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The Legacy of American Slavery: Contesting Blackness and Re-envisioning Nationhood in *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*

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Abstract: This article analyses Damian Duffy and John Jennings' adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979), *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017). It focuses on the graphic novel's explorations of the American past and present to examine the legacy of slavery today. Touching upon issues of interracial relationships, biracial children, and sexual abuse, the graphic novel discusses the complexity of being Black in the U.S., from the times of slavery to the present day, and demonstrates how generations of Americans are bonded together through the tragic history of slavery – a history through which racism has challenged the American nation and continues to do so. The article specifically focuses on how the graphic novel explores the relationship between the perpetrators and victims of slavery, the immediate and long-lasting effects thereof, as well as the responsibility borne by both the perpetrator and the passive observer (or the 'implicated subject', to borrow Michael Rothberg's term) in the formation of institutionalised oppression. The graphic novel functions on various layers: making perpetrators and victims visible (in the antebellum temporal context), complicating and deconstructing the perpetrator-victim binary in the contemporary context, and exploring implication through time. This article examines the potential of the graphic novel as a genre (in particular, its visual and verbal aspects) and of the motif of time travel to address the difficult legacy of slavery, the question of implication across time, and systemic/institutional racism.

Keywords: Octavia E. Butler, graphic novel, slavery, racism, perpetrator, nationhood, implication, time travel

Introduction

Slavery has had a profound impact on the formation of African-American identity and perception of Blackness in the United States. Damian Duffy and John Jennings' adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's 'grim fantasy'[1] *Kindred* (1979), *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017), communicates both visually and verbally how

All images featured in this article are from *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation,* by Octavia E. Butler, adapted by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017). All images © Abrams ComicArts.

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slavery continues to haunt the United States today. The publication of Butler's novel in 1979 and the recent release of its graphic adaptation are symbolic literary milestones that illustrate the perpetual nature of racial oppression in the U.S. While this article makes references to Butler's novel, its primary focus is on *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*. The graphic novel tells the story of Dana – an African-American woman who is forced to travel in time and meet her ancestors in person. Dana finds out that one of her ancestors was a white plantation owner who abused his slaves. Among them was Alice – a Black enslaved woman whose several children were fathered by her enslaver. One of them, a girl named Hagar, is Dana's direct ancestor. Experiencing slavery first hand, for Dana is perceived as 'property' in the antebellum South simply because of her skin colour, Dana not only learns about the injustice that her ancestors faced but also reimagines what it really means to be Black in the United States.

Octavia E. Butler's story of a time-jumping woman who becomes a witness to – and participant in – the history of racial oppression in America makes an important contribution to understanding of institutional racism in the U.S., which has continued long after the abolition of slavery. The graphic adaptation of that story, created by Damian Duffy and John Jennings, largely expands Butler's work. First, illustrating Dana's experience in the antebellum South, the graphic novel becomes a visual testimony of racial oppression and turns its reader into a witness. Certainly, Butler's novel also calls for remembering America's racist past, yet the graphic novel does so by employing a combination of techniques and methods that are exclusive to this medium, including visuals, sound, colours, text, and arrangement of narrated episodes. Second, by adapting the novel *Kindred*, the authors of the graphic novel extend Butler's work into the present day, to emphasise the ongoing anti-Black racial oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and crimes, insisting on the necessity to revisit the historical past to understand the traumatic present. Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd are only a few, best-known names on the long list of African Americans murdered by police officers. Police brutality toward African Americans and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement to protest racial injustice are some of the most illustrative examples of how serious the problem of racism is in the U.S. Narratives like *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* are not

1 Octavia E. Butler quoted in Lisa Yaszek, "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*', *Signs*, 28.4 (2003), 1053-1066 (p. 1058).

only timely reminders of the horrors of slavery, but also warn against forgetting that history and insist on ending racial oppression.

This article examines how *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* traces anti-Black racism in the U.S. from the times of slavery to the present day. It first analyses the problematic categorization of individuals into perpetrators, victims, and passive witnesses, who silently contribute(d) to the establishment and promotion of structural racism in the U.S. The primary focus here is on how time travel – the chief element in the graphic novel's plot – can be reinterpreted as a tool through which to understand but also complicate the linkages among those who were directly involved in slavery, as enslavers and enslaved, as well as their descendants and future generations of Americans more generally. The article then probes the issue of racial violence, as portrayed in the graphic novel, to foreground racism as an ongoing instrument of abuse that allows brutality against African Americans. Some of the questions that go through all sections in this article are how the immediate and long-lasting effects of slavery and racism have challenged American nationhood, and whether there is a hope for a post-racist[2] future for the U.S., where the past is remembered but the perception of race is radically transformed.

Perpetrators, Victims, and 'Implicated Subjects': (Un)Tangling the History of American Slavery through Time Travel

Transatlantic slavery profoundly affected the formation of societies in the New World, legitimizing racism and dividing individuals according to their skin colour. While white people were privileged, Black people were enslaved, abused, exploited, and oppressed. The United States and other former slave countries in the Americas were quite literally built on the bones of African slaves. The progress of the Western world hides behind its façade the horror of slavery and racism. From the first instances of African bondage in Virginia in 1619 to the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, slavery was viewed as an essential part of American society; therefore, it was approved of and legitimised.[3] Slavery was abolished

2 I resist using the term 'post-racial', which might be problematic in some contexts, suggesting an erasure of American multicultural history and diversity. Instead, I employ the term 'post-racist' to refer to a reality that is no longer characterised by racism on any level, or a set of practices and behaviours that do not intentionally or unintentionally lead to racial discrimination.

3 James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 7.

in the U.S. in 1865, but the ideologies that had sustained it for centuries did not vanish. Instead, they *transformed* to fit the principles and laws of a society where slavery is illegal and continued to exist in new forms.[4] Ideas promoting very similar views that existed in the antebellum U.S. persisted: that African Americans are less human on cultural, social, economic, political, legal, and other levels than white Americans. This thinking, rooted in the American past, allowed for the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, deprived African Americans of their civil rights, fuelled the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, and enabled numerous other instances of injustice and atrocities. This very thinking allows police brutality toward African Americans to continue today and prompts millions of individuals to rise up in the U.S., and worldwide, to defend what ought to be a simple human fact – that Black lives, indeed, matter.

Revisiting the inequality and crimes that racism has been fueling throughout the centuries invites questions about remembrance and responsibility, and what effects the past has on the present. Discussing some of the events that resurrect the images of American slavery, including the recent demolition of Confederate monuments, Ana Lucia Araujo insists that these are not mere endeavors to negotiate the history of slavery but very bright signs of ongoing racism.[5] Such examples illustrate the long-lasting effects of slavery and racism on American society and its inhabitants, bringing to the fore the questions of remembrance and responsibility. Remembering the past is crucial for understanding the current conflicts. Raising the issue of responsibility in these fragile-yet-complex discussions helps us not only to understand that there are individuals, groups of people, and even nations that directly and indirectly orchestrated oppression and inequality, but also to connect generations of people involved in slavery and the post-slavery reality.

Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation is one such narrative that throws into relief the issues of memory and responsibility. It focuses on an African-American woman, Dana, who travels in time and space, moving from 1970s California to antebellum Maryland. The choice of location is crucial here, as Maryland was one of the first places in the English New World to practice African slavery, beginning in 1642, when

4 See, for example, Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016); Rochelle Riley, *The Burden: African Americans and the Enduring Impact of Slavery* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018); and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2020).

5 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 2-3.

13 Africans were forcefully brought there and made into slaves.[6] As Dana soon realises, the travels happen because of her ancestor Rufus: every time he is in danger, Dana – against her will – jumps to save him. Dana first meets Rufus when he is a boy, and continues to leap back and forth, seeing Rufus grow into a young man. The time of each trip is measured differently in California and in Maryland: in her present moment, Dana might be away for just a short period of time, whereas in Maryland days, months, and even years elapse between leaps. Dana's time travel is important because, in saving her ancestor Rufus' life, she, in principle, saves her own. Rufus is a white boy growing up on a plantation, the son of the plantation's owner Tom Weylin. As a child, Rufus befriends a freeborn Black girl, Alice, whose father is one of Tom Weylin's slaves. As Rufus grows into his power as a slaveholder, however, this friendship soon transforms into an obsession. Rufus does not accept Alice's marriage to a slave Isaac. Alice is arrested for helping Isaac to escape and becomes Rufus' slave thereafter. While claiming to love her, Rufus uses Alice as his own sex slave. Alice gives birth to several children fathered by Rufus, one of whom is a girl named Hagar – Dana's direct ancestor.

Octavia E. Butler wrote *Kindred* for overtly political reasons. The author explains that her novel 'was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery'.[7] Dana's travel is thus an opportunity for present-day generations of African Americans to (more quickly) change the situation that Black people found themselves in earlier in history. In *Kindred*, Butler explores whether the alleged passivity of slaves could have been influenced and turned into direct action, as well as whether it is even right to refer to slaves as passive actors. Crucially, however, although Dana realises the wrongs of antebellum American society and frequently helps slaves, she is neither introduced as a saviour in Butler's novel nor its graphic adaptation. Dana arrives in the past knowing about slavery and racism, and the oppression that African Americans have been experiencing for centuries. Her

6 Suzanne Ellery, Greene Chapelle and others, *Maryland: A History of Its People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 24.

7 Octavia Butler quoted in Bryan Yazell, 'Teaching Octavia Butler's Diverse Body of Speculative Fiction: Genre, Race and the Radical Imaginary', in *Teaching Girls on Fire: Essays on Dystopian Young Adult Literature in the Classroom*, ed. by Sarah Hentges and Sean P. Connors (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), pp. 154-170 (p. 159).

knowledge, as it might seem, makes her superior to the characters whom she meets in the South. This is the case, for example, when her basic medical knowledge helps her save several characters from near-death. Her ability to move back in time can be interpreted as a chance given to her to alter the past and help stop the injustice.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the graphic novel, Dana is a witness to slavery rather than an active agent trying to abolish it. Witnessing is illustrated in the narrative via various techniques. For example, during one of her earlier travels, Dana witnesses Alice's father being whipped by a white man (see Figure 1). Dana's position in the image is crucial: although hiding, she is central in the image. The tree behind which Dana hides divides the image in two: to the right, the naked slave tied to a tree, his face distorted with pain; to the left, the white man vehemently whipping the slave. The colouring reveals that the two important characters in the image are Dana and Alice's father; the trees, the landscape, the background, and even the white man are depicted in grey-violet shades, whereas the two African-American characters are accentuated through pink-violet shades. Distinctly foregrounding the two Black characters, the scene meditates upon the unequal positions of Dana and Alice's father. The man is a slave, dehumanised through being stripped, humiliated, and beaten. Dana, in turn, being invisible to the white character in the scene, is temporarily safe. One can speculate that the colouring accentuates that the two characters belong to the same race – the race that is enslaved in the antebellum South. There is, however, a deeper meaning that the colour conveys. Visually distinguishing the two African-American characters, the graphic novel connects America's slaveholding past to Dana's present. On the one hand, it denotes progress, as both Dana and the reader realise that slavery is indeed in the past. Yet, on the other hand, it helps Dana and the reader see the racial inequality characteristic of Dana's time (the 1970s) and the reader's present as the echo of oppression and abuse from the past. Dana is foregrounded in this image; she appears closer to the reader and her thoughts are spelled out. She is, however, only a witness here, and together with the reader is forced to see the atrocity. Hiding behind the tree, Dana is lying down, unlike the two men standing in the background; the hand that covers her mouth symbolises her silence in this scene, i.e., albeit we can read her thoughts, she is not an active participant, and will remain a passive, shocked observer. This image perhaps most vividly problematises the attitudes of those who criticise older generations of African Americans for their inability to improve race relations sooner. The image forces

FIGURE 1. Dana witnesses a slave being whipped (p. 43). © Abrams ComicArts.

Dana (along with the reader) to witness an episode from a slave's life, yet Dana is unable to move and speak.

Later in the novel, when Dana tells her husband Kevin (a white man who, on this occasion, has travelled in time with her) about the life on the plantation, she is depicted remembering how a slave was beaten (see Figure 2). As in the earlier image, the background is composed of a slave who has been stripped, tied to a tree, and is being whipped by a white man, whereas Dana appears in the foreground. The hand at her mouth again suggests that she is shocked by what she has witnessed as well as hints at her silence: just like other African Americans who saw the beating, she was unable to withstand the oppressor. While the image reveals that Dana has indeed witnessed the atrocity, the reader learns about it only through Dana's memory flashback. In short, in these two scenes, the graphic novel forces the reader, together with (and through) Dana, to witness slavery as a phenomenon that cannot be altered: first, because it is history, and second, because it is a form of *institutional* violence that could not be easily stopped by individual slaves or abolitionists.

Dana functions as a mediator between the historical past and the present (the 1970s), between the characters and the reader. Through Dana, the reader witnesses injustice and meditates upon the roles that everyone plays in the institution of slavery. Commenting on her choice to write *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler noted that history, including the history of American slavery and racism, tends 'to become overly reductive over time'.[8] The publication of a graphic novel version of *Kindred* in 2017 is another

8 Bryan Yazell, 'Teaching Octavia Butler's Diverse Body of Speculative Fiction: Genre, Race and the Radical Imaginary', in *Teaching Girls on Fire: Essays on Dystopian Young Adult Literature in the Classroom*, ed. by Sarah Hentges and Sean P. Connors (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), pp. 154-170 (p. 159).

Figure 2. Dana remembers witnessing a slave being whipped (p. 88). © Abrams ComicArts.

such attempt to remind the reader about slavery, not only to illustrate the history of racism but also to force readers to see the consequences thereof, including lynchings, beatings, and the ongoing oppression of people of colour, both in Dana's present (the 1970s) and the reader's.

Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation is not a slave narrative in its traditional sense – after all, Dana is not a slave, and everything that she tells the reader is largely based on what she perceives as an outside observer. Unlike other African-American characters in the novel, Dana's life is safe. She works alongside other slaves, sometimes she is even beaten, but whenever her life is in mortal danger, she returns to 1970s California. Yet, Dana witnesses and experiences slavery, and Christopher Daley emphasises the significance of the text's 'firsthand retelling'.[9] Dana also participates in history. What seems to be problematic, however, is that while she tries to influence some of the characters against slavery, she is also invested in ensuring that Hagar – the daughter of Rufus and Alice – is born, because it guarantees Dana's

9 Christopher Daley, 'Case Studies in Reading 1: Key Primary Literary Texts', in *The Science Fiction Handbook*, ed. by Nick Hubble and Aris Mousoutzanis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 75-99 (p. 90).

own existence. Therefore, Dana is both witness and accomplice to the abuse and exploitation that leads to Hagar's birth.

Two primary questions arise from Dana's ambiguous role in the graphic adaptation of Butler's novel: How does the graphic novel use Dana to mediate and complicate the relationship between perpetrator and victim? And precisely what role does Dana occupy in the narrative, being caught somewhere between slavery and freedom, as a descendant of both races but not really at home anywhere?

In my analysis of the perpetrators and victims depicted in the graphic novel, I rely on Alette Smeulers, Barbara Holá, and Maartje Weerdesteijin's interpretation of the former as 'all individuals who are in one way or another involved in the perpetration and commission of mass atrocities'.[10] In line with the UN's 2003 definition of victims, I view a victim as '*a person or a collectivity who suffers harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss, or impairment of that person's fundamental legal rights*'.[11] The perpetrator-victim dichotomy is rather straightforward in the graphic novel; it is the confrontation between the white characters and the Black characters through which slavery is communicated. Literally every white character that Dana encounters in antebellum Maryland is evil, and their evil nature becomes apparent through the way they treat Black people. The implication is that the time and the place affect people to such an extent that they take on the role that the institution of slavery would have them become: white people inevitably turn into enslavers and Black people become enslaved. Dana's very existence hinges upon her ancestor Alice remaining victimised long enough to ensure Dana's birth. The influence of time and place on the characters is vividly illustrated through Dana and Kevin. As both find themselves in the antebellum South, they undergo significant transformations. For example, they are not allowed to behave as they would in their present time; although being married to each other, Kevin plays the role of a white enslaver, whereas Dana is his slave. This performance recasts these two characters according to the political and racial norms of the nineteenth century. Kevin's whiteness denotes that he belongs to the oppressing race, whereas Dana's Blackness inevitably

10 Alette Smeulers, Barbara Holá and Maartje Weerdesteijin, 'Introduction', in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijin and Barbara Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 1-8 (p. 2).

11 United Nations quoted in in Heidy Rombouts, *Victim Organisations and the Politics of Reparation: A Case Study of Rwanda* (Antwerp: Intersentia, 2004), N18, p. 15, italics in original.

links her to the enslaved. The graphic novel invites the reader to engage with concepts such as *perpetrators* and *victims* by making race *visible*.

How, through Dana and Kevin's time travel, does the graphic novel foreground the complex issues of guilt and responsibility, victimhood and violence, the enslaver and the enslaved, thus uncovering the long-lasting effects of slavery?

Dana and Kevin have not directly participated in slavery, for they were born in the twentieth century, long after slavery had been abolished. To examine them as victims or perpetrators of slavery is thus difficult. Michael Rothberg energetically embraces this temporal distance, emphasizing the difficulty of remembering, analysing, and productively linking the historical past to the current present, because slavery was abolished a relatively long time ago (e.g., in the U.S. in 1865) and its direct participants, enslavers or the enslaved, are all dead. At the same time, he accentuates the fact that slavery and the various types of inequalities that it generated continue to haunt post-slavery societies even today.[12] According to Seana Valentine Shiffrin, many scholars equivocate over the implied responsibility for the legacy of slavery in the present:

> They worry about the temporal distance between the crimes and wrongs committed and the proposed moments of reckoning with them, taking it to be a serious issue that – to put it starkly – the original victims of slavery are dead, and the original perpetrators are no longer alive either.[13]

The ongoing anti-Black oppression and violence, however, aptly denote the mobile temporalities of Black enslavement. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues: 'We [the U.S.] are not free of our racial history':

> We had recently birthed another caste system – a system of mass incarceration – that caged millions of poor people and people of color and relegated millions more to a permanent second-class status. Yet we were in deep denial that a new system of racial and social control existed, and most of us … did not seem to understand that powerful racial dynamics and political forces were at play that made much of our racial progress illusory.[14]

12 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 63.

13 Seana Valentine Shiffrin, 'Reparations for U.S. Slavery and Justice Over Time', in *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem*, ed. by Melinda A. Roberts and David T. Wasserman (New York: Springer, 2009), pp. 333-339 (p. 333).

14 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2020), p. x, p. ix.

Dana's and Kevin's lives are, of course, influenced by the legacy of slavery. They are shaped by the past; the racialised roles the two characters play in 1970s U.S., the way their relative worth as individuals is perceived, the way their interracial relationship is condemned by their family members but also other Americans – all these examples and many more are the results of America's colonial past, slavery, and racism. Time travel is thus a technique that the graphic novel (in line with Butler's original) uses not only to remind the characters and the reader about the past, but also to re-envision the present.[15] Through time travel, the narrative invites the reader to contemplate slavery as a system and forces its audience to *see race* at the core of this issue.

While Kevin is not depicted as a racist at the beginning of the graphic novel (the reader might even assume that being in a healthy, married relationship with a Black woman, Kevin fully condemns racism), time travel helps develop him more as a character. Once, on the plantation, Kevin and Dana have a rather peculiar conversation. Kevin notes: 'It's surprising how little there is to see. No overseer, no more work than people can manage –'. Yet Dana (whose face, notably, is bruised from a recent beating) immediately interrupts him: 'Nobody invites you to sleep on dirt floors. Hell, a lot of field hands tend their own gardens instead of sleeping, just to keep from starving on corn meal and table scraps!' To this, Kevin responds: 'Wait, I'm not trying to minimize the wrong –'. But Dana emphasises: 'You are. You don't mean to but you are. Nobody calls you out to see the whippings'.[16] Race is the unspoken central issue in this talk. Dana, being stuck in the nineteenth century, becomes fully aware of her skin colour and what it means to the others. In the process, her Blackness starts to gain new meanings for her too, as she learns more about herself and her place in the African-American community, the phenomenon that Seana Valentine Shiffrin terms as 'the intimate connection between our self-conception and group-identification'.[17] Kevin, however, remains blind to the suffering and injustice that surround him on the plantation — the core components of the society in which he and Dana now find themselves. Kevin's attempt to explain that he does not support slavery

15 For more on time travel, see William J. Burling, 'Reading Time: The Ideology of Time Travel in Science Fiction', *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time*, 6.1 (2006), 5-30; and Jolie C. Matthews, 'Dominant Narratives and Historical Perspective in Time Travel Stories: A Case Study of *Doctor Who*', *The Social Studies*, 112.2 (2021), 76-90.

16 Octavia E. Butler, Damian Duffy and John Jennings, *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2017), p. 88.

17 Shiffrin, p. 333.

is futile. Indeed, he seems to suggest that slavery is not as bad as it is described in history books. In other words, not having witnessed brutal beatings and lynchings first hand, he *accepts* other instances of racism that surround him. Having finally returned home to the 1970s, after having spent five years in the nineteenth century, Kevin shares with Dana that he was helping fugitive slaves and thus fighting against slavery and racial oppression. Such a transformation might suggest that *witnessing* slavery helped him understand the experiences of enslaved Black populations. However, Kevin also emphasises that 'Everything here [the 1970s] is so soft. So easy…', and he therefore needs time to adjust to the relatively stable and peaceful present.[18] While this comment reinforces the horror of slavery, it largely diminishes the problem of racism in 1970s America. Kevin again appears blind to the racial injustice that surrounds him in his present time, suggesting that as long as Black people are not enslaved – as long as he does not see African Americans being whipped and forced to perform certain tasks, as long as he himself does not witness lynching – there is no racism in 1970s America. In both instances, thus, Kevin insists on how relatively non-violent each situation is and emphasises that because he does not witness any atrocity, there can be no atrocity taking place.

This problematic stance on witnessing racism and participating in its perpetuation moves the discussion beyond the rather clear perpetrator-victim relationship to the question of *implicated subjects*. Michael Rothberg coins the term 'implicated subject' to refer to 'the manifold indirect, structural, and collective forms of agency that enable injury, exploitation, and domination but that frequently remain in the shadows'.[19] Rothberg specifies:

> Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles.[20]

Rothberg's concept can be effectively employed to understand Kevin's role in both antebellum and 1970s America. His whiteness in both

18 Butler, Duffy and Jennings, p. 173.
19 Rothberg, p. 1.
20 Ibid.

instances guarantees a certain type of privilege that he is not even aware of, and which he takes for granted. Finding himself in the nineteenth century, he understands that he will not be turned into a slave and has an opportunity to simply observe injustice. Even the master-slave role play that Kevin and Dana perform while in the South, and the ease with which they accept the rules of this game, suggests how *normal* it was for a white person to imagine themselves as an enslaver and a Black person to think of themselves as enslaved. A telling scene that communicates the normality of slavery and the perpetual nature of racism takes place when Dana and Kevin witness two slave children playing an auction game. A younger boy pretends to be an auctioneer. He describes the characteristics of an older girl that could help him sell her for a higher price. Yet, once she hears him offer a lower price than he asked for their other friend and protests, the boy emphasises that she is not the one to decide this: 'You ain't supposed to say nothing! When master Tom bought mama and me, we didn't say nothing!'[21] Kevin attempts to explain to Dana – who is simply unable to watch kids playing such a game – that this game is a product of their racist everyday reality. Racial inequality, however, was enabled by those who directly participated in and promoted racism – perpetrators – and those whose passivity allowed the system to be built in such a way – implicated subjects.

The meaning of implicated subjects can be understood on a deeper level when connecting the historical past to the current present. Examining the problematic nature of the word 'legacy', Rothberg argues that 'implicated subjects are in certain ways stand-ins for the perpetrators to whom some degree of responsibility has been delegated, yet the indirect nature of that standing-in and that delegation remains to be determined'.[22] An implicated subject is thus not simply characterised by his or her passivity but is a participant in and contributor to slavery and the formation of racial inequality. Kevin's comments about the absence of atrocities (based on the fact that he has not witnessed them himself) and the 'soft'-ness of the 1970s indicate his inability or unwillingness to see racism and his own contribution to it. It is his denial that allows the system to run unimpeded. It is difficult, if not impossible, to estimate how much responsibility implicated subjects like Kevin bear in shaping the United States as a nation where racial inequality is one of the most urgent problems, but the fact of their contribution is unquestionable.

21 Butler, Duffy and Jennings, p. 87.
22 Rothberg, p. 63.

Dana's position in the graphic novel is rather equivocal, too. Despite coming from the future and thus in many ways appearing more knowledgeable than the nineteenth-century characters, Dana is unable to withstand racism (although she explicitly condemns it) – because she is alone, and because she is a Black woman. Both her gender and race make her vulnerable in the antebellum South. Finding out about her ancestors and life on the plantation more generally, Dana realises how important the birth of Hagar is; the child born from the sexual abuse of her enslaved ancestor guarantees Dana's own existence. In order to preserve history as is (or perhaps being unable to change it), Dana has to witness, and thereby become indirectly involved in, the relationship between Rufus and Alice. Just as it is impossible to precisely assess the responsibility of implicated subjects in the formation of racial inequality in the U.S., so it is impossible to argue whether Dana's actions could have changed history. First, it is hard to estimate whether Dana would even have been able to prevent Alice from getting pregnant by Rufus, and even if Hagar had not been born, Alice could have had more children with Rufus (in fact, the two have an older son). Second, even if Dana had helped Alice escape, this would not have guaranteed a happy end; Alice could have been caught and forced back into slavery or lynched. Even if Alice had managed to escape, for example to Canada, where it was possible to live freely, American slavery and racism would have continued to exist. Therefore, while Dana's investment in Hagar's birth is problematic, Dana is not responsible for the racial violence, abuse, and oppression directed at and experienced by African Americans. She develops a tight connection with her white ancestor Rufus, whom she saves from death multiple times. She even tries to change his racist attitudes, emphasizing that Black people are not property and foregrounding the inhumanness of white people's actions toward African Americans. Dana is frequently depicted taking care of Rufus, which stands for her persistency to temper the influence of racism on his mind, and thus improve the situation for his slaves. In one such scene, Dana saves Rufus, while trying to explain that his actions toward Alice are wrong (see Figure 3). She asks Rufus: 'Rufe, did you rape that girl?' She does not receive any clear answer from him. Dana accentuates the fact that Black people are humans, too, and thus must be treated accordingly, and asks, 'Why would you do such a thing? She used to be your friend'.[23] Dana does not stress Alice's race,

23 Butler, Duffy and Jennings, p. 115.

Figure 3. Dana cares for drunk, beaten-up Rufus (p. 115). © Abrams ComicArts.

but instead reminds Rufus that he used to treat Alice as an equal, a friend, and makes him think why this would have to change.

Dana's ambiguous role in the narrative, as she is torn between her white and Black ancestors, trying to help both, makes it possible to view her as an implicated subject, too. Rothberg throws into relief the importance of an intergenerational perspective for understanding the true nature of implicated subjects. He claims:

> The concepts of legacy, inheritance, and descent seem to promise direct lines of connection between past and present, but in practice the process of inheritance across generations rarely goes so smoothly. Not only are legacies and inheritances frequently contested at the level of the family, but at the level of society matters of descent become even more complex. Social legacies are rarely transmitted clearly or cleanly. Ubiquitous forms of social change, such as the demographic transformations catalysed by migration, proliferate ambiguously situated implicated subjects. In the wake of trauma in general and slavery in particular, questions of familial and social inheritance become especially fraught.[24]

24 Rothberg, p. 64.

Dana's relation to both the victims of slavery and its perpetrators is apparent in the graphic novel. Her very existence is the result of racial violence and abuse that were legalised by the slave system. She is connected to both victims and perpetrators by blood, whereas the events that take place in the South make her both a victim and an implicated subject. Through time travel, which the graphic novel effectively communicates via visual techniques, the narrative thus emphasises how difficult it is to untangle the connections among perpetrators, victims, and implicated subjects; it foregrounds how long-lasting the effects of slavery are, and in doing so, helps illustrate the fight for racial freedom and equality as a long, difficult, and intergenerational struggle.

The time travel technique used in the graphic novel (and Butler's original narrative) brings the importance of witnessing to the fore. In his analysis of Butler's novel, Scott Astrada argues, 'In *Kindred*, we can see how the historical space of being, of the individual, is not only influential in configuring the subject's grid of perception, but violently captures and molds the very space of perception'.[25] In order to understand slavery, *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* employs two approaches. First, it forces Black and white individuals from the 1970s to witness the past and experience what Astrada singles out as one of the main features of Butler's novel – how time and space influence and shape people. Second, it emphasises the crucial importance of taking into account the perspective of African Americans – those who experienced slavery and those who live with its legacy. While the graphic novel includes both Black slaves and Black people living in the 1970s, Dana is the only character who witnesses and experiences slavery in the nineteenth century and the racial inequality that descended from it in the 1970s.

In his analysis of 'slave testimony', letters, speeches, interviews, and autobiographies of formerly enslaved Black people, John W. Blassingame emphasises the necessity to examine testimonies of both enslavers and the enslaved to fully understand slavery, for each group provides different perspectives and answers questions that the other group simply cannot address.[26] Similarly, discussing Frederick Douglass' life in the U.S. from the time he was a slave to his career as an active abolitionist,

25 Scott Astrada, 'Home and Dwelling: Re-Examining Race and Identity Through Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*', *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy – Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, 25.1 (2017), 104-120 (p. 106).

26 John W. Blassingame, 'Introduction', in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. by John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. xvii-lxv (p. lxii, p. lxv).

Jeannine Marie DeLombard singles out 'the constitutive genre of the witness – the autobiographical account'.[27] Slaves were, to borrow from Frederick Douglass, 'eye-witness[es] to the cruelty',[28] and their stories, both undocumented and documented ones, impacted the meanings of slavery and the role of white people therein, foregrounded the suffering of Black people, and highlighted the criminal nature of racism. Their stories have also dramatically influenced the image of slaves themselves, transforming their position – and their role in history – as DeLombard describes, 'from victim to witness'.[29] Slave narratives, while not being considered reliable and legitimate proof of violence against African Americans by white people during the times of slavery, influenced the general climate that surrounded slavery by communicating the wrongs of slavery to Americans, thus inevitably impacting public opinion.[30]

Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation is a neo-slave narrative. Time travel makes Dana a witness to and victim of slavery. She participates in the lives of enslaved Black people and shares traumatic experiences with other characters, and the reader. The graphic novel reveals how various stereotypes about Blackness made slavery an institutionalised form of violence, as white people's 'fears' of Black people became 'laws'.[31] The graphic novel's engagement with perpetrators, victims, and implicated subjects provides an important intergenerational perspective on slavery, emphasising slavery's long-lasting effects. Scholars argue that the most 'powerful' narratives are those that do not just 'entertain or educate their audiences but ... move them to exemplary civic action'.[32] The graphic novel does so by *visualising* slavery's impact on American society and urging readers to eradicate racism that, despite the ceaseless efforts of African Americans, continues to poison the American nation. Like Butler's original novel, what makes the graphic novel important is its attempt to reclassify slavery as a phenomenon that is not merely situated in the past but that has power to shape the present. Via this narrative, one can trace the history of racism from the times of slavery to the 1970s, as well as beyond that decade and into the present.

27 Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 105.

28 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave. Written by Himself* (London: H. G. Collins, 22, Paternoster Row, 1845), p. 37.

29 DeLombard, p. 105.

30 Ibid., p. 109.

31 Kitty Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization and the Holocaust: A Comparative History of Persecution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 60.

32 DeLombard, p. 105.

Racial Violence: Past and Present

Commenting on how ordinary slavery as a phenomenon was prior to its abolition, Kevin Bales states, 'It is hard for us, people of the twenty-first century, to grasp this fundamental acceptance – the popular understanding that, like death and taxes, slavery was a permanent part of the human condition'.[33] In the twenty-first century, the idea of kidnapping, transporting, and forcing an individual (or whole communities) to satisfy the economic, political, sexual, and other needs of others sounds criminal and inhumane, yet slavery continues to exist in different parts of the globe.[34] As for slavery in the U.S., which brought misery and death to millions of Black people, though it no longer exists, its legacy continues to haunt present-day America and challenge American nationhood.

Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation depicts two versions of the U.S.: the nineteenth-century American South and 1970's California. In doing so, it addresses racial problems that were characteristic of both periods. This article, however, argues that the graphic novel makes an important contribution to understanding the current racial conflicts in the U.S., too. An adaptation of Butler's novel in 2017 is not arbitrary; it is an effective way to illustrate that racism continues to destroy American society, causing inequality on multiple levels. The creators of the graphic novel, Damian Duffy and John Jennings, contemplated moving Dana's present time from 1976 to 2016, and although they eventually decided to set the story in the same decade as specified in Butler's novel, the medium that they use – a graphic novel – in the words of Mollie Godfrey, 'shifts the story's emphasis toward the concerns of the present'.[35] In a unique way, the graphic novel addresses racism, and racial violence in particular, in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, the 1970s, and today.

Similarly to slave narratives that attempt to shift the focus from African Americans as 'victims' to their status as American 'citizens',[36] *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* does not victimise African-American characters. Instead, it unveils how corrupt and unjust American society is because of racism that ultimately results, among other things, in

33 Kevin Bales, 'Foreword: The Listening Abolitionist', in *Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives*, by Laura T. Murphy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. ix-xii (p. ix).

34 See Laura T. Murphy, *Survivors of Slavery: Modern-Day Slave Narratives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

35 Mollie Godfrey, 'Getting Graphic with *Kindred*: The Neo-Slave Narrative of the Black Lives Matter Movement', in *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination*, ed. by Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), pp. 83-105 (p. 90).

36 DeLombard, p. 105.

acts of racial violence. Nadine Flagel notes that while in the times of slavery racial progress was envisaged through slave narratives (among other genres), today this is largely done through speculative fiction.[37] Flagel even draws parallels between 'nausea at terror of the void and a sense of chaos, emptiness, isolation, infinitude, separation, and absence' that Dana feels as she travels in time and similar 'symptoms' that formerly enslaved individuals describe in slave narratives.[38] This illustrates the blending of the two genres and the appropriation of speculative fiction today to engage with the past, as is the case with the graphic novel. The medium of a graphic novel, in addition to the genre of speculative fiction, equips *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* with unique techniques to communicate and illuminate the long history of racism, from the times of slavery to the present day. Nimrod Tal and I argue elsewhere that the 'visual-verbal' elements in graphic novels are 'conjoint,' which means 'the verbal is not reduced to the text, and the visual is not merely about the image'.[39] Hillary L. Chute makes an important observation regarding comics' 'unique spatial grammar' and claims that their 'logic of arrangement . . . turns time into space' thus demonstrating that history is neither 'a closed discourse' nor 'a simply progressive one'.[40] Employing such techniques, particularly in the panels that illustrate the characters' travel through time and space, *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptati*on both depicts specific experiences as historical events and insists on the tight connection of those events to the present, which is what, in the end, forms American history.

Some scholars have questioned the effectiveness of communicating racial violence through image. For example, analysing recent films about slavery, scholars argue that images of racial violence can be interpreted both as 'evidence' and 'a spectacle of black suffering and death', the latter being a dangerous way to promote 'indifference' to the injustice and brutality experienced by Black people.[41] Additionally, shifting the focus from an individual to a group can erase the very

37 Nadine Flagel, '"It's Almost Like Being There": Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*', *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines*, 42.2 (2012), 216-245 (p. 217).

38 Ibid., p. 219.

39 Tatiana Prorokova and Nimrod Tal, 'Introduction', in *Cultures of War in Graphic Novels: Violence, Trauma, and Memory*, ed. by Tatiana Prorokova and Nimrod Tal (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), pp. 1-19 (p. 8).

40 Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 4.

41 Godfrey, p. 91.

individuals that are at the core of racial violence. In her recent book *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization and the Holocaust: A Comparative History of Persecution*, Kitty Millet raises an important question: 'How does one talk about the human in the face of so much loss, so many dead bodies?'[42] As we try to understand the institutional nature of slavery and racism, we should not forget that behind the term 'race' there are individuals who have experienced injustice. In that sense, *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*'s focus on one family across generations helps to concentrate on individual members of the African-American community *and* that community as a whole. In her analysis of Duffy and Jennings' adaptation, Godfrey examines 'the value of images' in depicting racism and claims that they 'witness rather than create spectacles out of antiblack violence'.[43] For Godfrey, the graphic novel explores the 'relationship between the spectacle of black pain and the need to witness rather than become numb to that pain'.[44] The graphic novel thus forces the characters, especially Dana, and the reader both to witness history and project it onto the contemporary moment, i.e., Dana's 1970s, and the reader's present. In doing so, it recasts the history of racial violence in the U.S. as a past, present, and future that exist simultaneously because of the ever-present repercussions of slavery.

Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation connects slavery, racial inequality in the 1970s, and the instances of racial violence that can be witnessed today. It links the past to the present and the present to the past, and emphasises kinship as the main motif running through that history. Godfrey draws attention to the opening image of Dana without an arm – the one that appears on an unnumbered page, before the graphic narrative starts. The scholar claims that this portrayal denotes 'the structural pain inflicted on Dana by the past', but adds, 'the image also implies that we will need more images to understand the relationship of that past to our future'.[45] The graphic novel's aim is thus to foreground the past in order to understand the present. The publication of Butler's novel in 1979 symbolically censured the absence of slavery, especially the role of Black women therein, in contemporary socio-political and cultural discourses.[46] *Kindred* – the novel – was thus

42 Millet, p. 2.
43 Godfrey, p. 91.
44 Ibid., p. 93.
45 Ibid., p. 91.
46 Philip Miletic, 'Octavia Butler's Response to Black Arts/Black Power Literature and Rhetoric in *Kindred*', *African American Review*, 49.3 (2016), 261-275 (p. 261).

an attempt to fill that gap. But, Guy Mark Foster also draws attention to the rather peculiar 'silence' on racial matters in the parts of the novel that are set in the 1970s (this argument can be extended to the graphic novel adaptation) and contends that it 'mirrors the silence around this subject that was characteristic of the entire nation following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.'[47] The 1970s was a time when 'colorblindness' became one way to address/neglect race in the U.S. Time travel can thus be viewed as an opportunity given to the main characters – Dana and Kevin – to deal with racial issues in a setting (a plantation in the antebellum South) where race is blatantly visible.[48]

Racial violence is the key issue that connects the past to the present in the graphic novel (and in Butler's original). Racial violence also emphasises the kinship of those involved in racism, both on the intergenerational level of the enslaved, the enslavers, and their descendants, and on the level of the nation, suggesting that slavery was a historical experience that shaped the American nation as a whole. Examining slavery in Brazil, Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna claim that 'a basic part of the slave system was the permanent sensation of violence on the part of all members of that society' – enslaved people were abused by their enslavers, who were anxious about the possibility of slave revolts.[49] The graphic novel foregrounds racial violence as the primary way to oppress Black people. Dana witnesses multiple beatings; she is also aware of sexual abuse that takes place on the plantation. Her ultimate goals are to soften the attitudes of the white characters, especially Rufus, toward their slaves, and help the Black characters minimise the harm that slavery does to them. In doing so, she becomes quite literally stuck between the two races: her Blackness does not allow her to be equal to white people on the plantation, whereas her ability to communicate with white people and be heard, as well as her appearance of being better educated than others (the result of her coming from the future) separate her from the Black people too. On a more personal level, however, Dana is stuck between her white and Black ancestors. She helps both Rufus and Alice, despite being aware of the violence and sexual abuse that he exercises toward her. Dana seems to believe that the situation around

47 Guy Mark Foster, '"Do I Look like Someone You Can Come Home to from Where You May Be Going?": Re-Mapping Interracial Anxiety in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*', *African American Review*, 41.1 (2007), 143-164 (p. 144) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40033770> [accessed 10 November 2020].

48 Ibid.

49 Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 211.

Figure 4. Alice accuses Dana of being 'too smart' (p. 152). © Abrams ComicArts.

race is, in a way, a product of its time, and one simply has to accept the rules of slave society. Her attitude toward white people provokes anger in her Black ancestors. In one scene, Alice accuses Dana of being blind to what is going on around her and trying to pretend to be on the same level with white people. Alice is both angry and hurt: her face is distorted with hostility toward Dana, which can be perceived from her straight-looking, half-closed eyes and her open mouth as she screams her accusations, as well as from the lines and circles that are drawn around Alice's head that convey the loud volume of the scene (see Figure 4).

The text that accompanies the image communicates the dissatisfaction that Alice feels about Dana not being like other Black people on the plantation: 'Doctor-nigger, think you know so much. Reading-nigger, white-nigger!'[50] Yet soon, Dana is rejected by the white people in the exactly same manner. She is brutally whipped by the plantation owner, Tom Weylin, Rufus' father, for being cleverer than the other Black people whom he enslaved (see Figure 5).

50 Butler, Duffy and Jennings, p. 152.

Figure 5. Dana is whipped by the plantation owner (p. 162). © Abrams ComicArts

Whipping Dana, Tom Weylin says: 'Educated nigger don't mean smart nigger, do it?!'[51] Dana is too 'white' for her Black ancestors, but she is also too 'Black' for her white ancestors. Negotiating the meaning of her Blackness, she comes to realise that she is, in fact, both white and Black, both in terms of her blood kinship to Rufus and Alice, and in the ways she *and* her Blackness are perceived in the antebellum South and 1970s America.

The crucial scene through which Dana's Blackness is reimagined takes place toward the end of the novel, when Rufus is trying to rape Dana. It is during that moment that Dana says to Rufus: 'Keeping you alive has been up to me for too long!'[52] Utterly disgusted with Rufus, his attitude to Black people and his own children with Alice, Dana is now determined to kill him. The images that depict Dana and Rufus fighting are interrupted by two visuals in which the characters are portrayed still. Each image includes a half of each character's face and together they form one complete visage (see Figure 6).

The two halves construct an angry expression that denotes their ancestral relationship, blood kinship created through the sexual abuse of an enslaved Black woman and her mixed-race children held by their father as slaves. Rufus and Dana become one human to symbolise their own blood relationship but also the complex history of kinship in

51 Ibid., p. 162.
52 Ibid., p. 231.

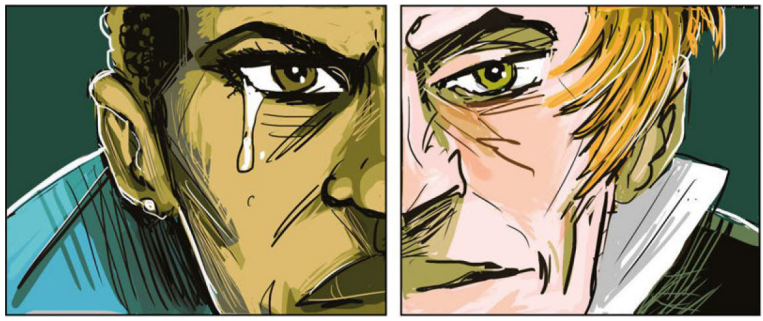

FIGURE 6. Reimagining Dana's Blackness through her white ancestor (p. 232). © Abrams ComicArts.

American society. Indeed, to what extent are the descendants of enslaved Black people and white enslavers *kindred* to each other? This face stands for both the oppressor (portrayed through the half of Rufus' face that communicates anger and power) and the oppressed (portrayed through the half of Dana's face that communicates the pain and suffering of slaves but also of the generations of African Americans who have been abused and discriminated against since the abolition of slavery). While both characters are determined to fight for what they think is right, the large tear running down Dana's face clearly indicates who in this image is a victim and who is a perpetrator. Here, Dana distinctly mirrors Alice, as portrayed in Figure 4, thus standing for Alice and all Black women who experienced sexual abuse and racial violence.

Dana's murdering of Rufus is symbolic. Through it, one can grasp Dana's own perception of her ancestors and blood kinship and trace her changing understanding of Blackness. The murder is a way to punish the perpetrator. It is a climactic moment that results from Dana's witnessing and experiencing various unspeakable acts of violence and injustice generated by racism. Yet Alice's suicide is the key event that helps Dana fully realise the true pain felt by enslaved Black people. The full-page image depicts Alice's body hanging in a barn, and Dana looking at the woman in shock (see Figure 7).

The image can be aptly compared to Figure 3; unlike the multiple opportunities Dana has had to save Rufus' life, she could not prevent Alice from committing suicide. Alice decides to end her life because she can no longer stand the sexual abuse of her enslaver, the separation from her husband Isaac, who was sold like a piece of property, as well as the fact that her children were born in slavery and may never know freedom. The image of dead Alice clearly denotes the psychological and

Figure 7. Dana finds Alice dead in a barn (p. 219). © Abrams ComicArts.

physical suffering of Black people at the hands of white enslavers and foregrounds how inescapable this condition is. But it also uncovers the very personal story of Dana's family: her white ancestor Rufus survives no matter what, whereas her Black ancestor Alice dies unfree, without rights or any power to change the situation for her Black friends and relatives. Seeing Alice's dead body, Dana understands the true horror of slavery and singles out her white ancestor Rufus as the true perpetrator. Killing Rufus is not only Dana's violent response to his assault on her – something that Alice could never do – but also an attempt to exorcise the white terror from her own family, symbolically punishing the enslaver for the oppression of Black people. Dana is given the power that neither Alice nor millions of other enslaved individuals had, and she uses it to stand up to evil.

Araujo underlines the importance of 'bringing the slave past to the present', which can be done in a variety of ways, including 'by preserving, commemorating, and staging this common past in the public space'.[53] The medium of the graphic novel is one such way to document, depict, and exhibit the history of slavery. Butler's novel *Kindred* has been read

53 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010), p. 5.

> as a commentary on the enduring violence and trauma of slavery in the lives and psyches of the descendants of slaves and on the nation as a whole; as a reflection on the ruse of freedom in the lives of modern black women, like Dana, who remain chained to the slave past; and as a meditation on the difficulties of writing the history of women in slavery from the vantage point of the enslaved given the paucity of the archive.[54]

This interpretation can be extended to the novel's graphic adaptation, which preserves kinship and ancestry as the key ideas through which to understand racism in the times of slavery and today. Butler's novel has also been read as 'an exploration of the tensions, contradictions, and anxieties attendant on those who attempt to understand and try to accept the genuine impurities in American politics and life: impurity of desires, impurity of family, impurity of racial identity'.[55] Similarly, the graphic novel invites the reader to see what happens when one tries to understand the true history of racism. It connects the times of slavery to Dana's present (the 1970s) to emphasise how racism has been transmitted across generations, formulating both antebellum and present-day America. That history indeed matters, and that slavery largely shaped the U.S. nation, is visually apparent in the graphic novel through the use of colours: the vivid, bright images of the past are contrasted to duller, much less emotional illustrations of Dana's contemporary time. But just as racism formed the nation, so did the struggle against it. As I have argued elsewhere, 'intergenerational struggle as a key element of racial progress' shaped the nation in general and African Americans in particular.[56] In *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation*, the African-American struggle across generations is emphasised through the Black characters that appear in the narrative, including Dana. She herself does not emerge safely from that interaction with the past, having lost her arm on her final return home to the 1970s. Her physical impairment is a reminder of the past that quite literally *deprived* her of various privileges because of how her race was perceived by white enslavers (and continued to be seen after the abolition of slavery). But the graphic novel also effectively connects those past experiences (both the slavery past and the 1970s) to the current day, when African Americans continue to face injustice and oppression.

54 Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 117-118.

55 Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 102.

56 Tatiana Prorokova, 'Intergenerational Struggle and Racial Progress in *The Help* and *The Butler*', in *Southern History on Screen: Race and Rights, 1976-2016*, ed. by Bryan M. Jack (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), pp. 199-209 (p. 200).

The Black Lives Matter movement has been drawing attention to the persistence of racism today, manifesting in various types of inequality, thus revealing the lies that surround the alleged 'color-blind institutional practices'.[57] Police brutality toward African Americans is one of the many problems that American society deals with today. Like any other instance of racism, this type of racial violence has historical roots. Godfrey insists that images of police violence toward Black people 'recall the images of whipping, lynching, and police brutality that circulated during eras of unrest'.[58] While there has been considerable progress in race matters since the colonial and antebellum eras, equality and justice remain the issues of essential importance for African Americans. Racism continues to poison the lives of African Americans and challenge American nationhood, dividing American society on the basis of race.

Conclusion

'Slavery is one of the keys to understanding the American experience', claims Blassingame.[59] The slavery past, more specifically, is one way through which one can understand racism in the U.S. today. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* explores the linkages between past and present not only to unveil the long history of racial oppression but also to illustrate how complex those experiences are and how many people are involved in them. Through multiple struggles for equality, African Americans, abolitionists, and all those who understand the immoral nature of racism have contributed significantly to improve the lives of Black people in the U.S. While these efforts cannot and should not be underestimated, structural racism is a much more complex problem, and it remains unsolved. By reminding readers of America's brutal past, the graphic novel draws attention to its brutal present. Emphasizing a unique kind of *kinship* that a nation can possess, it accentuates the value of history and suggests that racism has been present in U.S. society across generations, with Blackness continuously being viewed as an inferior and dangerous characteristic.

57 Godfrey, p. 90.

58 Ibid.

59 John W. Blassingame, 'Preface', in *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*, ed. by John W. Blassingame (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. xi-xiv (p. xi).

The long-term legacies described in *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* foreground the importance, but also the limitations and complexities of concepts such as 'perpetrator' and of the victim-perpetrator binary and emphasise the necessity to nuance and deconstruct these terms. On the one hand, the graphic novel demonstrates the importance of the figure of the perpetrator and its representation in the context of structural racism and transgenerational legacies of violence. By making both perpetrators and victims visible in the times of slavery, the graphic novel not only documents the past but also reiterates the complexity of race relations in the present moment. In doing so, it reconstructs the history of racism in the U.S. as well as helps illustrate the intricate nature of Blackness and the way it has been perceived in the U.S. across time. The graphic novel explores the issue of anti-Black violence via perpetrators, victims, and implicated subjects.

In his analysis of implicated subjects, Rothberg appeals to white Americans specifically, but also more generally to all those who have to 'reflect on and act against our implication in a system of racial hierarchy that we enable and a history of aborted justice that we benefit from in manifold ways'.[60] The ongoing racism in the U.S. is the legacy of slavery. To fully address this problem, the American nation should not only understand its racist past, but also become wholly aware of how much its individual citizens might be implicated both in that history and in the continued brutality of the present. The nation should, just like Dana, face its past to discover those *hidden* linkages among practices and individuals in order to reconsider its present and finally end its racism.

60 Rothberg, p. 10.

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