According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the average eighth grade white student is as proficient in reading, math, U.S. History, and geography, as a twelfth grade black or hispanic student. This is the simplest statement of what educators and policy-makers refer to as “The achievement gap”. The achievement gap leads, ultimately, to an opportunity gap, as black and hispanic students, on average, start college four grade levels behind white students.

Let me pause here to stress that the achievement gap refers to systemic problems with our education system, and does not refer to the inability of individual black students to navigate the educational system successfully. Many discussions about the gap provoke comments about excellence and achievement as demonstrated by black doctors, black professors, black business people, and most notably, a black president. And, the existence of the achievement gap makes these achievements especially noteworthy as they demonstrate the wherewithal of the individuals and their families which contributed to their success. Still, black exceptionalism does not make the achievement gap dismissable. In my paper today I will help us to understand how the phrase “acting white” has been misunderstood as a slander of
academic achievement by black students and empowered a popular misinterpretation of achievement gap data.

Why should we discuss the educational achievement gap? Well, to start off, it points to a systemic injustice of inequitable access to education. Also, barring a radical change in our education systems, should the current demographic trends continue, over half of the American high school graduates in the country will have an eighth grade education by 2050. It is difficult to imagine a working democracy in which the education of half of the citizens would be complete at eighth grade—right when the other half is essentially taking off.

There are a number of theories that try to explain the achievement gap. Still for our purpose today I’ll highlight the one that I think connects a particular relationship in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* Angel Harris, in *Kids Don’t Want to Fail*, profiles the most popular explanations for the achievement gap. One explanation for the achievement gap is the cultural opposition model, or cultural deficiency. Simply stated, blacks must not value education. Or, blacks are resistant to the goals of the educational system. This leads to behaviors which are not conducive to learning, according to this theory. Ultimately, this then leads to... an achievement gap. This is not an academic narrative; it is pervasive among politicians and educators. This theory is a complex web of assumptions which includes sub-narratives of which you may have heard like:

- the “Crabs in a bucket” hypothesis in which black students try to pull down other black students who achieve in school. For example, black essayist Clarence Page said on the PBS News Hour in the Fall of 2004 “In African American folklore, the sea crab ranks among the dumbest of creatures who also offers a valuable
lesson. When you catch a bucket or a basketful, you never have to put a lid on because when one of the creatures tries to get out, the others will just pull it back in. Some of our fellow human beings aren't much smarter than that. When they see you working hard to achieve your dreams, they'll make fun of you just for trying.”

- Or you may be familiar with the corollary “acting white” hypothesis in which high achieving black students are said to be accused by their peers as “acting white”. Karolyn Tyson defines the “acting white” hypothesis as “the premise that black students are driven toward low school performance because of racialized peer pressure” (It’s Not a “Black Thing”, American Sociological Review). In his speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, then Senate candidate Barack Obama said, “Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach our kids to learn. They know that parents have to teach, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television set and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.”

The pervasiveness of Oppositional Culture theory, which is exemplified in the “bucket crabs” hypothesis and in “acting white” hypothesis, signals to policy makers and educators that they are “off the hook” for closing the achievement gap because, according to the popularized version of oppositional culture theory, the pressure to under achieve among black student is driven by cultural norms and this makes low achievement among black students inevitable until a cultural shift changes the landscape.
Harris points to as the real source of the discrepancy in black and white academic achievement: An academic skills gap. All of the previous explanations for the achievement gap are distractions from a discussion about the skills gap. It is small when students enter Kindergarten and presents itself in avoidant and distracting behavior in late elementary and middle school. The proponents of oppositional culture theory explain disturbing schooling behaviors as resistant, but they are merely the consequence of an academic skills gap which prevents students from engaging in and participating in regular schooling activities in middle school and high school classrooms. In other words, black students aren’t taking Calculus and AP Biology... It is not because they are resistant to schooling and educational achievement... It is because schools have not prepared them to succeed in those classes. Or, with regard to President Obama’s convention address, it is not because black parents don’t teach, black children have low expectations, black television sets are on, or because a black youth with a book is slandered as acting white. Harris says that the skills gap accounts for roughly 70 percent of the resulting achievement gap. And, as soon as educators and policy-makers acknowledge what the data says about the skills gap, they can begin acting more effectively to provide academic skills training and interventions in an equitable manner.

So, Why the lengthy description of the achievement gap? Why would I spend so much time discussing a hypothesis, the “acting white” hypothesis, on a panel discussion about Octavia Butler’s speculative fiction, *Kindred*? If the “acting white” hypothesis doesn’t explain the achievement gap, then why discuss it AT ALL? Because the theme of “acting white”, or racial performance, comes up again and again in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. That is, through Alice and Dana’s various dialogues Butler’s science fiction novel presents, a plausible explanation of
what black students mean when they accuse one of their peers of “acting white”. It also may help us to understand how the phrase “acting white” has been misunderstood as a slander of academic achievement by black students.

Butler’s characters show that the supposed slander is rooted in the need for assurances of solidarity and loyalty from the accused, Dana, toward the accuser, Alice. The accusation of “acting white” is not an instrument intended to threaten Dana with alienation from the slave community for being educated. It is, rather, an attempt by struggling black slaves to solicit an affirmation of personal and communal loyalty from Dana—particularly since she appears to have access to white circles of power because of her ability to read and because of her limited medical caretaking skills.

The climax of the racial performance theme occurs as Alice gains her strength after being beaten and sold to Rufus Weylin. Dana is compelled to tell Alice about her new status—she is now a slave—the status that Alice claims her mother would reject in preference of death. Alice erupts, “Doctor-nigger, think you know so much. Reading-nigger. White-nigger! Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?” (p.160) Through her pain Alice accuses Dana of “acting white”. Alice’s stating, and I quote, “Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?” is her asking Dana if she is connected existentially to the pain of enslavement. She is questioning Dana’s commitment to the slave community. After all, if she knew of their pain, wouldn’t she also know enough to let Alice die?

No one in the book is more anxious about Dana’s skills and the access that she has to the Weylin family than Dana herself. When considering the risk that she was taking to teach slaves how to read, Dana thinks, “If anything went wrong, there would be blacks to take their
revenge on me when the whites finished.” If only she COULD be disloyal to the slave community by refusing to educate the slave children. She thinks, “Why couldn’t I just turn these two kids away, turn off my conscience, and be a coward, safe and comfortable?” (p.106)

Survival, for Dana, meant being fluent in the affairs of the white and the black community on the Weylin property. She had to risk the psychic dualism that accompanied her need to interact alternatively between blacks and whites. Alice, later, experiences some access to the Weylin household, but this comes as a result of rape and abuse by Rufus. Alice experiences the tension between a will to survive as a mother, as a person, and the will to escape enslavement, experience freedom through death. The will to be free wins. Before she goes to Rufus, to bear his sexual aggression, Alice confides to Dana, “I get so mad I can taste it in my mouth. And you’re the only one I can take it out on – the only one I can hurt and not be hurt back.”

Pain drove Alice. Her eruptions at Dana for being educated, or “acting white” are gasps for empathy. In the same way, what President Obama calls slander toward “black students with books” is really the pain of black peers who have not been equitably served or challenged by their teachers. As with Alice, the accusation “You are acting white” is a call for empathy; the call is to high achieving black students to identify with those experiencing the pain of facing the economic realities of graduating high school prepared with the marketable skills of an eighth grader; it’s a call to understand the fears of the hardships that accompany an attempt to climb out of the proverbial crab bucket, the bucket which got deeper and deeper as they passed through the American K-12 school system. The purpose of this paper was to read Octavia Butler’s *Kindred in a way that* helps us to understand contemporary theories about the education gap between blacks and whites in the US. Dana’s survival meant opportunity for the
children which she tutored. Contrary to Oppositional Culture Theory, the success of high
achieving black students is celebrated by the black community, by the human community, and
is accompanied by the responsibility to serve and remember the community from which that
success emerged.