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The Past, yet the Present: The Legacy of Slavery In the United States

Prelude to The Past, yet the Present

As an African/African-American Studies minor I’ve taken courses that have expounded on many incidents in the history of peoples of African descent. Ones that continue to resonate with me are those that have dealt with the Middle Passage and/or slavery. Today, I would like to make it known that Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* was indisputably a super-duper read. Strangely, I both hate and love how Butler arranges *Kindred*. She builds up the brutal acts of violence against the slaves and describes the aftermath in such a way that she puts me as the reader, in the shoes of those characters. I found the book hard to put down because I was yearning to see what happened next, yet hard to pick back up because of the vivid portrayals of inhumane treatment.

The Dichotomy

Today, I will simply share some of my interpretations of the novel *Kindred*. I will do something a little different. As I share my insights for the relevance of this text I will also share some things that I have learned from various sources. Including (but not limited to) professors, historians, and mentors over my time here at GVSU. In so doing, I’ll show you the ways in which some of the lessons Butler imparts in *Kindred*. Before starting *Kindred* I believed that it would be nearly impossible for black folk from the late 20th and 21st centuries to survive chattel
slavery like our ancestors did. Candidly speaking, I am a little upset with myself for even fathoming such a thought. Nonetheless, that thought has all changed now that I’ve begun to see the parallels of the past and the present. I realize that we are still enduring the legacy of slavery. My former professor and current mentor said in one of his lecture’s that, **in order to change your condition you must be educated in what is oppressing you.** *Thank you, Richard Yidana.*

It is upon this point that I’ll turn to a point in the novel that reminded me of this lesson. It is the scene wherein Dana, Luke and Nigel were conversing about why Tom Weylin doesn’t like blacks who talk better than him; he thought it would put ideas of freedom in their heads. At this point in the conversation Luke stated “Like we so dumb we some stranger to make us think about freedom.” (p.74) Dana, Luke, and Nigel—they all knew that the institution of slavery was oppressing them: they all knew that they didn’t like it. Thus, they were each in their own ways trying to bring about change. What Luke says here is so true even today. Whether one can verbalize it in a sophisticated, well-educated manner doesn’t matter: nobody wants to live in shackles. But, once one knows what is oppressing them then they can make change.

Being contemptuous of others who are different from ourselves is another place in the novel where we can see relevance between the past and the present. On page 220 we see that the slaves were resentful at Dana for living a slightly easier life. Her life was easier in the sense that Dana’s life was less physically laborious than theirs. The parallel of that in today's time can be seen in the differing perceptions of blacks from the lower and/or middle-income bracket versus black folk from the upper-income bracket. We can see unpleasant attitudes directed to wealthy blacks who have a slightly easier life than non-wealthy blacks. Surely they live a more comfortable lifestyle than you and I simply because of what they do and how much money they make. But, just because their struggle is a little less harsh it doesn't mean they struggle
nonetheless, for, **no two struggles are the exact same.** Again I give thanks to Richard Yidana for that one.

Another example of this parallel I would like to make is that of language. In *Kindred* Dana had a wealth of knowledge and spoke Standard American English, which made her sound “white” during that time. Today, we as Americans still associate language with race. For example, I have a friend named Dmitri who speaks Standard American English the majority of the time. Although he does code switch sometimes he still hears from both white and black folk statements like the following, “Dmitri, I don’t know if you know this or not, but you talk white.” He even had one individual who happened to be white tell him and I quote, “Yo Dmitri man I talk more black than you.” This was followed by a laugh and it was not of that of my friend.

Another question of then and now that *Kindred* got me thinking about is that of predators. While during slavery times blacks were preyed upon by vicious whites, today violence upon blacks is mostly brought by the hands of other blacks. Dana and other characters were constantly in fear for their physical safety. In slavery blacks were fearful of losing their lives or being viciously attacked solely at the hands of whites, whether it was an overseer, slave master, or patroller. As a Criminal Justice major I’ve come to learn that the majority of homicides are intra-racial which means they occur within one’s own race. Examples I have gathered from the FBI website provides evidence that roughly 90 percent of black homicides are committed by blacks. Today, while it is true that one can have his life taken by just about anybody; one could argue that blacks will primarily die at the hands of other blacks. Still, there are hate crimes targeted at blacks by whites. In 2010, Chase McClary, 24 at this time assaulted a 16 year-old African-American male solely because of his race. The teenager was struck in the face, neck, and head with the jagged edge of a broken coffee mug. On June 26, 2011 James Craig Anderson was
assaulted and murdered by a group of white teens simply because he was black. Which upon further investigation by the FBI it was discovered that these teens had a history of assaulted blacks. I think it not strange for any black man to have in the back of his mind that he can lose his life by both blacks and whites. This is a legacy of slavery.

Dana, the main character in *Kindred*, is in an interracial relationship. I found it interesting that her husband Kevin is white and she is black. In slavery times, the law did not allow them to be together. Thus, they had to pretend that they were master and slave. In 1883, the Supreme Court declared that it was legal for states to ban interracial marriages. However, 84 years later in the 1967 Supreme Court case Loving v. Virginia that 1883 ruling was reversed. Although today interracial marriages and relationships are permitted under law, they are still frowned upon. There was a recent incident in Louisiana back in 2009. The ignorance of people in power allows for things like this to continue. “Separate But Equal” I assume to be the notion asserted by those who disagree with interracial relationships today. **But, even that statement is contradictory because if we are all equal what is the purpose of separation?** *Thank you, Jennifer Stewart.*

The institution of slavery was one that endeavored to keep a group of people oppressed and subjugated. In the text, Rufus, deceitfully Rufus tries to keep Dana enslaved by falsely telling her that he mailed her husband letters. Rufus wanted to keep Dana enslaved by any means necessary. His desire to keep her there in that era was so strong that he was willing to kill her to prevent her from leaving on her own. This scene from the past reminds me of a similar circumstance today. Let me preface what I am about to say by reiterating that not all of my past and present examples will align perfectly, but they all hold strikingly similarities. Just like Rufus desired to keep Dana as his slave then, in our time we see our **Criminal Justice system trying and doing the same with blacks today. Thank you, Shawnkeisha Stoudamire.** Most of us have
heard the term “The Revolving Door” in which the criminal justice system both funnels and then keep blacks in the system to essentially be modern-day slaves in prison. Last year I attended a Black Studies Conference at Purdue University. I heard a Mr. Wylie Jason Donte Tidwell III of Walden University present a paper. His talk opened my eyes to the fact that there is currently a loophole in our Constitution, specifically in the 13th Amendment that allows for slavery even today. Yes, very ironic that the very same document that abolished slavery also says the following "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Simply stated if you commit a crime you can be subjected to slavery. The connection between this and Kindred is that there are many ways that those in power try to maintain that power over the oppressed. That was true then, that is still true today.

**Conclusion to the Legacy**

While reading Kindred I often wondered and asked myself. Why does Dana keep going back to endure this terrible pain? It was evident that one of her reasons of doing so was that she didn’t want Rufus to end up like his father. (Dana even mentions it at one point in the novel.) Another reason for her continual return was so that she could get a chance to get to know one of her matriarchs. Soon, it became clear that all she was did was to ensure her matriarch’s survival. Dana used her privilege and influences to make a difference. This assurance didn’t come easily, though. She was beaten several times, she was verbally abused and she was mentally tormented. When I see what Dana endures it reminds me of exactly what our ancestors did for us. Just as Dana fought to ensure her ancestors freedom we should model our behavior after hers we too, should think about the future generations no matter how much it may hurt us today.
I’ll close with this quote from Eric Thomas, one of my mentors who will be here at Grand Valley on the 18\textsuperscript{th} of this month to give a talk. In one of his videos, The Secrets to Success, he says, “The slaves said we will live because one day we will become. The slaves said we won’t always be slaves, so today although were slaves we gon’ act like we’re free, so that our children will be free.” I see the essence of this quotation in not only Dana, but in other characters in the Octavia Butler’s Kindred. As an African/African-American Studies minor I have the responsibility of remembering those who are not as fortunate as I am in any arena that I enter. I share that responsibility with you all under the sound of my voice. We must use our privilege and our influences to make the lives of our future generations better. People used to ask me what is it that I feel my purpose is. I tell them one of my purposes is to leave this world a better place than I found it. I have faith that this is a common goal that we all claim.