien abduction as a metaphor, but rather goes one step further and depicts a second Diaspora—not from Africa, this time, but from the United States. Moreover, Afrofuturists tell stories about their own culture, and while there are several white characters in *The Space Traders*, the main character, Gleason Golightly, is African American. Additionally, the white characters—such as the president, and the Secretaries, the businessmen—are flat characters. The reader does not receive much insight into their psyche, they are there to move the plot forward.

On the other hand, Gleason Golightly is a character with strengths and flaws. For instance, he is intelligent and quick on his feet. He has secured himself a high position within the American government, and although his being there is a way for the president to appease the Black communities, it still gives Golightly influence and room to manipulate some decisions in his favor. Nevertheless, he does not succeed in stopping the trade. He makes the mistake of arguing the immorality of the deportation of Black people, even though he knew from experience that it would not have worked. Golightly gets caught up in his own emotions, and he later chastises himself for that, saying “without power, a people must use cunning and guile” (Bell 179). This shows that Golightly is a multifaceted character, on the one hand he is a conservative man guided by logic, but he is also a regular human being that tries to sway people by making grand moral speeches.
In Afrofuturism, it is important to show that Black people are human too. As seen above, Golightly embodies that humanity. However, with *The Space Traders*, Bell is utterly pessimistic and describes the worst-case scenario. Taylor states that,

“This Bell’s point is that, historically, white Americans have been willing to sacrifice the well-being of people of color for their economic self-interests and that continued subordination of blacks is sustained by those economic and legal structures that promote white privilege” (123).

This means that his short story narrates what would happen if white privilege reached its highest point; where it not only gives privilege to white people, but actively abolishes the rights of a minority people. Sargent makes a similar claim in his essay on the flawed utopia:

“[I]n many developed countries, like the United States, racial and ethnic minorities suffer from unwillingness to provide the resources needed to improve their condition because doing so might reduce the standard of living of the rest of us” (“flawed utopia” 228)

In other words, the white characters in *The Space Traders* invalidate the humanity of Black people. Especially because one of the goals of Afrofuturism is to safeguard the humanity of Black people during the development of new technology. Bell’s story shows here that when the advantages of the new technologies are so high, white people would barely hesitate to prioritize their own needs over the needs of others. This also shows that this story is a cautionary tale that warns again new technology as well as extra-terrestrial threats.

Lastly, Afrofuturists use their own history in their stories, and the most significant reference to Black history in *The Space Traders* is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. The aliens give the Americans sixteen days, till the celebration of the birthday of one of the most famous Black activists in American history, to decide whether to deport all their African-American citizens. Therefore, it is highly ironic that every Black American loses his freedom on the day they should be remembering the man who fought for the equal rights of Black lives. Additionally, this might be the last time that Martin Luther King Jr. Day is ‘celebrated’ in the United States. At this moment, the Black Rights Activist is commemorated in the worst way, the people who supported the trade are disavowing his legacy by revoking the rights that he fought hard for while he was alive.
3. Visiting the past in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

It has already been said that Womack presents Octavia E. Butler as the third founding member of Afrofuturism (109), and apart from *Kindred* (1979), which is her first and most well-known novel, Butler has authored other popular books, such as *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Xenogenesis* (1989). She has received both the Hugo and the Nebula Award on multiple occasions—both these organizations award Science Fiction literature and its authors. As one of the first female Black authors to receive critical acclaim, she has become an inspiration to many writers wanting to follow in her footsteps, e.g. Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin (Womack 110-111). One of the central ideas in Butler’s works is her “version of sf’s double-edged sword:” (Kilgore and Samantrai 355)

“her highly speculative alternate worlds are in many ways not recognizable from where we stand, but their very difference makes them a critical mirror held up to the choices and investments that have made our world” (Kilgore and Samantrai 355).

Salvagio adds that Butler consciously confronts the problem that previously the majority of Science Fiction stories had been narrated by white males (78), and Butler’s choice of narrator is almost always a Black woman.

This is also the case in *Kindred*. Dana Franklin is a Black woman who is thrown back in time where she finds a white boy drowning. Over the course of the novel she travels back on six different occasions to the same plantation during Rufus life, and she is always there to save him from death. The boy grows up to be a slave master, and Dana has to keep him alive because he turns out to be her ancestor. Therefore, she is forced to watch him abuse his slaves until Rufus and Alice, a slave girl, conceive a daughter named Hagar, who will start Dana’s family tree. Dana can only be transported back to her present time when she is in real danger of losing her life. Every time Dana lives in the early 19th century she is forced to set aside her rights as a human being and pretend to be a slave. It is only on her last trip back that she draws the line and refuses to relinquish her body or her mind, and kills Rufus who is attempting to take her power.

3.1. The Genre Question

About *Kindred*, Octavia Butler states that it is not a Science Fiction novel, because “there’s absolutely no science in it” (Kenan 495). In her novel, Dana finds out the reason behind her time travel is because she has to save her ancestor, but nowhere is it explained in the novel how she is able to travel back in time. Butler states that “[t]ime travel is just a device for getting the
character back to confront where she came from” (Kenan 496). However, the fact that the science is never discussed, does not automatically imply that Kindred cannot be a science fiction novel. The act of time travel is still present in the story, whether the science behind it is explained or not. Schiff affirms that the novel is “both a realistic representation of the antebellum South and a fantasy of time travel” (107). Baccolini, as well, confirms that Kindred can be classified as a Science Fiction novel, particularly because it uses “some of the fundamental conventions of time travel stories (“Gender and Genre” 27). One example is the ‘grandfather paradox’, which denotes that by changing the past there is a possibility of altering the present; and Baccolini also points out that the two timelines, i.e. past and present, have different speeds (107). For example, Dana would spend a few hours on the antebellum plantation in Maryland, but when she travels back to the present time in California only a few minutes have passed.

Furthermore, Rushdy argues that the generic classification is moot if Jamison’s idea, that science fiction and historical fiction, is to be accepted (“Families”136). Jamison, Rushdy states, finds that both genres add “life and feeling” to historical authenticity by creating “violent formal and narrative dislocation[s]” (“Families” 136). Therefore, it can be said that Kindred, as an African American novel, uses both genres to “reconstruct the past [and] endow the present with new meaning” (Rushdy, “Families” 136). Moreover, in this historical novel, “Butler employs a revised […] form of the slave narrative in order to comment upon the historical and contemporary placement of African Americans, but specifically black women, in US society” (Wood 84). Kindred, according to the categories created by Rushdy (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 90), is a neo-slave narrative that imitates the historical novel. Even though the novel is a first-person account narrated by Dana, she was never a real-life person. Thus, while the circumstances of slavery are depicted in a way that is historically accurate, the characters in Kindred were never alive in the real world. Even though Kindred’s narrative is not based on real people, the events that happen in the novel are detailed descriptions of life on antebellum plantations (Govan 89). Butler effectively dismantles “the misrepresentation of slavery that must be exorcized from the cultural psyche of both black and white America” (Wood 95), thus, emphasizes the importance of having a honest account of history.

Wood also adds that Butler often writes this kind of “counter-discourse” (84), i.e. narratives that criticize contemporary society. This way, authors, such as Butler, can offer up a new and improved model of society through writing. Govan confirms that Butler consciously tries to “affect social perceptions and behavior” (79), she and Wood both state that Kindred’s didactic properties promote social change (94; 88). Therefore, Butler uses one of the
characteristics of the antebellum slave narrative, which is a first-person narrator that can persuade the reader. Dana Franklin, the narrator in *Kindred*, has influence over the reader, because the latter is made to feel empathy with the first-person narrator. Dana conveys her ideals, mostly passively, to the reader, e.g. marrying Kevin, against her and his families’ wishes, demonstrates that interracial marriage should be accepted (Butler 111-112). Dana also argues Kevin when he asks her to type out his stories, by which she challenges the sexism inherent to a patriarchal society (Butler 109). This goes to show that Butler criticizes contemporary society with her take on the slave narrative in the same way that former slaves contested slavery. This, however, is not the only characteristic of the slave narrative genre, that is present in the novel.

3.1.1. *Kindred* as a Slave Narrative

*Kindred* is filled with “iconic slave narrative scenes” (Wood 88). For instance, she experiences her first whipping on her third trip to the past:

“Then I was out of the cookhouse. Weylin dragged me a few feet, then pushed me hard. I fell, knocked myself breathless. I never saw where the whip came from, never even saw the first blow coming. But it came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin …” (Butler 107).

This whipping is also what pulls her back to her apartment in California. Dana feels overwhelmed with the pain, and she believes she would die of it. It is this fear of death that saves her and makes her travel back to her own time. Another example is when Dana tries to escape the plantation. She had lost her husband in the past when she traveled back to the present without him, and she is desperate to find him again. In the meantime, six years have passed in Maryland, even though she had only spent a few hours in California. When she returns, Rufus, her ancestor, is not in a hurry to send for Kevin—who had traveled north in those six years, so Dana takes matters into her own hands. Against all warnings, she braves the 19th century slave states and attempts to find Kevin herself:

“I felt almost sick to my stomach with fear, but I kept walking. I stumbled over a stick that lay in the road and first cursed it, then picked it up. It felt good in my hand, solid. A stick like this had saved me once. Now, it quenched a little of my fear, gave me confidence. I walked faster, moving into the woods alongside the road as soon as I passed Weylin’s fields” (Butler 171)

This is also the third stage—that of escape—in the slave narrative that Piccinato discusses (92). Additionally, the first stage—the description of the slave society—happens as Dana experiences history. The second stage—the growth in consciousness (Piccinato 92)—is present in the novel, albeit unconventionally, because this is a neo-slave narrative—the novel written
was written in 1979, and is not based on actual real-life people. In the antebellum slave narrative, the second step is when the slave realizes they can resist enslavement and they can escape. Dana, however, chooses to stay on the plantation, not because she accepts slavery, but because she chooses to keep her ancestor Rufus alive and she cannot do that if she leaves. It is only when she prioritizes the search for her husband Kevin over the need to keep Rufus—and her family tree—alive that she plots her escape (Butler 169-171).

Moreover, there are also two stereotypically Black female characters in the novel, the mammy and the sexualized Black woman. These stereotypes, however, are not exact copies of those that appeared in antebellum slave narratives. Mitchell states that “Black female protagonists […] subvert stereotypical configurations of Black female identity as well as […] undermine the racial, gender, and economic biases of the White enslaving society” (147). This is exactly what Butler does in Kindred, she gives both characters complexities and raises them above their stereotypes (91-92), as can be seen in the following excerpts:

“[Sarah] had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called ‘mammy’ in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.

“I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. Or it did until Rufus and Nigel drove into town and came back with what was left of Alice” (Butler 145).

From the excerpt, it is clear that Dana, at first, thought of Sarah as a mammy figure, she felt morally superior, because Dana herself had not given up yet. Dana did not understand how Sarah had accepted that she was not free. It is only when Dana sees Alice, who had tried to escape and was beaten half to death when she was found, that she truly realizes the risks of attempting freedom. Wood attests that, “Sarah’s creation and maintenance of a relatively safe space for the slave community attests to the complex strategies conceived to resist slavery” (92). This shows that Sarah has found a limiting space of freedom within the discouraging society that she inhabits. Sarah may be appointed as the ‘mammy figure’, but her life has not given her many other options, and she does what is necessary to survive.

The second example is that of the stereotypically sexualized Black woman. Her name is Alice, and she is Dana’s female ancestor, who has a child with Rufus. It is actually because of her ‘relationship’ with Rufus that she receives a sexualized image, “while he loves her he can
only cherish her as a possession, and as a possession she is deprived of any authority over her self and her body” (Wood 92). This demonstrates that Alice has no choice, and it is clear from the next excerpt as well:

““Dana?”
I looked at [Alice].
“What am I going to do?”
I hesitated, shook my head. “I can’t advise you. It’s your body.”
“Not mine.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper. “Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn’t he?”
“Paid who? You?”
“You know he didn’t pay me! Oh, what’s the difference? Whether it’s right or wrong, the law says he owns me now”” (Butler 167).

In other words, Alice has accepted her role on the plantation. She is Rufus’ lover, and he owns her body. If she fights him, she will be whipped. The only other option she has is escape, but this scene happens after she has already tried running away. She fell in love with a slave, and they ran away together—i.e. she helped him escape. When they were caught together, she was beaten and sold into slavery as well. During those times, it was hard enough mustering up the courage to escape once, but it is even harder to fail and then look for courage to do it a second time. Especially after getting a beating that she could not have survived without the help from Dana’s knowledge of ‘modern medicine’ (Butler 146-147). In any case, it is Rufus, the authoritative white man, who appoints the stereotype onto Alice, the Black woman, and she has no choice but to obey for fear of being whipped. Thus, Rufus is not only the master of her body, but he is also the master of her identity.

Additionally, Dana and Alice are often discussed as doubles of each other (Govan 93; Schiff 117), because they look alike, their characters are similar, and they are both desired by Rufus. Rufus even describes them both as being “one woman” (Butler 228). Nevertheless, the way they both end their enslavement shows that they are two separate characters. Alice kills herself when she thinks Rufus has sold her children (Butler 248-249). She did not have another way out, because she tried to escape and that plan failed. After her death, Rufus tries to replace what he had with Alice, by forcing himself on Dana, which is when she kills him. Schiff states that, “Dana assumes the position of her ancestor Alice and defends herself against the primal traumatic experience” (122), and by doing that she becomes the symbol of a Black woman who regains the authority of her mind and body. She ends her bondage by killing her supposed white master.
Furthermore, there is one other feature of the slave narrative that needs to be discussed. This one is specific to female-authored slave narratives. Foster states that “slave women’s narratives [...] present more positive images of secondary female characters, devote more discussion to familial relationships” (xxxiii). A story centered around kinship and family ties is more typically told by female narrators of slave stories. Wood confirms this as well, “Black women […] stress the importance of community and friendship in the narrator’s quest for freedom from oppression” (85). Dana even explains how she feels about family ties: “I’m black. […] And when you sell a black man away from his family just because he talked to me, you can’t expect me to have any good feelings toward you” (Butler 255-256). She explains to Rufus that she values her own ideals about family higher than her loyalty to him as her kin.

Both Rushdy and Richard have analyzed the meaning ‘kinship’ within Kindred (“Families” 136-155; 122-123). These analyses discuss the difference between blood ties and kindred spirits, which can be found in Dana’s relationship with Rufus and Dana’s relationship with Kevin, respectively. In the novel, Dana says that Kevin is a “kindred spirit” (57), and she has chosen to love him. Rufus, on the other hand, is literally her kin. They share DNA and she cannot escape him, because she has to make sure that he stays alive long enough for him to conceive a daughter, to commence their shared bloodline. Additionally, Richard states that Dana and Kevin only feel at home in a place, whether it be in California or Maryland, when they are together: “Any physical place they identify as home […] loses that significance when it is devoid of kindred spirits” (122). Therefore, in this novel, the family that is chosen, and whom you have shared memories with, is of higher value than the family that is given at birth. Rushdy confirms, “both Kevin and Dana […] are orphans [who] both return to history to claim and reclaim a reconstructed family which is based not on biological but on social ties” (“Families” 154).

In continuation, Rushdy states that Dana tries to distance herself from Rufus (“Families” 146), because he is not the family that she has chosen. For example, when Rufus hits Dana, she describes it as “the breaking of an unspoken agreement between us” (Butler 239). As a slave, “[Dana] accepts certain limitations on her freedom because of the conditions in antebellum Maryland but she also sets certain limits on Rufus's behavior toward her” (Rushdy, “Families 151). Thus, after Rufus hits her, she cuts her own wrists. The action brings her back to California—which was her goal, but it might have killed her. The risk was there, so she is willing to die, when it means not being a slave. The more Rufus acts as if Dana is his property, the more Dana pulls away from him, because she is unwilling to sacrifice her freedom. When
Rufus ultimately tries to rape her, she kills him in one of the final scenes of the novel (Butler 260):

“I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover” (Butler 260).

It is in this scene that Dana renounces Rufus as her kin, and symbolically cuts their (blood) ties. Rushdy states: “Dana kills Rufus, and, like her own attempted suicide, it is an act by which she disrelates him” (“Families” 153). Nevertheless, Richard adds that completely distancing herself from her family ties with Rufus is impossible: “Butler’s device of travel through time and space by the power of kinship symbolically asserts the impossibility of ending those lines at all (123). Additionally, Dana will never be able to ignore or forget the knowledge of her kinship with Rufus, a white slave master, and they will always have shared memories.

3.1.2. *Kindred* as an Afrofuturist Novel

The aspect of memory and history is also important in Afrofuturism. The importance of history has already been discussed a few chapters ago, but it needs to be said that memory, and remembering history is an important aspect of that. *Kindred* is a novel that remembers the past, but it is also a novel that modifies that memory (Schiff 136). Previously, it was said that the representation of history needs to be truthful, and memory is able to change the perception of history. Although history strives to be objective, it is memory that makes the events subjective. This does not mean that these personal memories are dishonest, it only means that there are different interpretations of the truth; “Butler achieves this dual effect—of Dana’s travel as an individually curative narrative of memory and the story of her travel as a communally curative narrative of history” (Schiff 108). In other words, the remembering that has been done in *Kindred*—through Dana because she goes back and experiences, and through the reader because by reading this story they are reminded of the past—individual people and society as a whole are able to heal. Schiff adds that “[Dana] is an inheritor of the traumatic narrative of slavery and part of the community that tells that narrative” (109). Therefore, Dana as the inheritor with experience can write a slave narrative about the people on the plantation in Maryland, especially, because, in that time, the life of Black people is not considered important, and, thus, they are forgotten. This is shown in the novel when Dana and Kevin go back to Maryland in the 1970s to look for the history that was memorialized. They find articles in the newspaper about Rufus’ death, and the names of the slaves that were sold subsequently. The
only information written with the slaves’ names is their age and their skills (Butler 262-263), precisely because everything else about them is of no importance to their white owners.

This idea that different people remember history in different ways is shown in the novel itself as well. For example, while this novel’s central focus is on slavery and Dana’s time travel, the celebration of the bicentennial—the 200th birthday of the United States—passes in the background of the narrative. The reason for that is pointed out by authors such as Steinberg, Wood, and Schiff. They all agree that the celebration is overshadowed by the atrocities Dana has to endure (Steinberg 475; Schiff 113). Wood states that “the government intended the sense of communal involvement encouraged by the heterogeneous activities staged to mark the occasion as a means to encourage a renewed sense of patriotism and love of country” (87-88). Therefore, to the government the 200th birthday might be perceived as a celebration to honor the United States, *Kindred* reminds the readers that the United States has a dark past that should not be forgotten. It shows that not all historical events are of equal importance, especially not to different people. Wood states that, “whereas the 19th-century slave narrative articulates a personal quest for freedom from slavery in support of a national movement for abolition, Butler’s 20th-century narrative dramatizes one woman’s renegotiation of black history and its effect on the construction of personal and national identity” (87). In other words, the goal of neo-slave narratives is not to convince the reader that slavery is cruel and should be abolished, but rather to remind the reader that it is a part of our history.

Symbolically, Dana finds herself throwing a book about slavery into the fireplace (Butler 141). It reminds her of Nazi book burnings and she thinks, “repressive societies always seemed to understand the danger of ‘wrong’ ideas” (Butler 141). Nevertheless, the act shows how important history is to her. If that book falls in the wrong hands, it could change the future for the worse, make it so legal slavery lasted longer in the United States. By burning the book, she safeguards the timeline. Slave Narratives themselves are a way to protect the past. When they are recounting real events, they are immortalizing those people that were slaves, and making sure that their experiences will still be remembered in the future. Even if these stories are not based on real people, the act of remembering the past is still important.

Both Dana and Kevin, however, do try to change the course of history for the better. Dana, for example, teaches slave children how to read and write (Butler 98), in the hopes that it would help their attempts to escape (i.e. they could write their own passes), or it would help them work their way up in the system. Moreover, in the first couple of times she crosses over, Dana believes she can influence Rufus’ mind, she says to Kevin, “Let’s see what we can do to keep him from growing up into a red-haired version of his father” (Butler 81). Dana is hopeful
and believes she can stop him from turning into his father. Nevertheless, the older Rufus gets, the more he emulates the slave society. This makes Dana realize how difficult it is to change one person’s mind within a system of oppression. However, on some occasions Dana is able to change the lives of the people that she is in contact with:

“She kills Rufus—after he has fathered her grandmother Hagar—and thereby ends the demands of the past on her present. She also profoundly affects the lives of the surviving slaves on the Weylin plantation, who are sold at the auction because of her act” (Rushdy, “Families” 143).

Furthermore, Kevin was doubtful when he first arrived in the past, “it already happened. We're in the middle of history. We surely can't change it” (Butler 100). He was a lot more pessimistic and did not believe that he could make any changes. However, when Kevin spends six years without Dana in the 19th century he does help slaves in their escape to the northern free states. This shows that both Dana and Kevin “gambled against history” (Rushdy, “Families” 154), and even risked their own lives to improve the lives of others.

Memory and history are not the only characteristics of Afrofuturism to be found in *Kindred*. Salvaggio states that, “Butler’s concern with racism and sexism is a conscious part of her vision. As she herself explains, a particularly insidious problem with science fiction is that it has always been nearly all white, just as until recently, it’s been nearly all male” (78). Therefore, with Dana Franklin as the main character of *Kindred*, Butler inverts the image of the typical science fiction hero. Butler destroys the zero-image of Black women in Science Fiction. Kilgore and Samantrai affirm that Butler chooses “to write self-consciously as an African American woman marked by a particular history” (353), and that her works encompass her “desire to see oneself complexly represented in one’s culture” (353). In *Kindred*, but also in her other works, she gives (Black) women a voice. This was uncommon in the science fiction field at the time that she started publishing her works (Kilgore and Samantrai 353).

Moreover, not only does *Kindred* describe an important part of Black history, each of the characters have their own identity and their own story to tell. Sarah and Alice have previously been analyzed as complex characters, but the main character, Dana Franklin, is another example. She is “a modern Black woman [who] periodically surfaces in antebellum Maryland over approximately a twenty-year span, with no free papers, no owner to vouch for her, no way to explain her dress, her speech, or her behavior” (Govan 89), i.e. her chance of survival is very small. Butler had initially intended for her main character to be a Black man, but when she was constructing the story, she realized that a modern Black man would not have survived on the plantation (Wood 90). Dana is able to survive because, as a Black woman, she seems less threatening, and white men would be less intimidated by her.
Another reason why Dana is a complex character is because Dana has light skin. Added with the fact that she has a bond with Rufus—she saves him and in return he cannot enslave her. While she does her best to pretend to really be a slave, the other Black women pick up on their bond, which generates tension between her and some slave women: “there are those here who think I’m more white than black” (Butler 223). Her close position to Rufus makes other slave women think she is sleeping with him, and her reaping the benefits of that status makes other slaves angry or jealous. Nevertheless, this does not make Dana any less Black, Carrie—who is a deaf slave and communicates with her own sign language—confirms this as well:

“‘[Carrie] came over to me and wiped one side of my face with her fingers—wiped hard. I drew back, and she held her fingers in front of me, showed me both sides. But for once, I didn’t understand.

Frustrated, she took me by the hand and led me out to where Nigel was chopping firewood. There, before him, she repeated the face-rubbing gesture, and he nodded.

“She means it doesn’t come off, Dana,” he said quietly. “The black. She means the devil with people who say you’re anything but what you are’” (Butler 223-224)"

This scene is not only important in the novel, but it crosses into contemporary society as well, where light-skinned Black people who are ‘white-passing’ occupy a space between white and Black. Who might struggle with their identity. Kindred conveys that each person chooses their own identity, and no other person has any effect on that.

Furthermore, Kevin, Dana’s white husband, is a complex character as well, which shows that Kindred also portrays white people with their varying identities. Wood states that Kevin’s first impression of the antebellum plantation is “remarkably liberal” (93). Dana and Kevin have the following conversation:

“Kevin frowned thoughtfully. “It’s surprising to me that there’s so little to see. Weylin doesn’t seem to pay much attention to what his people do, but the work gets done.”

“You think he doesn’t pay attention. Nobody calls you out to see the whippings.”

“How many whippings?”

“One that I’ve seen. One too goddamn many!”

“One is too many, yes, but still, this place isn’t what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage …”

“… no decent housing,” I cut in. “Dirt floors to sleep on, food so inadequate they’d all be sick if they didn’t keep gardens in what’s supposed to be their leisure time and steal from the cookhouse when Sarah lets them. And no rights and the possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason—or no reason. Kevin, you don’t have to beat people to treat them brutally.”
“Wait a minute,” he said. “I’m not minimizing the wrong that’s being done here. I just …”

“Yes you are. You don’t mean to be, but you are.” (Butler 100).

This scene shows that Kevin’s first impression minimizes the atrocities of the 18th and 19th century, and while he does not mean to, his thoughts, if overheard, can influence other people. It demonstrates the importance of experience. Kevin was kept in the dark about most of the whippings, because he was not made to witness them. Dana corrects him, but does so cordially, which shows the reader that cordial conversations between white and Black people are possible when both sides are willing to listen to each other. Moreover, it also affirms that Kevin’s experience will never, and cannot be a truthful and complete representation of slavery. Later in the novel, however, Kevin has learned by spending time in the past. Witnessing the atrocities, drives him to help slaves escape their bondage.

As most Afrofuturist works, Butler also integrates cognitive estrangement in her novel. Dana, in particular, experiences the alienation when she travels through time. Toffler’s theory about ‘Future Shock’ explains her disorientation: “Future shock is the response to overstimulation. It occurs when the individual is forced to operate above his adaptive range” (Toffler 344). He also links it to ‘Culture Shock’, a similar phenomenon. The latter is “the profound disorientation suffered by the traveler who has plunged without adequate preparation into an alien culture” (Toffler 347). In relation to Dana, it is not so much ‘future shock’, but rather shock of being transported to the past. The journey overwhelms her, and she has no time to get her bearings. Especially the first time she goes to save Rufus, she has no idea where she is. However, every time Dana is ‘called’ to the past by Rufus she feels nauseous (Butller 13, 19, 58, 117, 197, 247), as is described in the following excerpt:

“I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, “What happened?” I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. “Something is wrong with me,” I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming … Drowning!” (Butler 13).
This shows that her nausea is not a result of the shock, but rather a warning for what is about to happen. However, the consequences of ‘future shock’ are just as much physical as they are psychological (Toffler 343). Moreover, Dana and Kevin spend so much time in the past that they experience actual ‘Future Shock’ when they travel back to their present. Especially, Kevin, after he spends more than six years in the 19th century, has a hard time adapting to his surroundings:

“I found him fiddling with the stove, turning the burners on, staring into the blue flame, turning them off, opening the oven, peering in. He had his back to me and didn’t see or hear me. Before I could say anything, he slammed the oven door and stalked away shaking his head. “Christ,” he muttered. “If I’m not home yet, maybe I don’t have a home.”

He went into the dining room without noticing me. I stayed where I was, thinking, remembering. I could recall walking along the narrow dirt road that ran past the Weylin house and seeing the house, shadowy in twilight, boxy and familiar, yellow light showing from some of the windows—Weylin was surprisingly extravagant with his candles and oil. I had heard that other people were not. I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home” (Butler 190).

This excerpt is from when they return to the present after their fourth journey to Maryland. In each trip they spend a longer continuous time in the past, and by the end of the novel they are more familiar with the past, than they are with the present.

Therefore, Dana and Kevin have a hard time adjusting, and acclimatizing to their own time, even to their own home. (They had only moved into their new home two days prior to Dana’s first trip back in time.) Wood agrees that as “Dana is drawn further and further into the realities of this time-period, and her knowledge of her 20th-century self is progressively stripped away. In 19th-century Maryland the authority that Dana possesses over her 20th-century self is gone” (89). In other words, the previous scene also supports the fact that Dana has to reacquaint herself with her own identity as a free modern woman. She spent so much time pretending to be a slave, that she has refamiliarize herself with her own power.

Symbolically, Dana loses her arm during her last journey back to the present:

“His body went limp and leaden across me. I pushed him away somehow—everything but his hand still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching sickness.

Something harder and stronger than 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. From 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 260-261).

This loss will be a constant reminder of what she has experienced. Rushdy states that, “remembering can lead to wholeness, but it also carries a risk of loss” (139). In turn, Schiff adds that “Rushdy is […] referring to Dana’s amputated arm as a symbol for the violence that can be done to those who (re)member the past” (121). Thus, the loss of Dana’s arm is a metaphorical ‘phantom limb’ that represents her experiences. In the same way the history of slavery can be seen as the phantom limb in American history. Rufus literally put a hand on her, and it resulted in the loss of her arm. The history and memory of slavery has not only left a mark on her mind, but also on her body.
4. Reshaping the past in Robert O’Hara’s *Insurrection: Holding History*

Robert O’Hara is not as well-known as either Derrick Bell or Octavia Butler. *Insurrection: Holding History* was his first play, which he wrote while interning at the Public Theater in New York. He was mentored by George C. Wolfe, a Tony Award-winning Black playwright and director, known for writing *The Colored Museum*. Robert O’Hara directed *Insurrection: Holding History* himself in 1995 as part of his Master’s thesis at Columbia. Up until now, he has written seven plays, among which are *Antebellum* and *Bootycandy*. *Insurrection: Holding History* won the Oppenheimer Award for Best New American Play.

*Insurrection* tells the story of Ron Porter. He is a gay Black man who is studying the history of slavery at university, more specifically, he is finalizing his degree with a thesis on the Nat Turner Rebellion. Nat Turner was a slave who organized a rebellion in which more than 70 Black people (enslaved and free) went door to door to kill all the white people they found, and free all of the slaves. The rebellion was shortlived, and, in retaliation, every Black person suspected to be a rebel was executed or killed, and even more Black people were killed in fear of another uprising. When Ron hears that his 189-year-old grandfather, T.J., had been part of that rebellion, he is interested to know more details about the event, and the two of them travel back in time to bear witness to the event. The story is not only about Ron coming to terms with his history and his own identity, but also about T.J. making sure he has a future in Ron, his grandson. As the title of the play says, *Insurrection: Holding History* is Robert O’Hara’s way to reexamine the past, but also reimagine in accordance with his own perspective, thus he uproots literary conventions and calls into question traditional depictions of the past. As a neo-slave narrative, *Insurrection* is an example of a work of “remembered generation” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave Narrative” 90), because the reader witnesses slavery through the eyes of both T.J. the former slave, and Ron, the inheritor of that history. Although there are barely any sources connecting Robert O’Hara to Afrofuturism, his rebelliousness proves that he embodies the genre.

Carpenter, for example, discusses his rebellious nature in her analysis of O’Hara’s play, though she refers to it as “queering” history:

“By challenging white, heteronormative notions of African American history and identity and their assumptions regarding race, sex and gender, O’Hara not only queers the notions of a single authoritative perspective, but also creates a space for a queer history to be present (Carpenter 338).
By way of explanation, with “queer” Carpenter refers to more than just sexuality; she uses the word to mean ‘not heteronormative’. In other words, she affirms that O’Hara represents his characters in all their multiplicities, the play breaks with what is seen as the norm, and destroys stereotypes. The first Western tradition that O’Hara abandons are the Aristotelian unities that make the perfect tragedy. *Insurrection* does not stick to the unity of action, or the unity of time, or the unity of space. Moreover, on several different occasions different actions, times and spaces are convoluted in one scene:

“BUCK NAKED (Offstage): What’s that Ringin’?!  
GERTHA: Unplug that Gawddamn Phone.  
Snatch it outta that Wall Socket.  
(MUTHA puts mudpacks on RON’s Wounds.)  
OCTAVIA: but what if it’s Ron callin’ mama?  
GERTHA: then answer it I ain’t heah if it’s anybody else.  
OCTAVIA (To phone): hello. no didn’t. no didn’t my mama just tell you he was sitting ratt heah yeah i’m lookin’ dead in his face Good-bye  
Mister Reporter Man see ya next year  
GERTHA: see there it gon’ be lak that all damn day  
(without a beat  
GERTHA turns to MUTHA WIT, T.J. and RON.)  
MISTRESS MO’TEL/GERTHA: where all them otha niggas gon’ off ta?  
(MUTHA is taken aback by MISTRESS MO’TEL’s sudden Appearance.)” (O’Hara, Plantation)

This excerpt shows two overlapping scenes. Octavia and Gertha are in their house in the present timeline, while in the past timeline, Mutha is tending to Ron’s wounds with Buck Naked and T.J. nearby. Two actions are performed in two different times and places on the same stage. What makes the scene even more complex here is that one actress plays the role of both Gertha and of Mistress Mo’tel. The latter is another character from the present, who owns the motel that houses the bed that made Ron and T.J. travel back in time. For that reason, she sometimes serves as the connection between past and present and can move through time to talk to different characters. This is especially an example of ‘collapsing time’ that happens frequently throughout the play.

Moreover, from the same example above, it is evident that O’Hara uses Black vernacular language. This is how the playwright emphasizes that *Insurrection* is a play about African American people, who speak in their own dialect. He intends to tell an honest story, so he refrains from having his characters speak General American, because they would not do that in
real life either. It is not just his use of dialect that shows his rebellious nature, however, it is the entire text. As can be seen, he does not follow the rules of punctuation or capitalization, e.g. he never capitalizes the personal pronoun ‘i’. The text itself performs its own insurrection, “by desubstantiating the authority of what is ‘correct’ and ‘proper’” (Carpenter 326-327).

Furthermore, the play reinforces the idea that there are multiple versions of history, which does not mean that some of them are false, only that different people can have different perspectives on one single event. For instance, one of the first sentences in Insurrection is “RON READS a version of THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER” (O’Hara, Prologue). O’Hara emphasizes the words ‘a version of’ by not capitalizing them in an otherwise capitalized sentence. Throughout history, there have been two works called The Confessions of Nat Turner. The first in a fictionalized depiction of Nat Turner’s rebellion by William Styron, and the second is a text by Thomas Gray, who claims his text is an honest rendition of the confession by Nat Turner himself. Carpenter devalues these texts by stating they are only different perspectives of the same story, because Styron’s work is full of negative Black stereotypes, and Gray’s text denies the supposed speaker, i.e. Nat Turner, his own voice (328). This way, O’Hara proves that there can be different historical perspectives, by this he, however, does not mean that one is more truthful than the others, only that history is more complex than one might initially believe.

In the same manner, O’Hara indicates that history can be told through more than text. T.J.’s body is a testament of what T.J. and his ancestors have been through, his body tells the story of what it means to be a slave, he does not need to speak or write it down. “T.J.’s father lost his left eye as punishment for looking at a white woman; his mother lost all her toes—except the middle on the right foot—when, as a young woman, she ran way with T.J. to escape her life of enslavement” (Carpenter 330), which means that T.J.’s body is documented history of slavery. In other words, his body holds his identity. Additionally, O’Hara emphasizes the importance of oral narration too. In the past slaves were not allowed to learn how to read or write, and so if they wanted to learn, they had to do it in secret. Therefore, they could not write anything down, because those written words could be found by their masters. A scene in the play shows Nat writing letters on Hammet’s back with his fingers to teach him the alphabet (Robert O’Hara, Plantation). By writing on Hammet’s back, Nat is symbolically infusing Hammet’s body with words, thus his skin literally holds the meaning and memory of those words (Carpenter 330).

The complexity of the past becomes evident in another scene as well. When Ron tries to stop Nat from going through with the rebellion, his grandfather T.J. is furious with him:
“T.J.: HUSH UP!
you know nuthin
you know letters on paper
you know big words
connected ta little ideas
you know nuthin
[...]
i LIVED it!!
you. the one Watchin’!” (O’Hara, Nat’s turn).

What T.J. is saying is that Ron will never understand what it means to be a slave, he can read about it, and watch movies about it, but he will never know how it feels. The ironic part is that “Ron, an ivy-league member of America’s college-educated middle class, learns his most challenging and revelatory lessons from T.J., an ‘uneducated’ former slave” (Carpenter 329). O’Hara demonstrates that the middle class, or even the upper class, do not have a monopoly on knowledge. Therefore, he mocks the notion that one group of people can be superior to another group of people.

Another adjustment he made to the slave narrative can be found in the character Hammet, e.g. the following fragment:

“RON: you like boys?
(the SLAVE smiles.)
HAMMET (Quiet): … i lak you.” (O’Hara, Nat’s Turn)

O’Hara’s Insurrection is one of the few works about slavery that includes a possibly gay slave. In an interview with Werner, Robert O’Hara says that he does not believe that homosexuals were invented in 1969, “if I exist now, someone like me had to exist before me or I wouldn’t be here” (26). What’s more, “as Charles Nero astutely observes, despite the indisputable absence of substantial documentation regarding homosexuality among enslaved men and women, the existence of laws […] forbidding sexual acts among enslaved men is evidence in itself that such relationships did, indeed, exist” (Carpenter 336). This begs the question as to why homosexuality has been a mostly avoided topic in relation to slavery. There were laws set in place against relationships between people of the same gender, however, these homosexual relationships are underrepresented in slave narratives. Robert O’Hara is one of the first writers to add a queer Black character, because he wants to not only depict the future, but also history, as being inclusive, in order to “provide our community a sense of unity and wholeness” (Carpenter 337). Again, this shows that O’Hara wants to portray the full complexity of African American people. In the same line, Insurrection explores male subjectivity and sexuality. For
instance, O’Hara depicts that male slaves are just as much sexualized by white masters as female slaves:

“(Ron] wears boxing shorts with little designs on them.
OVA SEEA JONES pokes at RON’s Groin.)
Take them funny-looking thangs off.
(Ron does.
He stands Naked.
OVA SEEA JONES examines RON’s Face, Teeth, Chest, Groin
and Ass with Whip.” (O’Hara, Plantation)

This shows that, when Ron is ordered to take off his clothes in order to get whipped, the overseer sexualizes Ron’s body. This scene comes after the overseer has whipped a female slave, whom he molested as well, which means that male and female slaves have a “shared experience of violence and violation” (Carpenter 335).

Another character that O’Hara entered into his story that is unusual for slave narrative can be found in ‘Buck Naked’. He is a white indentured servant, within the play he is referred to as the one white ‘cracker’, who shares the same hardships as the Black slaves in the story, and lacks the same rights:

“BUCK NAKED (strong): just cos i’m different don’t make me no different
i’m still a slave just lak yo’ black—
[…]
i’m not gon have you givin’ me word fo’ word. i bends just as
low picks just as much hauls just as many works just as hard as any
otha nigga in heah n’ i be damned if’n you gon walk all through me
just cos i’m day n’ you nite!” (O’Hara, Nat’s Turn)

In this excerpt, Buck Naked stands up for himself against the other Black slaves. In this scene he is the minority within the group, and his being there is a rarity. Carpenter attests that “Buck Naked’s identification with the enslaved Blacks suggests a blurring of the racial and cultural categories of identity”, (336), Although Buck Naked is not recognizable as a slave by looking at the color of his skin, he still shares their misery. Especially, because the Mistress treats him no differently than the other Black slaves, and calls him “THE LAZIEST NIGGA I GAT” (O’Hara, Plantation).

Additionally, O’Hara uses science fiction and fantasy to break the rules of what should be physically possible. For example, Ron and T.J. travel back in time so that Ron can bear witness to the past. Another ‘impossible’ thing within the play is that T.J. is a 189-year-old former slave; T.J. “can only move his left eye and his middle toe on his right foot” (O’Hara,
Prologue). Never in the story is it explained how he is still alive. In this case, O’Hara uses cognitive estrangement to distance the reader, and suspension of disbelief is needed to keep up with the narrative. While he does not talk to any other character in the present day, the way that T.J. speaks to Ron is through the character Mutha (T.J.’s own mother), but when they travel to the past he regains his youth and is able to speak as himself again. None of these things seem remotely plausible, thus, O’Hara disregards nature, and tells his own story. Furthermore, O’Hara uses more techniques to alienate the reader. For example, Nat Turner and Ova Seea Jones, two extremely contrasting characters, are to be played by the same actor. Carpenter states that O’Hara means “to further emphasize the notion that variance—even disparity—can exist within a shared space” (326). For the same reason, O’Hara opens the play with a loud musical number to distance the audience from the events that they are about to witness.

Moreover, one of the major themes in *Insurrection* is the juxtaposition of race and sexuality. One example is how Ron reclaims the word ‘faggot’ while he is in the past “in order to nullify its power as an oppressive and derogatory term” (Carpenter 335), this is similar to the way African-Americans have reclaimed the word ‘nigga’ in the present world. This is another instance where race and sexuality are juxtaposed in the characterization of Ron. Throughout the play, T.J. asks about Ron’s sexuality, and he questions why Ron never told him he was gay. Ron, on the other hand, does not want to talk about his sexuality with his great-grandfather, even though T.J. keeps asking him to talk about that part of his identity.

“RON (Laughing): why are you so interested in that Gramps?
T.J.: why are you so interested in this?
RON: this is my past
T.J.: you my future.
you the one gon’ carry my scars. (O’Hara, Plantation)

In this scene, T.J. tries to make Ron understand that the way Ron is interested in his past, is the same way that T.J. is interested in his future. Another thing that Ron does not realize is that while he witnesses slavery, and gets to a deeper understanding of his history, he simultaneously gets closer to his identity as a gay man. So much so, that at the end of *Insurrection*, Ron is willing to stay with Hammet in the past, which is again when T.J. stresses he does not fully understand what it means to be a slave. T.J. makes it clear that he needs Ron to live because he wants to make sure he has a future:

“T.J.: you mine.
my responsibility was to bring you heah let you learn take
you back wont live heah they’ll kill you along wit the
rest you know you read it you studied it thousands of white
troops hundreds of dead slaves they’ll destroy this place
History
HIStory
cain’t be stopped
do what you can in yo’ Own Time
i need you to LIVE
Go Back.
Don’t die.
Don’t…
die…
heah…
i. wait. ed. one. hun. dred. year. you. came. birth. life.
shine. i. wait. ed. die. heah. don’t. cain’t. not. live. not.
heah. don’t. die. heah. i. knew. much. good. win. we.
win. won. you. mine. you. mine. mi. proof. you. mine …
PROOF.” (O’Hara, Massacre Mourn)

T.J. dies the moment he stops talking, and his last words are important because he admits
that he held off on dying until he could tell his story to Ron. He waited until he had someone
who could hold on to his history, and that person is Ron, who, symbolically, is physically
holding onto T.J. when he dies. As was said before in the first chapter when social death was
discussed, slaves were prohibited from forming any social ties. They did not have a community
to hold onto, and while T.J. is dying he holds on to the fact that he has Ron, and that Ron is his
heritage. T.J. has lived long enough to see an end to slavery, and thus, has had time to form his
own community. He has regained his social identity, and Ron can inherit his past, something
that was impossible during slavery. Similarly, Balon discusses the importance of kinship bonds
and that slavery made it impossible to “generate reproductive futurity” (141). Therefore,
Insurrection depicts how T.J. not only survives slavery, but stays alive long enough to kickstart
his own futurity.

Furthermore, O’Hara being an Afrofuturist shows itself in the way he portrays Ron.
When at first, he goes back to the past, all the knowledge he has about slavery he gained by
listening to stories of his grandfather, or by reading history books. It is not until he finds himself
in the antebellum South that he starts to understand what it really means to be a slave. For
instance, there is one scene where a female slave is whipped because she did not work hard
enough; Ron cannot handle seeing the physical abuse, thus he calls out the overseer and demands that he stops another slave from whipping the female slave—because the overseer did not exact the violence himself (O'Hara, Plantation). In this case, Ron does not realize that the rules are different in this society. As a Black man, even though he claims to be free, he is not equal to the white man. Therefore, as punishment for interrupting the whipping, Ron is ordered to be whipped as well, which is when T.J. takes Ron’s place and sacrifices his own body, because he is used to it. Ron slowly comes to understand that even though he wants to help the other slaves, he is not capable of making any changes himself. This shows how institutionalized slavery was at the time, and how impossible it is for one person, especially a Black person, to alter reality.

This same naiveté shows itself in another scene closer to the ending of the play. Ron attends a meeting leading up to the Rebellion, where Nat Turner and other slaves take the floor to organize the insurrection. Ron, however, knowing what he knows about the past, cannot stand idly by and watch these Black men and women march to their death. History has told him that, while they succeed in killing 50-60 white people, they will not end slavery, they will not even put a dent in it. Moreover, the white people respond by retaliating and around 120 slaves and free Black men are killed. In the end, the Insurrection only lasts a couple days, and Nat Turner is tried, convicted, and hanged. Here, Ron tries to change the shape of history, and T.J. is, again, the one coming to him with wisdom:

“T.J.: […] SEE these niggas
heah cain’t understand that ALL they know is that
they wanna be FREE and that’s what they plannin’ ta Do
So they gon’ WIN
they might DIE
but they gon’ WIN
You. da Proof.
(the SLAVE and the FREE MAN
Clock each other.)
slavery.
ends.
…” (O’Hara, Nat’s Turn)

By way of explanation, T.J. here reminds Ron that his knowledge of history does not mean anything to the slaves who are living it, who are suffering the abuse that is done to them in their present. The Black men have made up their minds, and they are going to fight for their freedom, and there is nothing that Ron can do to change that. T.J. stresses that whatever the outcome is
of the rebellion, they will be free. Either the slaves win their freedom, or they die, and in death they will be free too. Additionally, T.J. also mentions that Ron is the living proof that slavery did end, because he is a free Black man. Even though, slavery was not abolished that night, Ron should take solace in the fact that slavery does end. He has that knowledge, the abolishment of slavery is a fact to him, and he lives in a society where he is allowed to have an education and to learn about his past.

This characterization of Ron as a complex human being, stands in sharp contrast with the white reporter from his present. Thus, O’Hara portrays a role reversal of the Black man and the white man. Ron, a Black character with flaws and strength, advances the story. Meanwhile, the white reporter, whose name is barely mentioned, is a typical white racist; with comments like, “I mean did any slave really know his date of birth in Africa didn’t they go by the moons or something?” (O’Hara, Prologue), or this next example where he ridicules the African-American dialect by imitating it—not to mention the fact where the white reporter confesses that he will add his own take on the story:

“Look you can give me your story or I can make it up and even if you
Do confess to me I’m probably gonna put in a filler here and
There so listen Nigga yo’ silence will do you no benefit you dig?”
(O’Hara, Prologue, my emphasis)

Generally, in Western literature, the white man is the main character and the Black man is either a zero image or a walking stereotype (Gerald 83-84). In this case, however, Ron, the gay Black man, is the complex character, and the white reporter is the caricature of a white middle-aged man. Additionally, by refusing to let the reporter tell T.J.’s story, Insurrection criticizes the fact that a white man usually had to endorse a former slave to confirm the legitimacy of the slave narrative (Wood 84).

With Insurrection: Holding History, Robert O’Hara challenges conventions of the past on two different levels. First, on the level of the text itself by not imitating the traditional slave narrative, but rather reshaping it based on his own needs. Second, on the level of the content because he adds atypical characters and imagery. The reason behind all these changes is that he wants to emphasize that history is complex and there are different variations of the truth, because stories can be told through different perspectives. Thus, the reason he breaks with monolithism, like many other African-American writers before him, is to negate stereotypes and to demonstrate the fluidity of history and its people. The second goal of the play is to depict honest characters in all their complexity, which is why he breaks with every possible stereotype. Robert O’Hara builds on the typical features of Afrofuturism: he uses Western genres and then
morphs them into something entirely different, and in doing so he shows the humanity of his characters. *Insurrection: Holding History* is, like its title, a rebellious testimony of the past.
Conclusion

Through *Kindred*, *The Space Traders*, and *Insurrection: Holding History*, Octavia Butler, Derrick Bell, and Robert O’Hara have written stories about complex African American characters fighting for a future. In *Kindred*, Dana Franklin must save her own future by ensuring the start of her family tree. *Insurrection: Holding History* is a play about two different generations facing slavery. T.J. Porter dies peacefully knowing that slavery ended, and that his bloodline will continue with Ron Porter. Bell’s short story is the exception in this line-up because *The Space Traders* is a cautionary tale of what might happen in the future if our history is forgotten.

These stories erase the zero-image of Black people in history, but also in contemporary society, and it tells Black people they can look to the future. These narratives about Black slavery are a representation of the past, the present, and/or the future. A representation that is specific to the narrator telling the story. Nevertheless, each of these stories are truthful in that they, each in their own way, tell the story of Black slavery. In Butler’s and O’Hara’s cases, their stories are about history. Dana and Ron become new witnesses to Black slavery, they travel back to the 19th century and experience the past themselves. Both of them are reminded of the atrocities that happened in the past. They become aware of the responsibility they have to live on and create a future for themselves, they owe it to their ancestors who survived slavery. On the other hand, Bell shows what might happen if history is forgotten, or ignored. His short story shows that time can repeat itself. By forgetting the past, Golightly’s world went through a reversal and reinstated slavery. While it was not explicitly stated, the trade that was made with the aliens, was an exchange in ‘goods’, which implies that the African Americans were seen as property of the American government, who could do to them whatever it pleased.

Remembering history is a big part of Afrofuturism. Learning about the past is important to Black people, because for a long time they were denied having a past. In the same way that they were denied having a future. All three of these works—*Kindred*, *The Space Traders*, and *Insurrection: Holding History*—carry with them the message that says to remember the past lest it repeats itself. Ron, Dana, and Golightly, each go through their own experience of slavery. Two of them, Ron and Dana, find their way back to freedom. Golightly’s story, on the other hand, serves as a cautionary tale. Furthermore, within their own stories, these African American characters fight for the rights and self-empowerment of Black people in their respective versions of the United States. They all try to change the course of history, some attempts fail—the biggest example is Golightly’s alien abduction. Nevertheless, some of them are successful—
like Dana who renounces Rufus as her master, and takes ownership of her freedom and her identity. Thus, *Kindred* and *Insurrection* are stories of hope, personal growth and self-discovery. Both Dana and Ron overcome their history, literally and figuratively. Ron, especially, becomes comfortable in his intersecting identity as a gay Black man.

However, the journey of these main characters does not go smooth. As was said, cognitive estrangement is a common theme in Afrofuturism. In *The Space Traders* aliens come to earth, and bring inconceivable technological solutions to America’s problems with fuel and pollution, this treasure turns out to be impossible to relinquish. Dana experiences ‘future shock’ twice—when she first arrives in the past, and when she last arrives in the present. She finds incomprehensible comfort on the 19th plantation, and loses the comfort that her own home should bring her. Moreover, *Insurrection* does everything it can to unsettle the audience, from collapsing time, to having actors play multiple characters regardless of the way they look. However, the most unsettling thought of all in these three narratives is the fact that slavery was ever real, or that is could possibly return.

Furthermore, these Afrofuturist slave narratives contain complex Black characters, and break with the traditional image of the slave. For example, Hammit is a gay slave, Buck Naked is a white slave, and both Alice and Sarah are shown to be more than their stereotypes as a Black temptress and a ‘mammy figure’, respectively. One of the ways that the authors accomplish this is by borrowing from many different genres; such as, the slave narrative, the historical novel, the dystopia, time travel stories, and more. Their goal is to create the truest representation of what it means to be Black in the past, and in the present society of the United States. Ultimately, their works encourage (Black) people to create a space for themselves in the future, as well as to find a way to recover from the atrocities that their people had to live through.
Works Cited


Balon, Rebecca. ‘Kinless or Queer: The Unthinkable Queer Slave in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Robert O’Hara’s *Insurrection: Holding History.*’ *African American Review*, vol. 48, no. 1-2, 2015, 141-155. PDF.


