

Perception and Complicity in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to thematically and formally compare and contrast Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This thesis makes the argument that although these two novels differ somewhat in form and genre, a meaningful comparison may be made on the basis that a white supremacist state forms the thematic backdrop of both novels. Interestingly, although the two novels are informed by different racially oppressive states, they come to similar ethical conclusions regarding perception and complicity. Both illustrate the ways in which the state influences perceptions, especially concerning others. These perceptions in turn facilitate individuals' complicity with oppression. However, the novels also caution against judging complicity in others without proper perspective. Complicity in certain individuals is at times unknown or unavoidable.

Another facet from which these novels are compared has to do with their narrative form. Both feature what James Phelan calls "character narrators." Portions of Phelan's narrative model for character narration are applied in order to contrast how each of the novels exploits the ethical potential of this form. The implications of tense are also discussed, especially in light of the unconventional use of the simultaneous present tense in Coetzee's novel.

This thesis concludes that the juxtaposition of these two novels demonstrates certain historical realities concerning the depiction of racially oppressive states. Moreover, it argues that each of these two novels illustrate a set of conditions which may be predicted in the other.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1: A Close Reading of J.M. Coetzee’s <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i> | 10 |
| Chapter 2: A Close Reading of Octavia Butler’s <i>Kindred</i> | 32 |
| Chapter 3: Thematic Considerations..... | 54 |
| Chapter 4: Narrative Considerations..... | 74 |
| Conclusion..... | 91 |
| Works Cited..... | 94 |

Introduction

Problem Statement

In many ways Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Butler's *Kindred* make for an unlikely pairing. While one is the work of the renowned South African linguist and post-colonial novelist, the other is the work of a lesser known African-American writer most recognized for her works of science-fiction. However, I would argue that these two novels have much in common both thematically and formally and that a side-by-side analysis of each can offer insight into some of the methods contemporary novels employ in a post-colonial/post-civil rights world. Moreover, this approach will, I hope, enable me to make a series of points about the thematics of the two works.

It cannot be denied that European contact with other continents during the colonial period has had an overwhelming impact on those spaces. That contact has largely been characterized by a profound imbalance of power and an impulse to impose a single narrative for the benefit of the colonial state. Not unlike the power that God grants Adam to name everything he finds in the Garden of Eden, colonial settlers have felt that it is their prerogative to define others unlike themselves as they expand their domains. Invariably, these definitions operate on the premise that what is European and Christian is "civilized," while everything else is "uncivilized." This leads to the perception that others are somehow less human, which then becomes the justification to eliminate, assimilate and enslave entire populations. These activities would have implications for the way in which people perceive and write about themselves and others for hundreds of years. In fact, the impact is still being felt today, which is something that is evident in the two novels discussed in this thesis.

Both of these novels deal with the problem of perception: how we perceive ourselves, how we perceive others and how much those perceptions are informed by the nations in which we live. Not only is perception handled on a thematic level in these novels, but it is a major aspect of their narrative forms as well. As the novels present characters that are forced to reconcile their previously held perceptions with their experiences, so too are the readers' perceptions positioned and re-positioned through narrative features. In this way, both novels make a type of meta-commentary on the power of written works, such as histories, to affect readers' perceptions. This is especially meaningful because the tendency of conventional

histories to undervalue or silence voices outside of the national narrative. I also point to complicity as having an important thematic and formal role in both works. Complicity and perception in fact go hand in hand, the implication in both novels being that many of the perceptions that the protagonists hold are symptomatic of their unwitting complicity in oppression. On a formal level, a more nuanced form of communication is illustrated through a triangle of authorial agency, narrative features and reader response.

Like the works of most authors, Octavia Butler and J.M. Coetzee's novels are informed by the lives they have led. Octavia Butler (1947-2006) was an African-American woman and career science-fiction writer. Butler had a somewhat introverted childhood and began writing at a very young age as an outlet. Her writing has been influenced by the popular science-fiction of the time, but also by the African-American experience. In an interview with Randall Kenan Butler explains the importance of non-literary sources for her work: "Every place I've lived is a non-literary source, every place and every person who has impressed me enough to keep my attention for a while" (503). Butler's body of work may then be described as a blend of science-fiction with social commentary from an African-American perspective. Butler freely incorporates elements of miscegenation, African lore and female African-American characters. Kenan notes that "Butler manages to use the conventions of science-fiction to subvert many long held assumptions about race, gender and power" (495). Perhaps none of Butler's works does this more than *Kindred*.

In light of Butler's body of work, *Kindred* sets itself apart. It is normally shelved with African-American literature, rather than science-fiction. Though time travel is an important thematic device in the novel, the mechanism that drives it is not. Butler acknowledges this explaining, "*Kindred* is fantasy...with *Kindred* there's absolutely no science involved" (Kenan, 495). Furthermore, not only is *Kindred* influenced by Butler's own life, but she has chosen to allow it to be heavily informed by the African-American slave narrative as well. In this way, Butler further foregrounds the racial and social commentary that is such an important part of her body of work. However, the author also admits to being unable to fully recreate the slave experience. She says of *Kindred*: "one of the things I realized...was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was" (Kenan, 497). However, precisely this problematic, the impossibility of one ever fully understanding the context of another's suffering without experiencing it themselves, becomes a major theme in *Kindred*.

J.M. Coetzee (1940-) is a South African linguist and writer of Afrikaner descent. In their introduction to *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, editors Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson write that Coetzee is a “first-world novelist writing out of a South African context” (1). In other words, Coetzee blends traditions of the Western novel with the South African experience. This is understandable in light of the culture of South Africa, which Huggan and Watson describe as a “bizarre and conflicted amalgam of first- and third-world elements” (1). It is also worth noting that Coetzee’s fiction began appearing in the 1970s, a decade that began a period punctuated by some of the greatest racial tension in South Africa’s history. However, this is not to imply that Coetzee is can be described as merely “a South African” novelist. At times, Coetzee seems to deliberately avoid South African identification. This is certainly the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a dystopian allegory of life in a racially oppressive Empire.

The fact of the matter is, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, like *Kindred*, is not a novel that is easily pigeon-holed into a specific framework, if any are. Some critics have spent time trying to fit the novel into a specific time and place outside of South Africa, some within and still others focus on its universalist qualities. There is no “right” answer, but in this thesis a combined approach will be argued. Elements of the Empire from the novel will be compared to the apartheid South African state, especially the period shaped by the government’s scheme of confronting perceived threats known as “total strategy.” Simultaneously, the racially oppressive Empire will be discussed in the larger context of white supremacy and subsequently compared to the slave state in *Kindred*. It is hoped that in this way that the two novels may meaningfully inform each other.

With these considerations in mind, it is therefore the aim of thesis to answer the following questions around *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*: how are the themes of perception and complicity presented and how do the protagonists of these novels deal them? How are perception and complicity related to the racially oppressive state? What formal features are employed by the authors to communicate ethical positioning in each of the novels? And finally, can these novels shed light one another? Before approaching these questions, some brief explanations are in order.

Methodology and Theory

It is important to insure that when a comparative study is made that the comparison be grounded by some commonality. Whether in theme, form or otherwise, some common ground must be found against which a comparison may be made. This is not to say that only similarities are significant. Differences may also be enlightening, perhaps more so than similarities. All the same, it is important to establish a basis from which two things may be compared. *White Supremacy* is a historical comparative study by George M. Fredrickson which outlines of the establishment and development of white dominance in the United States and South Africa. I refer to this work in Chapter Three: Thematic Considerations, but I think that some of his introductory comments serve as a useful explanation here. He explains that in order for a comparative study to be meaningful, a basic framework of similarities must first be established, “in order to show that one is dealing with the same type or category of phenomena” (xv). The opening of Chapter Three is intended to do just that: establish a common thread between the two novels around which comparisons and contrasts may be established. As I have mentioned above and in the title of this thesis, I believe that “perception” and “complicity” lie at the heart of Butler and Coetzee’s works discussed here. More specifically, the novels deal with perceptions and communication (or language) imposed by repressive states. I make the argument that the state in each of the novels is “white supremacist,” borrowing Fredrickson’s definition of the term. I explain my reasoning behind applying this term to both novels and discuss how the protagonists in both works are forced to navigate situations imposed by white supremacist states in order to come to their revelations. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to comparing and contrasting other thematic elements in the two novels that are related to perception and communication.

In Chapter Four: Narrative Considerations, I discuss some of the formal qualities of the two novels. In this chapter I make use of James Phelan’s narrative model relating to what he calls “character narration” as a basis for discussing and comparing the two novels. Phelan’s model is particularly well-suited to this study because not only are both novels distinguished by their character narration, but his model has a lot to say about perception and communication, only in this case it is a discussion of how the implied author communicates to the authorial audience through narrative features, which in turn influences reader perception. In other words, my argument is that the thematic elements of perception and communication are foregrounded by their use as narrative elements.

Keeping the above in mind, I believe that it is most useful to begin the thesis by offering a close reading of my own for each of the novels in question. The first two chapters do just that, each a close reading of one of the novels. The reason for this is to give a basis for elements that I have chosen to focus on later in the thesis. Since I refer back to both narratives repeatedly in the latter two chapters, I believe that it is important to have close readings as a reference point. Finally, the initial two chapters are not only “background” material, but I believe more firmly solidify the basis for comparing these two works.

Relevant Terminology

Significant aspects of theory and methodology, as well as that of my analyses, turn on terminology I use in order to discuss the two novels. I therefore find it necessary to briefly introduce the most important of these terms.

“others”

Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* both deal with experiences and perceptions regarding “others.” The term is defined in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* as “the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ego” (170). The verb form “othering” is also used, meaning “the process by which imperial discourse creates its others” (171). I believe that “marginalized by imperial discourse” is key here. As I have indicated above, one of the qualities of the repressive colonial state is to define everything as it “sees fit” without regard to conflicting perceptions. The definition of whom or what is “civilized” and who or what is not becomes the basis and justification of oppression. In both novels discussed here, those individuals who have been dehumanized by the “imperial discourse” are subject to state-sanctioned atrocities, whether it is torture and war in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, or torture and enslavement in *Kindred*.

It must be admitted that the definition of “others” is problematic as it relates to *Kindred*. After all, *Kindred* largely concerns itself with a specific time and place in American history: the antebellum slave state. There is after all, no “imperial centre” in relation to the location of oppression. This is undoubtedly what distinguishes American literature and its sub-genres from post-colonial literature. Perhaps somewhat before, but especially after the American Revolution, the United States became its *own* center. However, it cannot be denied that throughout the history of the United States the nation has been characterized by its white

supremacist qualities. The institution of slavery is, for example, tacitly acknowledged and accepted in the Constitution of the United States¹. Moreover, many of the mechanisms of othering characteristic of colonial states, such as dehumanizing and silencing, have been implemented in the United States as a means to justify and continue the enslavement and disenfranchisement of the country's African-American population.

Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis I use the term "others" in the post-colonial sense to refer to both the African-Americans in *Kindred* and the so-called barbarians in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Moreover, for simplicity's sake, I occasionally use the terms "barbarians" or "barbarian woman" in reference to characters in Coetzee's novel, although it is one of the premises of the novel (and a rather important one) that the notion that these people are "barbaric" is nothing more than a self-serving and subjective definition supplied by an Empire that is only interested in defining itself as "civilized." At various times in the novel the Magistrate uses terms such as "indigenous nomads" to refer to these people, but predominately he uses "barbarians," perhaps further indicating his inability to fully escape the perceptions that have been imposed by the imperial discourse. It should be noted that the use of the term "barbarians" in the discussion of the novel in this thesis is done so with the understanding that it is merely a marker of convenience and not descriptive.

Likewise, when referring to the others of *Kindred* as a people, I use the term "African-Americans." In the primary and much of the secondary literature the term "blacks" is used. This term is often quoted, but not used when speaking in my own words. Occasionally, other highly derogatory terms for African-Americans are used in *Kindred*. These have been quoted sparingly and only when it has been deemed necessary to provide the appropriate context.

"Implied Author"

In *Living to Tell About It*, James Phelan revises the concept of the "implied author" as developed by Wayne C. Booth. Phelan explains that he does this in part as a response to the debate surrounding the utility of the term. As Booth defined it, the implied author is a "second self" that the author constructs "with certain attitudes, beliefs, and values and these matters necessarily inform the narrative text" (Phelan, 39). The purpose of the concept is to account for authorial agency while not implying the intentions of the "flesh and blood" author. Booth developed this concept as a response to the New Critical "dictum that what the author

¹ See U.S. Constitution, Article 4, Section 2, Clause 3: This clause provides a legal framework for the return of fugitive slaves across state lines.

intended to achieve is not relevant to the critic's judgment of that achievement" (Phelan, 38-9). Booth rejects this because it fails to account for any agency the author has in designing the text. The concept of the implied author however, does just this. We may not "know" the flesh and blood author or her intentions, but we may observe the workings of a consistent construct the author creates.

Almost since the time since it was first published, the concept of the implied author has come under attack. The criticisms tend to move meaning away from authorial agency, such as the implied author, and closer to the reader's response to the text. Phelan notes that some of the criticisms "seek to relocate unreliability only in the interaction of reader and text" (38). Part of Phelan's project then is to refine the concept of the implied author in order to account for communication that may be attributed to what he regards as "curious phenomena" in texts, such as unreliability and redundant telling. Without the concept of the implied author these phenomena which often have a profound effect on meaning and the ethical positioning of the reader would have no other plausible explanation for their existence. Not satisfied with such a scenario, Phelan offers his definition of the implied author:

a streamlined version of the real author, an actual or purported subset of the real author's capacities, traits, attitudes, beliefs, values, and other properties that play an active role in the construction of the particular text (45)

This definition not only accounts for the communicative value of certain textual phenomena, but also allows a description of works in which the flesh and blood author constructs an implied author that does not necessarily square with her own values or beliefs.

For the purposes of this thesis I employ Phelan's definition of the implied author. At various times throughout, I use "implied author," "author," and the name of the author interchangeably. It should be noted that when any of these terms are used in relation to the narrative works discussed in this thesis, "implied author" as Phelan defines it should be understood. The exception is when referring to the authors in relation to non-fiction works, such as essays and interviews. In these senses, the flesh and blood author should be understood.

"Authorial Audience"

Just as the implied author is a construct that helps us understand the way in which a text is designed by a flesh-and-blood author, so too is the authorial audience. In fact, the authorial audience is related to the concept of the implied author. Just as the implied author is distinguished from the flesh-and-blood author, the authorial audience is distinguished from

the flesh-and-blood reader. The authorial audience may therefore be defined as “the hypothetical, ideal audience for whom the implied author constructs the text and who understands it perfectly” (Phelan, 213). In other words, the authorial audience is who the implied author has in mind when constructing a text. This is who the implied author ultimately directs her text towards. It stands to reason that if we accept that the implied author designs a text, then there should be someone for whom that text is designed. This is the authorial audience. Phelan indicates that as we read we attempt to join the authorial audience.

“Narrator” and “Narratee”

In the simplest terms, the narrator tells a story, while the narratee is her audience. However, both “narrator” and “narratee” should be distinguished from “implied author” and “authorial audience.” All four of these concepts are located within the text, but potentially occupy different planes of existence. In character narration, such as those discussed in this thesis, the narrator and the narratee are not only located within the text in question, they are also located within the narrative itself. Phelan writes that “the standard rhetorical approach to character narration is to assume that the narrator directly addresses a narratee and, through that direct address, the implied author indirectly addresses the authorial audience” (12). Thus, there are two tracks of communication in character narration: that which the narrator tells the narratee, and that which is indirectly communicated from the implied author to the authorial audience through a number of narrative features and the overall construction of the text.

“Telling Functions” and “Reliability”

Related to the concept of the implied author are “telling functions” and “reliability.” Accepting that the flesh and blood author constructs an implied author infused with a certain set of values, “telling functions” are Phelan’s way of explaining exactly how that implied author informs the text. Phelan specifies between two types of telling functions: “narrator functions” and “disclosure functions.” Each one of these telling functions refers to a different “communicative track” that exists within the text (Phelan, 218). “Narrator functions” refer to communication that occurs between the narrator and the narratee, while “disclosure functions” refer to communication that occurs between the implied author and the authorial audience (Phelan, 214-15). The distinction is especially relevant in narratives that make use of character narration because the narrator is located on the same plane of existence as the rest of the narrative. Therefore, she will be communicating to her narratee through her narrator functions, but be unaware of the authorial audience (the intended audience of the implied

author). The communication from the implied author to the authorial audience thus occurs indirectly through certain features, or disclosure functions, of the character narrator's telling. For this reason, Phelan describes character narration as "an art of indirection" (1).

According to Phelan, "reliability" is defined as the degree to which the narrator's telling is "in accord with the perspective and norms of the implied author" (218). The narration may be regarded as reliable or unreliable. As previously mentioned, Phelan sees the implied author "not as a product of the text but rather the agent responsible for bringing the text into existence" (45). Since this is the case, Phelan also locates reliability within the text since it is a product of the structuring of the text and is thus a product of the implied author's design. In other words, reliability (or unreliability) of the narrator is another tool that the implied author has at her disposal to communicate with the authorial audience "behind the scenes" of the narrator's telling.

In this thesis, Phelan's model of the relationship between implied author, narrator and authorial audience is used to describe the various levels of communication in Butler and Coetzee's works. The model is particularly useful for this task because both novels are distinguished by their character narration and the reliability features of those narrators. These narrative features are also characterized by different levels of perception, which I argue is major thematic element of these novels. As such, it is my position that certain thematic and formal elements of the novels serve to inform each other, making a meta-commentary on the power of communication and perception. However, it should be noted that my use of Phelan's model is not comprehensive, but rather elements of it have been adopted which I believe best serve to describe the works in question.

Chapter 1:

A close reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Introduction

It is almost immediately clear in *Waiting for the Barbarians* that though he serves as a functionary of the Empire, the Magistrate wishes to set himself apart from others who serve that same Empire. It is unclear who the narratee of the story is, but the Magistrate, at least in the opening passages of the novel, plainly wishes to cast himself as occupying the moral high-ground in relation to Colonel Joll. Almost everything about the Magistrate's early encounters with these representatives from the capital are described in such a way as to draw maximum contrast between the two. However, along with a sense that the Magistrate "protests too much" there are some damning contradictions in his reflections and behavior, especially towards a barbarian woman he houses. In this chapter I present a close reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* with a special emphasis on the topic of perception as presented through the Magistrate's narration. It is the aim of this close reading to underscore elements of the novel which illustrate the subjectivity of perception, both of others and the self. Moreover, I hope to show how the novel illustrates the means by which nations impose a national perception through control of communication.

The Magistrate Asserts His Distance

At the Magistrate's first meeting with Joll he is bewildered by the "two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire" (1). Joll explains the practical purpose of the sunglasses and informs him that "At home everyone wears them." Despite the apparent ubiquity of sunglasses in the capital, the Magistrate's description of them reveals how completely alien they are to him. One might expect a similar description from a time traveler from the past, or perhaps from a native who has spent his entire life far removed from a modern urban society, as we might perceive the so-called barbarians of the novel. In contrast to his own rustic life style, the Magistrate imagines Joll "with his tapering fingernails, his mauve handkerchiefs, his slender feet in soft shoes...back in the capital...murmuring to his friends in theatre corridors between the acts" (5-6). The Magistrate portrays this man sent from the capital with his urban luxuries as the antithesis of himself, a rugged and

knowledgeable “country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire” (8). Though they both serve the same Empire, the Magistrate clearly differentiates between the roles they play in its service. The Magistrate’s role is that of the hands-on local official, making decisions based on rational observation and not giving in to paranoid hysteria, to the benefit of border dweller and barbarian alike. However, Joll seems to represent to the Magistrate the faceless bureaucracy of the Empire, (emphasized by the opaque sunglasses which he is never without) his actions dictated by knee-jerk and reactionary policies.

Along with differences in the roles each plays in the Empire, there are contrasts in how the Magistrate and Joll perceive the barbarian “threat”. Joll has arrived in the Magistrate’s frontier town under the auspices of “the emergency powers” in order to investigate barbarian unrest, which is rumored to precipitate a general uprising. Joll’s “work is to find out the truth” (3). The Magistrate however goes out of his way to downplay the perceived threat of barbarian attack. According to him, the “so-called banditry” does not amount to much. They steal a few sheep or cut a pack animal from a train...they are mainly destitute tribespeople” (4). It is interesting that he uses the term “destitute tribespeople” and not “barbarians” to refer to the nomads who occasionally pilfer supplies. Later, after Joll has rounded up and interrogated two groups of indigenous prisoners, the Magistrate sarcastically asks the Colonel if his inquiries “among the nomad peoples and aboriginals” have been as successful as he wished (25). The semantics here do not seem accidental. These “nomads, aboriginals and tribespeople” could all be termed “barbarians,” but the Magistrate seems keen to demonstrate that he not only understands the nuances among the various peoples of the border regions, but that he also knows the difference between the bogeyman-like barbarian of imperial imagination and the real people who inhabit the frontier. In all the years the Magistrate has inhabited his town on the fringes of the Empire the barbarians have never lived up to their ruthless reputation.

Of this unrest I myself saw nothing...once in every generation without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing his home...raping his daughters. (9)

In this way the Magistrate emphasizes both his distance from Joll, (and capital of the Empire with its faceless bureaucracy) and his sympathy for the barbarians.

The Magistrate also takes issue with Joll’s methods, which he suspects include torture. During the evening in which Joll conducts his first interrogations, the Magistrate narrates that

“At every moment that evening as I go about my business I am aware of what might be happening, and my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain” (5). Clearly, the Magistrate is disconcerted by what he strongly suspects is happening to the prisoners. However, though he later hears rumors about screams coming from where the prisoners are quartered, the Magistrate claims to have heard nothing himself. At their next meeting, the Magistrate questions Joll about his procedures of interrogation. He does this by posing a problem to the colonel which exposes the general flaw regarding the use of torture to extract information:

“What if your prisoner is telling the truth...yet finds he is not believed?...to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more!...How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?”
(5)

Here, the Magistrate is either trying to gain a reassurance from Joll that he is not causing “unnecessary” pain, or he is actually trying to argue the fruitlessness of torture in general. The former would imply that the Magistrate supports the use of torture *to a certain degree*, but I would argue that the latter applies here. The Magistrate, who up to now has been begrudgingly hospitable to Joll, is now openly voicing his disapproval of torture and perhaps even trying to sway the Colonel’s point of view. This interpretation is supported by the Magistrate’s next reply. After Joll explains that there is “a certain tone” that enters a man’s voice when he is telling the truth, the Magistrate exclaims sarcastically, “The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?” (5). This is the “most intimate” he has been with Joll, and certainly the most confrontational up to this point. When the exchange is concluded the Magistrate remarks that “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll” (5). Again, the Magistrate expresses his growing discomfort with Joll’s presence and his aversion to the colonel’s methods. In doing so, he foregrounds his opposition to Joll and thus gains a great deal of reader sympathy.

The Problem of Complicity

Based on the textual evidence above, it is clear that throughout the opening chapter of the novel the Magistrate makes a concerted effort to distinguish himself from Joll, maintain his innocence and emphasize his own disapproval of torture. His only concession is an aside in which he questions “who am I to assert my distance from him?” (6). However, when he questions himself it only seems to underscore the fact that he is making a conscious effort throughout the first chapter to do just that: distance himself from Joll and the rest of the

Empire. The reader is then left to question the Magistrate's motives. We could of course take the Magistrate's narration at face value, that he is just a simple "country magistrate" who has been caught in the middle of a conflict that is not his own. In that case, it is quite natural that this minor official of the Empire distinguish himself from other officials who carry out acts of oppression. However, given the lengths that he goes to separate himself from the Empire he serves, it seems as if the Magistrate "protests too much." There appears to be a degree of unreliability in his narrative. The Magistrate condemns Joll's actions, yet simultaneously claims no direct knowledge of them. This contradiction and the fact that he is the protagonist of his own narrative puts his reliability in question. As such, the Magistrate's finger-pointing may be based in a deeper sense of collective guilt. His narration can therefore be seen as an effort to resolve the moral conflict he faces as an official of an empire that conducts, with his knowledge and tacit compliance, a targeted fear and torture campaign against the indigenous population.

Another possible explanation for the Magistrate's contradictory narration has to do with the distinction between responsibility and complicity. On the one hand, the Magistrate makes it clear that he sees Joll as responsible for recent troubles at the outpost. However, even as he places the responsibility for the mistreatment of the prisoners squarely on Joll, the Magistrate is bothered by a sense of his own complicity. As described above, the Magistrate draws a distinction between himself as a civil functionary of the Empire and Joll who represents its military arm. The narrator's perspective emphasizes that Joll has arrived to torture and press the barbarians into conflict, while the narrator himself advocates the relative peace of the status quo. However, what the Magistrate fails to recognize at this point, or admit, is that the easy life of a frontier official that he cherishes is direct a result of the actions of men like Joll. He hints at the cyclical nature of conflicts with the barbarians in his observation that "once in every generation...there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians" (9). Later, as he dines with a young officer newly stationed at the outpost he describes how the gradual salination of the town's water supply fuels the barbarians' belief that they will outlast the settlers. The officer disputes this interpretation, explaining:

"We are not going, therefore they make a mistake. Even if it became necessary to supply the settlement by convoy, we would not go. Because these border settlements are the first line of defence of the Empire" (56).

In other words, the very existence of the town and therefore the Magistrate's beloved position in it, are a not so much a result of natural population growth, but rather the Empire's need to

pressure the barbarians. Since this is the case, though he is not responsible for Joll's torture of the barbarians, the Magistrate cannot escape the complicity that his position implies. On some level, perhaps subconsciously, the Magistrate must be aware of his accountability, and this awareness informs much of his narration.

The burden of accountability must indeed weigh heavily on the Magistrate. Immediately after viewing the body of a prisoner who has died at the hands of Joll and his men he begins to complain that he "did not mean to get embroiled in this" (8). The Magistrate is certainly aware of and even criticizes Joll's methods before this, but somehow seeing the body of the tortured prisoner is a game-changer for him. It is as if, despite his knowledge of torture in the Empire, he is able to guiltlessly enjoy imperial benefits as long as he does not actually have to see broken bodies. However, the body of the tortured prisoner cannot be unseen and after Joll rounds up more prisoners for interrogation the Magistrate laments that "the joy has gone" from his life and that he wants "everything as it was before" (24-26). He is naturally outraged by Joll's interrogations, but that outrage seems disturbingly misplaced. The Magistrate is not as concerned with the effect of torture on the prisoners as he is with its effect on himself. This is not because he feels compelled to take drastic action against Joll: he in fact does nothing on behalf of the prisoners other than to write a letter to the capital, which he "wisely" decides not to send (21). Rather, the Magistrate's outrage directed towards the fact that Joll's interrogations happening right under his nose exposes the fact that he is simply unwilling or unable to do anything about it. He even goes so far as to imply that direct responsibility would in some way be preferable to a sense of complicity after the fact. When Joll departs, the Magistrate is left to deal with his victims. As he looks upon the "sick, famished, damaged, terrified" prisoners that Joll leaves behind, the Magistrate indulges in a grotesque musing:

It would be best...if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start...it would cost little to march them out into the desert...leaving them buried forever and ever...to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions (26).

However, the Magistrate claims that he is not a man of "fresh starts" and orders that food and medicine to be given to the prisoners and that they be released as soon as possible. Though he would never actually indulge in his dark fantasy, it reveals the Magistrate's problem with accountability: Joll may be directly responsible for the atrocities in the town, but once he is gone the frustrating task of living with the consequences falls to the Magistrate. He must remain and attempt the impossible task of restoring these broken people to their formal lives.

As such, from the Magistrate's perspective, the notion of a "new start" is somewhat preferable, since the elimination of these people would eliminate both the burden of action from the "innocent" citizens of the town as well as the ugly reminder of the atrocities that are carried out on the town's behalf, which the tortured bodies of the prisoners represent. This passage shows how the Magistrate, once again, is keen to show his audience how he "struggles on with the old story," in contrast with Joll and "the new men of the Empire" (26). Ironically, he orders the town's soldiers to thoroughly clean the barracks where the prisoners were housed and tortured and shouts "I want everything as it was before!" (26). He may not be making a "fresh start," but the Magistrate will, as far as he can, try to return his town to its "innocent" state in order to avoid the specter of complicity. Therefore, his claim of moral superiority has become a little more outrageous since it hinges on his audience believing he is making a difficult decision by not executing several innocent men, women and children, as well as his desire to gloss the unpleasant events that have taken place under his nose.

It is unclear who the Magistrate's intended audience is; others, himself or perhaps none at all. Regardless, I believe that by the end of the first chapter a purpose for his narration has emerged: he realizes that his life of relative ease and comfort in part depends on the reassurance that he is "a man of conscience," as J.M. Coetzee himself describes him in *Into the Dark Chamber* (Coetzee, 363). It then becomes necessary for him to distance himself from imperial acts of torture and the absurd rationality for it. However, in so doing the Magistrate's narration reveals a number of contradictions, such as his need to accuse Joll of torture while simultaneously disavowing any direct knowledge of it, only to later admit that he "stopped [his] ears to the noises" coming from the Colonel's torture chamber (9). Likewise, though he admits to "stopping his ears" to torture, the Magistrate points out that he was not doing himself any favors by staying in the town, that he could have (and perhaps for his own good should have) simply "handed over these two absurd prisoners...and gone on a hunting trip for a few days" (9). However, when Joll returns from an expedition into the wilderness to round up more prisoners to interrogate the Magistrate does in fact escape, not on a hunting trip, but into the arms of a prostitute "away from the empire of pain" (24). Furthermore, after Joll departs and the dust settles the Magistrate's primary concern is not so much how the Colonel's visit has affected the prisoners, but how it has complicated his own ethical standing. Through these features of the Magistrate's narration I believe the reader may detect a degree of unreliability as he struggles to come to terms with an inescapable level of

complicity. This struggle is further pronounced in the following two chapters in which the Magistrate's perceived distance from the forces of the Empire becomes less tenable.

The Barbarian Woman

Shortly after the departure of Joll's prisoners, the Magistrate notices a young barbarian woman begging in the streets. She has been left behind by the others, ostensibly because of severe injuries to her feet. The Magistrate reasons that it will not do to have her begging and living outdoors and therefore has her installed as a kitchen maid and his personal housekeeper. What follows is a chapter that offers crucial insight into the Magistrate's character and further examples of his attempt as narrator to guide his audience's (or his own) moral response.

It seems important to the Magistrate, at least at the outset, to emphasize the act of kindness that he is bestowing on the barbarian by taking her in off the streets. Indeed, in light of the previous chapter, the Magistrate seems ready to explain his actions as a good-natured attempt to reckon with his sense of complicity for what has happened to the prisoners. However, a great deal of the narration of his time with the barbarian woman seems designed to mask an ulterior motive. For example, the first day the Magistrate notices the barbarian woman, he passes her several times in the street and he remarks that "each time she gives me a strange regard," though later we learn that she is blind to everything other than peripheral vision (27). It is as if the Magistrate wishes to point out that the barbarian woman, rather than himself, has initiated contact between them. He ends up approaching her and points out that since "winter is almost here" she can share the cook's room (28). Although she initially refuses his offer, he continues his advances until she finally yields, eerily reminiscent of his earlier conversation with Joll in which the Colonel admits that his approach to the barbarian prisoners is to apply pressure until the subject yields. Moreover, rather than the cook's room, the Magistrate guides her to his own lodgings. In another aside he admits that the coming winter was nothing more than an excuse to goad her into his rooms, remarking "the distance between myself and her torturers...is negligible" (29). Interestingly, this statement runs parallel with his rhetorical question from the previous chapter in which he asks "who am I to assert my distance from [Joll]." In that case, the Magistrate questions his endeavor to distance himself from the Empire, yet proceeds to do just that. Here again, he makes a statement critical of the part he plays in the regime, yet fails to make the change in his behavior that those realizations would seem to imply. Despite this realization, the Magistrate later

rationalizes taking in the barbarian woman claiming that he has “relieved her the shame of begging” (34). The Magistrate is conflicted about his relationship with the barbarian woman, but not so much to change his course of action. Despite his self-critiques and insistence otherwise, the Magistrate proceeds to objectify the barbarian woman in ways that are reminiscent of the colonial tactics of the Empire which he is so keen to differentiate himself from.

Once he has escorted the barbarian woman to his chambers, the Magistrate begins an odd habit of ritualistically washing the woman, starting with her broken feet. He washes and massages her, and allows his fingers to trace her wounds. As he does so, he repeatedly asks her to describe how she received her injuries, but she is not forthcoming. “Nothing is worse than what we can imagine...don’t make a mystery of it, pain is only pain,” he wants to say to her (34). He becomes obsessed with the marks on her body, so far as to plainly admit that “until [they] are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (33). The Magistrate is likewise highly concerned with investigating the torture chamber, now restored to its original purpose as a part of the garrison’s barracks. Though he has ordered the return of “everything as it was before,” he later wishes to reconstruct the torture chamber. To do so, The Magistrate orders the men now quartered there to remove their possessions from the room. He then conducts a thorough inspection of the room, but besides some soot “the walls are blank” (38). He interviews a couple of the young soldiers who were present during Joll’s interrogations. However, as with his questioning of the barbarian woman and inspection of the torture chamber, there are few answers. One of the soldiers responds to a question of what happened to the barbarian woman with “I do not know sir!...There was nothing I could do, I did not want to become involved in a matter I did not understand!” (39). Interestingly, the soldier’s response echoes the sentiments the Magistrate himself expressed during Joll’s visit. It seems that the soldiers are no different from the Magistrate in their need to avoid admitting complicity. What is implied then is the subjectivity of perspective and ethical judgments. The Magistrate can no more expect an admission of accountability from the soldiers than he can from himself.

In a further denial of accountability the Magistrate asks the barbarian woman if she would like to return to her people, but he does not insist: “Do you like it, living in a town?...Are there things you miss?...If you really want to go back,...I will have you taken” (35). Her only response is to ask “Taken where?” (35). Her dilemma is similar to that of the fox cub the Magistrate gives her as a pet: she does not believe that the fox cub belongs in the

town, yet observes that it would be cruel to return the young creature to the wild to fend for itself without its mother. Later, when he asks her directly “Do you do whatever you want?...Come, tell me why you are here,” she can only respond “Because there is nowhere else to go” (43). The woman is in a position as equally or nearly powerless as the fox cub. In her current injured state, it may not even be possible for her to return to her people who depend on a nomadic lifestyle. The Magistrate has made his offer with the knowledge that there was little risk of having to act on it. As such, the offer is made for appearances only, either for the benefit of his audience, which is likely himself.

It has quickly become apparent that the Magistrate has not “acquired” the barbarian woman for her domestic services, nor to save her from begging in the cold. For him, she represents an artifact to be studied, and he is indeed a collector. Earlier in the novel he describes his hobby of excavating ancient ruins in the surrounding desert. As he works to uncover the crumbling structures from the dunes, he imagines that they are the work of an empire, not unlike his own, which has long ago passed out of existence while the nomadic barbarians remain. Among these ruins he discovers “wooden slips on which there are painted characters [he has] not seen the like of” (15). He lays them out in various combinations, in the hope that they might comprise a syllabary, or perhaps the elements of a picture. However, try as he might, the Magistrate cannot decipher these slips. This anecdote foreshadows his relationship with the barbarian woman. Later, he remarks that “until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood, I cannot let go of her” (33). As with the slips, he has added the barbarian woman to his collection and meticulously studies her in order to recreate a history that he deems fitting.

A Turn

The Magistrate does not (or is not able to) explicitly explain his obsession with the barbarian woman, but there are some strong implications. His intent becomes clearer as he compares the relationship he has with his favorite prostitute to that of the barbarian woman. The prostitute is of his own race and he finds her “very pretty.” The physical basis of the relationship is easy for him to understand: for him, “to desire her has meant to enfold her, to enter her” (46). In contrast, his desire surrounding the barbarian woman is not quite as tangible. The Magistrate seems in near-wonderment as he narrates his realization of the contrast: “I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body...I cannot even recall the other one’s face. ‘She is incomplete!’” (45). His previous rationalizations about helping the

barbarian woman or even sexually desiring her have suddenly evaporated. Once the Magistrate has stripped himself of these pretenses all that is left of his perception of the barbarian woman is that of a faceless, “alien body.” He seems to have gained a new found clarity of his own absurdity in harboring the barbarian woman like a pet. He almost sounds like a waking sleepwalker, surprised by his surroundings, when he describes her as something that has “fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed, for which I am responsible” (47). Furthermore, this moment of clarity forces him to make the unpleasant connection between himself and the barbarian woman’s torturers:

But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret...? For the first time I feel dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn, or tear, or hack your way into the secret body of the other!...I behave in some ways like her lover...but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate (46).

It has become apparent to the Magistrate that he has in fact objectified this woman in a manner that bears some similarities to her torturers. Both have directed their focus on her *body* rather than her *person*. The body of the other has represented for both an inconvenient fact, the mere existence of which is a problem to be solved. Each in their own way has attempted to tease non-existent answers out of those bodies. For the Empire this results in goading the barbarians into a conflict, which happens to serve its own interests. For the Magistrate the signs of torture on her body are like the wooden strips he has collected on his archeological excavations: he hopes that by studying these marks that he can gain some kind of insight into himself and his place in the Empire.

It is perhaps no surprise then that of all the barbarian woman’s wounds, of particular interest to the Magistrate are her eyes. Since their first meeting he has been fascinated by her eyes. Because of her mannerisms he initially believes she is blind. However, she explains that due to the torture she was subjected to her forward sight is blurred, leaving only her peripheral vision intact. This phenomenon fascinates the Magistrate. She can see, but cannot see *him*: “When she does not look at me, I am a grey form moving about on the periphery of her vision. When she looks at me I am a blur, a voice, a smell” (31). He narrates this from her perspective without the benefit of her input. It seems important to him that she see him in a certain way, perhaps differentiating him from the other officials of the Empire that she has come in contact with. Nevertheless, his interest in her injury lies not so much in what the implications are for *her*, but what it means to *him*. In the same sequence in which the

Magistrate begins to question his own motivations in bringing the barbarian woman into his chambers the first place, he also takes a new look into those eyes:

...with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me...*No! No! No!* I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself (47).

Here again, the Magistrate has a moment of clarity in which he is appalled by the implications of his own complicity in the mistreatment of the barbarian woman, and undeniable parallels that exist between himself and her captors.

From this point on, nothing is the same between the Magistrate and the barbarian woman. It is clear that some sort of turn has taken place in his attitude towards her. After he returns from several more nights with the prostitute, the ritualistic washing and massages cease and he remarks that he now finds the barbarian woman ugly and revolting. When this turn first begins to take hold he has another moment of what has become characteristic denial, exclaiming “How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed...I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!” (48). However, this is more a cry of desperation than anything else. The Magistrate realizes now that keeping the other as his self-reflecting pet was not much better than Joll’s torture of her. It is apparently a difficult pill to swallow, and the Magistrate seems desperate to cope. Eventually, he begins to have trouble remembering what the barbarian woman even looks like, remarking “if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start” (50). His previous criticism of the “new men of Empire who believe in fresh starts” is now ironic as he must “begin to face the truth of what [he is] trying to do: to obliterate the girl” (50).

The barbarian woman has become an inconvenient presence for the Magistrate, just as the barbarians are in general to the Empire. He now finds her ugly because she is a constant reminder of his guilt and complicity in oppression. As a means of coping with his guilt he tries to remember what she was like before she was interrogated. In this way he may cultivate a memory of her as a person, rather than the broken body he has objectified. However, the task proves difficult. He remembers seeing Joll’s barbarian prisoners as they shambled into the compound, but he struggles to place her within the group. He then conducts an interrogation of his own, hounding the barbarian woman with pointed questions about the day she and her people arrived in the town: “Do you remember when you were brought here...for the first time?...Where did you sit? Which way did you face?...On which side of your father

were you sitting?...Tell me what you were doing...Did you see me?" (51). All of this is a desperate attempt to reconstruct his memory of the woman, to create a version of her "as she was before the doctors of pain began their ministrations" (51). The whole exercise, at least in part, is yet another attempt by the Magistrate to find some way of mitigating the accountability for this woman he has inherited from Joll's operation. As he later explains in reference to the loss of two of the town's soldiers, "we survive as filiations in the memory of those we knew...Am I not also comforting myself?" (59). It would indeed come as a comfort to the Magistrate if he could construct and maintain a memory of the woman as a *person* rather than a *victim*. In the end however, he is unable to do so, except within a dream in which he imagines her as a child. Upon seeing the dream-child he exclaims "So this is what it is to see!" (57). He now realizes the futility of trying to mold and reconstruct her and also that he must let her go.

A Journey: Spatial Distance

Failing to "obliterate the girl," or even mentally restore her, the Magistrate decides that the only course left to him is to make the arduous journey into unknown territories in an effort to return her to her nomadic people. Unlike his previous half-hearted offer, the Magistrate now tells her flatly that he is taking her back, to which "She gives no sign of rejoicing" (63). Her position has not changed and she realizes that she has no choice in the matter.

The Magistrate chooses a guide and two soldiers to accompany them, as their journey will take them across a frozen wasteland and desert during the final throes of winter. Though the other men initially ignore the barbarian woman, in the course of the journey they eventually warm up to her. During a time of relative ease they begin to joke with her and the Magistrate is surprised to observe that as "the banter of the pidgin of the frontier goes on, she is at no loss for words" (68). Though she shared the Magistrate's chamber for months, she has opened up more with these men in the course of a week on the road than she ever did with him. This despite his pointed efforts to reconstruct her experiences and "decipher" her wounds. The poignancy of the moment leads to a profound change in the Magistrate's perception of the woman. In the village he had seen her as a broken body and then, as his guilt mounted, "ugly" and revolting. Now, he is thunderstruck to realize that "she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman!" (68). It is no coincidence that this sudden

change in perception has taken place outside of the Empire's domain. Spatial distance has facilitated actual attitudinal distance.

The Magistrate's journey provides him with spatial distance from the Empire, but also with the symbolic distance he has been searching for. As noted above, throughout the first two chapters of the novel the Magistrate spends a great deal of time asserting his distance from the Empire, but his protests largely ring hollow in light of his contradictory actions and attitude towards the barbarian woman. Once he has "crossed the limits of the Empire" he sees for who she is, rather than how he or anyone else in the Empire would define her (77). Only far from the Empire's influence do they consummate their relationship. At this stage the Magistrate is full of regret, lamenting that "like a fool, instead of giving her a good time I oppressed her with gloom" (68). This change in perception on the part of the Magistrate contrasts sharply with his previous delusions of his supposed "saving" of the barbarian woman and his "distance" from the rest of the Empire. However, one is not without sympathy for the Magistrate, since fully understanding the barbarian woman requires transcending an imperial culture he has been a part of his whole life. Only now can he see her true value as a person and regret his mistreatment of her.

Not only has the journey facilitated a change in the way in which he perceives the barbarian woman, but soon after their love-making he takes the most honest look into himself to date. For one thing, he recognizes that their most intimate encounter was immediately preceded by the woman sharing a moment of joy with the other men in their party. He reckons that "perhaps the truth is that it was one of [the other men] she was embracing when I held her in my arms" (69). However, he explores his feelings and claims not to be wounded by this because, though he has derived much pleasure from her, his feelings do not "go deep" (69). This leads him to seriously question the source of his obsession with her. The answer he comes to reveals what has become the duplicitous nature of his relationship with the barbarian woman:

it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her...are easily forgotten. Is it then the case...that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased...or is it the case that it is the marks on her that drew me to her...is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (70)

The answer is both. As noted above, the Magistrate "collected" the woman in order to decipher the story that her wounds and pain might tell. However, he was never able to fully reconstruct that history. Moreover, the more he dug, the more he recognized himself in the

acts of her torturers. Eventually, she became an inconvenient and ugly reminder of his own complicity. He in fact now acknowledges the failure of that project saying “perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put...or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through” (70). Both parts of this statement ring true. The first part is an admission that no account of that of the barbarian woman’s torture could reconstruct her pain or restore her to her formal self. The second part later proves to be eerily prophetic, as the Magistrate upon his return to the town will be forced to live through “that which has not been articulated.”

As to the Magistrate’s reasoning that in the dark her marks “are easily forgotten,” he has, of course, spent many nights previously “in bed in the dark” with her. The difference now is the very real distance he is from his post in the town. It is not so much that her scars are easily forgotten in the darkness of the tent, but that the Empire itself is easily forgotten so far outside the context of the outpost town. As their little band moves further from the Empire and approaches the lands where her people still hold sway, it becomes possible for the Magistrate to perceive himself and the woman in a context not defined by the Empire.

Not only does the barbarian woman prove to be “a witty, attractive young woman,” but as the journey ends she begins to assert some control over the Magistrate as he suddenly finds himself to be the powerless foreigner. As they approach an armed group of barbarian horsemen, he encourages her, without a hint of irony, to “Tell them your story. Tell them the truth” (77). He does not realize at this moment that it is precisely the same advice that he gave to the old man before he died at the hands of Joll and his men. The barbarian woman was certainly told to “tell the truth” while she was Joll’s prisoner and so understands its relative meaning. Whose truth should she tell *now*, her own or the Magistrate’s? As the only one able to speak to the armed horsemen, she more than likely has the life of the Magistrate and their companions in her hands. Fortunately for them, she appreciates the dark humor of the moment:

She looks sideways at me and gives a little smile. “You really want me to tell them the truth?”

“Tell them the truth. What else is there to tell?”

The smile does not leave her lips. She shakes her head, keeps her silence (77). He does not fully realize that it is *she* who has in fact taken pity on *him*. The Magistrate is typically slow to grasp the extent to which the tables have turned as he grips her arm and says “I wish to ask you very clearly to return to the town with me. Of your own choice...Do you

understand me? That is what I want” (77). His manner belies a belief that he can still get what he wants from the barbarian woman, or perhaps from any of the barbarians. As she prepares to depart with her people, the Magistrate offers to buy one of their horses with a bar of silver. The woman translates that the answer is “no.” He refuses to accept the answer and offers up the silver bar himself. The leader of the barbarians takes the silver, but as payment “for the horse he does not take” from the Magistrate (79). Remarkably, the Magistrate stills sees himself as being in a position to negotiate, which in fact emphasizes the powerless position he is actually in. For all his recent revelations, the Magistrate is still a man of the Empire and will, continue to perceive the world from that perspective.

Severed Ties

Upon their return to the outpost town, the Magistrate and his men quickly discover that a fresh batch of troops has been garrisoned there in preparation for a campaign against the barbarians. It is not the only change. Before they even arrive within the town gates the Magistrate is arrested for “treasonously consorting with the enemy” and learns that he has been relieved of his duties (85). The man who now sits behind his desk is Warrant Officer Mandel, who, like Colonel Joll, is a member of the Empire’s Gestapo-like Third Bureau of the Civil Guard. He is also connected to Joll somewhat in appearance, having an “immobile face” and staring “with clear eyes as an actor from a mask” (84). Joll’s ever-present “dark glasses” and Mandel’s “immobile mask” of a face both evoke a sense of men who hide (or lack) emotion and empathy. Even the office itself has been transformed from “clutter and dustiness to vacuous neatness” (90). This symbolic gesture is not lost on the Magistrate and he understands its import: that he, the Magistrate, is no longer in control.

At the outset, the Magistrate is in fact elated at his loss of control. He reports that he has “a spring in his step” as he is escorted to his cell, the very same room Joll used to interrogate the barbarians before (85). The room is fitting. Now, more than ever the Magistrate feels that there is some real distance between himself and the Empire. It is one thing to feel that distance outside the Empire’s sphere of influence, but quite another inside the walls of the town. His relief is palpable as he exclaims “my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man” (85). The Magistrate now sees himself as not simply having a different perception from the Empire, but as being in clear opposition to it. However, the Magistrate’s satisfaction with finding himself in opposition to the Empire is tempered by his realization that he is not completely

aware what motivates his opposition. He supposes that it may have something to do with having to watch “the new barbarians usurping [his] desk and pawing [his] papers” (85). However, it must be pointed out that placing himself in opposition to the Empire is not entirely difficult for the Magistrate since it in a sense frees from the guilt by association and burden of complicity that have plagued him. He is, at the very least, able to recognize that “there is nothing heroic” about his opposition, demonstrating a level of self-awareness that would not have seemed likely in the early stages of the novel.

The Nature of Torture and Symbolically Becoming the “other”

The Magistrate’s notion of being in “opposition” becomes meaningless as time goes by. The mere loss of freedom begins to have a profound effect on him, which he in fact finds surprising. He wonders if he even has the right to claim that he is being mistreated: “No one beats me, no one starves me, no one spits on me. How can I regard myself as a victim of persecution when my sufferings are so petty?” (93). However, it is the sheer monotony of his confinement that begins to whittle his spirit. With no one to talk to and nothing left but to do but eat and evacuate his bowels, he feels his humanity slipping away: “Truly, man was not meant to live alone!...A bestial life is turning me into a beast” (87). Where he had initially entertained notions of having a trial, he now realizes that “even the prospect of defending myself in court, [has] lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions” (96). The Magistrate is experiencing the self-fulfilling prophecy that the town’s prisoners have previously endured: when one is treated like an animal, one is more easily perceived as an animal. A parallel may be drawn between his predicament and the experience of Joll’s first group of prisoners as they were forced to wait idly in the barracks yard:

For a few days, the fisherfolk are a diversion...Then, all together, we lose sympathy for them. The filth, the smell, the noise of their quarreling and coughing become too much...the kitchen staff refuse them utensils and begin to toss them their food from the doorway as if they were indeed animals...Someone flings a dead cat over the wall during the night (21).

The treatment that the Magistrate has endured is not unlike that of the other prisoners. In both cases the conditions of their captivity have led to the perceived deterioration of their humanity.

The humiliating and inhumane conditions that the prisoners, and later the Magistrate, endure seem to have a corruptive effect on the surrounding populace. The Magistrate refers to this corruption as he sits confined in the same cell Joll used to torture his prisoners and

surmises that he too “will be touched by the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing” (89). As noted above, the townspeople are a fickle lot, whose sympathies for the oppressed quickly dry up as soon as those individuals begin to smell. The Magistrate is hardly exempt. Despite his decades of service to the town, after his arrest he finds he finds that “There are always faces pressed against the bars of the gate gazing at the spectacle...Many I recognize; but no one greets me” (87). This complacency eerily evolves into outright encouragement and participation.

When Joll returns to the town with a dozen naked barbarian prisoners led by wires strung through their cheeks, the whole town gathers to cheer the triumphal display. Joll then writes “ENEMY” with a stick of charcoal upon the bare backs of the barbarians. Soon, he brandishes a cane and proceeds to mercilessly whip his prisoners. All around the Magistrate observes “the same expression:...a curiosity so intense that their bodies are drained by it...organs of a new and ravening appetite” (115). Presently, a soldier gives a cane to a girl, who shyly approaches but “brings it down smartly on the buttocks...to a roar of applause” (116). It does not matter that none of these prisoners have ever wronged a soul in the town. Once the inhumanity and enmity of the barbarians is established, it then takes very little to provoke the town into committing atrocities. Given the effort that the Empire has put into making the barbarians into enemies, the town is already primed for aggression towards them. All it takes in this instance to remind the town of the barbarians’ inhumanity and enmity are their naked bodies with the word ENEMY scrawled upon their backs.

Eventually, the Magistrate’s simple confinement gives way to increasingly cruel torments, exposing him even more to the experiences of the aboriginal prisoners. Just as the barbarian woman had once been little more than a “broken body” to the Magistrate, so does he feel that he too has become “no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (93). When he refuses to discuss his meeting with the barbarians, Colonel Joll then leaves him to the devices of Mandel. The Magistrate wonders “how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure in the name of his eccentric notions” (126). What he discovers in the process is that his will to survive rests higher than any other notion he could care to hold. Part of the torture he endures at the hands of Mandel is being forced to go through strenuous yard exercises while naked. The Magistrate is pushed to his limits, yet despite his already weakened state he discovers that “after a little rest and the application of a little pain, [he] can be made to jump or skip or crawl or run a little further” (128). He sometimes thinks he is near the point where he will beg for his own death, but he never reaches it. The

Magistrate learns that, regardless of the humiliation or physical trauma, as long as the body endures, then so too does the will to live. Even after living in filth for months, being starved, beaten and humiliated, when Mandel asks the Magistrate for a statement before hanging him, the answer is “I want to live. As every man wants to live. I want to live and live and live. No matter what” (130). The Magistrate’s will to survive trumps all other principles.

The torturers are not concerned with challenging the Magistrate’s principles, which he notes are very soon forgotten during his ordeal. They are not even interested in dragging information out of him: “They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body...a body that can entertain justice only as long as it is whole and well” (126). This breakdown of his human spirit is in fact the goal all along. After two months of captivity he knows that “No matter if I told my interrogator the truth...they would press on with their grim business, for it is an article of faith with them that the last truth is told only in the last extremity” (105). The Magistrate must now fully comprehend how useless his words were when he advised the boy that he “must tell the officer the truth” (7). “The truth,” it seems, is relative. The officers of the Third Bureau are not concerned with the boy’s truth or the Magistrate’s. The only truth that matters to them is the “last truth,” the one that fits the Empire’s predetermined narrative. The Magistrate creates a parody of this notion when he is questioned about the slips of wood he found in the ruins. Joll believes it is a “reasonable inference” that the wooden slips represent some sort of clandestine communication between the Magistrate and the barbarians (120). When Joll demands that he translate the mysterious markings on the slips, the Magistrate precedes to ad lib their meaning: “See, there is...the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down...it can be read *justice*” (122). In this way the Magistrate not only lampoons the arbitrariness of “the truth” in the Empire, but also underscores the fact that if the barbarians made war against them, then it would amount to a justified retaliation to imperial aggression.

Only now can the Magistrate fully comprehend his previous surmise: “that which has not been articulated has to be lived through” (70). What the barbarian woman could not tell him had to be lived through to be understood. It is appropriate then, that when the Magistrate is brought out into the yard by Mandel the final time he is handed “a woman’s calico smock” (128). He has the choice to remain naked, but chooses to don the garment, symbolically becoming the barbarian woman herself. He has suffered torture, captivity and humiliation just as she has done. His tormenters even joke “That is the barbarian language you hear” as he

cries in pain (133). When his painful ordeal finally ends, he lives for a time as a vagrant, begging and scrounging for sustenance, just as the barbarian woman has done. Moreover, he is similarly forced to feel the burden of bearing lasting reminders of his torments. He is in fact aware that “people are surreptitiously fascinated” by the scar under his eye (140). Not unlike the barbarian woman, he has become a curiosity and an object of pity.

However, the Magistrate contrasts himself with the barbarian woman in that he is willing to “sing for [his] keep,” practically going door-to-door selling his story of abuse for a few morsels of food (139). As he spins his yarns, he is aware that in his voice is “the subtle whining of a beggar” (141). The barbarian woman by contrast was willing to “do washing” and repeatedly refused the Magistrate’s “charity” (28). The barbarian woman who the Magistrate pitied and believed to be “oblivious,” is apparently the one who came through the ordeal of imperial torture with more pride and human spirit intact (28). In a later conversation with one of the cook’s she worked with, The Magistrate discovers that she was far from pitiful and “She never complained, she always did what she was asked...She was friendly. There was always something to laugh about when she was around” (166). Though the Magistrate could perhaps not be blamed for his behavior after what he had been through, his experience underscores precisely how *un*-barbarian the barbarian woman in fact is.

The Nature of Empire

Once the distance from the Empire that the Magistrate has taken such care to assert becomes a reality through his torture and ostracization, he wants no part of it. However, though he manages to pilfer a key and sneak out of the barracks, he cannot bring himself to leave the confines of the town. He realizes that “there is nothing outside of the walls for [him] but to starve” (110). His conscience tells him to break with the Empire, but he cannot survive without it. He is stuck in his position by virtue of his nationality. Without any sustainable options, the Magistrate voluntarily returns to the barracks, only to find that he was hardly missed. Even after his formal release, he continues to haunt the town as a ghost of his former self. He can only toy with the idea of leaving the town, despite the obvious hardship of homelessness, the coming of winter and the perception that a barbarian invasion is imminent. The oasis is the only home he knows and he does not believe he would survive a journey to the capital because his “heart would not be in it” (144). Although he can now identify with the other as never before, he cannot divorce himself from the fact that he is a man of the Empire

and in order to survive he must continue to operate within it. As he learned during his torture, one's sense of survival takes precedence over any other principles held.

The same holds true for the rest of the town. For many, perhaps most, survival means escape to the capital. Though these individuals are branded "cowards and traitors" of the Empire by the soldiery, the exodus continues (143). After it is learned that Joll's latest expeditionary force has perished in the wilderness, even those same soldiers abandon the town, looting as they go. Joll was in fact somewhat correct when he assures the Magistrate that the townspeople were not concerned that he had been replaced and "to the people in this town you are simply a clown, a madman" (124). However, just as the townspeople turned on the Magistrate, so too do they quickly turn on the capital forces quartered in their town as troubling incidents begin to escalate. Only weeks after Joll's triumph in the square, the quartermaster's wife complains about "all these strangers from the capital, upsetting things!" (139). When Joll makes a brief reappearance after his failed campaign, he is literally run out of town with townspeople hurling rocks at his carriage from the town walls. It turns out that the townspeople care no more for imperial allegiance than they do for one incarcerated official. What they are concerned about is survival for themselves and their children. An imperial campaign against the barbarians is fine with them until it begins to destroy their livelihood. Once again, the impulse to survive trumps other ideals.

The town's reaction to the troubles brought on by the Empire's campaign against the barbarians reveals one of the inherent problems with the imperial state: the conflict of interests between the Empire and the frontier town. The capital from which the Empire is ruled is simply too far removed from the realities of the frontier town. When the Magistrate suggests to a young officer that the barbarians will outlast the town, the officer answers "Even if it became necessary to supply the settlement by convoy, we would not go...these border settlements are the first line of defence for the Empire" (56). However, as noted above, the garrison did indeed leave and took much of the town's supplies with them. The Empire is stubbornly willing to impose fruitless hardship on its frontier people, if only to prove the philosophical point that the Empire cannot fail. It in fact exists only to continue. The townspeople of course, and eventually even the troops garrisoned there, prove to be unwilling to endure those hardships on the behalf of the faraway capital.

The Magistrate comments in further detail regarding the inability or unwillingness of those ruling the Empire to even contemplate anything resembling failure. He reasons that the

root cause of the Empire's inability to harmonize with its domain is that it "has created the time of history" (146). The history of Empire has no end. The Empire exists only to prolong itself. In order to have a reason to exist the Empire must cultivate bitter enemies without and fear within, or as the Magistrate explains, "By day it pursues its enemies...By night it feeds on images of disaster" (146). The priorities of Empire stand in stark contrast to those of the barbarians, the fisherfolk and most of the denizens of the frontier town. For these people, to survive and prosper is enough. They have no use for a history of progress and triumphs to compare themselves against. Rather, they live within the moment and the season, not concerning themselves with what they were and what they will become, only with what they *are*. According to the Magistrate, this is where Empire inevitably fails because "it dooms itself to live in history and plot against history," the inflexibility of its mere existence being its undoing (146). Unfortunately, that inflexibility is what drives the Empire to carry out atrocities as it imposes itself artificially and unnecessarily upon the realm.

Although the Magistrate is well aware of the machinations of Empire, he nonetheless quietly resumes the duties of his former post. With the garrison and a large portion of the town having evacuated, he leads the desperate preparations for the oncoming winter. No one in the town challenges his authority, clearly indicating that the town values its survival above the narrative that Joll offered regarding the Magistrate. The Magistrate wonders if continuing in his post is the right thing to do, saying he "toyed more than once with the idea of resigning...But...someone else will be appointed...and nothing will have changed" (152). Ironically, nothing changes with the Magistrate in charge either. Therefore, the Magistrate carries on in the hope that he can recover some of the quiet times that he had hoped to retire in. He knows the Empire cannot last, hence the title of the novel, yet he "presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (170). There is simply nothing left to do but continue to survive.

Conclusion

The Magistrate's perception is at the heart of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. He perceives himself in opposition to the Empire and its ruthless representatives, which initially wins him the reader's sympathy. However, inconsistencies in his narration, coupled with his treatment of the barbarian woman, call his perceptions into question. There is much he is clearly not seeing, or seeing and misperceiving, chiefly his complicity in regards to the Empire. His revelation of self-awareness eventually comes after a great deal of pain and soul-searching.

However, in a surprising turn, despite his profound revelations and the great deal of pain he endured at the hands of the Empire, the Magistrate continues to resign himself to its service.

Coetzee's novel is rich with episodes illustrating the subjectivity of "truth" and "perception." Furthermore, the novel emphasizes the fact that much that is taken for granted as "truth" is often imposed by a state whose interests are invariably self-serving. The novel also emphasizes stranglehold the state has on discourse concerning itself and the barbarians. The Magistrate recognizes this aspect of the Empire as well as his complicity in it, yet in the end he fails to act according to his conscience. The relationship between the Empire and communication will be elaborated on further in "Chapter Three: Thematic Considerations."

The Magistrate's inability to act may be seen as his ultimate ethic failure, but Coetzee complicates the matter somewhat. There is every indication that the Magistrate has in fact no other choice. There are things he can, and indeed does, throughout the novel that are ethically sound, such as voice his objections to authorities, provide comfort for the oppressed and try to recognize and attempt to correct his moral failures (as he has done with the barbarian woman). His moral dilemma is that there is only so much he can do. He can morally oppose the Empire, and yet he cannot live without it. To simply wander off into the desert would be suicide. As previously pointed out, the novel shows that the will to survive will trump moral dilemmas. Furthermore, as will be shown in later chapters, not only do the thematic elements point to The Magistrate's limited ability to act, but Coetzee also employs narrative features to illustrate the point to his audience. Finally, similar themes regarding perception and communication are present in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, however with some important differences. For instance, *Kindred* adds the temporal/historical element to the discussion. The following chapter offers a close reading of the novel.

Chapter 2:

A Close Reading of *Kindred*

Introduction

The African-American slave narrative is a literary genre that stems from the autobiographical accounts of slaves and former slaves. Popularized in the United States and Britain during the height of the abolitionist movement, the genre represents an important tool in enlightening readers to some of the horrors of slavery. According to William L. Andrews in the introduction of the University of North Carolina's North American Slave Narrative project, though these works have at times been challenged as antislavery propaganda, "some of the most important revisionist scholarship in the historical study of American slavery in the last forty years has marshaled the slave narratives as key testimony" (Andrews, "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative"). In other words, they may be regarded as important works of historical record.

It is also difficult to overstate the importance of the slave narrative in terms of African American literature as a whole. Again, according to Andrews, "until the Depression era slave narratives outnumbered novels written by African Americans." As such, slave narratives and the responses to them have become a crucial "vehicle for dialogue over slavery and racial issues between whites and blacks" (Andrews). This dialogue in fact continues to this day with the advent of the "neo-slave narrative." Through such novelization not only are firsthand experiences of racial oppression presented for a new audience, but the sources of oppression and its long term consequences may be examined as well. It is from this perspective that I approach *Kindred* in this work.

As with conventional slave narratives, *Kindred* is a first-person narrative in which the experiences of the narrator take center stage. The narrator draws upon her memories of life under slavery as the basis for the plot and thus functions as both story-teller and main character. However, novelized neo-slave narratives such as *Kindred* allow for a number of twists which distinguish them from traditional slave narratives. In the case of *Kindred*, the most distinctive feature is that the narrator, Dana Franklin, relates her experience after being inexplicably drawn through time and space from her southern California home in 1976 to the

mid-nineteenth century Maryland plantation of her ancestors. Dana in fact makes the round-trip journey numerous times in the course of the novel. Octavia Butler's treatment of the novel opens up new narrative possibilities for relating the experience of slavery, for example the emphasis on how modern Americans (both white and African-American) perceive the slave era and its participants. As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, there is an emphasis on the ways in which the state influences the perceptions of individuals. These and other aspects of Dana's experience will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Another aspect *Kindred* which is discussed here is the reliability of the narrator. As mentioned above, the reliability of traditional slave narratives were sometimes challenged, but this was due to political reasons rather than pointing out a narrative choice on the part of the author. With a novel such as *Kindred* we may (and should) question the reliability of the narrator and examine what narrative points are made through the author's narrative choices. In this chapter I offer a close reading of *Kindred* and point highlight thematic and narrative points that will be elaborated on in the second half of the thesis.

Emphasis on History and Memory

The concepts of "memory" and "history"- both collective and individual- play central roles in *Kindred*. From the start the reader is presented with a prologue which firmly places the novel as being based on the recalled experiences of the narrator, Dana. At this point, it is far too early for Dana's audience to guess exactly what those experiences were, but it is clear from the opening lines that Dana has endured significant physical trauma:

I lost my arm on my last trip home. My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone (9).

Butler's choice that Dana should "begin at the ending" in telling her story is interesting in that it highlights the role that perception plays in how we understand history. We may guess at what sort of traumas Dana has endured, but in truth, until she relates her account, we have no way of knowing. Perhaps she will never fully know comfort and security again, just as she will never have a left arm again. Dana's trip to the *past* has forever changed her perception of what it means to be an African-American woman in the *present*. Therefore, her experience has not only left her with a lasting physical trauma, but also with a change in perception.

This leads in to what may be seen as a central thesis to Butler's novel: where histories fail, memories may serve. "Histories" in this sense refers to the conventional recordings of events, in which either intentionally or unintentionally, emphasis is made from a certain

political or ideological standpoint. Memories, on the other hand, such as slave narratives, are written not only by those who experienced events firsthand, but also often by those who have no voice in other sources. *Kindred's* prologue provides an excellent illustration of this. As Dana lies in hospital unable to explain her missing limb, she is questioned by the police:

“How did you hurt your arm?” they asked. “Who hurt you?” My attention was captured by the word they used: Hurt. As though I’d scratched my arm (9).

Not only are the police unable to fathom an injury that has no immediate cause, but they are unable to get their heads around its scope. Something has clearly left an indelible mark on Dana, but what exactly has happened is vague and difficult to understand. Dana herself at that moment is unable to express to the police exactly what happened, and if she did it is highly unlikely she would be believed anyway. The truth is, the source of Dana’s trauma exists only in the distant past. The cause of her pain is long gone, but her injury remains all the same. Such is the dilemma of African-Americans and other historically oppressed people today. Dana’s suffering is symbolic of the difficulty of descendants of the oppressed to understand their own pain, let alone find a voice and relate their experiences to a likely unreceptive audience.

In hindsight, it is also interesting that at this time there is no mention of the marks that the past has left on Dana’s husband, Kevin. Later, it is revealed that Kevin is in fact white and accompanies Dana on one of her journeys to the past. Unfortunately for Kevin, he becomes separated from Dana when she returns home and is forced to live out the next five years of his life in the nineteenth century. When the two are finally reunited, it is clear to Dana that the past has taken its toll on Kevin.

His face was lined and grim where it wasn’t hidden by the beard. He looked more than ten years older than when I had last seen him. There was a jagged scar across his forehead - the remnant of what must have been a bad wound. This place, this time, hadn’t been any kinder to him than it had been to me (184).

This is clearly not to suggest that the struggles of a white man in the nineteenth century are equivalent to those of an Africa-American woman, and a slave at that. The point is rather a reminder that African-Americans are not the only ones to be deeply affected by America’s slave-holding past. The legacy of slavery has strong implications for whites as well. Even though the past “hadn’t been any kinder” to Kevin than to Dana, this is not made apparent right away. The omission of Kevin’s wounds from the prologue seems intended to make a narrative point: the difference between Kevin and Dana is a matter of perception. Dana’s wounds, though not fully understood at the outset, are obvious. Kevin’s, on the other hand,

are not revealed until after the couple has experienced their unconventional “lesson” in history.

The titles of each chapter also elicit a sense of the traumatic history of slavery. Each of the six chapters is titled with a simple definite noun: “The River,” “The Fire,” “The Fall,” “The Fight,” “The Storm” and “The Rope” (7). The titles seem designed to portray an increasing sense of violence and confrontation. It may not even be too far off to suppose that they trace the very history of the African-American experience, from the watery middle passage (“The River”), to the abolitionist struggle and Civil War (“The Fight” and “The Storm”), and to finally, to the lynchings of the Jim Crow era (“The Rope”). Dana’s journeys in time may also invoke imagery of the middle passage, as they are always immediately preceded by her feeling “dizzy, nauseated” (13). Interestingly, and certainly not coincidentally, “The River” opens with Dana informing her audience that “The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember” (12). The summer of 1976 is of course the summer the American Bicentennial, the 200th anniversary of the signing of The Declaration of Independence. This document’s claim which declares that “all men are created equal” would in fact ring hollow for many Americans for generations to come, and to some extent it still does. The celebrations of that Bicentennial year stand in stark contrast to the imagery of traumatic history that Butler opens her novel with. By juxtaposing the Bicentennial with Dana’s journey Butler emphasizes one of the very real human tragedies upon which the United States is built, as opposed to conventional histories which often serve to create a national mythology.

Dana’s Modern Perceptions

As “The River” opens, there’s reason to believe that Dana has bought into at least some of the promise that the Bicentennial celebrates. Unpacking boxes in her living room in June, 1976, she has still not lost the “comfort and security” she enjoyed before her final return home. However, it takes very little time in the past for Dana to lose that feeling. Her first journey to the past lasts no more than a few minutes, but soon after her return it is apparent that home no longer feels like a safe place. She says to Kevin, “I don’t feel secure here...Maybe I’m just like a victim of robbery or rape or something – a victim who survives but doesn’t feel safe anymore” (17). It is no wonder that she feels this way. That short space of time has proven to be a compressed and violent experience. Besides having to deal with the disorientation and shock of her sudden change of surroundings, she rescues a young boy from

drowning in a river, has her back pounded by the fists of his mother as she tries to resuscitate him and ultimately is forced to stare down the barrel of his father's rifle. However, it is interesting that she no longer feels safe in her own time. Her firsthand experience of the past has affected the way she perceives the present.

Dana narrates *Kindred* in the past tense, effectively relating the events of the novel post-time travel experience, which is emphasized in the aforementioned prologue. From the very start of the novel the reader is already aware that she has been through an intense trauma and will be forever changed by it, both physically and psychologically. Through her experience, Dana has lost the "comfort and security" she once enjoyed in her own time. Her time in the past has led to an attitudinal change in the present. The present that Dana returns to is the same one that she left, so it would be logical for her to surmise that perhaps was *never* actually as secure as she once thought. Such a realization must color the way she perceives the events of her own life. Certain events in her life that at one time seemed coincidental may now be recalled with a wider awareness of her own oppression. In short, one would expect Dana's narration of her own past to look quite different *after* her time travel than if it had been written *before*. However, as will be shown below, Dana's recollection of her own past does not reveal much of an indication of being affected by her attitudinal shift.

Both "The Fall" and "The Fight" open with a short interlude in which Dana describes the start of her relationship with Kevin. The opening of "The Fall" centers around the period when she first met Kevin. At that time she is a starving artist-type writer, struggling to make ends meet while working odd jobs through a casual labor agency. She and the other regulars at the labor agency refer to it as a "slave market" (52). Oddly, though she has experienced actual slavery firsthand, she makes no comment on this irony. To the contrary, she immediately backtracks from the nickname:

Actually, it was the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs, anyway (52).

However, other than the over abundance of available labor, there are parallels with slavery, namely the commoditization of human beings at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Though Dana is educated, intelligent and has experience writing articles and press releases for an aerospace company, the jobs she is called on to do by the labor agency are of the most menial variety. No distinction is made between her and the "winos trying to work trying to work themselves into a few more bottles" (52). She describes the monotony of the work:

You swept floors, took inventory, washed dishes...cleaned toilets, marked prices...you did whatever you were sent out to do. It was nearly always mindless work, and as far as most employers were concerned, it was done by mindless people. Nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks (53).

She is compelled to do this work by no force other than her need for a livelihood, so it is certainly not slavery. However, she is objectified in much the same way. She is treated as a rental property rather than an owned property, but other than that the similarity is compelling.

Dana's financial stability at this time stands in contrast to that of Kevin. Initially it seems that they are pretty much in the same boat. Kevin has also taken a job to supplement his struggling writing career, and they in fact meet while working in the same auto-parts warehouse. However, Kevin has not been forced to work through the casual labor agency, instead working as one of the warehouse's regular employees. Both have had little success earning a living as writers up to that point, but Kevin has previously had three novels published, in comparison to Dana's handful of short stories sold to "little magazines no one has heard of...The kind that pay in copies of the magazine" (55). She does not even have enough money for lunch when they first meet. Additionally, Kevin announces that he recently sold a book which will allow him to quit his job at the warehouse. Though Dana admits to feeling "a terrible mixture of envy and frustration," she makes no indication that Kevin's white-male privilege has played a part in his relatively more successful financial situation. However, relating her story as she is after her experience on the Weylin plantation, it is hard to imagine that the idea has not crossed her mind.

After what Dana has been through and her comment that she has lost "comfort and security" in her own time, it seems that she is demonstrating a degree of unreliability in the characterization of her own past. She is narrating her own past, but from the perspective of her *past self*, rather than her present, post-experience self. The effect is that a certain continuity within the novel is preserved. We know from the start that an attitudinal change has taken place within Dana, but that change becomes far more meaningful knowing where her starting point is. She is down on her luck when she meets Kevin, but she does not connect that to race and gender. She sees no real difference between herself and Kevin and is somewhat upbeat about her situation, commenting "He was like me – a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying," as if the differences in their financial situations were a matter of luck. She is every bit a confident, liberated African-American woman. She feels no need to comment on the implications of dating a white man twelve years her senior. In short, before her journeys to the past, Dana is a person who is able to take things at face value. In this way, the reader gets

more of a sense of the “comfort and security” that Dana has lost, and who she was before her time travelling experience.

Dana’s sense of “comfort and security” is not the only perception that is challenged in the course of *Kindred*. Not only is Dana forced to reconsider how she views her present, but she must also reevaluate her understanding of the relationship between master and slave because neither truly lives up to her expectations. Additionally, she and Kevin both find that their access to modern tools and historical information in the present offers them no real advantage in the past. Kevin especially, despite other advantages inherent to his race and gender, finds himself woefully unprepared to cope living in a slave state. These characters develop and their perceptions change as their understanding of the past goes from historical to experiential. This is one of the important themes of *Kindred*: the past and present are not separate entities, but are rather parts of a continuum and their interconnectedness means that each can affect how we perceive the other. For this reason, I will next to focus on these character developments in my close reading.

Memory and History

Upon her return to the present after her first journey to the past, Dana tries to convince Kevin that what happened was not a dream or a hallucination. The event has made such a profound impression on her that she does not simply “tell” Kevin what happened, she “remembered it all for him – relived it in all detail” (15). Kevin has a difficult time believing her version of events. From his perspective, she simply vanished for a few seconds and reappeared on the other side of the room. Though she reappears “wet, muddy, and scared to death” he cannot bring himself to believe her account (16). The problem is the difference of perspective and available “facts.” The couple’s dispute over what actually happened to Dana illustrates the difference between conventional “histories” and remembered accounts.

Howard Zinn opens his *People’s History of the United States* by critiquing conventional histories “in which the past is told from the point of view of governments, conquerors, diplomats, leaders” (9). These are the histories that are concerned with facts: dates of battles, lines of succession, famous documents. While this sort of information is not *wrong*, Zinn argues that it ignores how historical events are perceived by large portions of the population. This is why he chooses to “tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves” (Zinn, 10). It is not that these other stories have not been told, but in conventional histories they have been

deemphasized in favor of tellings that operate under a pretense of a national interest. Zinn argues further that this is an ideological choice and implies “acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress” (9). This explains the value of firsthand accounts, such as slave narratives because they tell the stories of otherwise voiceless populations.

When it comes to Kevin trying to get his head around Dana’s vanishing and reappearance, he resorts first to the “facts” as he knows them: “It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts” (16). This is a supernatural event, but he easily accepts what he saw as fact. Yet, he is far more reluctant to accept Dana’s perspective and later implies that she had a dream or hallucination. Dana is forced to explain this contradiction to him, saying “And I know what I saw, and what I did – **my facts**. They’re no crazier than yours” [emphasis mine] (16). Dana is pointing out to Kevin what Zinn argues above, that “history” and “facts” do not tell a complete story. Kevin has *his* facts and Dana has *hers*, and just because they are different, one does not invalidate the other. If anything, they complement each other. Kevin’s account is enhanced and better understood in light of Dana’s firsthand perspective. This is part of the reason why slave narratives are so important, and why neo-slave narratives continue to be written. They serve to fill the gaps in conventional histories.

However, it is not a matter of course that these types of accounts are absorbed into the mainstream historical canon. Just as Kevin is reluctant to believe his wife, so too have the memories of slaves been slow to be accepted as part of the historical record. As noted above, they were sometimes dismissed out of hand as propaganda and even inspired literary responses in the form of antebellum romanticism. It is not that Kevin does not *want* to believe his wife, but he is a product of his place and time, and as a white man he is primed to assume a role of authority, even unwittingly. For her part, Dana seems willing to acquiesce somewhat. Though she clings to the notion that what happened to her was real, it is a frightening thing to hang on to:

“As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about – like something I got secondhand...I’m pulling away from it because it scares me so” (17).

Kevin’s answer to this is “Let yourself pull away from it...Let go of it,” and so their compromise is struck: Kevin desperately wants the whole episode to be a dream, and Dana is

afraid to approach it (17). However, before they are allowed to become fully comfortable, they will have to face the past again.

Dana is soon drawn to the past once again, this time to the bedroom of young Rufus Weylin, who is now a few years older. Once again, Dana must act quickly to save Rufus' life, this time stopping him from burning down his own house. On this occasion, her journey lasts a great deal longer and Dana must cope with the fact that her modern historical knowledge has not prepared her for what she must face in the nineteenth century, particularly the heightened level of violence. When Dana asks Rufus why he set his curtains on fire he answers that it is revenge against his father and then pulls up his shirt so that she can see "the crisscross of long red welts" and "ugly scars of at least one much worse beating" (26). It is not the first vengeful fire the boy has lit and Dana is surprised to learn that "the boy knew more about revenge than [she] did. What kind of man was he going to grow up into?" (25). As she narrates, Dana of course knows the answer to this, and her question foreshadows that answer to the reader when she describes her ancestry.

The oldest ancestor that Dana knows anything about is Hagar Weylin, who once gave her parents' names as Rufus and Alice Weylin in a family Bible. As a boy Rufus confirms to Dana that he has a friend named Alice. It begins to dawn on Dana that Rufus is in fact her ancestor. This clearly comes as a complete surprise to Dana as she asks herself "How would she marry this boy? Or would it be marriage? And why hadn't someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white?" (28). Another factual account, this time her family Bible, cannot account for all the relevant details. Here again, is an emphasis on the important role played by the memories of people otherwise left out of conventional historical sources. This is also another example of Dana's narration being somewhat deceptive. She knows very well at the time of telling that Rufus and Alice's offspring is not the result of marriage. The effect, as above, is that Dana's present-self continues to emphasize the inexperience of her past-self. Dana shows that at this point in her journey she is continuing to "pull away" from the painful truth, that is to say, that Hagar's birth would be the result of rape. Knowing that Hagar was born in Maryland, a marriage between Rufus and Alice would seem highly unlikely. After all, she would almost certainly be aware in 1976 that anti-miscegenation laws were repealed in many states, including Maryland, only nine years before.² Interestingly,

² See U.S. Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*, 1967. This case established the unconstitutionality of state anti-miscegenation laws. Maryland repealed its version of the law in response to the start of the case. A further sixteen states had their anti-miscegenation laws *de facto* overturned as a result of the outcome of the case.

when Dana returns to 1976 for the second time and explains to Kevin how she survived an attack of a patroller, his first response is “Dana!...Did he rape you?” (45). Even Kevin, who up to this point has not shown much understanding, is more ready than Dana to articulate some of the dangers she is facing.

It is not that Dana is clueless about the era she has been drawn into. To the contrary, she regularly demonstrates a great deal of knowledge about life in the nineteenth century. After she leaves Rufus’ company, she makes her way to Alice’s cabin in the hope of getting aid from her mother. As she travels, she has the presence of mind to remain hidden because she knows that “Paperless blacks were fair game for any white” (34). This knowledge pays off in the short term because she does in fact manage to hide from a group of riders as they apprehend and beat a slave who is caught off the plantation without a pass. She is even able to recognize the riders as “Patrols. Groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among slaves...Forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan” (37). However, her history book-type knowledge does not prevent her from eventually being caught and nearly raped by one of the patrollers. She saves herself through the use of force, managing to knock the man unconscious with a tree branch before she is drawn back to the present before he regains his wits.

In the course of her second journey, Dana has begun to realize that a narrative, which is exactly what her account is, can convey the violence and oppression of the era in ways that history books and other sources cannot. The violence and danger of the era are simply not portrayed through “facts.” As she witnesses the beating of the slave, she can barely contain herself:

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against the urge to vomit. I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies...But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared than the child crying not far from me (36).

Indeed, she proves unprepared for the violence of the age when she is attacked by the patroller. At one point in their struggle an opportunity opens up for her to gouge his eyes out, in effect “cripple him, in this primitive age, destroy him” (42). However, much to her chagrin, Dana finds that she does not have it in her to do the deed. As the opportunity quickly passes she chides herself acknowledging that her “squeamishness belonged in another age” (42). After her return, Kevin gives her a knife for protection and asks her if she thinks that she would be willing to use it. Dana responds “Yes. Before last night, I might not have been sure, but now, yes” (47). Dana now knows that “most of the people around Rufus know more about

real violence than the screenwriters of today will ever know” (48). Aware now of the real dangers she may face on her next journey, Dana and Kevin scour their personal library for information which may allow them to forge some kind of document to keep Dana safe. However, their search is fruitless, and even an atlas proves fairly useless since so many of the landscape’s features have changed in the past one hundred-fifty years. If she is to survive in the slave-era it will not be because of her conventional “book smarts.” Rather, experience will have to be her teacher.

Corruption

In “The Fall,” Dana makes her third journey to antebellum Maryland. This time Dana is joined by Kevin, and in some ways this chapter is as much about him and the other whites on the Weylin plantation as it is about her. This is due to the increasing emphasis regarding the corruptive nature of the slave-state. The devastating effect that slavery has on African-Americans is self-apparent, but Butler also reveals through Dana’s eyes the corruptive effect that slavery has on the Weylin family. The chapter is ostensibly named “The Fall” because Dana is drawn to the past to aid Rufus after he takes a nasty fall from a tree, but it might also refer to the moral fall that has taken place on the plantation, and indeed the rest of the South.

Early in the chapter Dana makes it clear that she worries that even a man like Kevin may be susceptible to the corruption of the nineteenth century slave-state. As she begins to feel the nausea of her third journey begin, Kevin is there holding her. She immediately tries to push him away, explaining “I was afraid for him without knowing why” (58). Ironically, Dana is as worried about the well-being of her white husband in the nineteenth century plantation as she is herself. There is of course the practical risk that if Kevin travels back with her and they are separated, he may find himself stuck in the nineteenth-century. However, once they both find themselves in the past, Dana’s first concern is how the nineteenth century will affect Kevin:

I took his hand and held it, glad for the familiarity. And yet, I wished he were back at home. In this place, he was probably better protection for me than free papers would have been, but I didn’t want him here. I didn’t want this place to touch him except through me (59).

Dana clearly loves and trusts Kevin, but she also understands that no one is born a racial oppressor. It is a learned behavior, in this case reinforced by the legal and social pressures of the American south. Though Kevin is a liberal Californian who is married to an African-American woman, Dana clearly does not see him as fully immune to that pressure.

Dana has good reason to worry about Kevin. Regardless of his open-mindedness and racially mixed marriage, he remains a white male, and in the United States of 1976 that still has some strong implications. Simply put, the status that Kevin is granted by virtue of his race and gender has primed him for a dominate role. Since this role is even more strongly reinforced in the nineteenth-century, Dana is justifiably worried that it will be far too easy for Kevin to adopt some of the attitudes of his surroundings. There are actually some signs early in their relationship in California that Kevin takes his male privilege for granted. For starters, when they first consider cohabitation, Kevin's suggestion is that Dana get rid of some of her books so that he might accommodate her in his apartment, not considering that maybe he could get rid of some of his own. Dana has to make him aware of how one-sided his suggestion is by countering "Let's go to your place and I'll help you decide which of your books you don't read. I'll even help you throw them out" (108). On another occasion the couple have a minor falling out over Dana's unwillingness to type Kevin's manuscripts for him. She explains that she despises typing and prefers to write her own drafts longhand. She grudgingly acquiesces once, but when Kevin asks the favor a second time she refuses. Kevin becomes "annoyed" and then "angry" when she refuses a third time (109). His response could hardly be more chauvinistic. He tells her that "if [she] couldn't do him a little favor when he asked, [she] could leave" (109). Kevin is clearly not trying to "enslave" Dana, but all the same he fails to understand her perspective. The problem is that, as a white male, he has never had the need to question the social construct of supremacy that has always entitled him, so he fails to see how his response is unreasonable.

Robert Crossley writes that "the most problematic white man in *Kindred* is not the Maryland plantation owner, but the liberated, modern Californian married to Dana" (275). It is not that Kevin is a *bad* man, but precisely that he is a *good* man that makes him problematic. Kevin is a kind and sensible man that the reader readily identifies with. This identification becomes all the more meaningful as Dana watches Kevin more or less fall in step with plantation life. This begins immediately upon their arrival together in the nineteenth century. When they first encounter Rufus who has just fallen out of a tree, he asks Kevin whether Dana belongs to him. Somewhat unnervingly, Kevin replies without hesitation "In a way...She's my wife" (60). Later, he demonstrates a disturbing tendency to put a positive spin on plantation life:

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

place isn't what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage..." (100).

Dana is forced to set the record straight and remind Kevin that he has not been among the slaves or called out to witness one whipped.

In an interesting parallel to Kevin, Rufus displays increasingly disturbing behavior as he grows up. As mentioned above, Dana notes on her second visit that as a child Rufus was already familiar with violence and "probably knew more about revenge than [she] did" (25). On her third visit, Rufus is about twelve years old and Dana sees that he is already eliciting fear from the slaves, just as his father does. She is warned by another slave to "watch out" because just as Master Tom Weylin can quickly turn mean, "So can the boy now that he's growing up" (68). Dana realizes that since she may be forced to deal with Rufus many times throughout his life that she should try to influence him and endure certain humiliations in order to give him "as many good memories" of her as she can (83). Dana sees her influence as way to "take out some insurance" and keep Rufus "from growing up into a red-haired version of his father" (81). Kevin is hopeful, but skeptical of her chances, warning that she is "gambling against history" (83).

Unfortunately, Dana eventually learns that her efforts to influence Rufus are more or less fruitless. When she travels to the Weylin plantation for the fourth time at the start of "The Fight," she learns that Rufus has tried to rape his childhood friend Alice and is nearly beaten to death in retaliation by her slave husband Issac. Alice and Isaac run away together, but both are eventually caught, beaten and maimed. As a result of this episode, Isaac is sold away and Alice, though previously a free woman, is enslaved on the Weylin plantation. Thus, Dana can only grimly watch as Rufus not only goes unpunished for attempted rape, but is actually rewarded for it:

Rufus had...gotten possession of the woman without having to bother with her husband. Now, somehow, Alice would have to accept not only the loss of her husband but her own enslavement. Rufus had caused her trouble, and now he had been rewarded for it. It made no sense (149).

Dana must resign herself to the fact that she "had been foolish to hope to influence him" (123). She now has confirmation that she is powerless to stem the tide of history where Rufus and Alice are concerned. Her ancestor Hagar will not be born because of a romance between the two, but because Rufus will take possession Alice. Moreover, his mistreatment of Alice will drive her to suicide.

Despite Rufus' increasingly apparent corruption, Dana continues to assist him. She does this because she does not consider herself as being in the same predicament as Alice. She sees herself as more of an observer than a participant in history, with "nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen" for her (101). Also, since she is often the difference between life and death for Rufus, Dana still feels that she can trust him where her own well-being is concerned. This is the basis of their "unspoken agreement" to trust each other: Rufus holds the key to Dana's well-being while she is on the Weylin plantation, while Dana is Rufus' lifeline when he is in danger (238). Through her repeated efforts to save Rufus from himself, Dana shows that she believes in the power of her leverage over him, but she is as wrong about this as she is about being able to influence him to be kinder. Despite Dana's best efforts and hopes, Rufus eventually betrays her friendship just as he has done with Alice. He lies to her about sending her letters to Kevin so that the two may be reunited, he punches her out of jealousy and soon after Alice's suicide, tries to rape her. He does these things because he believes that he can gain possession of Dana just as he has with Alice. He even admits as much, telling her "You were one woman...You and her. One woman. Two halves of a whole" (257). As far as Rufus is concerned, affection for an African-American woman and possession of her amount to the same thing.

Despite Rufus' cruelties, *Kindred* does not imply an indictment of individuals, but rather the white supremacist chattel system that is the center of life on the Weylin plantation. Rufus' treatment of Alice and Dana is a learned behavior which mirrors his father's treatment of other female slaves. At one point during their stay on the plantation, Kevin remarks to Dana that he had seen "three little kids playing in the dirt back there that looked more like Weylin than Rufus does" (85). Even if their father is the master of the plantation, these children are slaves like their mothers. The same is true for the two children that Rufus fathers with Alice. For Tom and Rufus, sexual slavery is as much of a foregone conclusion of the human chattel system as is field labor. This explains why Tom does not question that Kevin wishes to share his room with Dana while both are on the plantation, even though they keep up the pretense that they are not married. Had they been a white unmarried couple this would have been unheard of, but since they adopt the roles of master-and-slave, Tom sees nothing irregular in the arrangement.

Kevin's experience while being trapped in the past offers a further example of the negative effect the human chattel system has even on members of the white over-class. Kevin is from another time and it would not be plausible that he would reach the level of Rufus'

corruption, but he has not gone through his experience unaffected. When he and Dana are finally reunited, she notices a nasty scar above one of his eyes and remarks that “This place, this time, had not been any kinder to him than it had been to me” (184). As mentioned above, Dana is concerned about the effect that plantation life will have on Kevin. By virtue of his race and gender, she feels that he may be particularly susceptible to corruption. Indeed, she is aware upon their return to 1976 that he has developed “a slight accent...Nothing really noticeable, but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin” (190). The fact that his time in the past has not turned him into one of the Weylins says more about Kevin’s own era than anything. Despite his race and his early confidence that he could survive there, he is not at all prepared to live in a slave state. It is as Dana had predicted, that if Kevin were to survive on the plantation it would be because he had “managed to tolerate the life there” (77). However, plantation life proves to be too much of an assault on Kevin’s modern sensibilities. After he and Dana are separated he stays on for a short time, but it is not long before he travels north. In fact, he has travelled so much that he can hardly believe he is home when he finally returns to 1976:

“I feel like this is just another stopover...like Philadelphia. Like New York and Boston. Like that farm in Maine...I kept going farther and farther up the east coast...I guess I would have wound up in Canada next” (192).

Kevin cannot get far enough away from the world of slavery. Not satisfied with merely making his way to a free-state, he ends up at the actual limit of the United States and very nearly goes beyond. The physical distance he creates between himself and the Weylin plantation is symbolic of the attitudinal distance he feels towards the institution of slavery. Moreover, it would seem that Kevin’s attitudinal distance is so marked that he can barely even tolerate the complacency of free-states towards slavery in the South, since his next move would have taken him outside the United States altogether. The U.S. as a whole would in fact not be forced to reckon with the question of universal emancipation for another generation.

Tom Weylin’s wife Margaret represents a further example of the negative, corruptive effect that slavery has on the white population of the plantation. She is immediately hostile towards Dana, but not without reason. She has been forced to helplessly watch as the female slaves of the plantation bear her husband’s children. One way she redresses her situation is to make advances towards Kevin. Another is the use of physical violence, as when Dana observes Margaret confront one of her husband’s slave children:

I'd seen Margaret Weylin slap one of them hard across the face. The child had done nothing more than toddle into her path. If she was willing to punish a child for her husband's sins, would she be any less willing to punish me if she knew that I was where she wanted to be with Kevin? (85)

Dana's question is answered when Margaret confronts her and asks where she slept the previous night. When Dana answers that she spent the night in Kevin's room, Margaret slaps her across the face and calls her a "filthy black whore" (93). In another episode, Margaret throws a cup of scalding hot coffee at Dana. The life of a plantation master's wife has clearly taken its toll on Margaret Weylin, and having a houseful of servants does not improve her mental state:

No one else was moving very fast except to wave away flies. But Margaret Weylin still rushed everywhere. She had little or nothing to do...So Margaret supervised – ordered people to do work they were already doing...and in general, made trouble (93).

The realities of sexual slavery compounded with the subordinate role Margaret must assume in her marriage have undoubtedly had a profound effect on her. She is an emotionally unstable woman who is wrought with jealousy and has no reasonable recourse for her grievances.

When Dana travels to the plantation for the fourth time in "The Fight" she learns from another slave that Margaret "went kind of crazy" after the deaths of a pair of newborn twins:

"She fought with Marse Tom, got so she'd scream at him every time she saw him – cussin' and goin' on. She was hurtin' most of the time, couldn't get out of bed" (137).

Margaret's mood swings and depression lead to her being removed from the plantation and placed in the care of her sister in Baltimore. Tellingly, Margaret does not return to home until after her husband Tom dies. Even so, she returns as a mere shadow of her former self, albeit much calmer, due to an addiction to laudanum, an opiate extract.

Obviously, the misery of the whites on the plantation cannot be compared with that of its slaves, and *Kindred* does not propose to do so. The corruption and deterioration of the Weylin family is presented as an indirect consequence of the institution of slavery, but it is a price that is willingly paid. Confronting the oppressors in this way humanizes them. Without at least some level of identification of the oppressor the author runs the risk of making "bogeymen" out of them, and such exaggeration only serves to shield the reader from an uncomfortable identification. In her essay on the textual traumas of *Kindred*, Marisa Parham refers to the act of not allowing the reader at least a moment of identification of the oppressor as "absenting the perpetrator" (1317). The problem is that author and reader alike may find it

uncomfortable to appropriate empathy towards those who commit acts of violence and oppression. However, by not allowing some level of identification with these types of individuals “makes the doers of violence shadowy aberrations” (Parham, 1317). The danger then is that perpetrators become strangers or others and readers may be lulled into a false sense of security that certain acts could only be perpetrated by “someone else.” Part of the success of *Kindred* is that it facilitates identification with both oppressor and oppressed, and in doing so offers a more complete picture of the total human tragedy that results from institutionalized slavery.

Challenged Perceptions

Perhaps more than anything, *Kindred* is about the challenges faced by its character narrator. Dana is an educated and thoughtful woman and there are a number of occasions throughout the novel in which she demonstrates a great deal of knowledge about the time and place she is inexplicably drawn into. There are also a number of references to sources of information, such as history books and slave narratives. However, despite her twentieth-century education, Dana finds that she holds a number of misconceptions regarding slavery in the nineteenth century. Moreover, her modern knowledge does less to facilitate her survival on the plantation than what she learns from the experience itself.

As previously mentioned, Dana is an aspiring writer and is quite well-read. However, her experience on the plantation underscores the notion that dry anecdotes in a volume of history is a poor substitute for the accounts of those who have been forced to live through the experience of slavery. She is often reminded of this by others on the Weylin plantation. Rufus warns Dana that sometimes she reminds him of another slave named Luke, who was sold because he “didn’t show much sense” (138). Other slaves echo the sentiment, such as the cook Sarah, when Dana talks of running away: “You got no sense sometimes! Just talk all over your mouth!” (144). Where Dana succeeds is when she takes the time to learn from the other slaves, as she does when she listens to their conversation in the cookhouse:

I liked to listen to them talk 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 (94).

Dana is forced to come to terms with the fact that she does not know as much as she thought about slavery or the time and place in which it took place, and if she is going to survive then the experience will have to be her teacher.

Easily the most powerful episode that demonstrates this point is when Dana attempts to run away from the plantation. It happens during “The Fight,” Dana’s fourth trip to the Weylin plantation. Her chief concern during this trip is to reunite with Kevin, who had been inadvertently left behind on her previous visit. She plans to run away, but stays on at the plantation in the hope that Kevin will soon respond to letters she has sent him via Rufus. Her decision to run away is immediately precipitated by the revelation that Rufus has lied about sending her letters to Kevin, thus hindering their reunion. Despite Dana’s planning and extensive foreknowledge of the dangers she faces, she does not last long on the run. In fact, she has fared much worse than Alice and Isaac:

We’d both run and been brought back, she in days, I in only hours. I probably knew more than she did about the general layout of the Eastern Shore. She knew only the area she’d been born and raised in, and she couldn’t read a map. I knew about towns and rivers miles away – and it hadn’t done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That educated didn’t mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape (177).

The fact that Dana’s atlas and history books are not enough to save her exposes the weakness of historical sources. History books and historical maps provide important facts and contexts, but they do not do justice to the human lives and suffering that take place as result of historical events. As Zinn points out, history is often written from a national perspective, and whether intentional or not, that perspective inherently ignores the perspective of individuals who are not necessarily seen as representing the national interest. Dana’s ordeal demonstrates this gap in the conventional historical record and the educational potential of sources which lend a voice to the oppressed, such as slave narratives, of which *Kindred* is related.

It is also apparent from the narrative that Dana’s perception of American slavery, as is the case with many people, has been influenced by some of the tropes prevalent in popular literature dealing with the American slaver era. These perceptions are challenged by what she actually finds on the Maryland plantation. For example, when Dana sees the Weylin house in the light of day for the first time, she is struck by how humble the residence actually is:

The Weylin house surprised me too when I saw it in daylight. It wasn’t white. It had no columns or porch to speak of. I was almost disappointed... It wasn’t big or imposing enough to be called a mansion. In Los Angeles, in our time, Kevin and I could have afforded it (67).

Dana seems to expect to see something along the lines of Scarlett O’Hara’s “Tara” from *Gone With The Wind*, but instead finds a house that even a pair of struggling writers could afford. She later learns that Tom Weylin is a man of little education and low social class who has in

fact inherited the plantation from his deceased first wife. Ironically, Dana later reads *Gone With The Wind* during one of the interludes she has in her own time, but she doesn't finish the novel because its portrayal of "happy darkies in tender loving bondage" is more than she can stomach (116). It is interesting that Dana understands that Margaret Mitchell's depiction of slaves is inaccurate, but is surprised to learn that the novel's representation of the wealth of white land owners is often just as inaccurate.

Dana's perceptions also appear to be influenced by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. For example, she seems to find it remarkable that Tom Weylin is not Harriet Beecher Stowe's Simon Legree. When Simon buys Tom he takes his hymn book from him saying "We'll soon have *that* out of you. *I'm* your church now!" (Stowe, 313). Tom Weylin would likely regard Simon Legree as unnecessarily cruel. Dana observes that, although Tom punishes his slaves, "He wasn't sadistic" and does so without joy or anger, but with the same neutral interest as if he were "chopping wood" (94). In fact, regarding Kevin's presumed failure to adequately provide for Dana, she realizes that Tom in fact "really felt sorry for [her]" (91). It is also Tom who out of a sense of fairness finally facilitates Dana's reunion with Kevin. Even though Dana is enslaved by this man, she is eventually forced to come to terms with his humanity and perspective:

[Tom Weylin] wasn't the monster he could have been with the power he held over his slaves. He wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did monstrous things his society said were legal and proper (134).

It must be pointed out that Dana makes this observation during her fourth visit and qualifies it by adding that on her previous visit "...he would whip you for talking back. At least the Tom Weylin I had known would have. Maybe he had mellowed" (134). However, it is equally, if not more likely, that it is Dana's own perception that has changed rather than Tom's behavior, especially considering the other challenges to her beliefs she is forced to reckon with. Moreover, by placing Tom's life within the context of his times, *Kindred* again places emphasis on the *institution* of slavery, rather than the slavers themselves. Tom is merely an individual operating within a much larger apparatus of oppression. The point that *Kindred* makes here is that although slavers are not blameless, their actions must be understood within the context of their times. Furthermore, it is far more useful for the reader of today to understand and recognize the process of oppression than it is to prosecute individuals *in absentia*.

Dana's misconceptions stemming from popular literature are not limited to the whites on the plantation. When she and Kevin first arrive on the plantation in "The Fall" she notes with surprise that there is no white overseer to be found. The overseer in fact turns out to be a slave named Luke, whom she befriends, although a white overseer is later employed for a period of time. However, the most interesting challenge to Dana's perceptions of the slaves on the plantation involves her relationship with Sarah, the head slave in the cookhouse. It is clear that Dana does not initially think much of Sarah. When Rufus refers to her as "Aunt Sarah" Dana makes a sarcastic aside over what his title implies: "Aunt Sarah? Well, that was better than Mammy Sarah, I supposed" (86). Among the most famous "mammy figures" are of course Aunt Chloe from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Mammy from *Gone With The Wind*. After Dana learns that Tom had previously sold three of Sarah's four children, she is surprised that Sarah has not tried to poison the man:

How amazing that Weylin had sold her children and still kept her to cook his meals. How amazing that he was still alive...If she ever decided to take her revenge, Weylin would never know what hit him (76).

Dana holds Sarah in contempt because for her, Sarah represents complacency and obedience in the face of oppression.

In a fascinating twist, Dana finds out exactly what it is like to fill "mammy's" shoes. When Sarah's daughter goes into labor, Dana is left in charge of the cookhouse. She is then forced to scurry about in order to prepare the Weylins' meal on time and save Sarah from getting into trouble. Where she had previously questioned why Sarah felt the need to scold other slaves for not working hard enough, Dana now finds herself doing the same to the boys who are supposed to help with the meal. Their response is, "You sound just like Sarah" (159). In fact, it is not the only time that Sarah's voice comes through Dana.

Dana's exchanges with Alice offer perhaps the most compelling example of role-reversal. As previously mentioned, when Dana once talked of running away, Sarah chided her saying she "had no sense." Like Dana, Alice was also born free, but she loses her freedom trying to help her husband Isaac escape his bonds. When Alice mentions running away, it is now Dana who offers words of caution: "Be careful how you say things like that. You could get into trouble" (156). Later, Rufus asks Dana to convince Alice to come to come to his bed without a fight, "so [he doesn't] have to beat her" (164). The request naturally repulses Dana, and it is doubtless that if the same request had been made to her on an earlier visit she would have outright refused. However, by this time Dana has seen Alice and others severely beaten

and has felt the sting of the whip herself. She knows that Rufus is going to get that he wants one way or another, so she “couldn’t refuse to help the girl – help her avoid at least some pain” (164). Alice is outraged at what she perceives as Dana’s complicity with Rufus and angrily tells her “They be calling you mammy in a few years” (167). In many ways, Dana has already become the very picture of a mammy.

The only real difference between Dana and the “mammy” figure is context. “Mammy,” as portrayed in literature and film, is a complacent slave who serves out of loyalty to her masters. What Dana (and the reader) discover is that Sarah’s (and later Dana’s) motives have nothing to do with loyalty:

She had done the safe thing – had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might be called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt in the militant nineteen sixties...the frightened powerless woman...who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter...I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority (145).

It would do little good for Sarah to poison the Weylins as Dana had originally supposed she might. In such a case, all the slaves would be sold, likely breaking up families and placing them in even worse circumstances. With the appropriate context of the situation, Sarah in fact shows a great deal of courage. She has the courage to carry on and bear the burden of the other slaves’ derision for the sake their survival and the survival of her family. In much the same way Rufus controls Dana through Alice. Dana goes along with Rufus’ wishes and endures a great deal of verbal abuse from Alice all for the sake of protecting her, since Dana realizes that her ancestral line and possibly her own life depend on Alice’s survival. As a result of her attitudinal shift, Dana cannot escape her own thoughts as they admonish her previously held moral authority: “*See how easily slaves are made?*” (177).

The system only breaks down when Rufus can no longer give Dana and Alice something to live for. In the novel’s final chapter, “The Rope,” Dana learns that Alice has tried to run away. Despite bearing Rufus’ children, Alice cannot bear to live as his sex slave. She is caught and as punishment, Rufus deceives her into thinking that he has sold her children. This is the final straw for Alice and she then hangs herself. Rufus almost immediately tries to replace Alice with Dana, but with Dana no longer feeling the need to protect Alice, she drives her pocket knife into Rufus’ side when he tries to rape her. Rufus’ death sends Dana home, or at least most of her. Dana loses her left arm in the process, leaving her forever maimed by what happened.

Conclusion

In the *Kindred*'s highly symbolic epilogue, the Franklins travel back to Maryland, this time in their own 1976. They search for traces of the Weylin plantation and its graves, but find none. The only physical evidence that is left of those who lived there is an old newspaper article detailing the sale of the Weylins' slaves after Rufus' death. In the end, Dana wonders why she has even made the journey. Kevin replies "You probably needed to come for the same reason I did... to touch solid evidence that these people existed" (264). Tellingly, just before Kevin utters his response Dana touches a scar left on her face from Tom Weylin's boot and her empty left sleeve. Kevin also has a scar on his face. As Americans, they both bear the "solid evidence" already. The legacy of slavery is in the very fabric of American society and its consequences are still being felt today. However, recognizing and "touching" that solid evidence can be a painful process. As the Franklins have learned, much has changed, but a great deal has not. To identify with the lives of oppressor and oppressed alike can be an unsettling process as it opens up the potentiality for uncomfortable identifications.

This chapter has offered a close reading of *Kindred* in order to point out major themes of the novel. Much like Coetzee's novel, perception plays a central role. As shown, Dana learns that much of what she has taken for granted as "truth" does not correspond with her experience. The novel also challenges the reader's perception of the perpetrators of oppression by not masking or absenting them. Instead, they are brought closer through by illustrating the process of corruption. Moreover, there is the implication of the white supremacist state at the center of conventional perception and the process of corruption. The following chapter will examine in greater detail how *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* approach these and other themes and contrast their different approaches.

Chapter 3:

Thematic Considerations

Introduction

Racism exists on some level in all pluralistic societies, but the United States and South Africa have set themselves apart through an extended history of “systematic and self-conscious efforts to make race or color a qualification for membership in the civil community” (Fredrickson, xi). This is what George Fredrickson defines in these two nations as “white supremacy.” However, white supremacy has developed independently in the United States and South Africa, and while there are some similarities, there are also a great number of differences, especially in its severity over time. Fredrickson argues that it is often these differences that enable the subjects of a comparison to shed light on one another.

This chapter will show that the white supremacist state as Fredrickson defines it is the inspiration for the states depicted in *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Once that is established, the chapter will then highlight how the novels emphasize the processes by which the racially oppressive state influences the perceptions of individuals and compels their complicity. The chapter will begin however, by specifying the definition of white supremacy.

Defining White Supremacy

As mentioned above, the term “white supremacy” implies more than other terms such as “racism,” “prejudice,” or “discrimination.” All of these things are factors in the societies described the novels, but what sets white supremacy apart is the implication of a *deliberate state apparatus*. Returning to Fredrickson, he later describes the white supremacist state as a “racial caste system” (98). This system does not depend on the prejudices or beliefs of individual members of society in order to persist. Rather, it is a deliberate and codified strategy with the aim of promoting the interests of a dominate race while suppressing those of others. One significant difference is found in the possibility of upward mobility. A racist society may hinder, but not necessarily prevent a member of an oppressed race from attaining the rights and privileges of a higher class. By contrast, a caste system has mechanisms in place which prevent a person of low birth from ever advancing to a higher caste. Fredrickson mentions anti-miscegenation laws as an example to illustrate the difference. He points out that “so long as intermarriage is not prohibited it remains possible for some members of a lower

group...to improve their position by ‘marrying up’” (99). At various times anti-miscegenation laws have been enacted in both South Africa and the United States as a method specifically designed to prevent upward mobility through marriage. Moreover, such laws serve to illegitimize the offspring of interracial unions, thus preventing mobility across multiple generations. The effect of anti-miscegenation laws is so profound that Fredrickson labels their outcome as “the most distinguishing mark of a fully developed caste order” (99). The white supremacist state is then not defined by mere racist belief or tradition, but by racially discriminatory policies codified into law which prevent the alteration of an established racial hierarchy.

Another distinguishing aspect of the white supremacist state has to do with the use of language. In such a case, the state sets the parameters for discourse concerning itself and others. Furthermore, the only definitions that are deemed legitimate are those created by the state. The other is in a sense talked right out of existence. In referring to the use of language in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Hania Nashef writes that “The jargon exercised by an authoritative regime flatters itself by being the one and only holder of the truth” (10). The state in this way creates a one-sided dialogue, communicating *at* rather than *with* its subjects. As the sole holder of the keys of language, the state effectively defines itself and others only in ways that are congruent with its purpose. This scheme not only “precludes and subjugates the other,” but also insulates the state from criticism (Nashef, 11). Examples of state control of discourse are found in both of the novels examined here.

White Supremacy in *Kindred*

That much of the action of *Kindred* takes place in a white supremacist society can hardly be questioned. Dana’s time travel notwithstanding, *Kindred* takes place in a real-world setting populated with historically plausible people and situations. The establishment of a solid white supremacist state was crucial to maintaining the human chattel system which Dana eventually becomes a part of. In his essay on how slavery is perceived in twenty-first-century America, Ira Berlin explains that in the wake of the Declaration of Independence’s claim that “all men are created equal,” some reasoning had to be given to account for the institution of slavery. Even that document’s author “speculated that black people were different from whites,” while others went further and “maintained black people were a separate species” (Berlin, 16). Such reasoning laid the groundwork for a broad public policy

of white supremacy. Since this policy was necessarily race based, it applied to free African-Americans and slaves alike:

free black people...were denied the rights of citizens – the vote and the rights to testify in court, sit on juries, and stand in the military. Likewise, free blacks were denied entry to respectable society, segregated in white churches, and barred from schools with white children. Whites and blacks could not even be buried in the same cemeteries (Berlin, 16).

In short, the demands of slavery necessitated the white supremacist state which Dana is forced to experience.

Interestingly, Dana in fact occupies two worlds in *Kindred*: a nineteenth century slave state and late twentieth century California. The only question is whether or not the definition of white supremacy used here applies to Dana's modern life as well as her experience in the nineteenth century. The juxtaposition of Dana's two world certainly invites the comparison. Superficially, it would seem clear that Dana's life in California is not dominated by a white supremacist state. Obviously, her freedom to marry to Kevin is a major indicator. Moreover, as has been shown above, though Kevin on occasion takes his white male privilege for granted, he is no oppressor. To the contrary, he is appalled by slavery to such a degree that he is driven to put hundreds of miles between himself and the Weylin Plantation. His reaction is that of a man thoroughly unused to the notion of institutionalized discrimination.

However, there are also a number of subtle indications that point to, if not a white supremacist state, then at least the echo of one. An example of this is illustrated by Dana's difficulties with both the employment agency and getting her writing published. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kevin does not struggle nearly as much as Dana in either of these areas despite the two of them being academic equals. Furthermore, Dana's understanding of slavery seems to have its roots in a white supremacist educational system. Dana arrives in the nineteenth century with a whole set of unreal expectations. Much of what she expects to see seems to be pulled right off of the pages of *Gone with the Wind* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. James Oliver Horton argues that this is probably to be expected. He explains that, though Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was intended to elicit sympathy for African-American slaves, it often portrays them in a patronizing light as well. Indeed, in her preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe refers to African-Americans as "an exotic race, whose ancestors...brought with them, and perpetuated to their descendents, a character so essentially unlike the hard and dominant Anglo Saxon race" (xxxv). The reader is asked to sympathize with their plight, but is also given the impression that they are lacking in certain qualities that

define “white civilization.” Horton cites these works as a small part of a larger trend in the way in which the dialogue of race and slavery has been conducted in the United States. According to Horton, these works represent more than a set of cultural perceptions, but public policy as promoted through the public school system:

Public education prepared children to think about slavery and race in ways consistent with the assumption of white supremacy...this is the picture of slavery that most Americans growing to maturity before the mid-1960s carry with them (41).

Dana would have gotten a dose of the white supremacist narrative of race and slavery during her school years. What is certain is that she carries at least some of that narrative with her on her trips to the nineteenth century. If Dana does not live in a white supremacist state in 1976, it can at least said that her world remains in its shadow.

Coetzee’s contrasting approach in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Unlike *Kindred*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not explicitly take place in a real-world time or place. To the contrary, Coetzee himself has made clear his aversion to writing within the limitations of the “real-world.” In his essay “Into the Dark Chamber,” Coetzee describes what he sees as some of the pitfalls of writing literature of traumatic periods within these bounds:

For the writer the deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them...How is a writer to represent the torturer?...how to treat something that, in truth, because it is offered like a Gorgon’s head to terrorize the populace and paralyze resistance, deserves to be ignored (364-6).

The dilemma that Coetzee proposes here is that regardless of whether the writer attempts to depict actual torture or ignores it, he or she risks unwittingly becoming a tool of the state. Coetzee would avoid this Catch-22 problematic altogether by creating characters and situations on his own terms. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is written in this vein. Instead of rising the challenge proposed by the state, Coetzee depicts the dilemma itself: the Magistrate searches the torture chamber for signs, but finds nothing but a scorch mark on the wall. Since no record is left and the other has been tortured into silence, he turns his attention to deciphering the marks left on her body. In such a situation, his choices are “limited to *either* looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall *or* turning one’s eyes away” (Coetzee, 368). In other words, Coetzee refuses to engage a specific problem, but rather chooses to confront the *problematic*. As it turns out, the Magistrate chooses both options: he turns his eyes to the torture in his town and indulges his own “horrified fascination” in examining the

barbarian woman's wounds. Moreover, the fact that the narrative transpires on the fringes of an unnamed empire, and is at once dystopian and allegorical, adds to the novel's sense of universalism. Not only are the time and place of the novel not specified, but the races of the magistrate and the barbarian girl are not made explicit either. Nashef quotes an interview with Coetzee in which the author explains that "there is nothing about blackness or whiteness in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. [The Magistrate and the woman] could as well be Russian and Kirghiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber" (5).

The way in which Coetzee's approaches race and historicity in *Waiting for the Barbarians* stands in stark contrast to that of Butler's in *Kindred*. Where Coetzee has chosen to subvert the notion of race, which he believes to be an artificial construct anyway, Butler has chosen to confront it head on. Not only has Butler placed her narrative in an actual time and place, but she has based some of its themes on highly personal episodes from her own life. For example, in an interview with Charles Rowell, Butler describes some of the experiences which led to the inspiration of Dana's initially judgmental perception of Sarah, the Weylin Plantation's "mammy figure." Butler describes her childhood and how she would sometimes watch as her mother performed domestic work:

Sometimes...I would hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. This is something I carried with me for quite a while...As I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head (51).

As described in the previous chapter, what Dana initially sees as complacency and fear on Sarah's part is in fact the woman's impulse to survive for the sake of her daughter. The necessity of context in understanding the African-American experience is therefore a major theme in *Kindred*. Through Dana, Butler demonstrates that sometimes African-American perceptions of race and slavery can be as problematic as white perceptions. Misconceptions persist in part because "Americans, both blacks and whites, are reluctant to bring a painful historical context to bear on contemporary race relations" (Horton, 48). However, Butler does just that by having her modern African-American woman "translate" the slave experience for her contemporary audience. Butler even goes a step further and invites the reader to consider the context of the perpetrator as well. In this way, she does not shy away from facets of a historical discourse that have remained taboo for over one hundred years.

Despite their differing approaches, Butler and Coetzee arrive at a similar basic conclusion: a state that defines others through its dominance of the racial discourse and

historical narrative is one that is inherently repressive and violent. There is a “brutality that can be inflicted by language” (Nashef, 9). The alienation that results from the language of repressive regimes has the potential of opening the floodgates to virtually limitless oppression. Moreover, despite the lack of a specific setting in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I believe that it is just as much a novel about white supremacy as *Kindred* is. David Atwell argues that although the novel’s “non-specific milieu” might imply universalism, there is a difference between universalism for its own sake and what he terms “a strategic refusal of specificity” (73). In other words, Coetzee’s avoidance of his national situation in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an act, which in and of itself, is informed by that situation. This makes the novel, together with many of his other works, “a form of situational metafiction” (Atwell, 3). Specifically, Atwell points to the conditions in and around South Africa in the late 1970s as providing at least some of the inspiration for the Empire of *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

The years immediately preceding *Waiting for the Barbarians*’ publication in 1980 were marked by a great deal of instability among South Africa’s neighbors, as well as in the country itself. The government coined the phrase “total strategy” to describe its policy to deal with perceived threats from within and without. The term “total onslaught” was used to describe these threats. According to a publication by the Human Rights Committee of South Africa, the government created the notion of “total onslaught” in order to convince the populace that external and internal unrest represented an intense movement to overthrow the country (7). Indeed, the term “total onslaught” is clearly designed to give the impression of a massive, coordinated effort. According to the “total onslaught” narrative, due to South Africa’s strategic value and natural wealth, the Soviet Union was threatening to topple the government and “there were revolutionary forces at work within South Africa, which were intent upon supporting and fuelling this threat” (HRC, 7). This narrative accomplishes the dual purpose of winning support from Western nations at odds with the Soviet Union and providing a justification for “draconian repression of the black population” (HRC, 7). Furthermore, “total strategy” is distinguished by its extensive use of administrative structures as a means of oppression:

The government created commissions of inquiry...it banned a number of political organizations and individuals...it refined its elaborate and already totalitarian security apparatus. The central emphases of policy at this time were therefore managerial, technocratic, anticommunist, and military... Coetzee’s Empire is recognizable partly as the fictionalization of this especially paranoid moment in apartheid discourse (Atwell, 73-74).

The Third Bureau of Coetzee's unnamed empire and its use of a contrived external threat as the justification for exercising absolute control are instantly reminiscent of apartheid South Africa around the time of *Waiting for the Barbarians*' publication.

This does not mean that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is *only* about apartheid-era South Africa, just as *Kindred* is not *only* about the slave-era of the United States. However, I believe Attwell's assertion that even though Coetzee may at times "hold South Africa at arm's length," he cannot completely avoid its presence and influence (3). Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that since Coetzee is a writer in the Western European tradition, that the European colonial experience would inform his work on some level. In light of this, I would argue that the implications of white supremacy as a type of official public policy are thematically crucial to both of the present novels. As such, white supremacist state is a crucial thematic element in both of the present novels.

A Relationship Triangle

The model of the white supremacist state forms the backdrop of both novels, but in each of the narratives it manifests itself in different ways. The most basic difference involves the triangular relationship between the state, its citizens and the other. In both novels the relationships between the three are complex and at times fluid, but are inherently different from each other in nature. This section will deal with various aspects of relationships and highlight the differences and similarities between the two novels in question.

Though the Magistrate is a functionary of the Empire, from the opening passages of *Waiting for the Barbarians* he makes a concerted effort from to assert his distance from it. As I have suggested in Chapter Two, there is an element of deception in his assertions due to a troubling sense of complicity for the actions of the Empire, ostensibly taken on his behalf. However, this is not meant to imply that the Magistrate is one and the same with the Empire. He is clearly not. Nashef points out that while the Magistrate's attempts to communicate with the barbarian woman have failed, so too has his understanding of the Empire's oppressive language: "The language that speaks through the Magistrate is that of authority. He is made to utter words whose meaning he has failed to grasp yet have the power to destroy him and the other facing him" (Nashef, 10). His assertions of distance are somewhat overblown and he fails to see (or admit) his own role in the Empire, but the Magistrate is nonetheless a separate entity held outside the Empire's inner-circle of true power.

The Magistrate's relationship with the Empire, despite his assertions otherwise, is defined by his helpless ambivalence. He obviously abhors the Third Bureau's treatment of the indigenous peoples, but he is simultaneously reluctant to take a stand against it. Only after he is imprisoned, tortured and with little else to lose does the Magistrate attempt to prevent Colonel Joll and his men from torturing a group of barbarian prisoners, shouting "*No! No! No!*" (116). Previously he had been willing to stop his ears "to the noises coming from the hut by the granary" where the first tortures take place (9). In fact, the most profound act that he can muster which is in any way subversive towards the Empire is to leave it. The spatial distance his journey creates between himself and the Empire is symbolic of the attitudinal distance he spends so much time trying to convince himself of. Only when he is outside the Empire's borders does he cease to objectify the barbarian woman and perceive her as "a witty, attractive young woman" (68). The Empire not only influences his actions (or lack thereof), but also colors his perceptions. Only from a "safe distance" does the Magistrate seem to feel free to think for himself. The Magistrate's journey dramatizes the notion that the way in which the state defines others has strong implications for how its citizens perceive those others. Only through adequate distance is the Magistrate able to fully gain the perspective necessary to see the barbarian woman for who she actually is. Interestingly, in *Kindred* Kevin also makes a journey which symbolically underscores the attitudinal distance he feels towards the oppressive state that he finds himself in.

In many ways, the dilemma of Coetzee's "man of conscience" is reminiscent of Kevin. Kevin plays such a vital role in *Kindred* that he almost rises to the level of a second protagonist. Both he and the Magistrate illustrate the problematic of conscientious citizens living in an oppressive society. It is obvious they both loathe the repression and physical violence of their respective states, yet neither is always entirely willing or able to recognize his own role in that oppression. For the Magistrate's part, he wants nothing more than to live "a quiet life in quiet times" (8). The violence of the imperial regime is something that he is either unaware of or willing to tolerate until it is dumped on his doorstep. Kevin is quite similar in this respect. To Dana's annoyance, he often takes his male privilege for granted in their relationship. Even after the couple arrives in antebellum Maryland, he is not always able to notice the oppression going on all around him, preferring instead to focus on the adventure of time travel. The status that both of these men enjoy by virtue of their race is such a matter of course that they scarcely seem able to recognize it. Where they do recognize it, there is little or nothing they can actually do about it. Both men feel compelled to play out their

opposition through a journey outside the borders of their respective regimes. However, it should be pointed out that although both do so out of principle, Kevin has the added pressure of finding himself in a foreign time and place. If he wants to survive he must either leave the slave state or compromise his principles. By contrast, the Magistrate does not have the luxury of simply wandering off, being surrounded by hospitable wilderness. The point is a comment on compelled complicity: it may be extraordinarily difficult or even impossible for average people to avoid.

In this way, both novels problematize the position of the “everyday” members of the over-class of a repressive society: in order to survive in such a place, one must be complicit and accept it on some level. The implications of that complicity is naturally difficult to swallow for otherwise “good” members of society who feel they have done nothing worse than to go about the business of surviving. It is for this same reason that Horton explains that Americans have for generations accepted romanticized versions of their history. Many Americans identify closely with their heritage and, particularly for Southern whites, it is often “embarrassing, guilt-producing, and disillusioning to consider the role that race and slavery played in shaping the national narrative” (Horton, 36). This is the social environment that writers of fiction have to be aware of. The message of complicity delivered too bluntly runs the risk of alienating the audience from the characters. As Parham points out, no one wants to identify with oppressors, but failing to do so even for a moment “keeps one cloaked from one’s own horrible potentiality” (1317). Through their ordinariness, both Kevin and the Magistrate open the door for that “moment of potentiality” to occur. Both are easily identifiable, yet neither is a hero. Kevin eventually runs as far north as he can, while in the end the Magistrate more or less continues his life as before. A comparison of the two adds plausibility to their behavior: Kevin cannot be blamed for running away because the antebellum south is alien to him and he cannot adapt to its rules, while the Magistrate does not have the luxury of travelling to a more just time and place. Just like Kevin, in order to survive the Magistrate must return to a life that he knows. Therefore, it is difficult to condemn either man for conventionally un-heroic behavior in the face of a near irresistible regime. In this way, both novels emphasize the oppression of states rather than individuals.

An important distinction between the two novels regarding the relationship triangle is in their depictions of how the state and its citizens relate to others. In each of the works others play an important role in the racially repressive societies, but those roles are inherently different in each novel. In each case the roles they play are suited to the particular needs of the

state. What this reveals is that the model of white supremacy depicted in each of the novels is not a manifestation based on any one set of principles, but rather the result of a racial policy that is designed to be most advantageous for the state.

In *Kindred*, a great deal of attention is paid to the complicated relationship between whites and African-Americans in the nineteenth century, as well as its implications for the present day. As previously observed, one of the central elements of Butler's project is to challenge the American racial discourse which has been historically dominated by romanticized versions of history. Horton argues that since history "provides our national and personal identity...our tendency is to turn away from history that is unflattering and uncomfortable" (36). For instance, few visitors to the historic homes of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington want to be reminded of the contradiction between their roles as "freedom fighters" and slave owners. In the first one-hundred years following the American Civil War, slavery and its contemporary implications were either only briefly mentioned in histories or put in the best possible light. Some texts have gone so far as to claim that African-Americans "suffered less than any other class in the South from the *peculiar institution*" (Horton, 41). Moreover, racial assumptions that were promoted as a means of justifying the slavery were carried over well into the twentieth century and served to reinforce segregationist policies.

Butler uses her fiction as a way to dispel some of these mythical depictions. There are plenty of episodes in *Kindred* that reference historical depictions of race and slavery. Few are as absurd as J.D.B. DeBow's claim that "slavery is good because, among other things, it gives poor whites someone to look down on" (140). More problematic are the myths that are masked in a partial truth. Horton cites a mid-twentieth century schoolbook that claims that former slaves were perhaps better off before emancipation because at least then they "had snug cabins to live in, plenty of food to eat and work that was not too hard for them to do" (41). This assessment relies on the assumption that the master-slave relationship is a paternal one and that slaves are willing to accept as long as their immediate needs are met. Not only is this viewpoint dehumanizing in that it assumes African-Americans are content to be treated like animals, it ignores the economics slavery. That is to say, slavery's true reason for even existing: the exploitation of free labor. By not allowing herself to exaggerate cruelties in order to make her point, Butler manages to expose the true economic role that slaves play on the plantation. To do so, she gives the slaves what former schoolbooks describe as an ideal setting. Indeed, during the Franklins' time on the Weylin Plantation there is no indication that any of the slaves lack in either food or shelter, nor are they regularly given tasks beyond their

abilities. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Master Weylin “was not the monster he could have been” (134). However, there are no contended slaves on the Weylin Plantation and they are never considered a part of the Weylin family. As economic units, they do not even rise to the status of pets. Whenever the profits of the plantation do not meet the owners’ demands, a few slaves are sold off to make ends meet. Children are no exception, including those Tom Weylin has fathered with his female slaves. The slaves’ reliance on the plantation is not associated with loyalty or their own needs, as some sources have implied, but on the very real threat of being sold and separated from family.

Language: A Means to an End

On the surface, the others of *Waiting for the Barbarians* have a much different relationship with their oppressors than those of *Kindred*. The Empire does not depend on the barbarians for labor, who largely remain distant and unknown. By contrast, the slaves of the Weylin Plantation live in close proximity to their white masters and their voices are heard nearly throughout. However, a comparison of the relationships between the others and the regimes that oppress them in the two novels will reveal that they have much in common. The only meaningful difference between the two lies in perspective. The barbarians are silent and distant because the narrative is told through the Magistrate, who can only describe the world in the language the Empire has given him. *Kindred*, on the other hand, is told from Dana’s perspective, who is initially an outsider, but by virtue of her race is able to connect with and translate the slave experience. Through comparison the two novels reveal two sides of the same coin: if *Kindred* focuses on slavery as an end, then *Waiting for the Barbarians* emphasizes language as a means. This section will take a closer look at how language binds these two works.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon writes that “A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (9). As the master of language, the Empire becomes the sole purveyor of truth and master of all it names. Through the Empire, Coetzee demonstrates that “mastery of language affords remarkable power” (Fanon, 9). To begin with, the Empire is assumed to represent culture and civility. Since the Empire is the only source of truth, the barbarian then becomes by default the *antithesis* of culture and civility. The other therefore “has no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past’ “ (Fanon, 21). As far as the Empire is concerned, the barbarian is a void to either be filled or eliminated. This relationship is exemplified in Joll’s treatment of his

prisoners: “As the Empire believes that [the barbarians] are genetically prone to untruth, the only way to draw out some truth from them is through torture” (Nashef, 12). When the Magistrate asks Joll how he knows when a prisoner begins to tell the truth, Joll answers that “a certain tone enters the voice of a man that is telling the truth” (5). Joll’s assumption is that the barbarian, lacking the civility of the Empire, is inherently immoral and will always lie. Pain is then applied until Joll hears the “certain tone” of truth. What Joll is in fact waiting to hear is the echo of his own narrative. “A dominant of such a language is to address a vacuum, as is its dual role to negate the other and confirm the subject” (Nashef, 10). In other words, the Empire not only silences the barbarians, but uses them to flatter itself with confirmation of its own narrative.

Another version of this dynamic is illustrated in *Kindred* when Dana returns to her own time after her first journey to the past. When she relates her journey to Kevin, he simply cannot believe her. Her version of events is fantastic, but no more fantastic than his, having witnessed Dana disappear and reappear on the other side of the room wet and muddy. He has no explanation to offer, but cannot bring himself to believe her. At least on a subconscious level he seems to cling to the notion that, as the white male in the room, he “ought to know best.” On a narrative level, the contrast between this episode and Joll or the Magistrate’s search for the “truth” is that the reader is privy to Dana’s thoughts and will sense her frustration at not being believed. Unlike the barbarian woman, Dana has a voice and she uses it: “I know what I saw, and what I did – my facts. They’re no crazier than yours” (16). Kevin does not fully believe Dana until he travels to the past with her, but unlike Joll and the Magistrate, he comprehends her enough to understand that *his* truth does not negate *hers*.

The hypocrisy and limitations of the imperial narrative become apparent very early in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Time and again, Colonel Joll insists that the barbarians pose an imminent threat to the Empire, not unlike apartheid South Africa’s paranoid notion of “total onslaught.” This is in spite of the Magistrate’s assurance that the barbarians’ “so-called banditry does not amount to much” (4). The disingenuousness of the Colonel’s claim is thus revealed by his selective trust in the Magistrate’s local expertise. Joll does not trust the local man’s assessment of the barbarian threat, but is willing to rely on his maps which are “based on little but hearsay” in order to make a dangerous excursion into the wilderness to round up more prisoners for interrogation (13). Joll only recognizes one truth in the Empire: that which is disseminated from the capital. Rumors in the capital of border troubles are what have brought Joll to the frontier town in the first place. Though there is no evidence of unrest, Joll

cannot conceive that the capital reports are wrong and thus leads a disastrous campaign into the desert.

The Magistrate is nearly as limited in comprehending the other as Joll is. Though he recognizes the hypocrisy of the imperial rhetoric, he comes no closer to understanding the barbarian woman's story. The imperial language does not allow the Magistrate to understand the barbarian woman. Imperial control of discourse has not only limited the perspective of its functionaries, so too are its ordinary citizens held in its grasp. The Empire's rhetoric has practically paralyzed the Magistrate's town with fear:

There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters (9).

The eventual retreat of the Civil Guard precedes looting and a panicked mass exodus from the town. Since the barbarians are not present to speak for themselves, the townspeople fear the coming of something that they do not know. Ironically, it is the absence of the barbarians, rather than their presence, that creates unrest in the town. In *Kindred* a similar state of fear and paranoia is referenced when Kevin tells Dana how he narrowly escaped being associated with a plot to start a slave revolt:

“You ever heard of a man named Denmark Vesey?...Well, Vesey never got beyond the planning stage, but he scared the hell out of a lot of white people. And a lot of black people suffered for it. Around that time, I was accused of helping slaves to escape. I barely got out ahead of the mob” (193).

Kevin barely gets away with his life and has likely had other close scrapes as evidenced by the unexplained scar over his eye that he carries back to his own time.

In a further irony, the only truly uncivilized acts committed in either work are those perpetrated by members of the “civilized” racial over-class. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “barbarian” alternatively as:

1. Applied by nations, generally depreciatively, to foreigners;
2. Uncivilized, rude, savage, barbarous (OED online).

Thus, those that are “foreign” or “different” are presumed to be “uncivilized” and “savage.” Since the racial over-classes are assumed to be civilized, and others a negation of civilization, almost any act against those others will not only be tolerated, but often seen as warranted. The fear among the elite classes is so strong that mere association or suspicion of association with the other is enough to sanction violence against their own, such as in the cases of Kevin and

the Magistrate. This culture of violence will inevitably result in deplorable acts being committed regardless of race, as with the looting in the frontier town. The fear of losing control of the American slave population was enough to drive the southern slave states to go to a disastrous war against their countrymen. In such cases, atrocities are glossed “as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress” (Zinn, 9). The assumption of white civility is so great that large scale violence, even when committed against other whites, is considered within the realms of civility.

Written Language

The power of language in the two novels is not limited to direct dialogue and hearsay. The role that writing plays is also stressed in both novels. “Language subjugates in both its spoken and written form and only those who have the power to write are allowed into history” (Nashef, 12). The Empire of *Waiting for the Barbarians* incorporates a system of written language that takes the form of endless orders and reports used to mask and redefine its actions. In *Into the Dark Chamber*, Coetzee uses the example of a ban on photographing South African prisons to explain that “The response of [apartheid era] South Africa’s legislators to what disturbs their white electorate is usually to order it out of sight” (361). The language of bureaucracy is used to accomplish the same thing: to order atrocities out of sight by burying them under a heap of official reports, of which only representatives of the Empire have the capacity to write. The procedure is dramatized in the early passages of the novel. First, Joll prevents the Magistrate from witnessing the interrogation of a prisoner, assuring him that he would “find it tedious” (4). The next day the Magistrate is presented with an absurd report that one of the prisoners, an old man, initiated a scuffle with a guard, fell against a wall and died. He can do little more than rubber-stamp the report: he writes his own letter to the capital critical of Joll, but decides “wisely” to tear it up (21). Later, as he prepares to take the barbarian woman back to her people, the Magistrate sits down record recent events, but fails. He realizes the futility of trying to use the language of the Empire against it. It is pointless because the only discourse the Empire recognizes is that which it tells itself and “he is unable to uphold the discourse it represents...His inability to write stems from the fact that he can no longer partake in the jargon of the Empire” (Nashef, 9). The jargon and absurd reports serve the same purpose as the ban on photographing South African prisons: to mask atrocities from the historical record, thus avoiding a contradiction with the “true” national narrative. “Behind the so-called suicides and accidental deaths...behind the cursory postmortems by government functionaries, the bland, unlikely inquest findings, lie the realities of fear,

exhaustion, pain, cruelty” (Coetzee, 362). Thus, the language is not only the Empire’s weapon, it is also its shield.

In a highly symbolic episode, words are actually inscribed into the bodies of others, signifying them as enemies of the Empire:

The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal...ENEMY...ENEMY...ENEMY...ENEMY (115).

To drive the point home, soldiers then flog the prisoners with canes. The onlookers are eventually invited to participate in the flogging, and they enthusiastically oblige. The language of the Empire has succeeded in defining the barbarians as it sees fit. The townspeople show that they are willing to accept the Empire’s version of the discourse. As previously mentioned, to do otherwise would invite uncomfortable implications for their own complicity. As it is, “the markings stigmatize the native as the other, a quasi-human being from whom the civilized need to be protected” (Nashef, 13).

The marking of bodies as a means of communicating humiliation and otherness is also found in *Kindred*, albeit in a less symbolic form. In one episode, Alice and her husband Isaac are caught after four days on the run. Both are severely beaten and Isaac has both of his ears cut off before being sold to a trader. In this way, Isaac is forever marked as a punished slave. Eventually, Dana is also caught trying to escape and is whipped until she passes out from the pain:

They took me to the barn and tied my hands and raised whatever they had tied them to high over my head. When I was barely able to touch the floor with my toes, Weylin ripped my clothes off and began to beat me. He beat me until I swung back and forth by my wrists, half-crazy with pain (176).

In this case, the beating is told from the perspective of the victim. It is startling how much Dana’s experience resembles those told by actual slaves. One such example is that told by Mary Reynolds, one of the former slaves interviewed as part of a federal writers’ project from 1936-38. Mary was over one-hundred years old at the time of her interview, but recounts in chilling detail and in her own vernacular a beating she endured after being accused of facilitating the escape of a slave named Turner:

One day Turner goes off and don’t come back. Old man Kidd say I knowed bout it, and he tied my wrists together and stripped me. He hanged me by the wrists from a limb on a tree and spraddled my legs around the trunk and tied my feet together. Then he beat me. He beat me worser than I ever been beat before and I faints dead away...I didn’t care so much iffen I died (American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology).

What the comparison between the two novels reveals is that from the victims' perspective the focus is not so much on the *marks* as it is on the *pain*. Dana cannot see her own back, but the pain haunts her and forces her to question her resolve to run away. "See how easily slaves are made?" she chides herself (177). Indeed, Mary Reynold's recollection has not diminished despite her advanced age at the time of telling. What makes the inscription of bodies especially cruel is its permanence. Governments and historical records may change, but for Isaac, Dana and Mary there will always be scars and the memory of pain. Therefore, the marking of bodies in the two novels serves paradoxically communicates and silences simultaneously: the marks serve to underscore the otherness of the victim, while the pain they endure effectively silences them.

There seems to be an unending cycle of marking, othering and silencing at work in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In one of the early passages the Magistrate notes that that "once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode about the barbarians" (9). In the end, he admits that though he has experienced much in the past year he can "understand no more of it than a babe in arms" (169). The cycle predates his narrative and there is every indication that he believes it will continue in perpetuity. The history of the Empire is stagnant and the Magistrate does not see an end to it:

I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects...I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them...But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam...they will be won over to our ways (169).

In short, by the end of the novel the Magistrate has gained a great deal of empathy, but is not able to offer a solution to the stagnation of the Empire.

Kindred, on the other hand, implies a development for the voiceless others. Where the Empire of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is timeless and stagnant, *Kindred* takes place along continuum. The juxtaposition of past and present invites comparison and correlation. It is clear that the past of Dana's ancestors has made an indelible mark on her present. As previously mentioned, there are indications in Dana's present that the echoes of white supremacist society continue to reverberate over one-hundred years after the end of the Civil War. For example, not only does her white husband tend to take his white-male privilege for granted, but Dana's own perception of the past is colored by the white supremacist assumptions of her formal education. However, it is also clear that Dana's present is a much different world from that of her ancestors. The nation she lives in has evolved to a point

where Dana has a voice, even if she sometime struggles to be heard. The power to read and write is what differentiates Dana from her ancestors and the barbarians of the Empire. The act of relating her story in her own words allows Dana to translate the experience of her oppression in ways that someone outside of that experience would be unable to do. Just as the Magistrate is unable to piece together the barbarian woman's experience by examining her wounds, so too would Kevin fail in the same endeavor with Dana.

There is power implied in language and "only those who have the power to write are allowed into history" (Nashef, 12). *Kindred* references laws which made it a crime to teach slaves how to read and write, ostensibly to prevent them from writing travel passes for themselves. Beyond the practical reasons for keeping slaves illiterate is the effect of silencing their experience out of the historical record. This denial of cultural participation is then used to support assertions of the others' lack of civility and thus dehumanize them. However, Dana herself takes an enormous risk in teaching some of the Weylin Plantation slaves how to read and is subsequently beaten for her efforts. At other times she is valued for her literacy, such as when she helps young Rufus Weylin learn to read and later writes letters for him. Dana's special status among the slaves of the plantation is due in part to her literacy.

Not only does Dana navigate the pitfalls of being a literate slave, but she is in fact a writer in her own respect. The idea that she is a modern writer forced into the constraints of the silent other means that *Kindred* may be seen as a form of meta-commentary on the slave narrative. Just as Dana finds power and pitfalls in her literacy, so too did the writers of the first American slave narratives. In terms of power, Audrey Fisch writes that the slave narrative represents a "key artifact" in the campaign to end slavery (2). It is difficult to overestimate its influence on the discourse regarding slavery in America. In his essay on the development of the American slave narrative Philip Gould outlines the changing expectations of the genre. Early versions were not written for political change, but were expected to reflect other genres, such as "spiritual autobiography, the conversion narrative, the providential tale, criminal confession, Indian captivity narrative, sea adventure story, and the picaresque novel" (Gould, 13). It is no surprise then that many early slave narratives focused on themes of Christian spiritual conversion, since the early abolitionist movement was largely grounded religious philosophy. However, slave narratives managed simultaneously to "creatively engage the expectations of these groups in order to create cultural spaces in which the project of self-representation takes place" (Gould, 12). Self-representation humanizes the subject. As it turns out, the abolitionist movement eventually adopted Locke's philosophy of natural

rights for all human beings. “In keeping with this major shift in antislavery polemic was the slave narrative’s central proposition about the full humanity of the African” (Gould, 18). Thus, it seems the abolitionist movement and the slave narrative enjoyed a somewhat symbiotic relationship, each with the power to influence the other. What *Kindred* then demonstrates through its narrative and its genre is the potential that writing has to open up cultural spaces for the self-expression of an oppressed group and facilitate civil change.

Despite literacy’s potential for empowerment, meaningful change in perception is not immediate, nor even a matter of course. Often, the educated other faces harsh opposition. As Fanon puts it, “When a Negro talks of Marx, the first reaction is always the same: ‘We have brought you up to our level and now you turn against your benefactors. Ingrates! Obviously, nothing can be expected of you’ ” (23). As such, many slave narratives were accused of making false claims or of not being written by former slaves at all. The notion remained that non-whites were untrustworthy. A critic of Olaudah Equiano’s narrative wrote that “it is not improbable that some English writer has assisted him in compliment, or, at least, the correction of the book: for it is sufficiently well-written” (Gould, 22). The assumption is that “sufficiently well-written” is too much to expect from Equiano or any other former slave.

More disturbing is the opposition that has come from seemingly sympathetic quarters. As Dana finds out, her ability to read and write does not necessarily endear her to the other slaves on the Weylin Plantation. Sarah for instance is not ready to believe that slaves survive escape attempts. When Dana explains that she has read the narratives of former slaves Sarah is incredulous, saying “Books!...Foolishness!... Niggers writing books!...Don’t wanna hear no more ‘bout it!” (145). This episode illustrates the difficulty in perceiving a potentiality that goes against the grain of an “official” narrative, even when that narrative is to one’s own detriment. Some white abolitionists were no different. There was a notion that free expression from ex-slaves should be limited. For the white abolitionists, it was more important that the narrators appeared as legitimate as possible to support their campaign, thus at their meetings “ex-slaves were asked only to state the basic ‘facts’ of their lives; they sometimes bared their backs as texts that ‘proved’ their stories” (Gould, 20). As with the Magistrate, some white abolitionists wanted to make use of the others’ bodies as living texts. It is interesting that, in this way, *Waiting for the Barbarians* “predicts” the condition of slavery. As voiceless “bodies” that bear the colonial “text” there are almost no potentialities left for the barbarians within the Empire. The only function they could possibly fill under these conditions is in fact one form of slavery or another.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to make meaningful comparisons and contrasts between *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Kindred*. In order to do so, I have proposed that these two works may be compared along shared thematic lines. I have borrowed George Fredrickson's definition of white supremacy, which implies a state-sanctioned "overt doctrine of biological inequality" (Fredrickson, xii). While the depiction of such a doctrine is more or less self-evident in *Kindred*, I have made the argument that aspects of it are also present in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, despite the non-specificity of the novel.

Both novels feature complex relationships between others and members of the colonial apparatus. It is also noteworthy that both novels feature "well-meaning" members of the racial over-class who fail at times to recognize their own complicity in white supremacist society. I describe this aspect of their roles towards others in terms of their complicity. It is also interesting that "well-meaning whites" in both novels go on long journeys outside the borders of oppression in part as a means of exorcising the implications of their implied complicity. I believe that these similarities point to a general trait of the modern white supremacist state in fiction: in such a state ignoring atrocities becomes its own form of participation, therefore mere non-participation often ceases to be a morally sound option. It should be mentioned that there is sometimes a question of whether a morally sound option even exists.

Both novels make meta-commentary regarding language, though they mainly engage different subjects. *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses on the language of the colonial state. The actual form the novel takes is that of a dystopian allegory, serves as a means to subvert the language and discourse the state has a stranglehold on. Coetzee avoids the definitions supplied to him by the state and instead illustrates the dilemma through the Magistrate's struggle (and failure) to describe the experience of the other through the language of the Empire. He eventually realizes the inadequacy of the imperial language, since it does not allow true discourse or dissent, but is a one-way narrative that the state tells itself. The barbarians are then perceived only as the negation with which the Empire uses to compare itself to.

Kindred differs in respect to language in that it focuses on the voice of the other, which is what a conventional slave narrative does as well. This is not to say that the state is silent in *Kindred*, because clearly, it is not. For instance, as I have shown, as a result of her formal education, romanticized versions of history come through in some of Dana's

perceptions of the past. However, her narrative is clearly from outside the privileged class and she quickly recognizes the discrepancies between her ancestors' experience and schoolbook history. Where *Waiting for the Barbarians* demonstrates the power of language in the hands of the Empire, *Kindred* shows its potentiality in the hands of the other. When Dana travels to the past she is both vulnerable and feared. She is at the mercy of how the state defines her, but she simultaneously has a voice and uses it to force the whites of the plantation to recognize her humanity. She is an anomaly that often unnerves whites and slaves alike because she is a contradiction to everything they have come to expect from African-Americans. Her presence proves to the Weylins that they are on the wrong side of history, a fact that Rufus symbolically refuses to accept when he burns her modern history book. The very form that *Kindred* takes, a neo-slave narrative, implies the power of the ex-slave's voice.

Considered together, the two novels discussed here complement each other in noteworthy ways. The circumstances of the state in *Waiting for the Barbarians* will not allow for a cultural space to be created for the barbarians. The Empire offers them few choices, as a young officer explains to the Magistrate, "that is what war is about: compelling a choice on someone who would not otherwise make it" (54). The choice is between slow annihilation as their space shrinks or slavery to the Empire. In this way, the novel predicts a state of slavery, perhaps not unlike that which is depicted in *Kindred*. However, *Kindred* makes its own predictions. The American slave state did in fact exist and regardless of the its hold on language and discourse of others, its model eventually failed at an enormous cost to all involved. The conclusion made between the two novels is then bittersweet: self-representation ultimately prevails over the stagnant, repressive state, but states will always want others, and thus the dynamic is bound to repeat itself in one form or another with each new incarnation.

Chapter 4:

Narrative considerations

Introduction

Both *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are told through the voice of a character narrator who also happens to be the protagonist. How these novels employ this narrative strategy has implications for not only what is communicated, but also what kind of response the reader has. In *Living to Tell About It*, James Phelan describes two modes of communication, or “telling functions,” that occur in such narratives. The two telling functions are distinguished by their communicative tracks: “narrator functions” operate between narrator and narratee, while “disclosure functions” operate between the implied author and the authorial audience (Phelan, 217). Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to identify some of these narrative features in the two novels and discuss their impact on reader positioning and reception. The implications of narrative tense, especially as it applies to the present tense narration of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is also discussed here.

Telling functions

Before proceeding with an analysis of the impact of telling functions in the two novels discussed here, a brief explanation of some of Phelan’s terminology is perhaps in order. Phelan uses the phrase “character narration” as a more “user friendly” alternative to Gérard Genette’s term “homodiegetic narration” (xi). However, the two terms are synonymous with each other. That is to say, they both describe narration that is not only first person, but also has the characteristic in which the narrator occupies the same level of existence as the other characters. In other words, the narrator is able to interact with other elements of his or her telling. This is the case for both of the novels in question here. Moreover, both of the present novels have character narrators that also happen to be the protagonists of their narration. As will be shown, the choice of this narrative strategy has implications for how the reader responds to the narrators and the choices they make. That both of the novels make use of this strategy also forms a basis from which they may be compared and contrasted, hopefully shedding further light on their significance.

Phelan explains that character narration is in fact “an art of indirection” (1). The author has a communicative purpose which is not necessarily shared by the narrator. In other words, while the narrator is communicating to the narratee, the implied author is simultaneously communicating to the authorial audience. The challenge for the implied author then is to communicate her views through a narrator who has a different perspective and may or may not share the author’s views. This may result in a number of “curious phenomena” in which the narration will exhibit features which demonstrate the interplay “between the functions of the narrator in relation to the narratee and the functions of the implied author in relation to the authorial audience” (Phelan, 4). An example of one of these “curious phenomena” is the case in which a character narrator’s past-tense narration is ostensibly being told after a given experience, yet is not informed by that experience. The reason for this may be that the implied author wishes to reveal certain events in a particular order, even if all of it lies in the past from the narrator’s perspective (as will be pointed out below, this is at times the case for Dana’s narration in *Kindred*). Therefore, while the narrator reports to the narratee, he or she “unwittingly reports information of all kinds to the authorial audience,” though the narrator is in fact unaware of this audience (Phelan, 12). In this way, the intent of the implied author occasionally interferes with the mimetic quality of the narrator’s telling. Thus, Phelan’s “curious phenomena” are not accidental, but represent a strategy on the part of the implied author to communicate certain information to the authorial audience which is outside the scope of what may be regarded as communication purely for the benefit of the narratee. Phelan terms the actions of the narrator which act as communication to the narratee as “narrator functions,” those between the implied author and the authorial audience as “disclosure functions,” and both functions taken together as “telling functions” (12). Moreover, Phelan argues that these “violations of strict mimesis...can be introduced without entirely breaking the mimetic illusion, provided that they enhance the story’s overall purpose and effect” (28). In fact, these strategies can be employed to enhance the reader’s understanding and guide his or her ethical response.

There are a number of “curious phenomena” which highlight the distinction between narrator functions and disclosure functions, including, but not limited to, such things as redundant telling and telling that would normally be beyond the character narrator’s perception. It should also be pointed out that disclosure functions will normally take precedence over narrator functions “since communication between the implied author and the authorial audience ultimately subsumes that between the narrator and the narratee” (Phelan,

14). This is perhaps of no surprise, since communication between the implied author and the authorial audience is conceivably the reason that authors write books in the first place.

The notion of telling functions in character narration indicates that one text may in fact be communicating different messages (the implied author's and the narrator's) to different audiences (the authorial audience and the narratee). As such, there exists what Phelan calls "distance" between the intentions of the implied author and the narrator. This distance "will always be greater in unreliable narration than reliable narration" (215). The concept of reliability is therefore closely tied to that of telling functions. Often, the implications of the character narrator's reliability carries with it far more import than the actual events that the narrator describes. This is no less true for the works in question here in which the character narrators' reliability has implications for not only what message is given, but how it is perceived. As such, for present purposes the aim is to not only point out some of the formal qualities of character narration, but their ethical consequences as well.

Dana's telling

There are some significant instances in Dana's narration of *Kindred* which illustrate the interplay between narrator functions and disclosure functions. Her telling begins with a prologue which depicts the events that occur immediately after her final return to her own time, in other words, immediately after the end of the final chapter. After that, the narrative picks up on the first day that she travels to the past and continues in chronological order. The only exceptions are two short interludes in which she narrates her early relationship with Kevin. The entire narrative is told in the past-tense, the telling occurring ostensibly after the events of the prologue, which temporally follows the main body of the work. It would stand to reason then that Dana's telling should be informed by her experience, yet this is not always the case. For instance, as Dana becomes acquainted with the Weylin household, what she encounters is often something other than what she expects:

I looked around for a white overseer and was surprised not to see one. The Weylin house surprised me too when I saw it in daylight. It wasn't white. It had no columns, no porch to speak of. I was almost disappointed (67).

Dana is narrating from the perspective of "Dana the character," rather than "Dana the narrator." There is nothing in the surrounding passages in which she expresses anything akin to "I did not know then what I know now." To the contrary, all that she expresses here is her surprise as she gradually realizes that the plantation is not like the one depicted in the novel and film *Gone With the Wind*. Interestingly, Dana refers directly to *Gone With the Wind* later

in the novel during one of her stints back home in L.A. In order to pass the time while she is separated from Kevin, and to prepare herself for her next journey to the past, she decides to read all she can get her hands on regarding the slave era, including *Gone With the Wind*. She does not finish reading the novel however, because “its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage” is more than she can stomach (116). At this point in the narrative, Dana has spent close to two months living on the Weylin plantation. She was once surprised that the Maryland plantation did not resemble something out of Margaret Mitchell’s novel, but now she finds it is so full of falsehoods that she cannot even stand to finish it. Thus, Dana’s experience on the plantation has taught her something about the unreliability of popular American depictions of the slave era. Though Dana must be aware of this revelation throughout her telling, her narration is not informed by it until she reaches the temporal point in her narration in which the revelation occurs. This points to a narrative choice made by the author in order to foreground the intellectual process that Dana goes through as she gradually understands that much of what she thinks she knows about slavery is from sources that lack appropriate perspective and context. The benefit for the reader of this gradual disclosure is that we get a sense of just how much Dana has to reflect on and we do not judge her too harshly for not getting it all at once.

The alternative is that Dana, in her capacity as narrator, has made a conscious decision to withhold certain revelations in order to heighten the effect of her storytelling. In his chapter on present tense narration in *Understanding Narrative*, Phelan discusses the impulse to adopt this view. He refers to the mimetic standard that “knowledge alters perception” (227). In other words, this standard of “realism” dictates that Dana’s retrospective telling must either be unselfconsciously informed by the events she is narrating, or she is making a self-conscious effort not to reveal certain things until the right time. To borrow two more terms from Phelan, Dana is either “underreporting,” that is to say she is withholding information relevant to her narrative, or she is “underreading,” which is to say that she has not fully interpreted her change in perception (*Living*, 52). If we regard Dana’s telling as intentional underreporting, then we would have to explain her motivation for doing so. It is not in her character to deceive her audience for no reason and, as shown below, she soon discloses her revelations anyway. That leaves the idea that she is aware of the narrative value of gradual disclosure. To do so would require a certain level of sophistication as a story teller. Often this is not the case for a narrator, but the notion gains some plausibility here only because Dana *is* in fact a professional writer, and therefore would understand the value of timing in her story telling.

Despite Dana's capacity as narrator and professional storyteller in her own right, I would tend to view this and similar episodes of surprise as examples of Dana's disclosure functions overlapping and superseding her narrator functions. The reason I have for this view is the ethical benefit it affords Dana the character. By narrating her surprise without the moment of revelation already having been revealed, Dana's telling seems closer to the actual event than it is. Not only does this strategy raise suspense and increase the audience's interest, but we sympathize more with what Dana is going through. The reader is more readily able to perceive the character's sense of horror, wonder and confusion at being thrust into an alien world. The problem with the idea that Dana is merely feigning an unselfconscious telling is that it creates a different relationship between the authorial audience and the character narrator. Dana's unreliability shifts from unconscious naiveté to conscious manipulation. Also, had Dana's narration been more forthcoming, then she would likely have come off as too factual and perhaps a bit of a know-it-all. As it is, Butler has insured that her authorial audience is guided to make a favorable ethical judgment of Dana. Instead of being explicitly told by Dana "Much of what I thought I knew turned out wrong," we are left to witness as certain revelations gradually dawn on her. We are invited to admire Dana's perseverance as she struggles to survive in a time and place that she does not know as well as she thought she did.

Furthermore, as Phelan argues in "Present Tense Narration," strict adherence to a narrow mimetic standard is unnecessary (whether we are discussing present tense narration or otherwise). Firstly, Dana's perceived violation of strict mimesis is not problematic because "the reader's temporal orientation is always prospective" (228). That is to say, the reader may be aware that the narrative is retrospective, but she does not *know* what Dana's revelations are going to be. Therefore, the reader is unaware *at the time of reading* that the narration may not conform to the narrator's post-experience knowledge. Strict mimesis may be violated without destroying the work's overall mimetic effect or plausibility. To the contrary, to give strict mimesis precedence over the narrative undermines the telling because it changes what sort of person we understand Dana to be. Secondly, it must be assumed that the reader understands that she is reading a work of fiction, that it is, in Phelan's words, a "synthetic construct" (229). In truth, readers have different expectations for a work of fiction than they do for non-fiction. A work of fiction is not constrained by the conventions of non-fiction writing, and would often suffer stylistically if it was. Fiction's strength is found in the flexibility of its narrative style. In the example of *Kindred*, the narrative choices that Butler makes not only

preserve the mimetic flow of the novel, but allow for the dual communication from both narrator and implied author to take place. By not having Dana communicate too much too soon, Butler is in fact communicating to her audience that Dana is not going to learn everything she needs to know right away and she will in fact have to come to terms with the understanding that much of what she has been taught about American slavery is inaccurate.

An even more striking example of the dual communication that takes place in *Kindred* is illustrated in Dana's relationship with Sarah. During her first extended stay at the Weylin Plantation in "The Fall," Dana becomes quickly acquainted with Sarah, who occupies a position of authority among the slaves. As Sarah prepares the evening meal, she tells Dana that after her husband died, Tom Weylin sold her three oldest children. The only family she has left is her mute daughter Carrie. It is difficult for Dana to reconcile Sarah's grief with the position she has in the household:

I looked away from her...Her husband dead, three children sold, the fourth defective, and her having to thank God for the defect. She had reason for more than anger. How amazing that Weylin had sold her children and still kept her to cook his meals. How amazing that he was still alive (76).

Dana is not voicing her surprise at the situation, as she did when she first saw the Weylin home, but in this instance she also implies an ethical judgment. Not only does she feel that Sarah is *entitled* to revenge, but she is "amazed" that Sarah *has not* enacted her revenge. In other words, Dana is asking herself "why will Sarah not act?" Dana here begins to imply that she views Sarah with at least some amount of contempt for being a weak and loyal slave. The implication becomes more apparent in the next chapter when Dana notes that in Margaret Weylin's absence, Sarah is in charge of the house. The other slaves resent taking orders from Sarah and try to find ways to avoid working, and Dana does not understand why Sarah admonishes them for it:

"Lazy niggers!" she would mutter when she would have to get after someone. I stared at her in surprise when I first heard her say it. "Why should they work hard?" I asked. (144)

Again, the implication is that Dana perceives Sarah as a slave who is all too willing to please, even in her masters' absence. She makes her feelings toward Sarah even more explicit on the next page when she remarks that Sarah "was the kind of woman who would have been called 'mammy' in some other household" (145). The "mammy" reference is key because it reflects Dana's tendency to confront situations she encounters in the past in the context of her modern upbringing. The Oxford English dictionary defines "mammy" as a "(southern) black woman

who takes care of white children,” but also notes that it is “now regarded as derogatory.” The latter is surely Dana’s intention. By the 1970s the mammy archetype, along with the similar male version, “Uncle Tom,” represented complacency in the face of oppression, and were thus the antithesis of the African-American equality movement. Dana has thus judged this woman living in the nineteenth century according to her own twentieth century moral standards.

Eventually, Dana will be called on to fill Sarah’s shoes and will then grasp Sarah’s motivations for continuing to perform the duties assigned to her. However, by not allowing Dana to reveal her revelations regarding Sarah right away, Butler illustrates the disconnect between modern perceptions and historical realities. We read Dana’s resentment towards Sarah’s perceived complacency, but we simultaneously begin to understand Butler’s message that perhaps some of Dana’s perceptions are misguided. The author clearly sees Dana’s initial perception of Sarah as symbolic of a very real aspect of the modern African-American experience. In her interview with Charles Rowell, the author admits to at one time harboring a similar resentment towards her own mother. A short time later in that same interview, Butler recalls overhearing a similar sentiment from a young man at her college during the height of the Black Power movement:

He said, “I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d have to start with my own parents.”...He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well (51).

Just as this young man fails to put his parents’ experience into the proper context, so too does Dana fail to do so in how she regards Sarah.

This is not to say that Dana in her capacity as narrator *never* allows her narration to be informed by experiences before she narrates them. The question for Butler is how far to allow Dana’s narration to be guided by “Dana the character,” as opposed to the fully informed “Dana the narrator.” The danger is that as the audience begins to perceive the difficulty of Sarah’s dilemma, they may lose sympathy for a narrator that is beginning to resemble the brash young man that Butler recalls in her interview. In an interesting narrative move, “Dana the narrator” throws “Dana the character” a lifeline, so to speak. Immediately after using the volatile term “mammy” to describe Sarah, Dana’s narration is suddenly informed by the experiences that she has yet to tell about, as she admits, “I looked down on her myself *for a while*. Moral superiority” [emphasis mine] (145). Here, Dana makes it clear that her negative

judgment of Sarah is in fact temporary, and chastises her character-self with her dry, deadpan delivery of “moral superiority.” This move is made possible in part because Butler has chosen to have her protagonist narrate the novel.

Dana’s revelation regarding Sarah actually occurs later in the narrative when Dana is forced to step into the mammy role herself while Sarah assists with the birth of her grandchild. To complicate matters, as Dana struggles to finish cooking the dinner that Sarah started, Alice regains her memory of being beaten and enslaved while her husband was sold to an out-of-state trader. Though Alice is overwrought with grief, Dana cannot spare much time to console her:

She sat slumped where I put her, crying, praying, cursing. I sat with her a while, but she didn’t tire, or at least she didn’t stop. I had to leave her to finish preparing supper. I was afraid I would anger Weylin and get Sarah into trouble if I didn’t (159).

Where Dana had once wondered why Sarah does not poison Weylin, she now worries about angering him. Her early perceptions of Sarah were uninformed by Sarah’s context: Sarah serves Weylin as best she can not out of a sense of loyalty, but to survive and protect her daughter Carrie. It seems likely that prior to her months of experience on the plantation Dana would have seen it as unethical to prioritize Weylin’s dinner over consoling Alice. However, such a decision would have lacked the appropriate context and would likely have led to disaster. As she recounts this episode, Dana’s narration is “in the moment” and therefore her narrative function guides the audience to consider how Dana must think on her feet and make appropriate responses based on context rather than the perceptions of her modern life.

Dana is quickly perceived by others on the plantation as an obedient slave, but it still takes her time to fully comprehend what she has been forced to become. Rufus tells Dana that his father, who has had his share of relationships with female slaves, has advised him to stop pursuing a relationship with Alice and to settle for Dana instead:

“He thinks all I want is a woman. Any woman. So you, then. He says you’d be less likely to give me trouble.”

“Do you believe him?” He hesitated, managed to smile a little. “No.”

I nodded. “Good” (163).

Rufus’ answer to Dana’s question is less than convincing. Again, the discrepancy indicates that there are two lines of communication going on here. Dana’s response shows that she is willing to take Rufus’ answer at face value, while her narration of his body language indicates that she should not. In this case, as with her admission of “moral superiority,” Dana’s

narration comes from two positions at once. Dana does not explicitly say so, but there is just enough for the audience to infer that: 1) at this point in the narrative Dana still does not perceive herself as the slave that everyone else sees her as, and 2) she is mistaken to trust Rufus. In this way, direct communication from the implied author to the authorial audience may be seen at work through Dana's telling. Despite the uninformed nature of Dana's narration, we infer that Rufus now sees her as a suitable substitute for Alice, should his pursuit of her fail. We may also infer that Dana is unaware that he harbors this notion. In this way, important information about Rufus and Dana is passed on to the reader without destroying the sense that the narrative is prospective in nature. Furthermore, it solidifies the ethical positioning of Rufus. More and more, Dana's project to intervene in Rufus' education looks like a failure. It may in fact seem that Dana really should have known better and is making poor ethical choices by continuing to save Rufus' life after his attempted rape of Alice and more. However, there is another way to see it. Though there are signs of Rufus' corruption, we must continue to consider the fact that certain elements of Dana's narration are informed by revelations that she is not aware of at the time of the action. Moreover, Dana's inability to prevent certain events from occurring, such as the rape of Alice, fits in well with some of the thematic features mentioned in the previous chapter. It does no good to indict individuals for the crime of slavery more than one-hundred fifty years after the fact. The best that Dana or anyone else can do is to recognize the white supremacist state at the core of the oppression and try to understand the contexts of oppressor and oppressed alike. Eventually, Dana will experience those contexts first hand and have to come to terms with how she sees herself and what she has to do to survive.

Dana's ethical decision making regarding Alice gets more difficult as the novel goes on, which exemplifies how she is forced to ethically reposition herself. Presently, Rufus asks Dana to convince Alice to sleep with him. Dana is repulsed and initially refuses. However, Rufus threatens that if Dana does not "talk some sense into her" then he would have his overseer "beat some sense into her" (163). He essentially promises that he will beat Alice if she refuses and then have his way with her anyway:

"Send her to me. I'll have her whether you help or not. All I want to do is fix it so I don't have to beat her. You're no friend of hers if you won't do that much!"
Of hers! He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl – help her at least avoid some pain. But she wouldn't think much of me helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself (164).

Dana is in a no-win situation. Whether or not Dana convinces Alice to go to Rufus, the young woman will be hurt. The prospect is especially cruel because it forces Alice to have a hand in her own rape and turns Dana into an accomplice, though in reality Alice has no choice. In the end, Alice chooses to do what Rufus wants and just as Dana no longer thinks much of herself, Alice “became a quieter more subdued person...she seemed to die a little” (168). The climax of Dana’s ethical repositioning occurs shortly afterward as she finally articulates the motivations behind the sort of choices that she and Sarah have felt forced to make:

He had already found the way to control me – by threatening others. That was safer than threatening me directly and it worked. It was a lesson he had no doubt learned from his father. Weylin, for instance, had known just how far to push Sarah. He had sold only three of her children - -left one to live for and protect (169).

This is Dana’s realization in which she is finally able to reckon Sarah’s moral character on the same level as her own. This moment of full disclosure insures that we cannot question Dana’s motives when she saves Rufus’ life two more times. She must protect him in order to protect herself and those around her.

In this section I have endeavored to show that throughout *Kindred* it is clear that Butler’s character narrator technique serves to guide the reader’s ethical response to Dana and others around her. Most of the time, Dana appears less informed than her retrospective narration would seem to imply. This discrepancy allows the foregrounding of the dual communication of author and narrator to take place. The indirect communication from implied author to authorial audience allows that audience to infer enough information to have the intended ethical response of Dana while preserving the mimetic flow and prospective aspect of the narrative. In the following section I hope to show how character narration in *Waiting for the Barbarians* allows for similar relationships between implied author, narrator, and reader. However, I will also point to a crucial distinction, namely narrative tense, and discuss its further ethical implications.

The Magistrate’s Telling

As with Dana’s narration in *Kindred*, the Magistrate’s narration also features some “curious phenomena” that call into question his reliability and the extent which the author uses narrative features to communicate directly to the audience. Perhaps the most glaring discrepancy is the seemingly lack of self-awareness that the Magistrate often demonstrates. Where Dana does not disclose the revelations that her experience has brought her (at least not fully) until a certain time, the Magistrate asserts a distinction between himself and other

officials of the Empire when he should perhaps know better. His activities with the barbarian woman, though of a much different character from Joll's treatment of her, belie an imperialistic attitude towards the native population. To borrow Phelan's terminology, the Magistrate is underreading. His lack of self-awareness causes him to underread his own attitudes and thus fail to recognize his actual proximity to the Empire. On the other hand, there is a strong sense that the Magistrate "protests too much," which would seem to indicate that he is in fact self-aware to the extent that he feels the burden of complicity with Empire's atrocities. His efforts to assert his distance are therefore an attempt to mitigate these feelings of accountability through self-deception. Another narrative feature which informs our ethical judgement of the Magistrate is the tense of the narration.

Waiting for the Barbarians is distinct particularly on account of its tense. The novel is written entirely in the simultaneous present. That is to say, the Magistrate narrates events and his own thoughts as they happen. It is not a unique approach, but it is not conventional either. In fact, there have been those who claim that a narrative in the simultaneous present is in fact not a true narrative at all. In "Present Tense Narration" Phelan outlines Suzanne Fleischman's position which argues that present tense narration is "inherently unstable" because it does not adhere to a set of narrative norms (226). That is to say, that it violates the convention which defines narrative as retrospective telling. As such, there are two temporal tracks involved in narrative: the time of the narrator's telling and the time of the story being told. If these two tracks are condensed into a single track, as is the case with present tense narration, then one of two things happens:

Either the narrator will disappear and the events will be presented as if without a filter, thus moving the text toward drama; or the narrator will become supremely important and the events will be merely an occasion for the discourse, thus moving the text toward lyric (Phelan, 226).

The logic is compelling. If a narrator is experiencing and telling simultaneously, then she has no opportunity to reflect on the content. One possibility is that the narrator is, in effect, merely reporting events as she sees them. Alternatively, she could be relating an entirely subjective account.

The problem with the above logic is the assumption of strict adherence to a narrow mimetic logic. The situation is similar to what has been outlined regarding *Kindred* in the previous section. A narrow mimetic view would dictate that Dana's entire retrospective telling should be informed by the revelations she makes in the final third of the novel.

According to that logic, the fact that this is not the case means that Dana is being deceptive in some way. However, this does not seem to fit with Dana's character who even as a slave is not afraid to speak her mind. Also, she does in fact reveal her revelations eventually, so there is no clear motive for her withholding information. Phelan argues that in such situations, the "apparent violation of the mimetic standard [does] not undermine but rather makes possible the effectiveness of the narrative...the violation is not a problem because the reader's temporal orientation is always prospective" (228). Likewise holds true for the present tense narration of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Mimetic conventions need not dictate meaning and reader response. To the contrary, as has been shown with *Kindred*, it is precisely the deviations which allow more meaning to be inferred and enhance the effectiveness of the narrative. Furthermore, it does not make sense to, on the one hand, claim that present tense narration is not true narrative form, but on the other hold it up to a "realism" litmus standard.

Phelan points out that the impulse to hold a present tense narrative to a narrow mimetic standard becomes even more tenuous precisely because of the artificiality of the form. The fact that the reader understands that she is reading a "synthetic construct" means that the mimetic standard does not have to be applied as narrowly as it would for perhaps a work of nonfiction (229). Since the reader has certain expectations for fiction from the outset she is able to suspend reality enough to allow herself to experience the narrative on its terms. Moreover, there is not a "plausible occasion for narration" in the simultaneous present tense in the first place (Phelan, 233). The Magistrate is telling as he is experiencing, which of course is impossible. Paradoxically, the simultaneous telling also adds a sense of realism that cannot be reproduced in any other way. Just as we live our immediate lives without the advantage of foresight, so too does the Magistrate narrate in the moment.

Tense and Ethical Placement

I believe it is then safe to shelve the notion that present tense narrative is no true narrative at all and that the character narrator must be a completely objective observer or entirely subjective. We may then turn to the question of the Magistrate's reliability, how it relates to the tense of the novel and how both influence reader response. Perhaps the most immediate effect is where the tense of the narration places the reader in relation to the narrator. As previously mentioned, the Magistrate does not have the "advantage" of retrospection in his narrative. As he is telling his story, he does not know what comes next. We can be sure that Coetzee has a plan for the narrative, but the Magistrate is not privy to that

plan. He has not lived it yet. As a result, the reader is in the unusual position of actually knowing slightly more about what lies in store for the Magistrate than he does. For example, in the opening passages the Magistrate's descriptions of himself and Joll emphasize their differences. The Magistrate paints himself as a knowledgeable local administrator: "I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire" (8). This is nearly the total opposite of his description of the Colonel: "with his tapering fingernails, his mauve handkerchiefs, his slender feet in soft shoes I keep imagining him back in the capital he is so obviously impatient for, murmuring to his friends in theatre corridors between acts" (6). The characterizations set up exactly what becomes a major theme in the novel: the conflict between the Colonel and the Magistrate, symbolizing the Magistrate's denial of complicity with the Empire. The Magistrate may not like Joll, but he cannot know at this point what lies in store. The audience however, has been given a signal that the two will soon become adversaries. Coetzee has combined the effects of character narration and present tense telling to place the audience "one step ahead," so to speak, of the Magistrate. We may find that the Magistrate is underregarding his situation, but it is difficult to argue that this is intentional since he has not had time to reflect on his perceived position in the Empire in relation to his actions. His narration simply lacks the distance of retrospection. The Magistrate is then "reliably unreliable," so to speak. He has been deprived of the "distance necessary for his reflection to make coherent sense of it" (Phelan, 234). We may note his flaw in perception, but it is made consistently and without deliberation.

Other than the Magistrate pleading his distance from the Empire, there are other examples of the narrative's placement of the audience's perception just ahead of that of the Magistrate. For one, there are occasionally discrepancies in his account which indicate, if not awareness, then at least a suspicion of his own complicity with atrocities of the Empire. The present tense narration insures that the Magistrate is too close to the events that he is narrating to recognize and reflect on these discrepancies. For example, after the Colonel interrogates his first prisoners, the old man and the injured boy, the Magistrate reports "Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing" (5). The implication is that, other than hearsay, he has no evidence of torture. Interestingly, on his very next meeting with Joll, the Magistrate receives confirmation from the Colonel that he believes that "pain is truth" (5). Later, however, the Magistrate's account changes somewhat: "I did not ride away: for a while *I stopped my ears* to the noises coming from the hut by the

granary” [emphasis mine] (9). Suddenly, there is a reason why the Magistrate has not heard the sounds of torture coming from the granary hut: he has *avoided* hearing what he has suspected all along. Indeed, the Empire has made it easy for him to avoid hearing (and seeing) what has gone on inside the granary hut. When the Magistrate asks to attend the interrogations he is assured by the Colonel that he would find the proceedings “tedious” (4). The old man’s death at the hands of his interrogators is further masked by a bland and generic report that eventually lands on the Magistrate’s desk.

This narrative’s placement of the audience allows it to witness the relative ease with which the Empire is able to facilitate complicity. It is also reminiscent of Coetzee’s account of how it was once illegal in South Africa to photograph a prison. He writes in *Into the Dark Chamber* that “the passerby shall have no means of confirming that what he saw...was not a mirage or a bad dream” (361). Coetzee’s point is that it is easier to hide something that no one wants to see in the first place. If someone has a chance to avoid a painful realization of complicity in atrocities, then they will grab that chance like a lifeline. No one wants to feel that they are being lied to either, which is precisely the impulse that the state exploits in order to act with impunity. The Magistrate indicates as much after he surreptitiously views the deceased old man’s body:

If I had only handed these two absurd prisoners to the Colonel...if I had gone on a hunting trip for a few days, as I should have done...and come back, and without reading it...put my seal on his report...if I had done the wise thing, then perhaps I might now return to my hunting and hawking (9).

The problem for the Magistrate is that his conscience will not allow him to “unsee” the old man’s battered corpse. He is forced to begrudgingly act in order to mitigate some of his feelings of complicity.

Perhaps the most significant example of the Magistrate’s lack of self-awareness comes across in his relationship with the barbarian woman. In the opening chapter his complicity is demonstrated through his resistance to recognize his true proximity to the rest of the Empire. However, in the second chapter this is demonstrated through action, specifically in how he treats the barbarian woman. Again, the tense of the narration informs the reader of the Magistrate’s awareness of what his actions imply. He meets the barbarian woman as she shambles around the town, her ankles having been broken during Joll’s interrogations. Despite her initial refusal he insists that she live in his chambers. He claims that he has “relieved her the shame of begging,” and on some level he clearly believes that (34). Phelan calls his

ritualistic washing of her ankles “an act of humility and respect” and it is the Magistrate’s “attempt to atone for the woman’s torture.” (235) However, the ritual soon turns into something else. The washing gradually becomes more involved until it becomes a wholly erotic activity. Moreover, the Magistrate begins to objectify her body in other ways. Her body for him becomes a puzzle to be solved as he tries to decipher her wounds and force responses out of her. The Magistrate’s “effort at atonement is corrupted by [his] complicity – and that very complicity prevents him from recognizing what he is doing” (Phelan, 236). In effect, he has approached her in precisely such a way that his connection to the Empire would imply. The Magistrate’s narrative allows the reader to comprehend that the washing ritual has gone from being an unusual, but well-meaning gesture to an eerie and self-serving act. However, the Magistrate, living in the moment of his narration, is still unable to see this.

The reader is therefore clued-in numerous times as to the Magistrate’s proximity to the Empire. His narration wavers from unawareness, partial awareness, to flat out denial of this proximity. The fact that he suffers from this confusion is a further indication that he is in fact caught up in an imperial existence. His attempt to subvert the Empire, or at least atone for it somewhat, by taking in the barbarian woman only serves to underscore his connection to it. He can sense his dilemma, but cannot fully articulate it because the imperial language is the only one he knows. The present tense narrative positions the reader just in front of the Magistrate when it comes to the ability to filter and reflect on his position, attitude and actions. Moreover, it is understood that the Magistrate himself does not have this capability. As such, it is not assumed that the Magistrate is being intentionally deceptive in his narration. Due to the artificiality of the occasion of telling, there is in fact no one for the Magistrate to be deceptive towards, other than himself. In this way, the reader does not feel deceived by the narrator, but understands the subjectivity of his narrative.

Reader Response

Despite the reader’s somewhat more informed position regarding the narrative in relation to the Magistrate, Phelan argues that one should not overestimate the reader’s distance from the Magistrate’s narrative situation. This seemingly paradoxical situation is a result of the interaction of character narration and present tense narration. Much of the Magistrate’s narration is informed by his disclosure functions. However, “although our awareness of Coetzee behind the Magistrate means that our understanding can exceed the Magistrate’s, we frequently must struggle to attain the necessary distance from the

Magistrate's views and actions" (Phelan, 235). This is due in part to the present tense of the narrative. Just as the tense holds the Magistrate in the moment, so too does it put a limit on the foresight of the reader. As the Magistrate fails to fully grasp his complicity, so too does the audience at a critical moment. In this way, Coetzee "sets a trap" for his audience within the narrative. We want so much for the Magistrate to comprehend his complicity that when he does so, yet fails to change, we allow ourselves to become complicit in his continued complicity. In effect, Coetzee uses narrative features and "the authorial audience's reading experience...as a way to exemplify one of his major thematic points about complicity" (Phelan, 235). This move to influence reader response at the end of the novel actually begins well in advance, arguably from page one.

It has already been argued here that the present tense of the narrative facilitates sympathy for the Magistrate. That build up of sympathy and the reader's expectations are key elements of Coetzee's thematic climax. Though it is understood that the Magistrate lacks sufficient perspective to acknowledge his own proximity to the Empire, the reader continues to sympathize with him because early on he makes clear his opposition to some of the oppressive activities of the Empire. On the one hand, Joll and his men torture the old man and the boy, while on the other, the Magistrate provides them with food and medicine. That sympathy erodes somewhat due to his treatment of the barbarian woman, but is recovered during their journey through the wilderness.

During that journey, the physical distance he puts between himself and the Empire is symbolic of his attitudinal distance which, up to now, he has felt but has failed to act on. A moment of realization occurs as he watches the barbarian woman joke with the young soldiers that accompany them. Where he had previously seen her as "incomplete" he now sees "a witty attractive young woman" (68). The Magistrate realizes now that he has seen her as the image painted by the Empire, rather than the person she is and it fills him with regret. When he returns to town he is immediately arrested and eventually tortured. In a highly symbolic episode he is forced to don a woman's smock and cavort around the prison yard for the guards' amusement, in effect taking on the role of the barbarian woman. His revelation and the suffering he endures restores sympathy for the Magistrate. Phelan writes that through his self-realization "The Magistrate is fulfilling one aspect of our desire" (237). The other aspect of our desire is the expectation that now that the Magistrate is aware of his complicity, he will make a final and decisive break from the Empire.

The reader expects a change in behavior in the Magistrate after the Civil Guard withdraws, but settles for his restoration. The withdrawal leaves a power vacuum which the Magistrate is able to easily step into. He resumes his prior position and no one challenges him. For all intents and purposes, the Magistrate is in the same position at the end of the novel as he was when it began. Though he has realized his error in judgment regarding his complicity in imperial oppression, he has failed to actually do anything about it. It is at this point that Coetzee springs his “trap.” As the Magistrate perseveres through hardship to take back the position of respect that was taken from him by Joll and Mandel “we are inclined to share his satisfaction and, therefore, overlook or not fully register the perpetuation of his complicitous consciousness” (Phelan, 239). Coetzee’s mastery over the formal narrative features facilitates the reader being drawn into a willingness to tolerate the Magistrate’s complicity. The ability of the author to illicit audience participation ensures that before judging the Magistrate too harshly, the reader must confront her own complicity in his situation.

The Magistrate’s experience, coupled with the reader’s activity, lead to a pair of important conclusions. First, from the Magistrate’s perspective, some level of complicity is unavoidable. The town is his home and to leave it would be suicide, since he cannot very well wander off into the desert. Moreover, with the onset of what will prove to be a harsh winter, no one else is in a position to lead the town through it. Secondly, as the reader experiences firsthand in the final episode of the novel, one’s complicity does not always imply knowledge of that complicity. In light of these considerations, one may conclude that “we must be very wary of adopting any stance base on our moral superiority to others whom we might consider complicit” in the perpetration of oppression (Phelan, 242). This is not to imply that perpetrators are to be dismissed, nor that there is no point in opposing complicity. Rather, the point that both *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* seek to instill is that our resistance to complicity be tempered by an understanding of perception.

Conclusion

Despite significant differences in form and genre, *Kindred* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* have a great deal in common. Both novels describe and are informed by aspects of white supremacy. This term is distinct from “mere” racism or prejudice. It rather implies a well-defined and state supported racial hierarchy. The states exploit their control of discourse to dehumanize others in order to justify racial injustice. The novels each deal with situations in which those the state defines as “others” are directly confronted with the consequences of that racial hierarchy. In the process, the character narrators are forced to contend with moral dilemmas that arise as a result of those confrontations. As a result, the narrators are forced to contend with revelations challenging their long-held perceptions and implied complicity.

Of the perceptions that each of the narrators must contend with, perhaps the most significant is how each views their level of complicity with racial oppression. Coetzee’s novel opens with the Magistrate spending a great deal of effort asserting his distance from the Empire. However, there are indications early on that he at least partially suspects that his attitudinal distance is not as great as he asserts. His relationship with the barbarian woman reveals to the reader and later to himself he does in fact act in accord with the Empire’s system of racial oppression.

In her own way, Dana is also complicit in a form of oppression. This may come as a surprise since she is in fact an African-American woman. However, her journey to the past exposes her unwitting participation in the discourse of the white supremacist state. Though she is the same race as the slaves on the Weylin Plantation, she comes from a different time, which implies a different set of perceptions and expectations. What she expects to find and how she judges others belie a set of perceptions that is influenced by a white dominated national narrative.

Both of the narrators initially fail to recognize their own complicity, but eventually each has a revelation in which they comprehend their own misguided perceptions. For Dana this means understanding that her moral superiority has led her to judge Sarah’s supposed complacency without context. The Magistrate somewhat ironically realizes that his attempt to mitigate his complacency in the barbarian woman’s torture in fact has led him to prolong her mistreatment. Each takes steps to make amends, but there is little to nothing that can be done. Dana’s efforts to positively influence Rufus and protect Alice both fail. Likewise, the

Magistrate finds it impossible to live outside the boundaries of the imperial life he has always known. Thus, both novels make similar major thematic points that an individual can be complicit in oppression without being aware of it and may indeed not have a choice in the matter. Simultaneously, any judgment of complicity in others should only be made in full awareness of the context within which the individual acts. In this way, the emphasis of responsibility for oppression in the novels is directed away from the acts of individuals and placed instead on the state.

The narrative form of the novels also plays an important part in the reader's experience. In both books the author employs character narration to communicate thematic points. This technique allows the author to communicate indirectly to the authorial audience through the narrator's telling. This amounts to the reader being able to experience two lines of communication simultaneously. In this way, the reader is brought closer to the narrator's experience, while receiving cues from the author that facilitates the ethical positioning of the reader. In the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, audience participation and ethical positioning is further enhanced through the use of the simultaneous present tense throughout the novel. Not only does this technique position the reader in a closer position of sympathy for the narrator, but the narrator's lack of retrospection means the narrator himself does not know the outcome of his narration. As such, the reader can often only make sense of events as the narrator makes sense of them. The present tense is combined with character narration in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to create an effect in which the reader is so close to the action that she ends up becoming complicit in the Magistrate's complicity. In this way, the thematic point that one can be unwittingly complicit in oppression is made through narrative features.

An important distinction between these two novels is their settings. Coetzee's novel is dystopian and allegorical, while Butler's is set in a real-world time and place. As such, there is a sense of completeness in *Kindred*. American slavery is a thing of the past and there is nothing that Dana can do to prevent the suffering of her ancestors. The best she can hope for is a better understanding of what they went through and what it means for her in her own time. *Waiting for the Barbarians* on the other hand is timeless. Not only is the setting's time and place unspecified, but the present tense narration has the opposite effect of *Kindred's* retrospective narration. That is to say, there is a strong sense of continuity and stagnation at the end of Coetzee's novel. It makes sense in terms of the inspiration for the Empire, since at the time of its publication the paranoid and racially oppressive apartheid state of South Africa was a contemporary fact. Furthermore, when juxtaposed, the two novels seem to inform each

other. While *Waiting for the Barbarians* shows that the racially oppressive state is inherently violent and stagnant, *Kindred* illustrates the unsustainability of such a state. Indeed, part of the undoing of slavery in America was due to the contribution of slave narratives, of which *Kindred* is an illustrative, albeit unconventional, form of. However, how long it takes for racial oppression to fully unravel is an unanswered question. Just as Dana still must deal with echoes of white supremacy in her own time, so too do nations such as the United States and South Africa continue to struggle with questions surrounding their racially oppressive histories.

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