THE CREATION OF ARTISTIC SPACE AND LITERARY POSSIBILITY THROUGH SPECULATIVE FICTION IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER’S KINDRED AND FLEDGLING

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By

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The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to my late Father, Mom, Rana, all my friends who have supported this effort,
and to the late Octavia E. Butler for inspiring my work and her countless readers.

Many thanks,
Harsimrat K. Grewal
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Introduction: Revisiting the Past is Necessary

Octavia Butler’s novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, showcase the many ways she creates a space for African American women in the genre of speculative fiction. The issue of space and the creation of a new space for women of color is an important focus of this work. Different theoretical approaches will be utilized to demonstrate how all approaches intersect to speak to a need and desire for a voice or means of expression. In other words, what seems to unite these theories is the ability to explore alternative spaces in time to make up for a lack of space or attention paid, especially in the past, to feminist discourse, black feminist discourse, and post-colonial theory, race studies/theory, and so on in other genres as well as in speculative fiction. All these different theoretical points of view discuss varying positions of marginality and incorporating all those different points of view can assume a place without conflicting or ‘bumping heads’ so to speak. All theoretical approaches to some extent attest to the silencing of voices and the evasion of discussion in literary discourse in the past on explicitly addressing issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality and aim to remedy this silencing and evasion by encouraging more possibilities for marginalized subjects.

Butler, I believe, appropriates the genre of speculative fiction, so that one can tackle the text from all these theoretical viewpoints. Speculative fiction is a genre that provides a writer with the opportunity to conduct thought experiments within the purview similar to science fiction. Often critics have referred to the genre of speculative fiction as well as science fiction as creating and envisioning futuristic characters and worlds. Black feminist discourse revolves around, in part, hearing those who are voiceless, and this
vision or purpose should find an intersection or meeting point with other theories that
work in part to address positions of marginality like queer theory, traditional feminist
discourse, critical race theory, and post-colonial theory. For example, Judith Halberstam
addresses ideas of ‘queer time’ and uses alternate conceptions of time to imagine a future
“outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage,
reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2). I think Butler provides the space to discuss such
futures that bring in ideas of immortality (vampire lore) in opposition to death and
reproduction by incorporating fictive beings such as vampires coexisting with humans as
seen in the novel, *Fledgling*. Each theoretical perspective attempts to analyze and
theorize form various angles and Butler’s inclusion of different kinds of marginality and
seemingly equal and unequal power structures address those attempts to speak from those
marginalized perspectives. I will attempt to analyze Butler by showing how she
experiments with time and memory loss to propel her heroines back to the past and leaves
the reader to envision futuristic possibilities that empower African American women and
women of color.

In the novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, Butler uses the past as an alternate space to
deal with the different scenarios in history and the current time wherein African
American woman and women of color possess the choice to assert agency, influence, and
presence over situations wherein they seemingly possess less power over their oppressors
(whether that oppressor is a white male slave master or a community of predominately
white male and female communities) as well as for empowering African American
women’s to affirm a strong voice, presence. Both the protagonists of these novels
embark on journeys either time traveling to the past or attempting to recover from
memory loss in an attempt to grasp vital information about the past to help resolve an imminent threat or danger in the present. I hope to illuminate how Butler appropriates not only the past or device of time travel but also the genre of speculative fiction to create a space for African American women and opens up possibilities for African American women and women of color (as well as any marginalized group lacking critical attention paid to asserting a presence or place in literature or literary criticism) to appropriate this genre to articulate how African American women and women of color possess agency and the power to speak against issues such as violence, perpetuation of hatred and racism toward women of color.

I will examine at large in this thesis project how Octavia Butler employs the recurring trope of memory loss and time experimentation with time to reveal how the protagonists in her novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, embark on quests for knowledge and self-understanding—more precisely, both Dana and Shori, respectively, involuntarily find themselves in situations where they must reclaim a past in order to survive in the present. Butler implicitly articulates the importance of an individual and communal awareness/understanding of revisiting the past as a necessary precursor to forging a future of more informed Americans who know their history and realize how an understanding of the past relates to contemporary social issues including race relations and power relations.

I believe that Butler intentionally places her female protagonists in such situations in these speculative novels for two main reasons. The first reason for this deliberate positioning of the protagonists in emotionally vulnerable situations is to trace the emotional growth of these characters. By tracing these protagonists’ emotional growth through the course of the novels, Butler creates African American characters who assume
a more central role in these narratives. Their journeys mark the path of an active search
toward an understanding of the self, history/the past (as opposed to a passive/spectator
approach to learning about history). Dana’s remark that “Pain dragged me back to
consciousness” reveals the necessity of obstacles and challenges to arrive at knowledge
or self-understanding (Butler 43). This tracing of emotional growth is different from
other narratives in that Butler crafts narratives that use futuristic elements such as time
travel and infuse those elements in a quest narrative that focuses inclusively on an
African American woman’s experience of such phenomenon and her ability to survive
that time travel experience. The actual or literal time it takes to come to a certain
understanding of the effect the past has on one’s life and future is not as important as the
characters’ thought process through this epistemological journey. Also, the use of time
travel without logical explanation and the vast difference in life spans between humans
and vampires serves to emphasize that time has no boundaries in the realm of speculative
fiction. Butler manipulates time as she sees fit to create challenges/obstacles for her
heroines while they embark on a collective quest for survival.

The second reason for such positioning of the central characters in these novels is
to underscore the importance of actively remembering or seeking out one’s past not only
on an individual level but on a more expansive, communal level. For instance, although
Dana and Shori serve as the heroines of these novels, many of the other characters are an
integral part of revisiting the past. Butler focuses on the importance of community in her
novels as a means to survival as well as self-understanding. In Kindred, Dana’s
community includes her distant relatives, Rufus, son of a slave-owner, and Alice,
daughter of a free slave. Early on in Kindred, Dana asks herself why she was traveling
back in time. She comes to the conclusion that it must be, in part, to insure her survival which is inextricably linked to her ancestors’ survival. In other words, her individual survival in the past and present is connected to her family’s (kindred community) survival. Dana asks: “Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family’s survival, my own birth” (Butler 29). Dana’s community, however, is not limited to her blood relatives or ancestors but also includes many of the slaves she works with and encounters on the plantation. This sense of community for Dana enables her to continue on this difficult and perilous journey to ultimately survive oppression and return to the present time.

In *Fledgling*, Shori soon discovers she must establish her own family/community of symbionts, or humans who regularly allow her to feed off their blood, in order to survive as a vampire, and continue on her journey of self-discovery and path toward recovery from memory loss. When Shori visits the ruined (burned) site of a dead community she woke up near, she longs for a community of people to help her piece fragments of life back together when she says: “I thought the place must have provided comfortable homes for several people. That felt right. It felt like something I would want—living together with other people instead of wandering alone” (Butler 5). Shori explicitly expresses a desire here to live among a community of people rather than bear the burden of trying to live and survive completely on her own. Both Dana’s and Shori’s survival depend upon the survival of their respective communities. In a way then, Butler uses time travel and memory loss as ways to catapult the protagonists in a space to revisit the past or history to underscore what is necessary to survive racial and gender oppression and challenging circumstances. Butler places the protagonists in a position to
tap into an inner, emotional strength as well as a building of endurance to withstand their dangerous circumstances. Once these protagonists find themselves in such positions they are forced to discover the essence of communal involvement and collaboration in survival and self-identity formation. In other words, Dana and Shori through the course of the narratives realize how important being part of a community is to survival and how that communal involvement enables one to grow as an individual. In chapter one, I hope to show how various theoretical frameworks can be utilized to frame a discussion about Butler appropriates the genre of speculative fiction to address the lack of creative space for African American women and women of color in the literary past. Also, chapter one will provide the context for understanding how writing and revisiting history provides inspiration for readers and writers to survive and interrogate the circumstances they inherit. In particular, I discuss Nellie McKay, Judith Halberstam, and bell hooks to introduce a way to interpret Butler experimentation with time as her way to create an urgency to write and revisit history. The goal is to reveal a literary history of silencing and evasion in regards to African American female voices and the use of different genres to remedy this silencing. Chapter two will focus on my analysis of Butler’s novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, and how Butler uses time travel and memory loss to implicitly argue for a necessary revisiting of the past to provide her heroines with circumstances where they can assume more agency and control over their oppressive circumstances. Chapter two will also discuss how writing and community are integral to the survival of Butler’s protagonists. Chapter three will include discussion of the issues of power and race in the present and how it relates to the central argument about Butler’s implicit argument for a necessary revisiting of the past. Chapter three will also deal with the
connections between Butler’s use of time travel and how that the appropriation of the
genre works to address a larger literary audience.
Valerie Smith in “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the Other” speaks about how black feminist criticism’s inception rose out of a reaction to what she calls “critical acts of omission and condescension” (Smith 312) and favorably refers to Teresa de Lauretis’ approach by saying that “She urges a feminist model of identity that is multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory…an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures” (Smith 313). It is admirable to advocate women writers of color to create characters that are “multiple and shifting,” but I would like to take one step further to suggest that black women/women of color writers should not only concern themselves with creating multifaceted, fluid, female characters but also work to broaden their scope to create multi-faceted African American female characters and narratives in new literary genres. In other words, it is not sufficient to create characters that defy binary oppositions, but it is also important to enter creative spaces where African American women have been either excluded or not fully encouraged to participate. Octavia E. Butler not only creates strong and fluid African American female characters in her novels but she enables them to embark on quests/journeys through the genre of speculative fiction to learn about challenges and complications revolving survival and reclaiming a voice.
Barbara Christian begins her article, “The Highs and the Lows of Black Feminist Criticism,” with questions Alice Walker asked in her influential essay “In Search of My Mother’s Gardens”: “What is my literary tradition? Who are the black women artists who preceded me? Do I have a ground to stand on?” (Christian 51). Walker attests to the idea that African American women can look to their foremothers as creative predecessors. These creative foremothers may not have had the same resources and opportunities that many black/and or women of color have today but still found creative ways to express themselves whether it was through quilting or gardening. Quilting involves piecing together memories or experiences in a tangible work of art. Memories and experiences can be represented through various forms of art including writing. Writing thus serves as the new way to capture memories and experiences to be passed down to future generations just as quilts have historically been passed down to successive generations and have been recognized as important historical records. It is important to give these creative predecessors their due because through the years their legacy has enabled African American women writers such as Octavia Butler to build off of a creative tradition to express themselves through a medium and genre of their choosing. Christian makes salient points in discussing the silencing/voiceless-ness of the African American female presence and the remedy for that silencing. She says: “Even those of us who were telling stories or writing did not always see ourselves as artists of the word. And those of us who did know our genius were so rejected, unheard that we sometimes became crazy women crying in the wind or silenced scarecrows. Who could answer us but us?” (Christian 53). The remedy for this silencing then is to speak out through art, through writing and assert a presence in literature. Butler’s heroines in *Kindred* and *Fledgling*
take on pivotal roles in these narratives that emphasize their struggle to survive difficult, near-impossible, and challenging situations with the hope to help their communities to survive as well. These African American heroines provide the voices that are often omitted and/or silenced in the genre of speculative or science fiction dominated by white male and female writers. Christian states at one point that: “We write to those who write, read, speak, may write, and we try to hear the voiceless” (Christian 53). In many ways, Butler writes her heroines such that they reclaim voice and a certain amount of agency through the course of the novels and embark on journeys that allow them to question and to seek out knowledge of the past and/or history they did not possess prior to those experiences.

Butler takes an admirable risk in writing these strong and fluid black female characters in the genre of speculative fiction knowing that the genre is not always well received by the academy. In her preface to her collection of short stories *Bloodchild and Other Stories* she addresses the reception of her earlier short stories: “It didn’t help that my college writing teachers said only polite, lukewarm things about them. They couldn’t help me much with the science fiction and fantasy I kept turning out. In fact, they didn’t have a very high opinion of anything that could be called science fiction” (Butler ix). What should become clearer is that Butler wrote within a genre that had not yet been fully embraced by the literary community or had seen many African American female writers contributing to that genre, yet she boldly creates assertive, complex, inquisitive African American female characters, thus engendering an African American female presence to this genre as well as appropriating this genre for African American women and women of color.
Ideas concerning community, survival, and voice (as well as choice, race relations and power relations) will recur through my discussion of Butler’s novels. Since these ideas are important and central to analysis on Butler’s works it is also important to include further insights into the legacy of such issues in African American literature. Nellie McKay in “Reflections on Black Women Writers” expresses how much of contemporary black women’s writing aims to express “an honest, complicated, and varied expression of the meaning of black women’s experiences in America” (McKay 161). A contemporary black woman writer then may choose any medium as long as that medium or genre sheds light on a particular experience or unique perspective. Butler, in turn, utilizes the genre of speculative fiction to express her unique perspective on the importance of community, survival, reclamation of voice through tropes of time travel and memory loss and rewriting of vampire folklore. Butler experiments with time to argue for a need to revisit the past/history to better understand current contemporary social problems or issues such as racism and sexism. In other words, Butler uses time to posit a revisiting of the past, a reconsideration of contemporary social issues such as racism and sexism, and speculation of these problems in the future. The experimentation of time allows Butler a literary device to tackle a broad spectrum consisting of the past, present, and future and introducing strong African American female protagonists who tackles social issues such as racism, sexism, and engage in power struggles to survive these social environments. Butler appropriates a genre that allows her to use whatever devices she deems useful and innovative to tackle contemporary issues such as race and gender oppression.
In her essay, McKay pays tribute to writers such as Alice Walker and Lorraine Hansberry, writers who have never been afraid to voice their experiences through writing. McKay claims that since the eighteenth century black women writers have focused on their individual and collective strength and endurance to survive oppression (McKay 154). She points out eighteenth century black women writers such as Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley as examples of writers who represent early literary voices: “Terry’s and Wheatley’s extant works confirm that black women in the eighteenth century had literary voices which they made to bold use, while black women of the nineteenth century, building on what preceded them, authenticated their voices by speaking to local and national issues that had direct impact on the lives of black people” (McKay 153). McKay then claims that successive generations of black women writers have worked to “authenticate” and insure the survival of these writers’ voices while building upon that tradition to write about African American women’s experiences told through their voices rather than filtered through anyone else’s voice. McKay cites Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Watkins Harper to demonstrate a legacy or a history of black women who found ways to express themselves through writing. “This history assures us that black women have not ever been artistically or critically silent, even though for most of the past their voices went largely ignored by those who did not wish to bear them” (McKay 153) The important point here to reiterate is that in the past these voices McKay and other black feminists mention always fought to be heard even when mostly ignored by the literary community. The survival of these African American women’s history inspires new writers to carry on a literary tradition and build upon that tradition by seeking new ways to articulate their life experiences. It seems that the role of
future writers/critics then is to acknowledge this long tradition of asserting bold voices to make up for lack of attention past critics have paid to listening and acknowledging those past voices. In creating heroines like Dana and Shori who fight to assert influence over the past and their present circumstances, Butler then builds upon this legacy of reclaiming a strong, assertive presence for black women and women of color in literature by articulating black women’s experiences through the genre of speculative fiction.

McKay also refers to the melding of both past and present black female literary voices in an effort to redefine the literary canon to create a new space for African American women. She states: “Now, finally admitted to a larger hearing than they ever previously enjoyed, both past and present black female literary voices combine to alter the historical nature of the discourse and to play a prominent role in revising the canon from which they were long excluded” (McKay 153). The past and the present voices then carry a tremendous power to affect a creative presence in literature. The melding of the past and present provide us with a more holistic understanding of reality. In other words, knowledge of one’s past and history informs one of how to understand one’s present condition and work to envision a more progressive future. This previous statement also claims that a monumental change has occurred in literary discourse wherein past critics’ evasion and silencing will no longer be as readily encouraged. African American women writers, female writers of color, and literary critics face a time of revision and recreation of space in literature made possible by connecting past voices and histories to present voices and current contemporary issues.

In addition to understanding the importance of melding the past and the present, McKay’s discussion of African American women’s possession of emotional strength and
demonstration of perseverance helps to explain why voice, community and survival connect both Dana and Shori’s journeys. McKay cites one of Frances Foster’s important studies in gender regarding different portrayals of men and women by male and female narrators in slave/emancipatory narratives. According to McKay, male narrators such as Frederick Douglas’s narrative focus on ex-slave women’s sexual exploitation and victimization. McKay cites Foster’s account of how ex-slave women’s narratives about themselves revolved around their ability to navigate oppressive situations with courage and strength. In their own narratives, black women, to borrow from McKay “saw themselves as more than victims of rape and seduction” (McKay 155). McKay elaborates on these women’s narratives to pinpoint what makes their voices and stories not only distinct but remarkable in their candor and focus on the positive attributes and qualities women possess as individuals and as a collective group. McKay credits Foster’s study as she describes these ex-slave women’s writing as follows:

…when they wrote, they not only wanted to witness to the atrocities of slavery, but also celebrate their hard-won escapes. Their stories show them to be strong, courageous, dignified, and spirited in spite of the world in which they were forced to live. They depicted themselves as complex human beings with a desire to engage in discourse that took the breadth of their experiences into consideration. In writing, they were no longer secondary characters in someone else’s script, but heroines in their own creations. As noted earlier, these black women writers focused less on individual performance and more on the positive roles that engage women. They allotted time to the value of family relationships, not only to beatings and mutilations by slave masters. As they related their stories, ex-slave women took control of the circumstances that enabled them to survive and escape captivity. (McKay 155)

The “hard-won escapes” these women wrote about attest to the importance of expressing emotional and physical survival through writing, and the “desire to engage in discourse”
point to the need to assert and reclaim a voice for African American women writers as a whole. The attention paid to “family relationships” also speaks to a collective desire to reinforce the importance and benefits of being part of a community. This description of black women writers demonstrates how they assume more control over their narratives and create stories that reveal what matters most to their collective experiences. McKay’s comments further supports a reading of Butler’s novels as works that function to create a new space for African American women to build upon a tradition that values their experiences since Dana and Shori as heroines fight to survive to uphold the right to preserve their family units, speak their minds, and celebrate their individual and collective survival. Ideas of survival via communal involvement or collaboration as well as utilizing one’s voice through writing to survive unite these past and present narratives; these ideas of survival via communal involvement and writing that McKay discusses provides an explanation for why Butler implicitly argues for a revisiting of the past albeit through innovative devices of time travel and memory loss in her fiction. Butler takes an untapped genre for women of color that intrigues her and uses that genre to reiterate a message necessitating a revisiting of a past to learn important lessons to deal with a present reality. She pushes her reader to examine both the past and the present and problematize social issues concerning inequalities of power. These devices enable Butler to focus on “positive roles that engage women” by positioning her heroines in circumstances that test their abilities to survive and reinforce support structures such as family and/or community. The families and/or communities may not conform to traditional definitions of nuclear families or hold up to hetero-normative standards of
sexuality, but these families and communities are in part what enable these heroines to survive their journeys, to tell their stories.

While revisiting the past is necessary for Butler’s heroines to learn about survival, it is important to note that Butler does not provide a romanticized vision of the past or present in her narratives. Marc Steinberg in “Inverting History in Octavia Butler’s Postmodern Slave Narrative,” stresses how Butler complicates the notion of survival for Dana in *Kindred*. Steinberg posits that Butler’s use of time travel “points to ways in which the past and present become interchangeable” (Steinberg 467). His argument centers on how Butler proposes a non-Western, post-modern cyclical understanding of time. In this way, he claims that Butler’s point in *Kindred* is to convey how issues such as racism and sexism that plague society in the past seemingly continue to plague society in the present (Steinberg 467). Steinberg cites various examples in the novel to suggest that Dana’s life in the antebellum South and her life in California in the present contain certain similarities in terms of her experience with oppression as an African American woman. Steinberg presents a compelling argument to suggest that Butler wants readers and writers to notice certain parallels in the experiences of oppression Dana feels while living in the past and present, but he downplays the role of community as important for Dana’s survival. I agree that Butler wants to draw attention to the fact that even though slavery as an institution has been abolished, Dana’s life during the bicentennial year of American independence still presents conditions that place her in the position of feeling like a slave or a second-class citizen. For instance, she refers to the labor agency where she works as a “slave market” (Butler 52). Also if society in 1976 is supposed to be seen as a socially progressive society, then Butler complicates this notion by mentioning the
taunting that goes on at work when Dana and (her soon to be husband) Kevin, a white man, choose to become friends and engage in a relationship with each other as Steinberg also mentions. (Steinberg 468). And the lack of support from both Dana’s and Kevin’s respective families also suggests that the present society does not differ too greatly in their disapproval of miscegenation as the society in her past.

Although Dana must make certain sacrifices and compromises to survive individually, Butler however does not devalue the importance of community in *Kindred*. In attempting to reinforce the importance of community Butler does not overlook the necessity of individual strength and sense of responsibility. In *Kindred* Butler in effect underscores both individual and communal responsibility. Dana makes decisions on her own when deciding to rescue Rufus, her many times great grandfather, each time he is in trouble knowing that securing his life might help her survive (and her future familial line survive) while also not necessarily helping the community of slaves on the Weylin plantation, but she also secretly helps slave children on the plantation to read (Butler 105). Even while arguing that Butler shows how a community of women on the plantation at times does not offer a haven for Dana, Steinberg admits that while some women might work to harm more than help, other women work to offset harm. Steinberg refers to a scene where Dana tries to runaway at night from the Weylin plantation only to be captured because one of the female slaves informs the plantation owner Tom Weylin. Steinberg states: “Perhaps a strong, yet ultimately ambiguous, example of the lack of sisterhood centers on Liza, who reveals Dana’s running away, but is also later punished for this action when attacked by Alice, Tess, and Carrie” (Steinberg 471). So even with this example, Steinberg demonstrates how Butler manages to show how a community of
or solidarity among women provide an emotional support structure for Dana in a time of need.

In addition to issues of reclaiming voice and survival via writing and community, Butler’s manipulation of time can be conceived of as a queering of time and space if read through Judith Halberstam’s lens. Judith Halberstam’s work in “In a Queer Time and Place” helps to identify a possible way of reading Butler’s experimentation with time by building on the goals that the aforementioned black feminist critics discussed. In other words, a way to revise or rewrite literature so that voices are not silenced or important issues are not evaded is to rethink the way we as readers conceive of time in literature. Halberstam makes the bold assumption that such a thing as “queer time” and “queer space” exists. Halberstam claims that the inception of these alternative ideas of time and space “develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (Halberstam 1). Queer time and space then works in part to subvert the reinforcement of these traditional institutions. By working to subvert or introduce a different way of conceiving of time and space, various positions of marginality come closer to the center of discourse. In other words, the use of queer time and space allows for the re-positioning of different familial or community structures to assume a more central role in narratives than in the past. In fact, Halberstam posits that this varying use of time and space allows for the opening up of possibilities for narratives. She says that “part of what has made queerness compelling as a form of self-description in the past decade or so has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (Halberstam 2). For writers, especially African American/women of color female writers, experimenting with alternate conceptions of
time and space provides a new means to open up discussion on various issues such as survival from oppression (including but not limited to racism, sexism, class-based oppression, etc).

Halberstam claims that queer time arose during the end of twentieth century during a time when many members of the gay community were greatly affected by the AIDS epidemic. She argues that the reality of decreasing time or decreasing lifespan creates the urgency to make more out of the present time or the amount of time left of life for people living with AIDS. Halberstam asserts that “The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and…squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (Halberstam 2). In this way, the urgency due to an awareness of an impending mortality, leads one to focus on the present. While the threat of an impending mortality presents the urgency to reexamine the way writers and readers think about time, this is by no means the only way to arrive at an alternative conception about time and space. Halberstam happens to situate this alternative conception of time and space around the particular AIDS epidemic or any crisis. She states that “Queer time, as it flashes into view in the heart of a crisis, exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism ‘The transient, the fleeting, the contingent’” (Halberstam 2). According to Halberstam, a crisis stimulates one to think of time in a non-normative way. It can be argued then that Butler manipulates time and space or “queers time” to position her heroines in a state of crisis at the beginning of the novels in order to focus on the immediate struggle in order to survive. Also, Butler experiments with time to create an urgency in her novels to
emphasize how writing and community play important roles in survival (not merely literal survival but survival of ideas and an articulated past told from a particular point of view). Both Butler’s protagonists face immediate threats or danger to their lives through the course of the narratives; “queering time and space” enables Butler to explore different ways to experiment with time and simultaneously express an urgency to revisit the past to learn about the different ways in which individuals and communities survive and the complications involved in survival from racism and sexism.

Halberstam is not the only one who has posited a way of responding to the presence of a crisis or impending mortality through writing. bell hooks speaks about the genre of memoir or autobiography as a genre that serves various aims. For hooks, an awareness of losing so many African American female writers at relatively young ages creates urgency for hooks as a writer to record her childhood memories and experiences through her own perspective in a memoir at the young age of nineteen. hooks poignantly states:

When I first told everybody around me that I was writing a memoir, the initial response was usually “Aren’t you rather young to be doing that?” A great many people still think that memoirs should be written late in life, in a moment of reflection and response when one is old and retired. Such thinking seems oddly old-fashioned given that we are living at a time when it is clearly evident that a great many of us will never live to a ripe old age. As never in my life before the young are dying around me or preparing for the possibility of early death. And like many folks in their mid-forties I am stunned by the number of friends, comrades, and/or peers who have passed away just when life was becoming most sweet. Among this mounting dead are well-known writers and artists who leave few if any autobiographical traces. Already there is an aura of unreconcilable loss that is assuredly a response to knowing we will never hear them tell their stories. (hooks 88)
According to hooks, too many African American female writers have been unable to record their stories before dying at relatively young ages, and as a result she sees a need for writers to get beyond prescriptions for writing in particular genres at certain ages. hooks highlights the loss of these writers’ stories and responds to this loss by capturing her own stories through writing. Writing serves as a way to preserve writers’ memories, ideas, and stories and insure the survival of those memories, ideas, and stories by passing them through writing (in one’s chosen genre) to future readers and writers. For hooks, writing can serve not only a means to express the personal but also the political. In speaking about her third book, *Talking Back*, hooks speaks about the unique experiences of women of color asserting a voice during a time when the contemporary feminist movement addressed issues of silencing and erasure and fear of disapproval and anger from their families for speaking out. hooks boldly says:

> While punishing me, my parents often spoke about the necessity of breaking my spirit. Now when I ponder the silences, the voices that are not heard, the voices of those wounded and/or oppressed individuals who do not speak or write, I contemplate the acts of persecution, torture—the terrorism that breaks spirits, that makes creativity impossible. I write these words to bear witness to the primacy of resistance struggle in any situation of domination (even within family life); to the strength and power that emerges from sustained resistance and the profound conviction that these forces can be healing, can protect us from dehumanization and despair.” (hooks 98-99)

hooks claims that writing functions as a means or powerful force for resistance against any kind of oppression or domination. In this way, “writing as a form of resistance” signals to the presence of a shared or collective purpose for many African American (women of color) female writers. Writing can work to resist the perpetuation of a
harmful idea. For example, as mentioned earlier Steinberg suggests Butler challenges her readers to resist complacently believing that the present day clearly differs from a past riddled with oppression. I do not accept that Butler intends to claim that no social progress has occurred from nineteenth century to the twenty-first century, but I believe that she does want readers to open their eyes about current inequalities or social problems that exist well into the twenty-first century. Time travel provides Butler with a way to juxtapose the past and present while leaving the reader to envision the implications of past and present actions on the future in her writing. Even more so, writing can work to challenge firmly held assumptions about race and gender in contemporary society and push readers to examine how we think of race and how our ideas of race/race relations manifests in literature and fiction. Butler essentially works to challenge her readers by prompting them to ask questions about the societies in which Dana and Shori live. Butler wants readers to make connections between the past and present in terms of understanding contemporary issues of power structures as well as the relationship between those power structures and race, gender, class, and sexuality. I believe Butler uses time travel and rewriting of vampire lore to create situations where her heroines can reclaim power or assert a certain amount of agency. She pushes readers to make these connections because only then will we be able to openly and honestly discuss how forms of domination persist in society unquestioned or unchallenged and providing scenarios in her novels where heroines questions and challenge these forms of domination. By engaging in these open dialogues, Butler provides the chance to break down barriers between literary genres and literary critics in their reception of speculative fiction and their response to African American women’s (women of color) call for increased
visibility in literature. Butler’s bridging of speculative fiction and African American women’s assertion of more agency and influence in literature provides a way to reach a broader audience of readers, and this is important because the broader the audience, the more visibility African American women writers possess in literature. Visibility is important because African American women and women of color can translate that visibility and attention detectable through writing and use that writing to influence readers to recognize the assertive presence and agency these women possess to combat racism and sexism in society.

In speaking of connections between the past and present, critics such as Thelma Shinn Richard claim Butler’s works evoke a post-colonial perspective to “bear on the possibilities inherent but unrealized in contemporary America” (Richard 118). This statement in part means that the history of colonization and imperialism of peoples of African descent by Europeans still present certain ramifications on present-day African American society and American culture at large. More precisely, Richard expounds on the fact that even though African Americans are no longer colonized in the sense that slavery has been formally abolished, there is still discussion among post-colonial critics about the extent to which colonialism (or the aftermath/remnants of colonialism/slavery) can be detected in contemporary society. Richard explains that defining the term post-colonial in relation to African Americans has often been problematic. In response to this supposed problem, Richard refers to Susan VanZanten Gallagher’s definition of the term “post-colonial” and its relationship to African American culture. Shinn states Gallagher’s definition of post-colonial writing as follows: “writing that emerges from peoples who were colonized by European powers, now have some form of political independence, but
continue to live with the negative economic and cultural legacy of colonialism” (Richard118). Embedded within this definition is the implication that although a former colony achieves independence that independence does not mean that that society does not still have to contend with negative effects of colonization or domination. Richard refers to Toni Morrison’s discussion of how American slavery can be detected in what Richards states in her own words as “the colonial discourse of canonical American literature” (Richard 118). Richard’s discussion of Butler’s works (including Kindred, Bloodchild, the Patternist series) from a post-colonial perspective helps to underscore how Butler can skillfully use the genre of speculative fiction to create fictive, allegorical scenarios between a dominant race and an “alien Other.” (Richard 119). More specifically, Richard states: “I have argued in Worlds Within Women that science fiction can allegorically comment on contemporary realities, citing in particular Butler’s Patternist series. Her later fiction is equally cognizant that the legacy of colonialism shapes our ability even to imagine the alien Other” (Richard 119). In this way, colonial discourse runs through Butler’s narratives of heroines operating within clearly defined power structures or hierarchies and learning how to survive and work within those power laden parameters. In any case, Butler’s novels can be read through a post-colonial lens primarily because she pays deliberate attention to the past/history as it relates to the present-day reality as well as the oppressive forces that pervade both the past and present settings in relation to the experience of slavery in the past and the effects of that experience over time. In this way, her work opens up possibilities for understanding the history of slavery and its parallels to the experience of colonization. In both instances, a colonizer and colonized group exist that could mirror the slave master and slave
Butler’s works expound on the subtle similarities and differences in power relations existing in the past (slave master and slave/colonizer and colonized) and the current power dynamics that various ethnic minorities and women must contend with to survive and thrive in contemporary society. Richard specifically states that in the novel, *Kindred*, Dana witnesses and recounts the effects of colonialism on the past and present: “The novel represents the ongoing effects of colonialism as Dana juxtaposes past and present in terms of race, class, and gender from a postcolonial Black female perspective” (Richard 119). The time travel device and memory loss employed in *Kindred* and *Fledgling* then can be seen as a way to incorporate elements of speculative fiction while simultaneously lending to a post-colonial reading of the importance of revisiting the past.

As mentioned earlier, Butler I believe uses time to reinforce the importance of learning about history and forms of domination. The heroines’ revisits to the past supply the needed experience to understand the existence of varying degrees of inequality in both the past and contemporary American society possibly lending to a discussion of how the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized continue to operate in subtle ways in contemporary American society.

Although Butler’s work can be read as a continuation of an African American female literary tradition of asserting a strong presence and reclaiming voice, read through a post-colonial lens, as well as creating a tone of urgency through queering time and space, she is writing within the genre of speculative fiction. Marlene Barr’s analysis in her book, *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, explains why the subject of communities is important and useful for the purpose of female speculative fiction writers. Barr’s introduction to the text mentions a problematic split that seems to
occur in the sense that male critics of speculative fiction do not pay enough attention to feminist issues, and that feminist critics do not devote much attention to the genre of speculative fiction. In fact, Barr states that feminist critics “should devote more attention to a genre which opens all possibilities to women” (Barr xii). In her book, Barr attempts to open up exchanges between feminist theory and female speculative fiction. Barr includes an entire chapter to the “social meaning of community,” and the attention paid to the topic of female communities within the realm of speculative fiction which connects back to ideas of communal survival and reclamation of voice (sense of urgency governing the chosen style and subject of the writing) extolled in black feminist theory as well as Halberstam’s notion of queer time and space (Barr xvii). In each case, marginalized voices work to create a space that addresses that particular group’s concerns. According to Barr, “Women who form communities, become heroes, and take charge of their sexuality behave in a manner which is alien—opposed, estranged, repugnant, outside—to the concept of femininity” (Barr xvii). This claim establishes a connection between the forging of communities and a new kind of femininity being constructed through women’s speculative fiction. This alternative femininity posits that women do not have to function as submissive agents in society, and these communities of women aim to encourage women to assert more control over their lives and their current circumstances. This alternative femininity which emerges from speculative fiction enables women to appropriate a genre to address their particular concerns or issues including but not limited to race and gender.

With much discussion paid to gender it is easy to lose sight of how speculative fiction as a genre can address issues of race (which often are omitted) as well as feminist
concerns. Butler as an African American woman then appropriates the genre for African American women and women of color. While Barr does not focus her discussion of speculative fiction too much on race, she does include Octavia Butler in her discussion of female speculative fiction writers who use the theme of community to unite their works as women writers. I will address the role of race in more detail in the following chapters in the close reading of Butler’s two novels, but before delving into the primary texts it is important to acknowledge how writers such as Barr have attempted to begin a discussion on the possible intersection of feminist theory and speculative fiction to create new spaces for women writers.

Not unlike black feminist theory’s positing of a lack of critical attention paid to African American women’s writing in the past, Barr begins her analysis on speculative fiction by citing Patsy Schweickart in her regret for “the lack of a theoretical framework with which to understand this fiction” (Barr 3). Nevertheless, with the lack of theoretical framework acknowledged, Barr manages to posit “these communities of women,” as “speculative fiction’s new frontier” (Barr 4). According to Barr, the forging of these communities of women written into speculative fiction’s female writers’ narratives “provide opportunities for female heroes to be full people instead of men’s appendages” (Barr 4). It is important for readers to encounter female protagonists that perform central roles because then and only then will women assume a more powerful stance within this literary discourse. Joanna Russ, feminist theoretician and creator of feminist speculative fiction, poses the rhetorical question, “What myths, what plots, what actions are available to a female protagonist? Very few” (Barr 4). The way to remedy the lack of many plots and actions available to female protagonists is to create narratives that envision such plots
and actions for female characters. According to Barr, Emily Toth’s solution to this problem or point of access for plots and actions for female protagonists is via community. Toth states: “[W]omen writers have created, as Lisa Alther does in *Kinflicks*, a third plot possibility: a community of women” (Barr 4). Other critics such as Nina Auerbach agree that focusing on community in female speculative fiction provides the means for women protagonists to assume more empowering roles in these narratives. In fact, Auerback states that: “As a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men…” (Barr 5) Perhaps as Auerbach implies, the importance of forging communities among women serves to empower women and enable them to live lives independent of a complete dependence on men for survival. In other words, it is not that men are seen as unnecessary or unimportant, but in these female speculative narratives of community, women assume more control over their own actions and survival through the support system of these female communities. In this way, women gain agency and power over their lives through their individual choices and collaborative female efforts as seen in Dana’s and Shori’s journeys.

Barr elaborates on the utility of community to show how female narratives of community tend to appropriate male tactics for acquiring power. In this way, women unite to assert more control by appropriating male tactics for acquiring power in a genre that previously only enabled male protagonists to wield power. Barr states that “Auerbach implies that imaginative female communities imitate the routine male habit of killing harmful invading enemies: [communities of women today must emulate their antagonist in order to exist at all…[I]imaginatively recast, female communities typically
achieve transcendence through their appropriation of male tactics in the quest for power.” (Barr 8). According to Auerbach, feminist speculative fiction writers appropriate male tactics (use of physical force and strength) to achieve an equal status or footing within the genre. Even with the appropriation of male tactics, the one thing that sets these female protagonists apart from their male counterparts is the conjunction of those tactics with reliance on the support of a community. This idea of using male tactics to acquire power relates back to Butler’s *Kindred* as Dana kills her ancestor, Rufus, and does so in the name of self-defense. In other words, Dana does not hesitate to defend her life when it is threatened by rape. She kills Rufus in the end of the novel to break free from him and exert more agency or control in this threatening situation. In *Fledgling*, the female protagonist, Shori, kills those individuals that threaten the survival of her communities of human (symbionts) and vampires (Ina). Butler then enables her heroines to survive by using their individual abilities as well as taking advantage of the support systems available to them. In this way, these heroines carve out a path for themselves wherein they refuse to be positioned on the margins of society. Female speculative fiction writers envision more possibilities for female characters in their works and as Barr states these “Feminist speculative fiction writers create worlds where it is impossible for women to be easily cast aside from the mainstream of contemporary life” (Barr 11). In making this claim, Barr asserts that feminist writers position female characters so that they assume more central roles and their presences cannot be ignored. An important part of revisiting the past in terms of literary criticism also is learning how to address the problems or unproductive/unconstructive evasions in the discourse and search for ways to remedy the
lack of attention paid to not just feminist issues but also issues of race, class, and sexuality.

Creating central roles for women in speculative fiction also leads to a collective feeling of empowerment for women. Barr compares Dana and other female protagonists to Annis Pratt’s description of a mainstream hero: “About to be conquered by ‘human society’, she turns to something ‘inhuman’; about to be dwarfed at the moment of the first development of her energies, she feels that the natural universe as a whole is ‘her kingdom.’” Taking possession of nature, she possesses herself” (Barr 41). There is the appearance of a feeling of empowerment or self-fulfillment derived from turning to something ‘inhuman’ or possibly some idea beyond one’s own understanding. This feeling of empowerment derived from turning to something inhuman helps one to understand possible implications for Butler utilizing devices such as time travel and redefining vampire folklore in Butler’s novels. By turning to something “inhuman” or perhaps realistically unlikely such as writing about time traveling to the antebellum South or vampires Butler creates a more expansive canvas for heroines to explore history firsthand and question the societies in which they live within the safe realm of fiction. By ‘safe’ I mean that fiction, especially speculative fiction, enables a writer like Butler to create numerous scenarios to place her heroines in and simultaneously provoke serious discussion and debate about race and power relations in contemporary America. Being able to control the discourse to a certain extent by writing assertively within speculative fiction provides an access point to really address issues pertaining to female identity. The creation of an alternate space provides opportunities for these heroines in the realm of literature and works in opposition to a lack of space felt by women in real world
situations. Barr actually refers to this acquisition of space through literature making up for an absence of space and agency in contemporary life when she mentions feminist speculative fiction writers and how “Their [heroines] marginality in the real world is replaced by their crucial participation in the alternative world (Barr 41). Dana not only participates in this alternate time and space which is the antebellum South but plays a crucial role in rescuing an ancestor to maintain her future familial line. Dana’s ancestor Hagar must be born in order to insure her own future birth, and so Dana must work to keep Rufus alive until his daughter Hagar is born. Also, Shori’s amnesia places her in a position similar to time traveling in that everything she experiences after waking in the cave she experiences as new. She plays the central part of rediscovering who she is and recovering her memories while also playing the role of sleuth and detective in deciphering who has killed her family and community members.

The manipulation of time then works to position these heroines such that they are faced with challenges that compel them to reexamine or rediscover the past. The retrieval of the past provides the heroines with the necessary journey to re-envision their roles in contemporary society and assert more agency and control over their own actions. The journey challenges both heroines to successfully face their obstacles and survive. Shori and Dana may not have control over the positions they inherit when they awake from amnesia or spontaneously time travel, but they have control over their responses to the situations they inherit. They assume responsibility for their own survival and the survival of their respective communities. According to Barr, time travel enables these feminist communities to rethink the way they perceive time. Time does not have to consist of disconnected moments of turbulence and or even intervals where women
experience a lack of forward movement or progression. Dana and Shori as time travelers in their own ways create the possibility of a fluid motion beginning in a revisiting of the past, returning to the present, and looking toward a future. In other words, “Speculative fiction’s time travelers, like the members of the genre’s immortal feminist communities, remind women that they should look to the past—and to the future—and view themselves as a part of a female continuum” (Barr 46). In the Oxford English Dictionary, continuum is defined as “a continuous thing, quantity, or substance; a continuous series of elements passing into each other.” Continuity is important to consider because if women are working to assert a firm and central place in literature and contemporary society then the first step must involve conceptualizing time as fluid motion rather than stilted. In other words, by asserting that time is a series of fluid movements, one creates the possibility of mobility. Feminist speculative fiction writers manipulate time to enable their female protagonists to at least attempt to maneuver through the past and return to the present to follow a challenging but steady, fluid progression into the future.

In addition to looking both to the past and future, Butler’s heroines inherit the opportunity of learning more about who they are as individuals in their quests for survival. Dana and Shori learn about the strengths they possess while attempting to survive their circumstances. Barr names Butler as a speculative fiction writer who “[does] not create women who are inferior to men” (Barr 40). In speaking of Butler and other female writers she says: “Rather, they create women who epitomize the suppressed authentic self. These female speculative fiction writers have, in [Annis] Pratt’s words, made of the women’s time travel novel “a pathway to the authentic self, to the roots of our selves beneath consciousness of self, and to our innermost being” (Barr 40). Time travel then
provides a means to grapple with self-understanding and self-discovery. Through the process of time travel, Butler’s protagonists embark on quests in part to learn something about who they are and to gain insight about their pasts. Throughout the narrative in *Kindred*, Butler includes flashbacks that follow Dana’s intermittent returns to the present (1976). Through those flashbacks, the reader gains a sense of who she is as a person struggling to survive as a writer while working in a “casual labor agency” which she also refers to as a “slave market” (Butler 52). The manipulation with time here allows the reader to connect with Dana’s sense of self in the present while also witnessing how she reacts to challenges when traveling back to antebellum Maryland.

Dana is described as a protagonist as well as other protagonists of speculative fiction novels as “holding[ing] marginal positions in society and are removed from the mainstream of daily life” (Barr 40). As a working class African American woman, Dana holds a marginal position in society as seen in the flashbacks. The contrast between the flashbacks in the present and the scenes in the antebellum South work underscore how Dana manages to assume a more central role in navigating the space she occupies in the past. In the past, Dana experiences slavery firsthand, but she also uses her knowledge and experience in the present day along with advice and assistance from other slaves to survive while in the past. Annis Pratt claims that characters like Dana who are “excluded from society’s mainstream experience time and space in a deviant manner: “Women’s fiction manifest alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-to-day life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology” (Barr 40-41). According to Pratt, marginalized women require an alternate conception of time and space to adequately represent and contrast their realities
from those individuals not marginalized. The main point to remember here that Butler uses the genre of speculative fiction to speak for African American female experience, and as such, if she expects to complicate and problematize issues of race and gender in contemporary society then an alternate conception of time and space would underscore this varied experience. Butler’s use of queer time and space then enables her female characters to feel empowered to embark on journeys for self-understanding or reflection, but simultaneously does not compel or force them to embrace traditional (biological) motherhood. This is not to say though, that Dana and Shori do not embrace motherhood to a certain extent via acting as surrogate/adoptive mothers to members of their respective communities, but the overall aim in these narratives is to provide these heroines with the freedom to embark on journeys without dealing with the restrictions involved with linear, standard time as opposed to Halberstam’s “queer” uses of time.

At this point, Butler’s manipulation or experimentation with time has been discussed primarily in terms of literal time travel, but she also experiments with time by using the device of memory loss to position a heroine in a similar position of urgently needed to reconnect to her past. Memory loss or amnesia in *Fledgling* is what introduces the character, Shori, to the reader. The memory loss propels the narrative in that Shori’s goal or quest in this novel is to regain her memory, and piece together fragments of what she remembers to reclaim her identity and reunite with her family/community. Butler essentially rewrites vampire folklore to create a space in speculative fiction to open up discussion on symbiotic or interdependent relationships. Butler does not attempt to posit these relationships as ideal by pointing out certain power dynamics between Shori, the vampire/Ina and her human symbionts. These symbiotic relationships, however, point to
the forging of communities and tightly knit support structures for individuals like Shori. *Fledgling* can be read as a novel about survival, in that Shori must fight to survive despite various obstacles, so that she might seek out those who were responsible for killing her family/community and seek justice for her loved ones. So the novel is about individual survival to some extent, but the success of Shori’s survival insures the survival of her remaining family members and community of Ina and symbionts. In other words, as a female Ina, Shori’s survival allows for continual growth of her symbiotic communities.

At different points in the novel, Butler has Shori researching folklore about vampires to find any relevant material about her existence as a vampire. Shori finds nothing in this folklore that seems to align with the reality of her existence as a vampire. She says:

> Many cultures seemed to have folklore about vampires of one kind or another. Some could hypnotize people by staring at them. Some read and controlled people’s thoughts…Some took in a kind of spiritual essence or energy—whatever that meant. All took something from their subjects, usually not caring how they injured the subject. Many killed their subjects. Many were dead themselves, but magically reanimated by the blood, flesh, or energy they took. One feeding usually meant the taking of one life. And that made no sense, at least for those who took blood. Who could need that much blood? Why kill a person who would willingly feed you again and again if you handled them carefully? No wonder vampires in folklore were feared, hated, and hunted. (Butler 37)

The folklore or myth of vampires seems to characterize vampires more as predators that feed off of and victimize human subjects. Butler’s creation of vampires or Ina does entail a power dynamic wherein an Ina such as Shori feeds off of a human subject, or symbiont, but does not kill that subject in the process. Butler rewrites vampire folklore to foster the creations of communities built upon interdependent relationships. There is not doubt that
the vampire’s saliva in this case contains chemicals that make the human subject more malleable or inclined to listen and respond to the vampire, but Butler makes sure to inform the reader that every action Shori takes is to ensure the safety and protection of her symbionts. In this way, Butler creates Shori as a character who possesses a degree of power over humans but also exercises a choice to act morally towards other humans. Butler creates a mutually dependent relationship between vampires and humans subjects to build new communities where survival is dependent upon the peaceful coexistence and assistance both groups provide for each other. Instead of consuming humans’ blood and killing them in the process, the relationship or mutual symbiosis actually prolongs the life of human symbionts. Iosif, Shori’s father, explains the process as follows: “We live alongside, yet apart from human beings, except for those who become our symbionts… Most of us must sleep during the day and, yes, we need blood to live. Human blood is most satisfying to us, and fortunately, we don’t have to injure the humans we take it from…We do keep those who join with us healthier, stronger, and harder to kill than they would be without us. In that way, we lengthen their lives by several decades” (Butler 63).

In the discussion that follows I will argue that Butler uses devices like memory loss and time travel to create possibilities for her heroines. They embark on quests for self-understanding, and they are given tremendous responsibilities for insuring their own survival and collective survival of their communities. These heroines are healers to a certain extent, but they are also concrete examples of African American women who fight for their individual survival and collective survival of their families and communities.
Barr states in her conclusion to her chapter on community: “Time travel enables female protagonists to recover, rebuild, and redefine their personal feminine archetypes of selfhood. Speculative fiction’s female time travelers convey the hope that, despite the passage of hundreds of years without such feminine archetypes, real women can insist upon and achieve self-affirmation in the real world. Real women can fruitfully compensate for lost time” (Barr 49). This idea that women can make up for lost time by creating narratives that encourage women to “recover, rebuild, and redefine” strikes me as significant especially in genre that is said to be still male-dominated. Butler incorporates this idea of community and interdependent/symbiotic relationships to represent a vehicle for women to assert themselves in a powerful, forceful, and effective way to achieve self-affirmation without rendering themselves completely dependent on men. In Butler’s narratives, the female protagonists actually encourage men to help forge larger communities without necessarily relinquishing their own rights to act as independent agents.

These various theoretical approaches provide a context to think about how Butler uses devices such as time travel and memory loss to catapult her heroines into situations to reacquaint themselves with the past, endorse the building of communities and the importance of the written word, and link community and writing with survival. Survival represents the possibility for empowerment for women of color to combat racism and sexism through the written word (an understanding of a history of domination) and communal involvement. Themes of voice, empowerment, power, and survival recur through Butler’s work, and through close analysis of the primary texts I hope to show
how her work speaks to stressing the importance of survival via community and writing while empowering her heroines to assert themselves throughout their narrative journeys.
In the novel, *Kindred*, Dana’s distant ancestor Rufus calls her back to the antebellum South, the year 1815, to save his life. Dana uses these words to describe this first experience when she says: “The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him the first time” (Butler 12). During this first time travel experience, Dana rescues a young four or five year old Rufus Weylin, a distant great great grandfather, from drowning. Dana does not initially understand the reasons for why and how she travels back in time. Her confusion signals the beginning of any journey or quest wherein one possesses more questions than answers regarding her plight. When attempting to discuss this movement through time and geographical space to Rufus, she begins to recount certain facts she is aware of: “Fact then: Somehow, my travels crossed time as well as distance. Another fact: The boy was the focus of my travels—perhaps the cause of them. He has seen me in my living room before I was drawn to him; he couldn’t have made that up. But I had seen nothing at all, felt nothing but sickness and disorientation” (Butler 24). In recounting certain facts or observations about her time-travel experience, Dana claims that Rufus, who represents her familial or kindred past, calls out to her and therein draws her back into the past for some unknown reason. She acknowledges that she had nothing tangible at that point to connect her to her ancestral past and that in this scenario her ancestor seems to possess a certain degree of power or control over her present life. The sickness and disorientation
she feels once she begins to travel back in time represents the initial emotional state of fear and sense of being overwhelmed with her plight. Later on in the novel, Dana displays more readiness to deal with the challenges that face her on this journey. The way Butler stresses the importance of revisiting the past is through creating a narrative that forcefully propels her heroine in a situation where she can question but she cannot retreat from this experience with the past. In other words, Dana does not intentionally seek out to learn about her familial past; Butler employs the structure of speculative fiction to open up a narrative where time travel is the only means to reconnect with that past.

Through speculative fiction, and the use of time travel, Butler enables the past to propel Dana into a time where she must face obstacles and struggle to survive. The time travel device creates a sense of urgency for Dana, a writer, to not only learn about the past but survive to possibly write about her experience when she returns to 1976. Time travel is the means for Dana to reconnect to the past, but the purpose for Dana’s revisit to the past has to deal with the absence of a clear understanding of her personal history. Dana can learn about her personal history as well as gain a greater understanding of her collective history as an American through reading about her history. In the absence of records or writing, Dana, however, must look to her time travel experience to gain the necessary knowledge about her history. More precisely, Butler uses time travel to underscore the importance of writing and the connection between writing and the survival of one’s cultural history/past. The act of traveling back in time essentially refers back to the need for and importance or records and writing; the time travel experience also
provides Dana with the circumstances to assert more power or influence in certain moments in history.

Before delving directly into an analysis of the novel, it is important to understand why writing is essential to providing a connection to history and a tangible testament to the survival of a society. Record-keeping often serves as the primary means for a society or culture to maintain a connection to the past. In the absence of important records, one must work harder to forge a connection to the past. An important part of identity formation and cultivating a sense of purpose resides in the ability to trace one’s ancestral past or cultural roots as well in the ability to critique past and present societal conditions. Writing is a fluid process that enables people to learn, re-learn, re-connect, and re-visit ideas about the past or individual and collective histories. McKay’s melding of past and present voices in African American women’s literature also attests to acquiring a more holistic or comprehensive understanding of society. Writing serves as the primary means to disseminate information, influence, and inspire readers. Without the presence of records or stories that connect readers to the past or history one does not possess the necessary and useful tools to successfully navigate through present obstacles and struggles and envision a future of survival and social progress. One learns how to emotionally and literally survive partly from the act of storytelling. Also, one learns how to channel one’s struggles and frustrations through the creative process of storytelling and potentially identify problems that need rectification. Butler expresses through her writing, that women of color can be forces to combat sexism and racism by tapping into an inner emotional strength and ability to write and record their experiences. Memory is treated as something that may be lost or is transient, so the ability to record experience and
history remains the key to forging a future society of people who do not perpetuate racism and sexism.

Past memories and experiences recorded through writing or art provide future generations with the inspiration to continue writing and creating. Alice Walker in her seminal essay, “In Search of My Mother’s Garden’s” attests to the idea that African American women have the privilege of looking to their foremothers as creative predecessors. In speaking of her mother, Walker claims that as an artist in her own right, she has enabled Walker and many other African American women to express themselves creatively through art and leave their own creative imprints on society. In reference to her mother Walker says: “Her face as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them” (Walker 408). In speaking of her mother’s creative legacy, Walker reveals how such women opened doors for African American women to recognize the creative potential within them and assert the will to realize that potential through art. Butler in a similar fashion creates heroines that search for a legacy and become inspired to either write about their own experiences or assume more of a leadership role in society.

Walker goes on to speak about her mother’s inspiration as well as the recognition of the importance of recording her mother’s stories. She says: “Only recently did I fully realize this: that through the years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded” (Walker 407). So the stories carry with them an urgency to be
remembered and passed on to future readers. The purpose for recording these stories then is to insure the survival not only of those particular stories but also to insure the survival of an implicit message entailing the importance of writing and storytelling. The only sure means to combat the silencing of voices is to remember those voices and their stories through the creative process of writing.

Butler creates this sense of urgency through her writing by forcing the protagonist, Dana, to travel back in time to fill in missing pieces of her family history. In a time, where Dana struggles to succeed as a writer she momentarily loses sight of the fact that she grows farther and farther apart from her ancestral past. When her ancestor, Rufus, calls her back in time, she confronts her past head on and begins to remember how she may be connected to Rufus. Dana remembers an old Bible kept in the family for many generations. She begins to speculate and states that: “Maybe he was my several times great grandfather, but still vaguely alive in the memory of my family because his daughter had bought a large Bible in an ornately carved, wooden chest and had begun keeping family records in it. My uncle still had it” (Butler 28). This Bible represents not only the site for Dana’s family records, but the fact that her familial records were recorded in a such a spiritual text attests to the importance of these records as a personal and collective history to pass on to successive generations for learning purposes. The Bible as well as any spiritual text is meant to be read and passed on to future generations to insure that the spiritual message continues to be read, shared, and interpreted by that particular generation. The texts and records are meant to allow the writers and their intentions to live on in the minds of their readers and prompt readers to think and reflect on what they read as well as critique what they read.
The daughter of this several times great grandfather is Hagar Weylin Blake. Dana goes on to clarify how far removed she was from Hagar’s life, and this acknowledgement signals to a need to find a connection to this distant relative. She says: “Hagar Weylin Blake had died in 1880, long before the time of any member of my family that I had known. No doubt most information about her life had died with her. At least it had died before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left” (Butler 28). Until this time travel experience, this Bible served as the only point of access to Dana’s relative Hagar. It is extremely significant that Dana states that all information about Hagar “died with her” and the only real tangible remnant of Hagar’s life is the Bible because this time traveling experience then serves as an opportunity to reconnect to this distant relative and survive the experience to write about the familial lost connection. In other words, this time travel experience enables Dana to fill in missing pieces of her family history while she experiences certain obstacles and challenges along the way that foster her emotional growth/maturity and affect her deeply.

Hagar Weylin Blake’s Bible contains a record of her family, but it does not really give Dana a sense of what these relatives were like or how they lived their lives or dealt with their struggles. The Bible provides a limited access point for information for Dana. Dana even realizes that this time travel experience might enable her to know more about Hagar and her other distant relatives when she recalls the Bible. She states: “Hagar had filled pages of it with careful script. There was a record of her marriage to Oliver Blake, and a list of her seven children, their marriages, some grandchildren…Then someone else had taken up the listing. So many relatives that I had never known, would never know. Or would I?” (Butler 28). The insertion of this question, “Or would I” suggests the
possibility of creating a connection where one previously did not exist. If Dana’s experience does revolve around reconnecting to distant relatives that might have been forgotten, then there must be some purpose Butler foresees in manipulating time to give Dana the chance to revisit the past. The purpose here seems to revolve around forging connections between the past, survival, and writing.

Butler also emphasizes the importance of survival or preservation of ideas and history through the written word in the novel, *Fledgling*. In this novel, the protagonist Shori awakens in a cave with amnesia. Instead of employing time travel as seen in *Kindred*, Butler employs the device of memory loss in a different way to create the need for Shori to reconnect to her lost past. As the narrative progresses, the reader learns that Shori is a hybrid being, in that she is part human and part vampire (Ina). More specifically, Shori is an African American and considered a minority even within this supernatural society of vampires/Ina. Shori is the result of her family’s experimentation with genetic engineering to create progeny that can withstand constant exposure to the sun and function with very little sleep. Her quest in the narrative revolves around regaining her memory and reconnecting to members of her family and community and eventually working to rebuild her familial line. Shori soon discovers that many of her family members have been murdered by unknown assailants and continue to be targets, and that realization prompts her to begin her quest.

Just as time travel allows Dana to fill in the missing pieces of her family history, Shori’s awakening from a cave with amnesia and subsequent encounters with other characters in the novel allow Shori to discover her identity and her purpose. Shori learns/suspects that most of her family members and community of humans, referred to
as symbionts, and vampires, referred to as Ina, who live in mutual symbiosis have been murdered. It is Shori’s quest to seek justice for her slain family members and rebuild a new community of Ina and symbionts to literally survive. Through this journey, Shori also learns about the importance of writing and recording history to preserve the memory of one’s civilization/society. When Shori speaks with one of the acquaintances of her deceased relatives, Hayden Gordon, he mentions using writing as a tool for survival. He tells Shori: “For a while, it seemed that we might not survive. I think that’s when some of us began to find a new use for the writing we had developed for secret directional signs, territorial declarations, warnings of danger, and mating needs. I think some of us were writing to leave behind some sign that we had lived, because it seemed we would all die” (Butler 189). Hayden goes on to talk about a series of trials and tribulations that the Ina as a species underwent including epidemics of fatal illnesses, and early childhood deaths. The important point to notice here is that Butler connects writing with survival in both narratives.

In *Kindred*, Dana continues to ponder over the reason for her time travel. One assumes that as a quest figure Dana will learn something of value that will help her in the present-day. Dana even cannot help but wonder why she has been placed in such a situation when she exclaims that: “There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn’t. But then, neither would anything else” (Butler 29). The blood relation here then seems to be central in compelling Dana to move back in time without her actually willing such experiences. In addition to the idea of reconnecting to kindred spirits, the issue of survival recurs especially in characterizing
the nature of the relationship between Dana and Rufus. Dana characterizes the relationship in the following way: “What we had was something new, something that didn’t even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related. Still, now I had a special reason for being glad I had been able to save him. After all…after all, what would have happened to me, to my mother’s family, if I hadn’t saved him?” (Butler 29). Dana soon realizes that her own future survival depends on the survival of this distant relative. The need to survive places Dana and Rufus in the position of depending on each other to survive, wherein both engage in an apparent symbiotic relationship that becomes more complicated as the narrative progresses. Dana soon realizes that she does not have as much power as she thought to completely change the past for the better. She realizes that she cannot change the kind of man Rufus grows into as their relationship continues, and that her main role is to keep him alive to insure the birth of his daughter Hagar.

At this point, Butler implicitly articulates that revisiting the past for her heroines is necessary and important. The heroine’s revisits to the past provide an opportunity for them to experience challenges that foster their emotional growth and maturity. Dana’s and Shori’s experiences force them to take a closer look at the problems and issues of the past and determine how those problems and issues relate to their present circumstances. Oppressive forces operate in the past that continue to affect the heroines in the present, and an acknowledgment of these oppressive forces and power structures allows the reader to begin to question why and how these oppressive forces continue to plague contemporary society. Butler essentially has the heroines revisit the past to more closely examine power structures and how these structures and oppressive forces operate in
contemporary society. There is a rich literary tradition of African American women writers who have paved the way for future writers such as Butler that needs to remembered and acknowledged through a more general understanding and appreciation of a literary history or past and as such, a revisiting of the past through the novels may also signal to the importance for a critic to remember and pay tribute to this literary history.

Once these heroines have revisited the past, they must then work to understand what is involved in literal survival and continual survival from these oppressive forces. So then understanding what is involved in survival is an important lesson to learn for revisiting the past. The primary ways Butler’s heroines learn how to survive is through the support of a community, through the tool of writing (a metaphorical survival), and through tapping into their individual inner/emotional strength and physical strength. Although Dana learns she does not have as much power to change the past as she thought, an important lesson Dana learns then from revisiting the past is how to survive. Her ancestors’ survival serves as the primary means of instruction for her. In particular, her ancestor, Alice, provides Dana with a model of how to survive. Dana exclaims: “From what I could see of her, she seemed to be about my age, slender like her child, like me, in fact. And like me, she was fine-boned, probably not as strong as she needed to be to survive this era. But she was surviving, however painfully. Maybe she would help me learn how” (Butler 38). Alice serves a figure from the past that mirrors Dana. Both appear to learn something from each other to cope with struggles they face. In addition to her relatives, Dana garners support from her husband, Kevin, especially when she expresses her own doubts about escaping the past alive. In fact, early on, Dana is
skeptical about being able to survive multiple trips to the antebellum South, but Kevin tries to reassure her when he says: “Look, your ancestors survived that era—survived it with fewer advantages than you have. You’re no less than they are” (Butler 51) Dana’s response to this attempt to reassure her reveals her understanding that her ancestors’ ability to survive stemmed from prolonged exposure and experience of hardship, at least more than she had ever experienced. She says: “Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could. Much more” (Butler 51). Dana admits that whatever knowledge she possesses may not be enough to help her cope with the circumstances in this different time and setting. She recognizes her dependence on those individuals who have already been tried and tested through their prolonged experience with slavery. In this way, Dana understands that survival will only be possible with the aid of a community in addition to her own knowledge and emotional strength. Dana’s recognition of the importance of community support as well as individual strength and endurance is a testament to her burgeoning emotional growth as a person.

Kevin serves a vital member of this community of kindred spirits for Dana. In fact, Dana states that Kevin was like me—a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying” (Butler 57). With Kevin’s support, Dana knows she is not alone in this journey. Although Rufus as a character works to thwart Dana’s efforts to return to the present by his constant ‘calling’ for help when in dire circumstances, Dana initially believes that she is dependent to a certain extent on this distant relative for her safety in the antebellum South. When Kevin tries to persuade Dana to leave the Weylin plantation when they both travel back in time, Dana reiterates the importance of her relationship with Rufus.
She says: “I’ll have a better chance of surviving if I stay here now and work on the insurance we talked about. Rufus. He’ll be old enough to have some authority when I come again. Old enough to help me. I want him to have as many good memories of me as I can give him now” (Butler 83). Dana believes that Rufus is her insurance policy that guarantees her survival. Later on in the novel, she realizes that no matter how many good memories she tries to instill in Rufus’s mind, he will do what is necessary to keep her connected to him in the past. In this way, Rufus wields a certain degree of power over Dana.

In addition to Kevin, Alice, and Rufus, Dana becomes a part of a larger extended family while working on the Weylin plantation. One day when Dana goes into the cookhouse and finds Sarah and Carrie there she exclaims: “I liked to listen to them talk about sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive” (Butler 94). Dana makes mental notes of what she observes on the plantation and gives credit to not only her personal kindred but to all of those individuals who worked to survive such brutal times. As the narrative progresses, Dana realizes that the purpose of revisiting the past is not necessarily to change certain events possibly for the better, but rather to learn how to survive and gain a better understanding of what her ancestors’ lives encompassed on a path toward survival. The main objective of the narrative is not to alter history because in reality we as people do not possess the power to change the past. Dana even tells Kevin at one point that “We’re in the middle of history. We surely can’t change it. If anything goes wrong, we might have all we can do just to survive it” (Butler 100). As individuals we have the ability to alter our current circumstances and base our choices on
an understanding of past mistakes and errors. In the same way, Dana does not have the power to change the past, but a major part of her journey comprises of bearing witness to this personal and collective history. By bearing witness, Dana grows closer to this past and as a result of bearing witness can become an agent or force of resistance against similar forms of oppression in contemporary life. In other words, Dana’s witnessing of history serves to reinforce a mindset that works to resist the perpetuation of cycles of domination of one group over another. Dana also possesses the ability to retaliate against those that attempt to violate her or place in her in the position of a victim.

As suggested earlier, Dana perceives that her survival will depend to some extent on the creation and preservation of a symbiotic relationship with Rufus. She initially believes that she has the chance to save Rufus from himself, or rather from his self-destructive nature. Dana says in reference to their symbiotic relationship: “It shouldn’t take him long to realize that he and I needed each other. We would be taking turns helping each other now. Neither of us would want the other to hesitate. We would have to learn to co-operate with each other—to make compromises” (Butler 121). While Dana is willing to make certain compromises, Rufus turns out to make very few concessions within this kindred relationship. The point to remember here is that Dana attempts to forge a relationship with Rufus to secure not only her safety but the safety of those around her. Her inability to prevent Rufus from acting in ways that harm others reveals her lack of power in this simulated master-slave relationship.

In relation to power and Dana’s agency in the novel, Pamela Bedore in “Slavery and Symbiosis in Octavia Butler’s Kindred presents a compelling argument that suggests that Dana possesses more agency than most critics deem. Bedore believes Butler leaves
open for interpretation that Dana initiates the time travel. She states: “The ambiguity of the direction of first contact raises some very important questions. Does Dana need Rufus as much as he needs her? If so, what are the consequences of that mutual need dependence to late-twentieth, and even early twenty first-century race relations?” (Bedore 74). These questions are important to consider because Butler seems to leave room open for interpreting power dynamics in her characters’ relationships with others. Many critics including Bedore claim that issues revolving power are central to understanding most of Butler’s novels. Bedore specifically addresses particular works of Butler’s when stating that “Virtually all of Butler’s books deal with complex issues of power, and perhaps her most challenging depictions of power relations occur in the Xenogenesis trilogy: Dawn, Imago and Adulthood Rites” (Bedore 74). Other critics such as Sandra Govan also attest to the importance of initiating a discussion about the “politics of power” in Butler’s works. (Govan 82) In terms of revisiting the past and survival, Butler seems to also push the reader to consider how a lack of and the possession of power is represented in the past and how the lack or possession of power affects one’s ability to survive and survive emotionally and physically intact as a person. In any case, Butler’s novels may revolve around understanding the “politics of power” as Govan states but in the process also works to place the reader in an uncomfortable position in terms of confronting issues of power in the past that manifest perhaps in subtle and similar ways in the present-day.

Bedore makes sure to underscore Butler’s desire to position the reader in an uneasy position when she describes the relationships between the alien species, the Oankali, and humans in the Xenogenesis trilogy. The relationships between the Oankali
and humans bear a close resemblance to the relationships between the Ina and humans to a certain extent in *Fledgling*. Bedore explains the apparent power dynamics inherent in these relationships between the Oankali and humans as follows:

> These novels may elicit uncomfortable reactions in readers since the complex characterization of the Oankali figures them as simultaneously master and saviour. The humans are coerced into a relationship with the Oankali in which they are dependent on the aliens for sustenance and survival, and which the humans are biochemically altered in order to have both increased health and sexual pleasure in mating with the Oankali. The humans are thus left with little choice but to mate with the aliens, which creates a hybrid species genetically altered to contain the best of both peoples, and leaves the human characters simultaneously hating and loving their oppressors/saviours. (Bedore 74)

In this way, the alien species serves as somewhat of an equivalent to the Ina/vampires in *Fledgling* in that both possess a degree of power over the humans they engage with to mutually survive and thrive in society. While the specifics regarding the nature of these various non-human characters in both novels differs, the important point to stress is that Butler’s works seem to form a pattern in regards to probing into the issue of power. This idea of power relates back to revisiting the past and survival in that Butler experiments with time to create a space where her heroines can at least envision or seek out instances to claim power or agency in certain situations and moments within the novels. The ability to create moments in the novels wherein her heroines seek to assert more agency and power when contending with an oppressive force (whether it be slave master or a family of vampires out to eradicate African American vampires) provides the reader with at least a figurative example of how women and women of color can forcefully resist racism and sexism. The figurative example of survival and resistance against racism and
sexism paves the way for future writers to create characters and scenarios wherein women of color can travel back in time and space to perform extraordinary acts of courage and survive to tell the tale. I believe that Butler uses time travel to create the necessary sense of urgency for her readers to understand the importance of writing, community and survival as a means to access more influence and power in society. By reclaiming a voice and a strong presence (individual and collective voice and presence) through speculative fiction writing, one moves closer to acquiring a more powerful stance in changing a society to resist forms of oppression such as racism and sexism by reaching out to a broader audience.

Interdependence and symbiotic relationships also connect back to the issue of power. These symbiotic relationships depending on which Butler novel or text one refers to has the potential to benefit those involved in such a relationship and potentially harm those involved depending on the characters’ intentions and desires to wield more power within relationship. Bedore discusses the theme of symbiosis at great length and mentions how Butler has even corrected critics assuming that she is speaking about slavery in her works such as *Bloodchild*. Bedore cites a critic that disagrees with Butler’s contention that symbiosis rather than slavery is at the work in that short story. Bedore refers to Elyce Rae Helford’s interpretation of the *Bloodchild*, and believes that Butler through the genre of speculative fiction ruminates on issues of race. In speaking about how Butler incorporates the discussion of race through speculative fiction to counteract the lack of discourse on race by previous speculative fiction writers, Helford states that embedded in the story of *Bloodchild* is “a reencoding of race, whether as part of a metaphor for enslavement or ‘symbiosis,’ replaces a former philosophical and cultural
tradition of denial of race issues” (Bedore 74-75). In other words, Helford manages to articulate how Butler appropriates the genre to speak about how issues of race and power come into play through the employment of symbiotic relationships. In this way, Butler manages to also create a space to make up for the lack of attention paid to issues of race and power in speculative fiction prior to her work. I have argued thus far that Butler creates a situation that forces Dana to revisit the past by having Rufus “call her” back to the past because Dana needs to experience this journey to gain self-knowledge and needs to bear witness to this past to function as a force for resistance against any form of domination. In the same way, Bedore believes Dana’s journey is not completely a product of fulfilling the needs of an ancestor, Rufus, but a necessary path to formation of self-identity for Dana. Bedore states: “I suggest that Dana’s initial time travel is as much prompted by her own need to confront her identity as a black woman in America as by Rufus’s near-death experience” (Bedore 75). Bedore then touches on the idea that Dana is lacking a necessary experience to help shape her identity as an African American woman living in twentieth century American society. In this way, revisiting the past and bearing witness to what is entailed in survival from various forms of oppression become an important part of Dana’s path toward self-identity formation and a growing maturity.

At this point, Butler’s appropriation of the genre of speculative fiction has been addressed as well as her preoccupation with problematizing power dynamics/relationships in her novels. Sandra Govan in “Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel” discusses at length about how Butler appropriates the style of the historical novel and slave narrative and refashions those styles to include a probing into power relations in the past and contemporary society. Govan begins her
discussion by stating how Butler in a post-modern fashion takes inspiration from literary tradition from which she crafts her own narratives imbibed with contemporary social concerns. Govan states about Butler that: “She is a writer very conscious of the power of art to affect social perceptions and behavior and a writer unafraid to admit that, when appropriate, she borrows from tradition, that she takes and reshapes African and Afro-American cultural values, that she has heuristic and didactic impulses which she transforms into art” (Govan 79). This statement implies that Butler’s art serves not only an aesthetic purpose but manages to also instruct the reader in a creative way about social issues and problems regarding race, gender, class, and various forms of domination or hegemony still existing in contemporary America. I would add to this literary criticism that Butler experiments with time travel and memory loss to create new ways to reinforce the melding of history and contemporary social issues, and her novels instruct the reader to become more conscious of how women of color can move beyond exerting more influence and agency in these novel and exert that same influence in contemporary society. I believe Butler’s writing extends to all her readers an eye-opening experience into a figurative realm of heroines that seek to initiate changes or social reform to their contemporary societies.

Throughout this discussion, I have worked to underscore the importance Butler places on revisiting the past in her novels, the importance of making connections between past social conditions and current social conditions, and the importance of survival in the effort to show how she manages to appropriate the genre of speculative fiction to speak and address concerns she as writer deems pertinent and neglected in the past body of work in that genre. In this way, the omissions in the past and social issues of the past
whether in speaking about oppression experienced as well as literary omissions (on race, power, etc…), Butler wants to call attention to a revisiting of the past as a starting point to build connections (to the present-day) rather than maintain the status quo of silently turning our back on our literary and historical past. Even Govan believes that Butler intends for readers to make connections between the past and present when reading her novels. She says: “Butler seizes the possibilities inherent in the historical novel and the Black tradition in autobiography. She adapts these forms to produce extrapolative fiction which, for its impetus, looks to a historically grounded African-American past rather than to a completely speculative future. On the surface, this seems indeed a curious connection, this linkage of future fiction to the past” (Govan 79). For Govan, Butler appears to meld the historical novel concerned with the past and bridge that style with futuristic fiction to create what Govan refers to as “extrapolative fiction.” I would argue that Butler does not only expect her readers to make connections but also expects her readers to notices how one may arrive at those connections—through the creative process of writing. In other words, Butler demonstrates how one can use a genre like speculative fiction to reveal the ways one arrives at connections between the past and present through the process of writing. The specific connection I believe that can be drawn is the connection between survival and writing. The presence of records and stories to be passed down to future generations to some extent allows for the survival of ideas to be supported and/or challenged. Butler then melds not only the past and present within her works in an attempt to force readers to make connections between the past and present but also melds genres to create that same desired effect. Govan poignantly expresses Butler’s ability to reach a varied and larger audience through her renovation of past
literary traditions best when she says: “Butler’s works do something else not generally asked of good historical fiction. They reach an entirely different audience, an established science fiction readership which, taken as a whole, is more accustomed to future histories and alien spaces that it is to authentic African and African American landscapes. That is, I suppose, one of the benefits of renovation: more people are attracted to the old, the historically significant, recreated and redressed in a new light” (Govan 95). To rephrase, Butler provides speculative fiction readers with a rich excavation of the past and African American history refashioned in a new literary space. Butler broadens the readership of these historically cognizant speculative fiction novels by encouraging these readers to consider the effects of the past on future generations. In recreating history through a different literary genre, Butler inspires readers and writers to reach beyond their comfort zones and think more critically about history through the lens of an African American female speculative fiction writer.
Chapter 3: More Connections between Writing and Survival in the Past…And Links to Race and Power in the Present

Just as Butler goads the reader to reach beyond his or her comfort zone, she challenges her heroines to move beyond an initial period of fear and confusion and evolve to a point where they rise to each challenge or obstacle before them. These heroines are not evincible but they possess the courage to not give up or relinquish their rights to surviving their predicaments in one way or another. Dana as a character does not cling to feelings of fear and confusion as the narrative continues, but instead comes to a self-understanding that enables her to forge ahead through her quest for survival. In one of her time traveling experiences, she manages to not get consumed with trying to figure out how everything is happening during the time travel experience. The object of these experiences then becomes something that transcends the logical explanation for these experiences. The time travel is simply the device to position Dana is the past to finally exert some influence and agency in her life. After she attempts to rescue Rufus once again from being killed in a fight Dana walks back to Weylin plantation to get more help. During that walk, she has an epiphany. She says: “I had begun to feel—feel, not think—that a great deal of time has passed for me too. It was a vague feeling, but it seemed right and comfortable. More comfortable than trying to keep in mind what was really happening. Some part of me had apparently given up on time-distorted reality and smoothed things out” (Butler 127). As a result of her awareness of the need to survive rather than attempt to piece together a logical explanation for how she was traveling back
in time, Dana reaches a point of emotional growth wherein she focuses not on what she
does not know or understand but focuses on how she can best respond to the obstacles
that she faces while living in the past.

As a writer within the narrative, Dana also realizes the importance of being able
to write about her experiences in the past once she successfully survives and Hagar is
born. She says “Someday when this is over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to
write about it” (Butler 116). The ability to record her experiences and tell her story from
her perspective gives Dana a sense of comfort and hope necessary to continue to
persevere. In the beginning of the narrative Dana hopes to use her education and
knowledge from the present day (1976) to her advantage in antebellum Maryland. It does
not take too long for her to realize that twentieth century book knowledge is no match for
knowledge acquired through years of experience with struggle. Dana says: “Nothing in
my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few year s an
illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and
lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong? Why was I still slave
to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me” (Butler 177).
Dana’s emotional growth is apparent somewhat here because she learns to place her
initial assumptions about the past aside and realizes that survival is more difficult than
she thought and not easily attained through book knowledge. Perhaps her awareness of
this increased difficulty shows that her faulty assumptions of the past are deemed as such
once she revisits the past through time travel. She learns to place certain assumptions
about the past aside, and the struggles she faces creates a humbling experience for her.
Dana learns that the desired symbiotic relationship she thinks she can engage in with
Rufus is not possible. Dana discovers through her mistakes that she cannot trust Rufus or believe that she knows what he will do next. Later on in the novel, Dana in reference to Rufus exclaims: “I kept thinking I knew him, and he kept proving to me that I didn’t” (Butler 186). Through her experience with Rufus and the antebellum time period, Dana learns to cope and survive and determines who she can and cannot trust.

In one of the later scenes where Dana travels back to the late twentieth century, she fully articulates the difference between her struggles in the present and her struggles in the past. She says: “I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus’s time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse…Rufus’s time demanded things of me that had never been demanded before, and it could easily kill me if I did not meet its demands. That was a stark, powerful reality that the gentle conveniences and luxuries of this house, of now, could not touch” (Butler191). Dana is talking about how the present no longer feels familiar to her in the way it used to once she has traveled back in time. The time traveling experience has transformed her life in such a way that will remain with her for years to come. She no longer will reflect or think of the past or history as a passive spectator who reads about slavery in history books. That distance from the past no longer occupies a place in Dana’s mind. She has lived during a period that has tested her more than she ever thought she could be tested. Her current reality with its struggles to overcome now appears to house more luxuries than she had previously thought; yet this awareness about the differences in experience with the antebellum period and 1976 does not necessarily mean that Dana does not have struggles to contend with when she returns to the year 1976. She still faces a new journey of
succeeding as a writer with the memory of her experiences of the past as well as a physical reminder, a missing arm, at the end of the novel. In essence, Dana’s time travel experience teaches her a great deal about the difficulty involved surviving oppression/slavery both in the past and the present-day.

Dana keeps a journal to collect her thoughts about her experiences in antebellum Maryland, and that journal provides her not only with a written record of experience, but that journal also serves as the inspiration for a subject for her to write on and possibly publish. In one of the flashback sequences that occur in the novel, wherein Dana describes her life just before she met her husband Kevin, she describes her life as a struggling writer trying to get her work published and appreciated while working in a labor agency. Writing about Dana’s experiences and feelings about her circumstances enable her to cope better with the time travel experience and all its trials and tribulations. Survival for Dana in part then can be articulated through Dana’s words. Towards the end of the novel, Dana actually expresses a desire to turn her journal writing into a story to share with readers. She says: “Actually, I was looking over some journal pages I had managed to bring home in my bag, wondering whether I could weave them into a story” (Butler 244). The desire to tell her story hearkens back to the creative predecessors that Alice Walker and many of the black feminist critics paid tribute to in their works. It is simply not enough to survive a difficult, painful experience. One must write about that experience and allow her words to reach a potentially larger audience in order for the achievement of survival to resonate for all to hear.

Writing also serves as a catharsis for Dana in that writing provides a creative outlet for her to express her frustrations with her experience with the past. In one of the
final sequences in which Dana returns to the past after spending a brief amount of time in
the present, she finds Alice dead, hanging by a noose. Rufus tells Dana that Alice
committed suicide because he told Alice he had sold their children into slavery. After
Alice’s funeral, Dana recalls that “Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn’t say them,
couldn’t sort out my feelings about them, couldn’t keep them bottled up inside me. It was
a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward” (Butler 252). In this instance, writing is
not preserved for the purpose of passing those words on to the next generation, and
instead the writing serves to facilitate the process of grief or mourning for Dana. The
important point to remember is that writing provides a way for Dana to emotionally
survive such traumatic experiences.

Emotional survival thus is made possible in part by the ability to write about one’s
experience and thereby undergo a catharsis. As alluded to earlier, survival, however, can
be complicated and made more difficult due to unequal power dynamics. In other words,
relationships such as the one Dana experiences with Rufus reveal that a certain hierarchy
of power exists between races as well as gender. As mentioned earlier, often critics cite
Butler’s preoccupation with power dynamics and hierarchal structures of power. There is
evidence to show that Butler is concerned with issues of power in both novels, but I think
the relevance of this interest in power relates back to ideas of community, writing, and
survival. So far, I have discussed how integral building communities and writing are to
Dana’s survival through her time traveling journey, but what seems to also determine or
factor greatly on whether she comes out of this experience alive depends on the power
she can wield over Rufus (in this case the oppressor, who seemingly possesses the most
power in the antebellum Maryland setting). The question then becomes, who possesses
more power in this kindred relationship between Dana and Rufus? Kevin and Dana debate about who wields more power in this situation. Kevin tells Dana: “Your coming home has never had anything to do with him. You come home when your life is in danger” (Butler 247). Dana responds with: “But how do I come home? Is the power mine, or do I tap some power in him? All this started with him, after all. I don’t know whether I need him or not. And I won’t know until he’s not around” (Butler 247). So even towards the end of the novel Dana is not sure about the necessity of her kindred relationship with Rufus. She clearly does not want to depend on him after witnessing his betrayal of her trust numerous times. For example, when Dana and Kevin travel back in time together to the past and get separated (Dana returns to the present unintentionally without Kevin) Rufus lies about mailing the letters Dana writes to Kevin informing him of her whereabouts. There is a growing sense that Dana cannot control Rufus’s behavior the older he gets and as a result she is placed in a more vulnerable position in terms of power.

The final scene in the past reveals how Dana must do what she has perhaps feared to do—that is, test her theory about not knowing whether she really needs him until he no longer is alive. In this scene, Rufus finds Dana reaching for her bag containing items retrieving from the present that might be of some use including a knife. After Alice dies, Rufus grows more possessive of Dana and attempts to replace Alice with Dana as a lover. Dana implicitly tells Rufus she will make certain compromises for the sake of their kindred relationship but will not allow herself to be sexually exploited. Up until Alice dies, Rufus respects Dana’s choice, but after Alice’s death he changes his intentions for Dana. Dana recalls her past encounters with Rufus from when he was a young boy to his
adulthood and says: “I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk. But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times. So hard to kill…” (Butler 260).

At this point, Dana knows that she can either let Rufus violate her and forgive him as she has done in the past or make the more difficult choice of defending herself from him by killing him. At this point, one might wonder why Dana would kill the one person she has repeatedly tried to save throughout the course of the narrative. By choosing to defend herself by killing Rufus, Dana asserts a certain amount of agency in that particular moment in time. She regains a certain amount of power over him and control over her fate by this one action. By making the decisive action to kill Rufus, Dana no longer exists as “slave to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me” (Butler 177).

The final scene of the novel places the reader in the position of assessing or determining the meaning of Dana’s journey. As alluded to earlier, in an attempt to escape from Rufus violating her she stabs him with a knife from her knapsack and then suddenly experiences:

Something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painless, 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 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” (Butler 261).

So at the end of the novel, Dana finally returns home to the present in her house, but this time she leaves the past for what seems the last time. In other words, Dana does not experience any more moments of dizziness or disorientation that lead to her traveling back to the antebellum South. She does not, however, return to the present without a physical marker signifying her long and perilous journey. Dana survives her journey in the sense that she returns to her home and present time alive, but she also loses a part of left arm in the process of arriving back home. One way to interpret the scene depicting Dana’s arrival home could be that she has returned home and completed her quest but she also has changed fundamentally in the process of beginning and ending this particular journey. A part of her literally and figuratively remains in a space in between the past and present—the wall (the wall perhaps signifying a liminal space). Even though Dana sees that she is back in her living room, she still feels “caught somehow” perhaps by the past. The part of her left arm that is seemingly absorbed by the wall is the exact part of her harm that Rufus holds onto before she travels back home. The way this scene ends suggests that Butler wants the reader to make a connection between the past and the present, and I believe that Dana’s missing arm represents a permanent marker that will prevent Dana from forgetting her past. Even though she loses her arm, Dana survival from attempted rape signifies the exerting of influence over her life in that one moment. Throughout the novel, Dana thinks she must protect Rufus, someone who acts out of self-interest, but when she must make the most difficult and critical decision of all, she refuses to be victimized and asserts agency. Butler leaves this final scene in the past open for interpretation, but Dana’s survival, albeit physically injured/mutilated, signals to.
an act of resistance against sexism and racism. Dana’s act is one that empowers women of color to make difficult choices when it comes to resisting violence related to sexism and racism. Thus, Dana loses a part of her arm as a physical reminder of the past and all it entails about her personal history as well as a collectively shared history as an American. The initial reason for the journey was to fill in missing pieces of a family history from the Bible that Dana recollected seeing, to insure that Dana’s distant relative, Hagar, was born thus insuring Dana’s birth, and when Hagar is born Dana decides to leave the past for good. The only thing preventing Dana from returning home safely is Rufus’s obsession with her staying in the past to continue to protect him. The missing limb represents a lasting marker of Dana’s journey and insures that she will never forget what she witnessed and observed while revisiting the past. Even more compelling, one can read the missing limb as a physical marker of how no one can extricate themselves completely of the past or history especially if he or she is to move on to next task of making necessary connections between the past and present. Perhaps, it is the reader’s turn to now see how oppressive forces from the past in some ways linger and bleed into contemporary life/society.

Butler’s heroine in *Fledgling*, Shori, does not lose any of her limbs in her quest to remember her past, but she loses many loved ones in the process of remembering and working to protect other family members and allies she acquires while searching for the assailants who target her and her family. The memory loss Shori experiences serves as the catalyst for her journey to remember who she is, search for those that seek to kill her and those she loves and survive all to insure her familial line continues for future generations. In this way, both Dana and Shori work to preserve the survival of future
generations of their family. Shori awakes from amnesia in a cave with nothing but questions. Once she awakes in the cave she recalls her initial thoughts as follows: “I could see then that I had come from a shallow hillside cave. It was almost invisible to me now, concealed behind a screen of trees. It had been a good place to hide and heal. It had kept me safe, that small hidden place. But how could I come to be in it? Where had I come from? How had I been hurt and left alone, starving? And now that I was better, where should I go?” (Butler 4). Shori even acknowledges her frustration with her lack of knowledge of the past when she says: “I had an endless stream of questions and no answers” (Butler 5). This feeling of disorientation and confusion is similar to the feeling Dana has when she travels back in time to antebellum Maryland for the first time. The beginning of both these journeys marks an initial period of confusion wherein the protagonists possess more questions than answers, and as a result of this self inquiry the protagonists begin their search for some answers to their questions.

Dana loses a part of her limb at the end of *Kindred*, but Shori wakes up to see that she is scarred or badly injured before her quest even begins. Shori recalls that her “skin was scarred, badly scarred over every part of my body that I could see. The scars were broad, creased, shiny patches of mottled red-brown skin. Had I always been scarred?” (Butler 4). The presence of scars or mutilated bodies indicates that these bodies need healing of some sort before being able to proceed with their lives as normally as possible. In Shori’s case, she notices that her body has already begun the process of healing. She says: “I remembered discovering, as I lay in the cave, that my head felt lumpy and soft in two places, as though the flesh had been damaged and the skull broken. There was no softness now. My head, like the rest of me, was healing” (Butler 4). Even though
Shori’s body has begun to heal, her mind remains scarred in that she cannot remember anything prior to waking up in the cave. She acknowledges the need and desire to remember how she was injured when she states: “Somehow, I had been hurt very badly, and yet I couldn’t remember how. I needed to remember…” (Butler 4). This desire to remember signals Shori’s awareness of a need to rediscover her past in order to rebuild her life and survive. The memory loss provides Shori with an option to begin anew and gain the necessary knowledge or information to succeed in her quest to survive.

After she leaves the cave, Shori runs into an Anglo-American man named Wright Hamlin who gives her a ride to where she needs to go, but Wright soon discovers that Shori does not even know who she is let alone where she lives or used live. Wright ends up taking Shori in until they both have more answers about Shori’s identity. An important point to mention here is that Shori appears to be perhaps ten or eleven years old based on her size and appearance, so she appears to be a child but later on realizes she is much older in vampire/Ina years. Shori later recounts how she felt when she left the cave as if she were being reborn. She says: “I thought back as far as I could remember, closed my eyes and thought myself back to the blindness and pain of the little cave. I had emerged from it almost like a child being born” (Butler 26). In a sense, the memory loss places Shori in a position wherein she operates almost like a blank slate, but soon Shori begins to remember certain things about herself, abilities she possesses. These memories begin to come back to Shori in fragments. Shori realizes that she must do what is necessary to repair her “damaged body” and “damaged mind” if she has any hope of rebuilding her life and searching for her home and family. (Butler 27) Just as Butler underscores the importance of community to survival in *Kindred*, she emphasizes the
importance of community to even a greater degree in *Fledgling*. Shori passes what initially appears to be an abandoned community or neighborhood of sorts on her way before she runs into Wright and wonders if she had once belonged to such a community. The experience makes her long for the chance to be a part of family or community instead of searching for answers to her questions alone. After staying with Wright, Shori decides to revisit the site hoping to remember something that might help her learn where she came from prior to the cave. She says to Wright that she “feels connected with that place somehow” (Butler 36). This need to reconnect to this site impels Shori to return to the burnt site and do research on the area. The newspapers she reads claim there was a fire in the area, and that the people who had lived there abandoned their homes.

In any case, Shori does not believe the neighborhood was abandoned, and in the midst of this self-investigation discovers that she might be what Wright refers to as a vampire. She bites Wright’s neck and realizes that such an action makes him more dependent on her. Shori realizes that “Because I bit him, he’ll obey me” (Butler 48). In other words, her bites somehow cause others to need to remain connected to Shori. Through this logic of Shori as a vampire being able to feed off of human subjects and have them as a result obey her, introduces the idea of choice or free will into the novel. If she wanted, Shori could use her ability to render several people dependent on her without their consent. Shori even tells Wright that “I think it would be wrong of me to keep you with me against your will…the bites tie you to me” (Butler 48). Instead, she feels that she needs to give Wright a choice and vaguely remembers that if she continues to feed from him it will be increasingly difficult for him to refuse to leave Shori. Shori tells him: “Wright, if you don’t take this chance, I don’t think you’ll be able to leave me. Ever. I
won’t be able to let you, and you couldn’t stand separation from me. I know that much. Even now, it’s probably hard for you to make the decision, but you should go if you want to go. It’s all right” (Butler 49). Through this act of Shori giving Wright a choice to stay or leave, Butler rewrites vampire lore to introduce the importance of a sense of moral responsibility into this fictional space of vampires and humans. The rewriting of vampire lore relates back to Butler’s experimentation with time in that both the vampires’ and symbionts’ life-spans are increased by virtue of their interdependent relationships. Butler experiments with memory loss and increased longevity to create a theoretical society in which vampire society simulates human society in many respects. For example, vampires may choose to act morally or immorally. Also, one can claim that Butler presents Shori as a figure who possesses a degree of power and chooses not to use that power to only fulfill her own ends. In this way, Butler proposes the option of someone who possesses a greater degree of power over another individual and exercising the option to not exploit that power. The restraint Shori displays in this situation clearly differs from Rufus’s use of power over Dana knowing that she needs his help to survive in the antebellum period. In both narratives, Dana’s and Shori’s encounter these power struggles in their quests to survive; they ultimately both survive via their individual strength and support of their respective communities.

Through more conversations with Wright and other intuitive experiences (biting other humans and discovering that they will listen and obey to her once she has bitten them), Shori believes that she might be part of some sort of research or experimental trials. She says: “I think I’m an experiment. I think I can withstand the sun better than…others of my kind. I burn, but I don’t burn as fast as they do. It’s like an allergy
we all have to the sun. I don’t know who the experimenters are, though, the ones who made me black” (Butler 31). This realization that she might be an experiment leads her to think of a possible reason she and her family might be targeted by unknown assailants. Through her initial research on vampires, Shori finds quite a bit of traditional vampire lore or myth that does not really help her figure out who she is or assist her on her quest for answers about her role as a potential vampire. In regards to the published or documented information about vampires she says: “Whoever and whatever I was, no one seemed to be writing about my kind. Perhaps my kind did not want to be written about” (Butler 33). This lack of necessary recorded information reinforces the need for more writing on this subject and prompts Shori to seek answers elsewhere. With very little published on her kind, Shori returns to the burned site to gather more answers. Through a series of events she meets the male head of her family, Iosif Petrescu. Following a brief conversation with Iosif, she finds out she is a vampire, but not the kind of myths and legends. Iosif tells her she is an Ina. She learns that she ages much more slowly than humans, that her connection to humans that she bites is characterized as a necessary symbiotic relationship for Ina, that the humans she ties herself to are referred to as symbionts, and that the saliva she injects when she bites these symbionts allows them to heal faster and age more slowly than average humans. Iosif tells Wright that his relationship with Shori is a “mutualistic symbiosis. You know you’re joined with her” (Butler 63). This ‘mutualistic symbiosis’ insures that Shori and her symbionts will be able to depend on each other to survive and will work together as a functional communal unit.
The meeting among Shori, Iosif, and Wright also engenders a conversation about repairing emotional scars and is relevant to the challenge Shori possesses in beginning of the novel to rebuild a new community of her own of Ina and symbionts. Wright tells Iosif that: “Shori told me she had been badly burned as well as shot. But she healed on her own. Not a scar” (Butler 72). Iosif responds to Wright by pointing out Shori additional scars when he says: “Except for not knowing herself or her people. I would call that a large scar. Unfortunately, it’s not one we know how to fix” (Butler 72). The memory loss, then, serves as something that Shori must battle without a quick remedy or panacea available. Without an immediate remedy, Butler implicitly draws a stark contract between physical and emotional wounds. As part vampire, Shori can easily recover form physical wounds, but as someone part human, she cannot remember who she is or her personal and cultural history. In this way, Butler creates a sense of loss that promotes the need for Shori to finds way to remember her past so she may physically and emotional survive her present circumstances. Shori also learns that her family members died in a fire in the reported abandoned neighborhood and suspects fowl play. Her quest now comprises not only regaining her memory but seeking justice for her deceased family members/community of Ina and symbionts by bringing the assailants to justice.

The battle that ensues between Shori and those that seek to kill her and those individuals connected to her signals to a battle wherein one group seeks to regain a position of power over Shori and her family that presumably has been lost. Also, the group targeting Shori and her family do so out of racial hatred. Butler has introduced the role that racial hatred plays in terms of fostering an environment of tension and competition for control of power in a society through the employment of Shori’s loss of
memory and her quest in the novel. In relation to power, Iosif instructs Shori to “treat your people well… Let them see that you trust them and let them solve their own problems, make their own decisions. Do that and they will willingly commit their lives to you. Bully them, control them out of fear or malice or just for your own convenience, and after a while, you’ll have to spend all your time thinking for them, controlling them, and stifling their resentment” (Butler 73). With advice given, Iosif tells Shori to prepare to stay with his community for protection, and that he will come to collect them the following day. Stefan, another member of Iosif’s family pleads with both Shori and Wright telling Shori “All of our female family is dead, Shori. You’re the last” (Butler 79). This last phrase, “You’re the last” signals back to a creation of urgency for Shori to determine the perpetrators of her family’s murder and the risk to her own life. This idea relates back to hooks’ and Halberstam’s discussion of time and creation of urgency to write when facing an impending mortality. Even though Butler makes vampires’ extraordinarily long life expectancy contingent on the interdependent relationship between them and humans, Shori’s life and the rest of her loved ones’ survival is dependent on her seeking out answers and remembering her past. Shori and Wright agree to have Iosif collect them the following week, but when the day arrives for their departure Iosif does not come. Shori and Wright discover that potentially the same individuals that murdered her family members in the first neighborhood have succeeded in killing Iosif and his community. The urgency to survive and protect those surviving loved ones around Shori is created by these continuing attacks on her family members.

As stressed with *Kindred*, writing and community as necessary tools for survival are also important for Shori’s survival and the survival of other Ina/symbiont
communities that she encounters and befriends. Written records of Ina society help Shori understand her family’s history and the history of Ina society and begin to piece together motivations for the murders of those related to her. The symbiotic relationships that exist in this novel serve to underscore the importance of tightly knit communities that look out for the preservation of one another. Without the interaction of other Ina individuals and symbionts Shori would not feel fully equipped to deal with the perpetrators of her family’s murder.

In terms of endorsing a society that values community, Butler achieves the creation of such a society in *Fledgling* through the necessity of symbiotic relationships. Shori chooses individuals that appear to be on their own, lonely, or in search of some purpose in their lives, and those who would benefit from being part of a community. The following description of Wright, a construction worker, places him in this category of an ideal symbiont: “He had been a student in a nearby place called Seattle…the University of Washington for two years. Then he dropped out because he didn’t know where he was heading or even where he wanted to be heading…He’s worked for his uncle for three years now, and his current job was helping to build houses in a new community to the south of where he’d picked me up” (Butler 15). Wright then is someone who is unsure of exactly where he wants to be or what he wants to do with his life, but he currently finds purpose in building houses for communities. The act of building to create a space for communities to live and thrive fulfills the necessary conditions for someone entering into a symbiotic relationship. In his own words, Wright states that he is still unsure about his purpose in life but finds value in building houses for communities of people to live. He admits: “I still don’t know where I’m headed, but the work I’m doing is worth something.
People will live in those houses someday” (Butler 15). Although Wrights claims he does not know where he is headed in life necessarily he knows what kind of work he values. He wants to do something that benefits society in some way. It is safe to say then that Wright is someone who would do whatever was necessary to help those in his immediate community. He becomes Shori’s first symbiont, and as a result works to help Shori learn what she needs to know about her past and other symbiotic Ina communities to survive and seek out justice for her deceased loved ones. In return for his loyalty and assistance, Shori will also be responsible for protecting him, and the venom from her bites will increase his longevity to anywhere from 170 to 200 years. (Butler 63). In fact, Iosif tells Shori and Wright that Wright’s “immune system will be greatly strengthened by Shori’s venom, and it will be less likely to turn on you and give you one of humanity’s many autoimmune diseases. And her venom will help keep your heart and circulatory system healthy. Your health is important to her” (Butler 63). In reading Iosif’s account of the health benefits Wright will possess after assuming the role of Shori’s symbiont (as well as the benefits to Shori being literal, physical survival), the reader sees how both Wright and Shori depend on each other for literal and emotional survival. In this way the strength of community serves as a necessary precursor to both physical and emotional survival.

While Shori is not necessarily a writer like Dana, another symbiont that Shori chooses is a writer named Theodora Harden. Shori describes her as an older woman, and Theodora coincidently works in a library and writes poetry. Theodora has a family consisting of grown, married children, but keeps to herself mostly. The reason Shori seems to be drawn to Theodora is her need to find a purpose or more of a substantial role
in a community. In a way, Shori senses Theodora’s loneliness and as a result wants to remedy those feelings somewhat by making her a part of her Ina symbiotic community. Theodora even admits to feeling lonely when she tells Shori: “I am lonely…Or I was until you first came to me that first time. You’ve made me feel more than I have since I was a girl…You need me…No one else does, but you do” (Butler 92). Theodora’s current family consists of grown children with lives of their own leaving Theodora with plenty of time to be on her own or independent to do whatever she pleases. Theodora then has the ability to choose whatever life she wants at this point. She finds a new sense of purpose in being part of a community that depends on her, and therefore seeks to be a part of Shori’s Ina community.

In addition to the importance of utilizing writing to gain necessary information to be passed down to successive generations and the importance of support structures like community to aid in survival, Butler creates a protagonist in Shori that is fearless; Shori possess a great deal of emotional as well as physical strength. Shori’s small size and gender in any other narrative might be seen as detriments to her survival, but in Butler’s narrative she bears more physical strength than the average man. Her size and gender end up being strengths that help her survive. For example, Brook, symbiont to Iosif, tells Shori about her position of power as an Ina female: “Ina children, male and female, wind up with more potent venom, but the female’s is still more potent than the male’s. In that sense, the Ina are kind of a matriarchy. And a little thing like Shori might be a real power” (Butler 109). Butler inverts gender hierarchy of power by crafting a narrative wherein a seemingly young petite female Ina/vampire possesses the most potential to wield power in a beneficent manner rather than using the power to oppress other
individuals. This inversion of gender hierarchy is significant because Butler implies that women of color can assume leadership positions in society and wield power for the greater good of that society. In this way, Shori functions much like the speculative fiction heroines Barr refers to that attempt to wield power in a genre typically populated by white male protagonists. Through the course of the narrative, Shori also reaches a point wherein she has received some pertinent information about who she is and where she has come from and is able to articulate the purpose of her quest. She says: “I don’t know where to begin a search for more of my kind…I don’t want people to get killed, but I have to do something. I have to find out who these murderers are and why they want to kill us” (Butler 118). In this statement Shori makes sure to assert that she does not wish harm on anyone, but she must do what is required to protect her newly burgeoning community of Ina and seek justice for the members of her slain family/Ina community. One notices the emotional growth Shori demonstrates from her confusion and disorientation in the cave to the point when she exclaims that “I’ll do what’s necessary to sustain us” (Butler 122). Her dedication to protecting and insuring the survival of new symbionts and new Ina acquaintances are evident also in her words: “I’ll do all I can to keep them safe” (Butler 149). Shori still does not know who has twice attacked members of her family at this point in the narrative, but she is determined to incorporate her father’s (Iosif) symbionts as her symbionts. She tells Brook and Celia, Iosif’s surviving symbionts, when they question whether Shori would want to claim them as her symbionts when she did not originally choose them to be a part of her Ina community: “I inherited you, both of you, from my father’s family. You’re mine” (Butler 124). Shori assumes responsibility for these symbionts and vows to prevent a third attack when they stay with
the Gordon family, friends of her father’s, and in assuming such responsibility Shori proves to represent a beacon of hope and strength.

Much has been said about female strength and community thus far, but the reason for the attacks on Shori’s family is not a random act of violence. Butler uses the space of the novel to ruminate on race and racism present even within a realm where vampires or supernatural beings coexist with humans. In contemporary society racism is usually discussed in terms of a dominant race existing and minority races coexisting that often feel alienated or positioned at the margins of societal concern. In *Fledgling*, Butler creates a new kind of race, so to speak, the Ina/vampires. Even in folklore and myths as seen Shori’s description of myths she reads, vampires are often feared and ostracized as evil or demonic creatures out to threaten humans. Shori reads about how vampires “took something from their subjects, usually not caring how they injured the subject. Many killed their subjects” (Butler 37). Butler creates a race of vampires and renames them as Ina, vampires who do not intend to harm humans but rather engage with humans that want to participate in a symbiotic relationship. Regardless of their intentions or motives, the Ina are perceived as threats by humans who hold to traditional stories about vampires. Shori is a unique case wherein she is the product of her family’s, the Matthew family, experimentation with genetic engineering to create a hybrid, half human and have Ina/vampire. In fact, Shori is perceived to also be of great value for her hybridity. Shori’s dark skin allows her to go out during the day without severely getting burned and she can get by with very little sleep. In other words, Shori by virtue of being an African American—her race—she is more likely to survive certain conditions and situations than her non-African American male and female Ina counterparts. So far, Shori’s gender and
race have been described as assets that make her more apt to survive difficult conditions and circumstances and her petite size does not affect her physical strength in any shape or form. More precisely, Butler creates a character like Shori to represent the embodiment of black female empowerment to its fullest potential by positing the advantage of being an Ina female and more specifically a black hybrid Ina/human female. Shori’s diversity comprises a vital part of her strength as a heroine. By experimenting with memory loss, vampire lore and vampire longevity, Butler uses supernatural elements in *Fledgling* to create a more powerful female that refuses to be embodying the role of female victim.

As a heroine Shori must possess both physical and emotional strength as well as the support of her community if she is to combat those that have murdered her family members and continue to pose a threat to Shori and her new Ina community. Butler cleverly weaves in a contemporary issue or problem that still plagues society as a whole, and that issue is violence that erupts out of hatred and racism. Even though critics have alluded to the idea that Butler melds different genres and melds history with the present in her works, the specific issue I believe that sets Butler apart from most speculative fiction writers is that she relates a history of violence derived from hatred, racism, and sexism. A common thread here is a history of violence toward African American women and women of color. Shori eventually discovers that the perpetrators of her family’s murder are members of the Silk family, another Ina community. The reason this particular Ina family decides to engage in this clandestine violence is due to their hatred for what Shori represents as a hybrid Ina/human and African American woman. In short, the reason for the murders and violence is hatred for the Matthew family’s experimentation with genetic engineering. Even more than the Silk family’s hatred for
genetic experimentation runs a deep seated hatred of Shori as an African American Ina and miscegenation. Butler then situates the conflict in the narrative around the onslaught of violence and the perpetuation of violence to others due to racist beliefs.

Even within the realm of speculative fiction a non-human fictive species such as the Ina are not immune to racism and violence. It becomes apparent to Shori that the Silk family used their venom by biting unsuspecting human subjects to influence them to attack Shori’s family members. In other words, members of the Silk family used innocent human beings as a means to achieve the end of murdering Shori’s family. When Preston Gordon, the head of the Ina community that agrees to protect Shori and her symbionts, claims that the Ina do not engage in such violence, Wright responds to his skepticism by claiming that “your species seems to be as much made up of individuals as mine is. Some people are ethical, some aren’t” (Butler 148). While members of Gordon family argue amongst themselves about whether an Ina family would use humans as tools to kill others Ina families, Shori “suspect[s] that their objections came more from wounded pride than logic. Ina didn’t use humans as daytime weapons against other Ina. They hadn’t done anything like that for centuries” (Butler 148). One cannot help notice that violence has occurred within this species of Ina, but such violence had not occurred “for centuries.” What then spurred this sudden onslaught of violence? The fact that Ina are misusing their abilities of persuasion to further their own ends suggests that whatever issue is at the forefront of such violence remains a primary concern—race and racism. According to another Ina, Wells, Ina were not known to be racists, and most Ina supposedly supported the efforts behind the genetic engineering experiment to yield more benefits for all Ina communities. (Butler 148) Wells goes on to say that “Human racism
meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them. They looked for congenial human symbionts wherever they happened to be, without regard for anything but personal appeal” (Butler 148). While Wells claims that most Ina are not racists, the fact that one particular family is engaging in violence because of racist beliefs shows that racism is still a problem to contend within this fictive society with vampire-like beings cohabiting human society. Perhaps Butler suggests here that even within contemporary America, race relations and racism are still important topics to probe into even if a large majority of people believe that racism perhaps does not exist to the same extent it did in years past. What is significant about Butler’s inclusion of race and racism within the genre of speculative fiction is that she can utilize this genre to initiate thought provoking debates about race and violence, and the initiation of this dialogue promotes readers to begin to ascertain the source of such violence and hatred and attempt to combat the perpetuation of violence.

With having to battle racism head on and seek justice for her family, the symbiotic relationships Shori engages in become a necessary emotional support system as well as necessary relationship for Shori to survive. It is Brook, a symbiont, that reminds Shori when she feels most under pressure about the responsibilities Ina and their symbionts fulfill for one another. Brook tells Shori: “We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That’s the way an Ina-and-symbiont household works, or that’s the way it should work” (Butler 177). It is important to notice here Brook’s phrasing of her description of the way symbiotic relationships should work as opposed to the way most Ina communities do operate. In other words, Ina society should function so that Ina and symbionts have an equal stake in supporting and protecting each other, but that does not
mean that certain communities will follow that example. In this way, the reader can extrapolate from this fictive society how real societies of human beings create certain societal rules and laws for the protection and benefit of the entire society, but the creation of these laws does not prevent some individuals from breaking those laws. So again, Butler pushes the reader to carefully read these narratives, extrapolate connections from these narratives and think critically about how such issues of race and power relate to history and apply to contemporary society.

The theme of family/community permeates the novel. Shori acquires another new symbiont named Joel Harrison through a symbiont of the Gordon family. In an initial conversation between Joel and Shori they both express a need and desire to be part of a family. Shori tells Joel that she will be on her own to build a home for community once she leaves the protection of the Gordon family, and Joel responds to her by saying, “Then let me help you make a new family” (Butler 159). Shori adds that “I want you to be part of my new family…more than that, I need you” (Butler 159). Shori explicitly states that she needs another symbiont to physically survive and wishes to include another symbiont to her newly growing family. Implicit in this exchange between Shori and Joel is the imperative for rebuilding a family/community especially after completely losing one to such a tragedy of mass murder.

When speaking with Joel, Shori also mentions how helpful and essential Wright was to her survival after awaking in the cave lost and confused. She says “When I had no one else, when I had no idea who or what I was, he helped me” (Butler 159). Once again, the symbiotic relationship provides Shori with the necessary support to help her prepare for her role as protector of her family and community. In fact, Shori prevents a third
attack on the Gordon family by detecting when the intruders arrive at Punta Nublada, the town where the Gorden family resides, and warning all the residents to evacuate before the assailants arrive. Before the attack, Shori embodies the role of protector by insuring that those individuals standing guard of the residence are not easily seen and therefore easily killed. She states her intent to protect the community when she says: “I put on my hooded jacket, sunglasses, and gloves and walked around to each of the houses of the community. I spotted the guards from outside, then went into the houses to do what I could to help them be less easily spotted. Being easily spotted by the kind of attackers my symbionts and I had faced would mean easily shot” (Butler 159). In this way, Shori acts as a stabilizing force that prevents the perpetuation of endless violence against her communities.

In addition to making the protagonists in her novels protectors of communities, Butler expresses the capacity for women of color to protect themselves and others through her characterization of other women of color in the novel. While surveying the houses in the Punta Nublada community to assist the guards, Shori meets a woman named Linda Higuera. Shori describes Linda as “nervous, muscular brown woman, at least six feet tall and leaning on a rifle. We were on the third floor of William’s house, and she was one of his symbionts. From what I had seen, William preferred big, powerful-looking symbionts, male and female. Wise of him” (Butler 160). This description of Linda shows a woman of color assuming a position of power, possessing physical strength, and possessing the ability to defend herself from those that intend to harm her. Although, Shori mentions that Linda is nervous, the fact that she is standing guard knowing that the community might be attacked makes her anxiety warranted.
What is even more important to mention is the conversation that ensues between Shori and Linda. The conversation revolves around the role of protector that men tend to serve and that women can learn to assume as well. Linda tells Shori that it is an incredible asset to not need much sleep and be able to wake up quickly if necessary when she sensed danger. Linda refers to her Ina, William in saying: “I wish William could do that. I would feel safer if he could at least wake up if we need him” (Butler 160). Shori quickly responds by telling Linda that it is “Your turn to keep him safe” (Butler 160). Linda then realizes Shori has a point when she says: “You’re right. Damn. He’s so strong, I’ve gotten used to depending on him. Guess it ought to work both ways” (Butler 160). Linda realizes that a part of what determines whether a symbiotic relationship works successfully depends on everyone doing their part for the whole community. The success of this symbiotic relationship then leads to the survival of all involved in this relationship.

In addition to maintaining stable communities for survival, Shori learns about the importance of seeking out knowledge about her society to better equip herself to survive. Since Shori continues to deal with memory loss, any information she receives first hand from other Ina and symbionts proves to be instrumental and allowing her to better understand her role as an Ina. She craves knowledge to better understand who she is and her community of Ina. She tells a fellow Ina, Daniel, that “So much of my memory is gone that I’m grateful for any knowledge. I need to know the consequences of what I do” (Butler 185). Shori wants to know the full extent of what she is capable of and the effects her actions have on others, and as such she seeks to act according to a certain moral standard. She does not want to harm innocent individuals, but she is willing to defend
herself and her Ina community so they may continue to survive these threats on their lives. Shori asks Daniel for any texts that might give her further information or insight about the Ina and their history as a people. She asks Daniel: “Are there…do you have Ina books, histories I could read to learn more about our people? I hate my ignorance. As things stand now, I don’t even know what questions to ask to begin to understand things” (Butler 185). Hayden agrees to bring Shori some books to read, and she through her reading discovers that at one point the Ina might not have survived a series of illnesses and conditions that plagued the society. Hayden tells Shori of a time in the past where the Ina were “weak and sick.” (Butler 188). Hayden proceeds to mention the difficulty the Ina experienced reproducing children. Many children conceived did not survive to be born. Hayden states that “Everyone took in orphans and tried to weave new families from remnants of old. We suffered long periods of an Ina-specific epidemic illness that made it difficult or impossible for our bodies to use the blood or meat that we consumed, so that we ate well and yet starved” (Butler 189). This history of suffering and awaiting an impending death creates an urgency to salvage pieces of Ina society by leaving traces of their lives in writing. The writing serves as a way for the society to live on in the memory of its readers even if members of that society do not survive. Hayden describes that after losing many members of Ina that “gradually, we began to heal” (Butler 189). By reading history, one learns that healing is possible after intense periods of suffering and that one may survive such circumstances to begin the process of healing. Even though some Ina survived, they became targets of suspicion and often were alienated by those that were not a part of their communities. Hayden says: “Suspicions about us grew out of control now and then down through the ages, and we had to run or fight, or we
were tortured and murdered as demons or as possessors of valuable secrets” (Butler 189). The Ina then have been alienated individuals who have often been seen as people to destroy rather than left alone to live their lives as they see fit. In other words, the Ina have been oppressed by those who have no regard for learning about their societies.

In terms of race, critics such as Thelma Shinn Richard and Elizabeth Anne Leonard cite Toni Morrison’s work, *Playing in the Dark* when discussing race and/or post-colonial discourse. The literary criticism on race is helpful to include because it highlights how Butler skillfully inserts commentary on racism in her novel. So much of this discussion has concentrated on the means for these heroines’ survival, but what also needs to be addressed is the fact that ultimately these heroines are attempting to survive from some oppression whether it be racism or sexism or a combination of both. More precisely, Butler creates a quest for Shori to combat racism in order to survive and insure the survival or continuation of her familial line. Dana also attempts to survive the experience of slavery while time traveling. Leonard mentions Morrison when discussing the history of silence and evasion in literary criticism as earlier noted by black feminist critics. Morrison, in her text, *Playing in the Dark*, seeks to better understand the “nature—even the cause—of literary “whiteness.” What is it *for*? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as “American”? (Morrison 9). Morrison speaks about a detectable Africanist or black presence in American literature which she carefully qualifies as “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of view, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about this people” (Morrison 7). Morrison essentially articulates a need to
understand the construction of race in America and the way one may track this construction is through American literature. Studies on race theory have prompted critics to not only look at the way “blackness” is described and written about in literature but also now how “whiteness” is constructed, embedded, and written about in American literature. In other words, Morrison believes we as critics can understand how race is constructed and perceived in literature through an examination of how “whiteness” operates in the American literary imagination. Morrison makes an important point that actually aligns with what many black feminist critics have stressed as well as feminist speculative fiction critics such as Leonard have said about race and literature/fiction. Morrison states: “In matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse….It is further complicated by the fact that ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (Morrison 9). Morrison explains a common trend in attempting to move beyond racism revolving around one trying to ignore race altogether when analyzing or interpreting American literature or texts. Such an attempt does not accomplish anything other than ignoring how race has shaped certain ideas of what it means to be an American.

A common theme hopefully detectable throughout this essay has been about confronting issues head on instead of avoiding them in literary criticism. Critics like Leonard admit to challenges they face when teaching different genres of literature including African American literature. The correct approach here is to explicitly articulate challenging issues and work to solve those issues or problems through an open and honest discourse. As a teacher, Leonard describes two major events that prompted her to think about how often race is addressed by literary scholars. Briefly, she mentions
reading a science fiction story a student handed in with the inclusion of characters such as “evil Black elves,” and she mentions attending a conference wherein all attendees were Caucasian. As a result of experiences like these and others, Leonard begins to acknowledge a persistent difficulty in speaking about race in academia and states after attending the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts that “I was a middle-class white liberal and I had scarcely thought about it; was I typical or an anomaly? I began to do research into the subject and discovered that the criticism of fantasy, science fiction, and horror literature was largely silent” (Leonard 2). The subject that she has scarcely thought about until this point is the attention paid to race in literary criticism of the fantastic or science fiction.

Leonard articulates her own uneasiness with teaching a novel by an African American writer to white students being a white female. She says: I find myself in the peculiar position of being seen by them [her students] as an authority about an experience which I cannot fully understand and a history which I do not fully know. I am both hesitant to represent a group I am not part of and uncertain of what my own racial assumptions are. I do not always know how my whiteness shapes my reading” (Leonard 3). The issue that Leonard then seems to struggle with is how her racial and cultural upbringing influences the way she interprets works that do not necessarily align with that particular literary lens or perspective. This questioning of the way “whiteness” shapes the construction and interpretation of numerous American works of fiction is precisely what Morrison is interesting in analyzing in her work. This conversation about the need to open up discussion about race and interpretation in literature is relevant to interpreting how Butler creates novels about racism and survival. Clearly survival from
racism and various forms of oppression play an important role in these works. Perhaps this recurring theme of survival is intended to provoke readers to begin to have more conversations about race and the role is plays in various works of art and the messages such works send to their readers. For instance, if authors of science fiction and speculative fiction create narratives that place characters of color or female characters in marginalized positions or even omit persons of color completely from their works, then what does that placement of certain characters or omission say about how that writer perceives or understands race? Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark* that “the subject of the dream is the dreamer,” and what she means by this statement is incredibly important. The subject of a writer’s work is often shaped by his or her ideas or thoughts about society or a particular subject. The topic of the writer’s work is filtered through his or her understanding about a subject such as race (also shaped by his or her unique experiences) through the work and intercepted by the reader. Morrison elegantly explains this idea by stating: “The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this” (Morrison 17) Morrison says then that this Africanist presence in much of American literature is closely tied or involved in the writer’s “whiteness” or rather his understanding of this Africanist presence in relation to his understanding of how whiteness is embodied in American society. One can think of Butler as writing within a genre wherein writers are often unaware of the omission of ideas about race and seen as working to perhaps draw
attention to this omission by choosing to make race a central and important aspect in her works.

In an effort to make up for the omission of race in literary discourse, Leonard also cites the work of post-colonial critics such as Edward Said. Leonard refers to an important point made by Edward Said in relation to examining and discussing race which follows: “[T]he history of fields like comparative literature, English studies, cultural analysis, anthropology can be seen as affiliated with the empire and, in a manner of speaking, even contributing to its methods for maintaining Western ascendency over non-Western natives” (Leonard 3). As readers and critics if we are aware of this affiliation with these various fields in the humanities to potentially speak for upholding a view of Western “ascendancy over non-Western natives” then it is incumbent upon us to work against the reinforcement of such a hierarchy. Perhaps being aware of the potential to reinforce certain power dynamics and working to prevent readings or interpretations that reinforce such readings is a way to remedy or counteract the silencing of marginalized voices in literary criticism. Even Leonard attests to the importance of preventing the perpetuation of such power structures when she states: “If we are not to reproduce these power structures, if we are not to allow whiteness to exist unquestioned, unproblematized, among those who benefit from being white, then we must (loudly and perhaps gracelessly) examine race and its role within literature and literary studies” (Leonard 3). A movement forward in literary criticism then comprises of digging deeper into the role race plays in fiction.

As a genre, speculative fiction serves as a new and more malleable space to create narratives that explore issues of race and survival especially if critics such as Marlene
Barr and Elizabeth Leonard agree on the lack of attention paid to both gender and race, respectively. Earlier in this discussion Barr posited that speculative fiction opened possibilities for feminists and women writers and readers. Leonard believes what she terms as the fantastic as a genre is aptly suited to open up possibilities to discuss the role of race in fiction. In fact, she provides two main reasons for this claim. In fact, Leonard states that one reason the genre of the fantastic is well suited for the study of race “has to do with the fantastic’s lack of realism; It can serve as a literature of possibility” (Leonard 4). Leonard goes on to powerfully elaborate on two main reasons for the genre’s suitability to examining the race and the role it plays in literature. The second reason the genre of the fantastic (as well as speculative fiction) suits the enterprise of examining race and its role in literature is because it is considered a popular medium. Leonard qualifies her reason by stating “People outside the academy read it” (Leonard 3). She cites Henry Giroux in stressing the need to bridge a gap between what students learn in academia and practical real world knowledge. Giroux states: “Schools need to close the gap between what they teach and the real world. The curriculum must analyze and deconstruct popular knowledge produced through television and culture industries, and be organized around texts and images that relate directly to the communities, cultures, and traditions that give students a historical sense of identity and place” (Leonard 3). In this way, the popular even as initially a means for escape provides a trail for understanding what contemporary issues are on the reader’s mind. Even more importantly, the role of race in contemporary society also may be elucidated in this popular medium. Leonard states: “Because the fantastic is not “high” culture but “popular,” what it has to say about race is especially significant; it can represent or speak
to the racial fears of a large group” (Leonard 3). In other words, if one wants to explore race and its role in fiction then a popular medium such as the fantastic and speculative fiction already houses much of contemporary society’s views and ideas regarding race. Leonard refers to Michael Omi’s thoughts about the study of race through popular culture.

For Omi popular culture contains a permanent record of ideas regarding race. Omi states:

Concepts of race and racial meanings are both overt and implicit within popular culture—the organization of cultural production, the products themselves, and the manner in which they are consumed are deeply structured by race. Particular racial meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the presence of a system of racial meanings and stereotypes, of racial ideology seems to be an enduring aspect of American popular culture. (Leonard 3-4)

Omi and Leonard both then reiterate how if unexamined, racist ideologies will be perpetuated through literature/fiction as well as in other artistic mediums. It is the role of the critic to recognize what ideologies are being espoused in a particular work and choosing to call attention to those views as well critiquing those espoused ideologies. Leonard eloquently says: “It is a political act, as Le Guin said of fiction; criticism, and particular criticism of the popular, must also choose between collusion and subversion” (Leonard 4). Butler acts simultaneously as a writer and critic when she creates heroines like Dana and Shori who choose to subvert or challenge the racist ideologies of their oppressors.

Leonard believes critics should more closely examine race in the fantastic and/or science fiction/speculative fiction is because this genre’s “lack of realism; it can serve as a literature of possibility” (Leonard 4). Again, this is not the first time speculative fiction or a related popular medium has been perceived as a genre that opens up possibilities for
its writers and readers. In other words, the fantastic or speculative fiction as a genre creates possibilities because it is not limited or constrained by criteria to act out plots that occur as they would in real life. In this way, the metaphorical or allegorical options to include in a speculative work are limitless so to speak. Leonard goes on to explain that: “The pages of a science fiction novel can play out a society where difference is tolerated, even welcomed, or a society that is truly color-blind, and allow the reader to ask, ‘What if my world were like that?’ By presenting alternatives, the fantastic throws into relief the “real.” Because works of the fantastic are simultaneously situated both within the writer’s realm (and thus subject to the codes and conventions of the time in which they are written), and within the realm of the imaginary worlds constructed, they can both reenact and alter racial codes and representations” (Leonard 4). The crucial component to remember here is the capacity for the genre to “both reenact and alter racial codes and representations” because Butler works to demonstrate power structures and oppressive forces at work in her narratives while simultaneously creating heroines who are determined to combat these oppressive forces. By creating heroines that battle their oppressors, Butler reenacts representations of power struggles that occur between races (and power struggles between men and women) in contemporary society but does so as to provide her heroines with more agency and potential to wield more power. If the society of Ina are supposed to be truly color-blind when it comes to their tolerance of other races, then what is Butler trying to convey about race if certain members of this so-called color-blind society target Shori because she is a black woman? Butler articulates the perception that while certain societies expect and hope that they have already reached a point wherein tolerance for difference is universally accepted (that as a whole, racism or
intolerance no longer exists in this more civilized and modern society), that point of universal tolerance and acceptance of difference has not been reached. More precisely, the message here is that the goal should not necessarily be about reaching a point where race is no longer recognized or discussed but rather that as a society we can begin to talk more openly about race and how one’s race may shape perceptions about oneself and others in contemporary society.

While on the topic of race, Teri Ann Doerksen in “Octavia E. Butler: Parables of Race and Difference” also sheds some light on the role of race particular in Butler’s earlier works including *Parable of the Sower*, *Bloodchild*, and *Wild Seed*. She first acknowledges Butler as one of the few writers who create strong, multi-faceted African American female characters in science fiction/speculative fiction. Doerksen says that “Science Fiction that includes characters from non-white heritages is far more scarce, and despite all the time that has passed, there is still a very good chance that if a reader finds a science fiction novel with a complex, interesting, multifaceted woman of color as a protagonist, the novel is by Butler” (Doerksen 22). Such a statement reveals how much Butler has been credited as a pioneer for women of color writing in this genre. Doerksen speaks about the genre of speculative fiction as one that is prone to questioning or providing a space to execute thought experiments for a writer. It is evident in both Dana’s and Shori’s journeys that they begin their quests inundated with questions, and both heroines are given a space to voice those questions openly. Doerksen asserts in speaking of speculative fiction and Butler that “The genre, in turn, seems well suited (if unaccustomed) to her particular kind of questioning. It is a literature of metaphors, and Butler’s forte is in creating metaphorical solutions that reveal contemporary social
political issues.” (Doerksen 22). Butler then uses the creative space of speculative fiction to address issues of race and power as they relate both to history and contemporary social politics. What I have discussed thus far is meant to highlight how Butler creates African American female protagonists who engage in these quests to better understand issues revolving race, gender and power through history and contemporary society through experimentation with time.

In speaking of speculative fiction lending to a desire to write allegorically, Doerksen provides an illuminating analysis of Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* in that she situates this work as an allegorical narrative with a message to warn readers about social issues. Doerksen states: “*Parable of the Sower* continues a kind of work that Butler has developed over more than a decade: it asks the reader to see narrative as allegory, to work to understand contemporary social situations better by seeing them reflected in a speculative text. It is primarily a cautionary work, warning through illustration of the potential outcome of certain contemporary social policies.” (Doerksen 23). Doerksen’s analysis of *Parable of the Sower* attests to a clear pattern of using fiction to extrapolate questions, possible solutions, and promote serious critical discussion and debate about issues including but not limited to race, gender, class, choice/free will, and power. In brief, Doerksen sums up Butler’s use of speculative fiction to address issues that Butler deems relevant in the present-day when she says: “Butler uses the genre of science fiction, with its implicit acceptance of speculation about the fate of the human race, to investigate, in Donna Haraway’s terms, “forced reproduction, unequal power, the ownership of self by another, the siblingship of humans with aliens, and the failure of siblingship within the species” (Doerksen 24). Butler then demonstrates the power of a writer to appropriate a
genre to speak to social and political issues while also garnering a broader readership in
the process. Doerksen articulates Butler’s ability to produce works that provide
connections between history/past and the present as well as between real life and art.
Doerksen says: “In a sense, Butler’s works themselves are also bridging agents, spanning,
as Haraway has suggested, the gap between social reality and fiction” (Doerksen 33).
Butler’s ability to meld history and contemporary social and political issues in her works
as well as her ability to meld different genres to reach larger and more diverse readership
speaks to her strength and sense of responsibility as a writer and artist.
Conclusion: Butler’s Speculative Fiction Initiating an Interrogative Debate

This discussion on Butler and her novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, began with an argument entailing how Butler implicitly argues for a revisiting of the past in these two works specifically. In short, Butler introduces the reader with a way of taking history and juxtaposing that history to contemporary reality to force readers to make important connections between these moments in time. Although many critics have spoken about Butler’s works driving readers to make connections, my discussion adds to existing criticism by proposing connections between *Kindred* (a novel with already existing literary criticism written on it) and Butler latest novel, *Fledgling*. Both the heroines, Dana and Shori begin their quests more questions than answers, but they both navigate their new environments with determination and perseverance. Both heroines lose something important or vital to them while attempting to survive their challenging circumstance. Dana physically loses her arm, and Shori loses so many of her loved ones along with the memory of her family. Both heroines learn about the importance of community and preservation of writing in their revisits to the past and that understanding serves as a means to survive their experiences from sexism and racism.

Butler stimulates the reader to continue to ask important questions once these narratives come to a close. For instance, after reading these novels and perhaps other works the reader must ask: How similar and/or different are race relations and power dynamics in both time periods/societies? Critics have cited how Butler melds genres, but the effect of melding these genres perhaps has not been explained fully. By melding genres, Butler creates avenues for future women writers of color to experiment with
different devices to show how certain tools such as writing and the support of community aid one in combating racism and sexism and opening up conversations about race rather than closing off such discussions. Butler’s creative predecessors wrote about African American women’s experience of strength, endurance, courage, and perseverance, and Butler pays tribute to this important historic legacy without reproducing the same narratives about slavery by melding different genres. She contributes to this legacy of strong, assertive, creative African American female artists by appropriating a genre that enables her to employ devices such as time travel and memory loss to revisit the past/history without being completely limited to one particular period of time in her writing. In other words, Butler does not create her narratives in one particular setting or time period, but decides to write in a genre that will allow her to move fluidly from one time period to the next without creative censure. As writer, Butler provides a comprehensive view of history, contemporary society as well as a glimpse at an experimental future in her works. The advantage of writing in the genre of speculative fiction then is being able to cover a larger canvas so to speak. By being able to position African American women characters (and other minority characters in other works) as quest figures traveling through time and attempting to recover from memory loss, Butler envisions the possibility of creating a space to more comprehensively compare and question issues such as racism and sexism in these different spaces in time.

The melding of the past and present in Butler’s novels as well as taking established genres such as the historical novel and slave/emancipatory narrative and melding these genres with futuristic fiction force connections between different creative mediums. Butler evidently sees a utility in creating a bridge between these different
genres so as to create more possibilities for discussion and debate. In melding the genres, I believe Butler makes a statement that while it is necessary it is no longer sufficient to learn and understand history solely through historical textbooks, historical novels, and first-person accounts (including slave narratives) of history. Butler does not want her readers to passively ingest history through merely reading these texts without understanding the implications history has on current and future generations. As readers we must apply the history we are taught and consider the author’s point of view and not merely take what we read for granted. As readers, we need to understand how inequalities in power persist in contemporary society with regards to, but not limited to, race, gender, class, and sexuality.

Dana and Shori represent individuals on a journey to survive—to physically survive, emotionally survive their traumatic experiences, and their physical and emotional survival depend on the aid of their respective communities. The work of learning about history and applying that knowledge to the present-day issues is not a solitary enterprise. I believe the emphasis she places on individual as well as communal involvement in survival speaks to desire for society as a whole (as well as various marginalized groups) to recognize the many advantages of working together as a collective unit for a unified goal. Butler provides the reader with Dana and Shori as emotionally strong and independently-minded African American female protagonists who realize their limits as individuals and recognize and appreciate the support of their communities.

As a writer Butler leaves an indelible mark on her readers and constitutes a vital part of a long-standing African American female literary tradition and an inspiration to
future female writers of color who decide to write and create in new genres (perhaps continue to meld various genres to create their own creative mediums). By leaving her creative imprint in speculative fiction, Butler insures the survival of her intentions as a writer. I believe that an important goal of her fiction is to compel her readers to probe more closely into difficult issues such as race and power relations in contemporary society and inspire a fearlessness in her readers that her heroines in her novels exude regarding asking difficult questions regarding power dynamics, race relations, gender-related oppression and any forms of persisting domination occurring in society. Butler uses speculative fiction to confront society head on with questions regarding the past, present, and future. The fact that one can read Butler’s works from various theoretical angles (black feminist critical approach, post-colonial theory, etc…) reveals how one’s writing can open up a myriad of possibilities for readers and critics to interpret and apply her works to contemporary issues. Post-colonial critics and critics interested in critical race studies examine how literature addresses a society possibly reinforcing western notions of empire, imperialism, and domination and how a society’s current views on race relations and identity formation is reflected in that society’s literature. These burgeoning literary investigations regarding race and post-colonial study signal to a progressive movement in literary criticism wherein new conversations are being initiated. The problems of silencing, evasion, and erasure may be remedied through the initiation and stimulation of more open and honest dialogue and debate.

The over-arching theme to consider throughout all this analysis and discussion of literary criticism is the espousal of questioning and critical thought about past and contemporary society through art. Many critics have discussed at length on their own
and in conversation with each other about Butler’s ability to appropriate various writing styles or genres such as the historical novel and slave narratives and bridge those styles with a newer more popular medium such as speculative fiction. The advantage of borrowing from existing literary traditions or genres to create in newer genres such as speculative fiction is that one can ease the transition for readers used to certain literary forms while gradually acquainting them with newer forms with the potential to perform more functions in literature. Literature can serve various functions. Historical accounts and storytelling provides readers with written records of history or the past and provides readers with an access point to understand their individual and collective histories. Self-identity formation in part relies on the awareness of one’s past or a sense of history. So literature can work to inform or instruct a reader about history. McKay hones in on how different writers provided various points of view based on their life experiences that shaped their writing. African American women writers addressed their subjective experiences of struggles and their success in overcoming their struggles. bell hooks speaks strongly about how memoir and autobiography can work as mediums of resistance and ways to preserve a writer’s personal stories and ideas. The point here is that writing has consistently worked to help writers capture their ideas and personal stories/histories to pass down to future generations of readers. In addition to passing on valuable and influential writing to future generations, a writer has the potential to influence her readers to constantly interrogate what he or she reads. Butler performs the dual role of writer and critic as she melds genres to assert her voice and offers a social critique on the strongly held beliefs and actions of past and present societies. Butler writes her narratives so that readers will feel compelled to interrogate the motives and actions of her characters, of
their (the reader’s) own ideas, and each other ideas. In essence, Butler challenges us as readers to critically think about what we read and step outside of our comfort zones to question history and the society in which we live and not retreat from this quest. Most importantly, Butler creates heroines that assume leadership positions to initiate and carry on this quest of learning history and questioning what we read and think about race, gender, and power.
Works Cited


McKay, Nellie.  “Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising The Literary Canon.”


