Time Lapse and Time Capsules: The Chronopolitics of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction

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Introduction

What is learnt when questions of temporality, of relations with the past, and of forms of anticipating the future are pressed in analysis of narrative fiction? In the novels of Octavia E. Butler, we find a distinctive engagement with time that sometimes works to disrupt received temporal regimes, probes how we experience, interpret and shape time, allows new understanding of time and power, and indeed offers its own theorization around such questions. The use of time travel in Butler's *Kindred* (1979) has attracted critical attention for its striking traversal back and forth between the late twentieth century and the past of slavery. Yet new readings are opened up by exploring temporality, including narrative temporality, in *Kindred* alongside other, non-time travel fiction by Butler. Guided by archival material on Butler's speculative thought on time, and drawing on critical frameworks related to the black diaspora, Afrofuturism and genre, this article will examine the 'chronopolitics' of Butler's story worlds and make a case for her multi-layered, generative approach. Looking at the 'future histories' *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), as well as *Kindred*, I hope to elucidate Butler's interest in protagonists who are 'out of their times,' in representing multiple temporal orders that complicate dominant discourses of progress, and in laying bare the continual construction of accounts of the past and future in the present.

'A Partial Correction': Connie Samaras

In a 1994 letter to Butler, local Los Angeles artist Connie Samaras poses 'What would you like to have a space alien know?', with this prompt helping to unpack her artwork's attempted 'correction' to an official, authoritative and yet limited time capsule or archive,

namely the representations of earth curated to go up in U.S. space probes seventeen years earlier (Samaras, OEB 6223). One of the ways I will think about envisioning time and travel in time is via the notion of the time capsule. The starting point of Samaras's correspondence with Butler offers a helpful way in to investigating such units in Butler's own work and in this I adopt a capacious definition of time capsule as social snapshot, ark, survival kit, storage cache, archive, and so on.

Part of the Huntington Library Butler papers, Samaras's letter explains her alternative time capsule, seeking to rewrite the assumptions, for example about heteronormativity, that underpinned NASA's 1977 representation of human life on earth.[1] Dated April 22, 1994, Samaras's letter invites Butler to contribute to her exhibition catalog and discusses a series of photo/text/video works. In the accompanying press release, the installation is titled 'A Partial Correction to the Representations of Earth Culture Sent Out to Extraterrestrials on the U.S. 1977 Voyager Space Probes.' Samaras's exhibition is to foreground the personal and the partial so as to denaturalize the earlier representations that laid claim to objectivity and a kind of universality. Samaras notes, 'how representations of space embody both a visionary desire for progressive change while simultaneously functioning as a repository of conservative nostalgia for a mythical, uncontested hegemonic past.' She writes, 'By both parodying and playing off the idea of the art museum as an ideologically constructed history archive, my interest is to use this reconstructed time capsule as means of "preserving" marginalized and radical histories, discourses, personal narratives, and political reforms' (Samaras, OEB 6223). Samaras connects the NASA time capsule to the narrowed delineation of national cultural accounts, probing 'the ways in which oppositional ideas and culture become deradicalized especially when we start to look at what constitutes national identity and archives' (Samaras,

[1] The selection team for the material was headed by Carl Sagan. Samaras notes the 'Family of Man' type representation – claiming universality – settled on for the capsules.

OEB 6223). Inviting Butler then to respond to the aforementioned question 'What would you like to have a space alien know?', Samaras aspires to a different kind of approach in her project and also cites Butler as, in turn, an inspirational influence. Not only does the correspondence between the two women open up the identity and national politics of the time capsule in helpful ways, but it also offers an image for thought in gaining new understandings of time in Butler's fiction; these archives and capsules attempt to reach through time, to 'preserve,' to anticipate, and to inform and shape another time. The exhibition's reference to the Space Race of the 1960s and '70s also recalls the context of the Cold War, and this forms a backdrop to aspects of the Parable novels alongside African American experiences of, and engagements with, the temporal orders of dominant U.S. society (e.g., the navigation of the history of slavery and racialized accounts of modernity). Importantly, from Samaras's correspondence we can also take away how the notion of the time capsule highlights the constructed nature of all such representations; in the popular sense of a time capsule people *choose* what to put in them for a future interpreter to find, and those choices are underpinned by social norms and the position and perspective of who is doing the choosing. Although there can be an element of chance in what is in an archive, as any archivist knows, there are also choices about what goes into an archive and what does not, who it is assumed the archive is for, and, as Derrida and Foucault point out, respectively, our technologies and disciplines for organizing knowledge themselves shape what can be archived, accessed, communicated, and known (Manoff 4-6 & 10-11).

The Black Atlantic

The temporal has been explored in various ways by critical frameworks in the field of black diaspora and African American studies. One such framework can be found in Afrofuturism, to which I will return, and another, less directly, in Black Atlanticism. Paul Gilroy's

influential attempt in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) 'to rethink modernity via the history of […] the African diaspora into the Western hemisphere' provides a broad lens in setting up counterpoints to dominant accounts of progress and history, and in seeking to understand the forces that have shaped black cultures over time (Gilroy 13).[2] Gilroy challenges a nationalistic focus in cultural studies and intellectual history via the possibilities of an 'intercultural and transnational formation' based on exchanges, voyages and interactions between 'Europe, America, Africa and the Caribbean,' which he labels the black Atlantic (ix & 4). Within this spatial model, he also identifies in black expressive practices a counterculture of modernity, one which disrupts received ideas of tradition and modernity, Enlightenment and progress, historical memory and universal time. For example, as Yogita Goyal sums up pithily in her 2014 critique of Gilroy, 'While nation time is linear and developmental […] diaspora has seemed to offer a more discontinuous and fractured sense of time. While nation time links past, present and future in a march toward progress, diaspora time emphasizes the breaks and discontinuities in such a movement […] a time that is characterized by rupture, but also by various kinds of imagined or projected simultaneities' (Goyal x).[3] Through Gilroy's paradigm of diasporic modernity, I suggest we can come to understand more of Butler's critical and narrative project in her fiction, including engagement with, and enactment of, rupture and kinds of plurality or simultaneity.

For Gilroy the Middle Passage of the slave trade is a key displacement within his Atlantic formation, also informing 'the development of a political (anti) aesthetics' in

[2] See Terry (2013) for a fuller version of my engagement with Gilroy.

[3] At one point Gilroy poses the 'idea of diaspora' as an 'eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being' (198). See Goyal on Gilroy's tendency to highlight the slave trade and 'slavery as the primary historical crucible for modern blackness' (vi). See also Hanchard on the African diaspora, modernity, and the imposed disparity and disjuncture of racialized time.

response to 'protracted familiarity with ineffable, sublime terror' in the New World (Gilroy 215). When we pay attention to these political aesthetics, grand narratives of progress, rationality, and nation are forced into a confrontation with the internality of slavery and colonialism to them and a different periodization of modernity emerges (17). The final chapter of *The Black Atlantic* turns from vernacular forms to a cluster of contemporary African American novels to further develop ideas about confrontations with the unspeakable and diasporic expressive inventiveness. These novels all 'deal explicitly with history, historiography, slavery, and remembrance' (218). Finding Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) exemplary of 'the strategies for summoning up the past devised by black writers whose minority modernism can be defined precisely through its imaginative proximity to forms of terror that surpass understanding,' Gilroy points towards a distinctive poetics in negotiating such history and proximity (222). He cites Morrison's proposition that 'modern life begins with slavery,'[4] and from this premise both questions the uses to which tradition and the 'premodern' have been put in nationalistic accounts and looks at 'the diaspora temporality and historicity, memory and narrativity that are the articulating principles of the black political countercultures that grew inside modernity in a distinctive relationship of antagonistic indebtedness' (191). The sense of discontinuous, multiple, tensile temporalities here, and the challenge to received histories via fictions that explore questions of remembering and writing the past, is suggestive for a reading of the temporal in Butler.

The Chronopolitics of Afrofuturism

Kodwo Eshun's take on relations with past, present, and future provides another key point of reference, Eshun being one of several critics who coined the term, and theorized about,

[4] Gilroy explains, 'It is being suggested that the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marked out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would only become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later' (221).

Afrofuturism in the 1990s. In his 2003 essay 'Further Considerations of Afrofuturism' he elaborates on the possibilities of critical futurisms for disturbance of both enduring colonial orders and the current 'futures industry.'[5] Starting from racism's denial to 'black subjects [of] the right to belong to the enlightenment project,' Eshun proposes that black intellectual culture has become overdetermined by the 'need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence' (Eshun 287). Underlying this, in Michael Hanchard's terms, is the West's 'idea of African and African-derived peoples as the antithesis of modernity' and as without history, as well as 'the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups' (Hanchard 247 & 253).[6] For Eshun the resultant emphasis on a cultural project of recovery – that is memorial and historical imperatives in diasporic culture and the accumulation of 'countermemories that contest the colonial archive' – not only situates colonization and slavery 'as the founding moment of modernity,' but also has meant that a focus on the future, 'the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures[,] was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty' (Eshun 288). Yet if the future is seen as 'a chronopolitical terrain,' as hostile and in need of contestation as the past, then 'inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial' (289). This provides a different angle to Gilroy's account of modernity and slavery (and to some less critically minded versions of Afrofuturism), urging an orientation 'towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective' (289).[7] Eshun advocates an extension of vigilance

[5] See Terry (2016) for a fuller version of my engagement with Eshun.

[6] Hanchard writes, 'unequal relationships between dominant and subordinate groups produce unequal temporal access to institutions, goods, services, resources, power, and knowledge […] racial time has operated as a structural effect upon the politics of racial difference' (Hanchard 253). See also Fabian's foundational work on how modern time, and temporal distance, underpins the anthropological notion of otherness, wherein different populations are seen as belonging to different times.

[7] Eshun's call can be situated alongside those of other thinkers who see Afrofuturism as a critical approach rather than a utopian vision; Mark Bould, rather than 'merely celebrating Afrofuturism as resistance,' holds

'into the field of the future' and characterizes Afrofuturism as 'a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection' (288 & 301). '[I]nquiry into production of futures' is an aspect of Butler's future history novels, while all of her work manifests a preoccupation with who gets to define, and belong in, the future (289).

Alert to corporate force in the neoliberal, capitalist twenty-first century, Eshun points out that today 'power […] functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures' as the powerful 'draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past' (Eshun 289 & 291). Through this understanding of the present grip of a futures industry and predatory and uneven futures, he highlights the high stakes in shaping counter futures, in problematizing associated technodeterminism, and in continuing what Gilroy succinctly puts as 'the repudiation of the ideology of progress by the racially subordinated who have lubricated its wheels with their unfree labour' (Gilroy 215). According to Eshun, 'Afrofuturism, then, is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic […] the anticipatory and the future conditional' (Eshun 293). He finds alternative appeals to the future in various modes of black vernacular expression, which make visible 'competing world views that seek to reorient history' (297). Also suggestive for my reading of Butler is his description of work that shapes chronopolitical intervention via its form: 'By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned blacks to prehistory' (297). In a new twenty-first century in the grip of the futures industry, Afrofuturism can

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work under this label to account for not often enough questioning capitalism and aiming for 'a transformation' (Bould 182).

further ‘the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation’ (301).

Narrative Time Travel

David Wittenberg’s proposition that time travel fiction reveals to us how all narrative involves a form of time travel, offers another frame of reference and also draws in questions of genre. In *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (2013), Wittenberg poses time travel plots as thought experiments, which represent broader theoretical questions about storytelling, temporality, history, subjectivity, and so on. He writes, ‘I wish to suggest not merely that time travel stories are examples or depictions of narratological or philosophical issues, but that these stories are themselves already exercises in narratology and the theorization of temporality – they are in essence “narrative machines,” more or less latent, emergent, or full blown’ (Wittenberg 2). To put some of this another way, a reader’s alignment with a narrator or focalizer who experiences jumps in time (where such jumps are a part of the plot itself) is shown to be not so very different from the contractions, flashbacks, dilations, and advances experienced by the reader in an ‘ordinary’ narrative, with the former (time travel plots) often working to make us more alert to the latter (the construction and experience of time in narrative more broadly). Wittenberg suggests time travel stories thus expose and destabilize ‘some of the basic conditions of story construction,’ rendering us all theorists or experimenters in the philosophy of time (6). Although he accords Butler’s *Kindred* just two footnote mentions, his arguments are generative in terms of looking at Butler’s time travel novel alongside the temporal modalities and manipulations in other, non-time travel fiction by her.[8] Wittenberg also highlights the frequency of a concern with

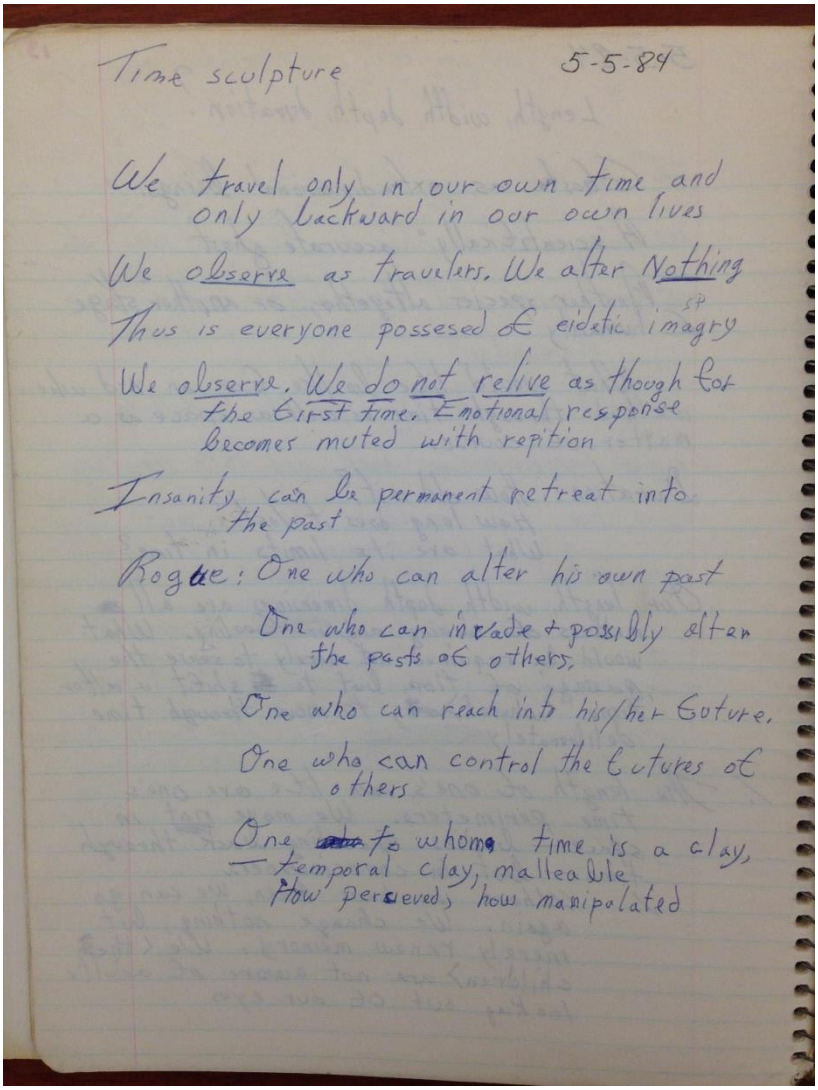
[8] Wittenberg also turns to a category of ‘non-science-fictional narrative experiments that might be called time travel either in their specific confrontation with the significance of temporal ordering or in their experimental construction of narrative viewpoint’ (Wittenberg 210).

historiographical problems in time travel fiction, as it often enacts the fundamental question of how the past is reconstructed by or within the present (14). This echoes Gilroy's observation of a preoccupation with questions of remembering and writing history in the contemporary African American novels he examines in *The Black Atlantic*. For Butler, as we will see, how the past is reconstructed by or within the present is a significant concern in both her time travel and non-time travel works.

Time Sculpting

Butler's commonplace books, as found in the Huntington archive of her papers, offer insight into her interest in time, and in bending the terms by which it is usually understood. In a 1984 entry Butler speculates about what she calls 'time sculpture,' linking the ability to reshape events of another time to a rogue figure (see Figure 1). This possibility suggests something of a time traveler, a trickster who has grasped control of time.[9] S/he is someone who can potentially 'alter the pasts of others' and can reach into and influence the future (Butler, OEB 3227). The plasticity of time is drawn out via Butler's page heading, 'Time sculpture,' and the metaphor of molding or modeling: the rogue is 'One to whom time is a clay, – temporal clay, malleable.' Butler's notes also touch on memory as one personal form of backward time travel that we all have in common. As I will go on to examine, while several of her characters prompt us to think again about placement in time and determinism and circumvention, Butler's narrative manipulation of timeframes works to expose, and theorize about, the (re)making of time.

[9] The foundational Afrofuturist film *The Last Angel of History* (1995) features a time hopping, excavating 'data thief' who resonates with Butler's time rogue.


Time sculpture 5-5-84

We travel only in our own time and only backward in our own lives

We observe as travelers. We alter Nothing

Thus is everyone possesed of eidetic (SP imagry)

We observe. We do not relive as though for the first time. Emotional response becomes muted with repition

Insanity can be permanent retreat into the past

Rogue: One who can alter his own past

One who can invade + possibly alter the pasts of others,

One who can reach into his/her future.

One who can control the futures of others

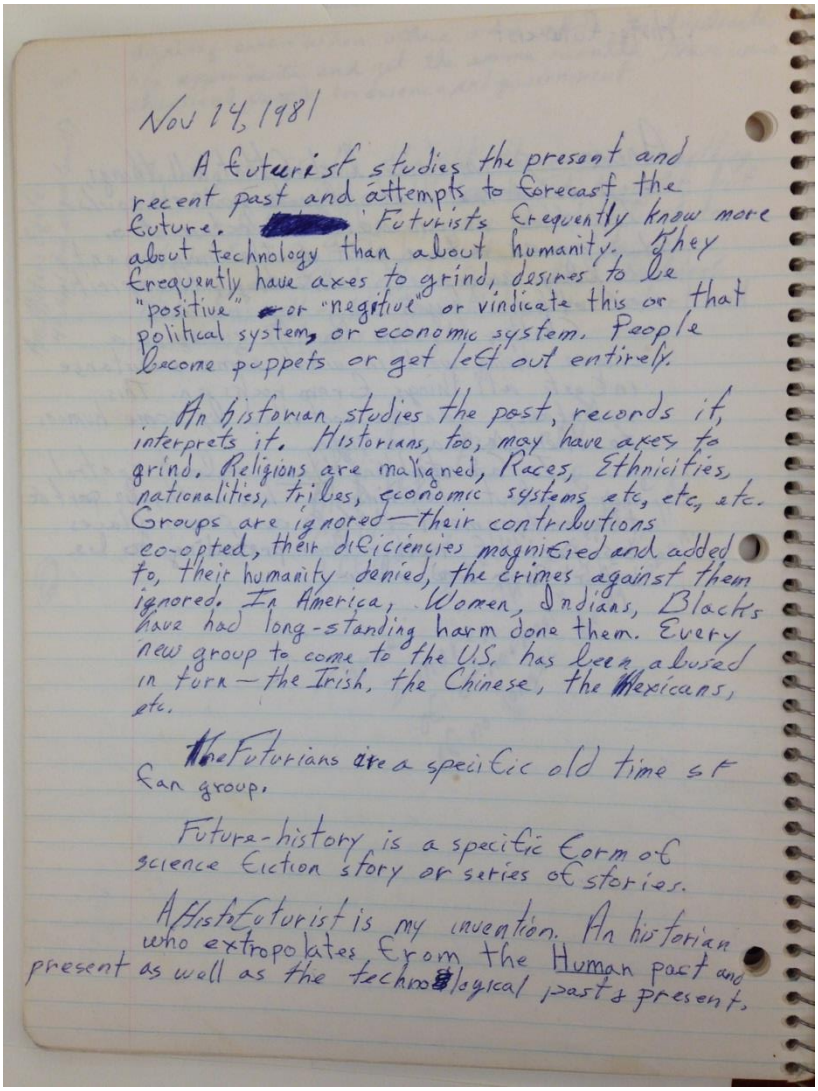
One to whom time is a clay, temporal clay, malleable How perceived, how manipulated

Figure 1. Octavia E. Butler, Commonplace Book (large), 1984

The Huntington Library (OEB 3227). Copyright Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

Elsewhere in her papers, as Shelley Streeby has also identified, Butler invents and discusses the term 'Histofuturist' (see Figure 2). This page dated November 14, 1981, from another of her commonplace books, shows her note-form categorizing of futurists and historians, and via histofuturism posing of a more enabling orientation that looks both forward and back. According to Butler, the forecasting futurist 'know[s] more about technology than about humanity' (Butler, OEB 3221). Meanwhile, like the futurist, the historian – who 'studies the [human] past, records it, interprets it' – is partisan and leaves

some people 'out entirely.' Attempting to move beyond the limitations of both futurist and historian positions, Butler concludes 'A Histofuturist is my invention. An historian who extrapolates from the Human past and present as well as the technological past & present' (Butler, OEB 3221). Such a figure, turning to the field of the future yet not fleeing from the past, bears some resemblance to Eshun's Afrofuturist critical vision. Along with her 'time rogue,' the formulation of the 'Histofuturist' offers a further lens for investigating Butler's novels and, in particular, the alertness to interventions in time of her protagonists.



Nov 14, 1981

A futurist studies the present and recent past and attempts to forecast the future. [redacted] Futurists frequently know more about technology than about humanity. They frequently have axes to grind, desires to be "positive" or "negative" or vindicate this or that political system or economic system. People become puppets or get left out entirely.

An historian studies the past, records it, interprets it. Historians, too, may have axes to grind. Religions are maligned, Races, Ethnicities, nationalities, tribes, economic systems etc, etc, etc. Groups are ignored—their contributions co-opted, their deficiencies magnified and added to, their humanity denied, the crimes against them ignored. In America, Women, Indians, Blacks have had long-standing harm done them. Every new group to come to the U.S. has been abused in turn—the Irish, the Chinese, the Mexicans, etc.

The Futurians are a specific old time sf fan group.

Future-history is a specific form of science fiction story or series of stories.

A HistoFuturist is my invention. An historian who extrapolates from the Human past and present as well as the technological past & present.

Figure 2. Octavia E. Butler, Commonplace Book (large), Oct 1980-1983

The Huntington Library (OEB 3221). Copyright Estate of Octavia E. Butler.

Metanarratives and Narratives of Slavery

Turning to the fiction, I first wish to chart a few of the many ways in which time features by outlining Butler's engagement with metanarratives. Indeed, in both *Kindred* and the two Parable novels the experiences of Butler's protagonists are framed by grand narratives of time that other temporalities then complicate. In *Kindred* such a frame can be identified in brief but charged references to U.S. national history. For example, foundational accounts of U.S. independence are invoked by the novel's short, present day time span including the 4th of July. Friends ask protagonists Dana and Kevin to join them at the annual Rose Bowl celebrations, while in a direction that removes her liberty, involuntary time traveler Dana reports 'with some kind of reverse symbolism, Rufus called me back on July 4' (*Kindred* 243). Butler's choice of 1976 as Dana's 'home' timeframe also signifies a critical engagement with accounts of the national past that have excluded so many and with contemporary commemorative celebrations, 1976 being the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and its laying out of rights. The bicentenary is also brought to our attention by the special issue quarter produced by Kevin in 1819 when he tries to convince Rufus that he and Dana are from the 1970s. Rufus observes, 'seventeen seventy-six, nineteen seventy-six […] Two dates' and Kevin elaborates 'some money was changed to commemorate the anniversary' (64). After introducing this timeline, to some extent Butler leaves readers to reach their own conclusions about the national grand narrative that 'The country's two hundred years old in nineteen seventy-six' (64). Yet we cannot fail to assess it in light of the other act of remembrance made central in the novel, the remembering of slavery achieved via the time travel plot and thus revealed as internal to stories of the country coming into being. The sustaining of official accounts and history focused on 'great men' is briefly summoned up when Dana tries to offer further evidence to Rufus by recounting

historical events; she narrates, ‘I dug back into the American history that I had learned both in and out of school’ and relays a sequence of early nineteenth-century Presidents of the United States (63). Lastly, historiography and the work of historians is invoked by mention of the ‘Maryland Historical Society’ in the novel’s epilogue (263). This depicts Dana and Kevin taking a trip to Maryland and the area of the former Weylin plantation, both to see what record may be left of the lives of their nineteenth-century friends and to ‘try to understand’ their time travel experiences (264). The slim, partial results of their local research stand in telling contrast to ‘authoritative’ historical frames as summoned up in shorthand fashion elsewhere. The references to national history in *Kindred* operate as one metanarrative in a novel where multiple temporalities jostle and, following Wittenberg, the time travel plot models or theorizes the retrospective and the anticipatory as contested active fields.

In the speculative duology *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* an overarching narrative of the twenty-first century is found in ‘The Pox,’ the abbreviated term given to the current economic, infrastructural, and social breakdown in America. The start of Chapter One in *Talents* sees Bankole (the husband of protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina) adjust the periodization of the Pox in an extract from his reflective writings, *Memories of Other Worlds*:

> I have read that the period of upheaval that journalists have begun to refer to as ‘the Apocalypse’ or more commonly, more bitterly, ‘the Pox’ lasted from 2015 through 2030 – a decade and a half of chaos. This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended.
>
> I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was

> caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. (*Talents* 13-14)

This account of upheaval and crisis contributes to the grand narrative shared by many in the Parable novels of an apocalyptic and / or regressive age. Bankole's comments enable Butler to set up the backdrop to her novel and, indeed, the pattern of man's self-destruction from which Lauren's Earthseed mission tries to breakout. Yet this opening extract also self-consciously frames *Talents* in terms of attempts to interpret, periodize and write the past, suggesting competing accounts and our present, ongoing construction of history. Butler draws on echoes of the Cold War in the militarization and othering of her Pox-riven America, but rather than centralize fear of a nuclear end time, she combines collapse and degradation with a focus on individual and community resourcefulness and adaptation, which, despite Bankole's pessimism, in itself suggests survival rather than finality. In this example, Butler invokes epochal models but also allows for the possibility of other perspectives and temporal logics via her narrative layering.

A factor in the chaos, violence, and hardship of this time of Lauren's youth is environmental damage, including climate change, rising sea levels, and depletion of resources. While contributing to the events that characterize the Pox, the environment is also symbolically accorded its own register of scale and change over time, potentially offering an alternative to society's metanarratives. In Butler's recurrent imagery of West Coast Redwood trees we find both a vision of a world in decline and irrevocable change, and an ecological timeframe outside of the dominant mode of conception.[10] Bankole writes of how in the early 2030s in Northern California younger Redwoods (about a century old) are dying before they can mature. In a self-reflexive passage that clearly chimes with his own sense of being in

[10] This alternative modality resonates with geological 'deep time,' a temporal scale that has been influential in ecocritical thought.

later life, he considers environmental toxicity and observes that the old giants will live on but without offspring or replacements (see *Talents* 61-62). In a more optimistic metaphor of planting, Lauren foretells that her belief system Earthseed will grow slowly like the Redwoods.[11] While both characters put the tree imagery to their own uses, these references call up non-human timeframes and, for instance, the description of mature Redwoods as 'anachronistic' can be viewed in productive terms as disturbing assumptions of monotemporality and pluralizing the time scales at work in the novel (62).

Lauren's Earthseed religion itself involves an extended sense of time, stretching beyond one human generation or lifespan. In the face of the inequities, suffering, loss of knowledge, and fragmentation of the Pox, through the belief system she forges, Lauren hopes a shared, distant goal will lead to unity, responsibility, and purpose for followers. The Destiny within Earthseed – the interstellar seeding of new human communities beyond our planet – is such an undertaking that it necessitates a big timeframe, rather than actions determined by immediate contingency alone, as all too often the case during the Pox. Lauren explains to her doubtful husband, 'We need the stars, Bankole. *We need purpose!* We need the image the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species […] When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves' (*Talents* 163-64). Lauren distinguishes Earthseed from other metanarratives by, for example, emphasizing that it is not an attempt to restore or recreate, unlike the repressive Church of Christian America, which mobilizes rhetoric of a mythical past: 'It's a way of trying to build tomorrow instead of cycling back into some form of yesterday' (134). Earthseed is also founded on inclusivity as opposed to scapegoating and exclusion. Given

[11] Lauren comments, 'My "talent," going back to the parable of the talents, is Earthseed. And although I haven't buried it in the ground, I have buried it here in these coastal mountains, where it can grow at about the same speed as our redwood trees' (*Talents* 25).

that we think of change as happening over time, the core belief that 'God is Change' is also relevant. Lauren puts forward that change is inevitable, unstoppable but shapeable or steerable; rather than of one directional development, the future oriented imagery of Earthseed is often of molding and adapting: 'Alter the speed / Or the direction of Change. / Vary the scope of Change' (27).[12] Yet Butler leaves it up to the reader to decide the extent to which Earthseed should be judged positively and the extent to which it finds new ways to think about progress, futurity, and change. The narrative composition of long extracts from Lauren's journal, shared by both novels, aligns us with her viewpoint and beliefs, but *Talents* in particular also intersects other voices and angles. Both Bankole and then later Larkin describe Lauren as not long sighted in her Earthseed plans but 'short sighted,' failing to anticipate the devastation of the Acorn community, protect her daughter, and focus on rebuilding Earth (123 & 127). In the very last pages of the second novel the name of the first starship fulfilling the Earthseed Destiny is revealed as *Christopher Columbus*. Although Lauren writes 'I object to the name,' elements such as this hint at the difficulty of leaving behind older grand narratives and patterns (363).

In *Kindred* the protagonist's relation to an extended time span features rather differently, not in terms of looking ahead in a future history, but jumping back via a time travel plot. When Dana (and later her white husband Kevin too) is propelled from 1976 to the early decades of the nineteenth century, more than 150 years, Butler offers her unique version of a turn toward the history of slavery in late twentieth-century black diasporic novels. The shock, disjuncture, fear, and suffering Dana experiences as she traverses back and forth suggests similar ideas to Gilroy's theorizing of the rupture and modernity lived by slaves and

[12] Bankole summarizes, 'God can be directed, focused, speeded, slowed, shaped. All things change, but all things need not change in all ways' (*Talents* 48). See Phillips on the dialectical thinking that underlies this sense of change.

slave descendants in *The Black Atlantic*. After her first trip and return Dana explains, 'I don't feel secure here […] I don't feel safe anymore,' as her world has been changed forever by the encounter with the past of her ancestors (*Kindred* 17). Gilroy writes of 'a distinctive and disjunctive temporality of the subordinated' (Gilroy 212) and through Dana's 'strange' experience, in which 'Today and yesterday didn't mesh,' Butler finds a way to capture and examine some of this (*Kindred* 115). Indeed, following Wittenberg, might Dana's 'time-distorted reality' and jolts in time even be read as a form of theorization via the time travel plot, of slavery's violent temporality (127)? The disruption is felt even – or perhaps all the more – in Dana's last leap in time: 'I was back at home – in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow' (261). Here the entrapment and distortion features in a more extreme, material way as this time her arm – the arm that forefather Rufus had hold of – is 'joined to,' and lost within, the wall of her house (261).

During Dana's transitions between time periods, another order of time emerges in terms of family, slavery, and connection across successive generations. Underpinning Dana's involuntary returns to save Rufus at moments when his life is in danger is Butler's twisted take on the Grandfather paradox. Dana must ensure the survival of white ancestor Rufus and the birth of he and Alice's daughter in order to ensure her own family line and existence. However, within the warped drama of slavery's entwinement with sexual and family life – a drama that can be read through the novel's title – Butler finds space for a critique of the process of replication within the slave system. Specifically, Dana fears time repeating itself as Rufus grows like his father, slaveholder Tom Weylin, and Rufus's relationship with Alice echoes the cook Sarah's with Tom Weylin's first father-in-law (see 151), with Dana's own changing relationship with Rufus as he ages threatening to become a further repetition. *Kindred* both elaborates this logic of reproduction and puts it under pressure, revealing a

further aspect of the narrative of slavery and playing out questions of determinism, risk, and agency.[13]

During his boyhood, Dana invests time and care into trying to prevent Rufus later becoming a ruthless master like his father, including encouraging him to see herself and other black people as equal human beings, thus counteracting most of what his society and immediate surroundings teach him about race. This is shown to have achieved only partial success in Rufus's adulthood though and the narrative reminds us of the probability of 'like father, like son' at several junctures: 'Rufus turned his head […] The expression on his face startled me. For once, the boy looked like a smaller replica of his father. His mouth was drawn into a thin straight line and his eyes were coldly hostile. He spoke quietly now as Weylin sometimes did when he was angry' (*Kindred* 104). This element works to emphasize the cyclical, inherited nature of slavery's constitution of slaves and slaveholders, and its deterministic force within family units. It also feeds into Butler's capturing of the grueling, cross-generational longevity of slavery's terror, the difficulty of escaping its self-replication, even for 'drop-ins from another century' (97). Nonetheless Dana makes concerted attempts to influence Rufus's development, to inculcate in him different values, and once he is adult works to persuade him to free his slaves. Some of this is about self-preservation and making 'a haven' for herself as insurance against future visits to an environment that is particularly hostile toward and dangerous for her as a black woman (84).[14] Whether Dana is able to reach back into the past and change things for the better is only equivocally resolved in the novel's

[13] See Guha-Majumdar for an engaging discussion of determinism and hope, pessimism and optimism, in *Kindred* via Ernst Bloch.

[14] In the language of financial speculation on the future, she says 'Kevin, let's take out some insurance […] Let's see what we can do to keep him from growing into a red-haired version of his father' (81). Kevin's reply, 'You're gambling. Hell, you're gambling against History' highlights the high stakes but also hints at Dana as potentially a trickster-like time rogue (83).

epilogue when, from the few historical records Dana and Kevin are able to find, they deduce that most of those on the Weylin plantation stayed slaves. On one hand, the imperative that Rufus and Alice have a daughter together is not overturned and we might identify in Kevin and Dana's repeated involuntary time travel – victims of a force that pulls them back into the past – a sense of being caught in the cyclical time of slavery that works to echo powerfully how slaves Alice, Sarah, Carrie, Nigel, and others, are trapped. On the other hand, Dana does not lose faith in attempts to influence the past and, as with Lauren's Earthseed, in her embrace of the anticipatory and orientation towards reshaped futures perhaps we can, as Eshun urges, chart 'histories of counter-futures created in a century [or centuries] hostile to Afrodiasporic projection' (Eshun 301).

Time Capsules

As mentioned earlier, one of the images I draw on to think about different understandings of time or travel in time is that of the time capsule. Here the capsule is conceived loosely and encompasses the survival kit, storage cache, and archive as found within Butler's fiction. Connie Samaras connects one kind of time capsule to the narrowed constitution of national identity and culture, and the notion itself highlights its constructed nature, the choices involved in what goes in and assumptions about who or what it is for. We can also extend our understanding to the time capsule as a kind of time machine, as enacted in the time travel novel but readable too elsewhere.

Recalling Samaras's starting point of the representations sent up with the Voyager space probes, in the Parable novels Lauren's vision of the dispersal of Earthseed followers into space suggests a kind of time capsule. Indeed, as any space vehicle moves across light

years it therefore travels in time. The last pages of *Talents*, via a 2090 extract from Lauren's journal, offer a striking image:

> Today's shuttles have been loaded […] Traveling with the people are frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams and hopes. As big and as spaceworthy as they are, the shuttles should sag to the Earth under such a load. The memories alone should overload them. The libraries of the Earth go with them. (*Talents* 363)

Readied for a life to come among the stars, the loads of the shuttles intertwine futurism and history; they carry resources in anticipation but also 'memories' and vast archives that are both forwards and backwards looking. The mention of 'plant seeds' recalls Lauren's broader analogy of seeds in the Earthseed Destiny. Here, as elsewhere, seeds connote stored knowledge and life, thus themselves operating as kinds of time capsule, poised to come alive or be of use at a future point.

I propose another form of time capsule can be located in the anticipatory go-bags prepared by both of Butler's main protagonists. For example, even aged fifteen Lauren in *Sower* keeps a backpack ready as a kind of survival kit in case she has to flee her home. Tellingly, one of the things it includes is a whole range of seeds, a genetic bank ready for food supply in a future world. At the end of the first Parable novel, on arrival at the farm that will become Acorn, Lauren is able to say, with characteristic forethought: 'We can […] put in a winter garden from the seed I've been carrying and collecting since we left home' (*Sower* 318); 'I brought tree seeds too […] they won't do us any good for a few years, but they're a hell of an investment in the future' (322). Lauren's physical go-bag is echoed in her research as a child, storing knowledge from books as preparation to survive and teach in a Pox-shaped future. She reads books on living in the wilderness, native plants, and medical emergencies:

'I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should bury money and other necessities […] where thieves won't find them. I think we should make emergency packs […] Money, food, clothes, matches, a blanket' (58). This form of 'investment in the future,' foregrounded in go-bag time capsules and later Acorn's storage caches, reveals Butler's protagonist as adhering to histofuturism, both anticipating, and remembering and recordkeeping. As I will come back to, the inclusion of her writing in these time capsules or time machines opens up another way of Lauren reaching into the future and defying the chaos and apparent trajectory of her present time of the Pox.

Similarly, after her first couple of sudden trips into the past, in *Kindred* Dana prepares an emergency go-bag that includes painkillers, soap, and pens and notepad. She keeps this close to her, ready in case she is transported back into antebellum Maryland again.[15] The contents assist her on the Weylin plantation and there also serve as a forward glimpse into her world in the late twentieth century. However, when Dana carries a 1960s history book on slavery with her, it becomes a point of contention: Rufus describes it as 'the biggest lot of abolitionist trash I ever saw' and Dana quickly realizes information therein on those who fought to free slaves could endanger lives if in the wrong hands in this time (*Kindred* 140). On one trip Dana brings her own writings back from the past to her present time, thus preserving bits of her journal account of her experiences and offering another kind of textual time capsule (see 244). In all three novels the survival bags or caches and enclosed written material that travels in time, model both forms of projection, thinking of future needs, and forms of archive. Butler often imbues her female protagonists with a futurist characteristic of being forward facing and the pack contents render this in concrete, interventionist form. Yet, at the same time, some items such as Dana's history book dramatize competing accounts of

[15] Dana updates her bag, adding items such as a toothbrush and toothpaste, a knife, a history book, a map (see *Kindred* 45, 49 & 114-15).

the past and, indeed, the potential for multiple and opposed interpretations and uses, thus highlighting the 'ungiven' nature of all such representations. While Dana's time travel allows Butler to explore a perspective external to her time(s), and Lauren's Earthseed worldview plays out a different sense of temporality to most of her society, both women assemble anticipatory time machines / capsules. In so doing they lead us to understand the significance of the marginalized staking a claim in the terrain of the temporal, and contribute to the novel's manifold complication of grand narratives.

Time Lapse and Narrative Time

In *Kindred*, while Dana's space and time travel from Altadena, California in 1976 to an early nineteenth-century Maryland plantation holds center stage, it is worth also looking at other forms of movement in time or temporal manipulation at work in the narrative. Drawing on Wittenberg's ideas, the novel's time travel story can be said to renew our awareness of narrative handling of time more broadly. For example, *Kindred* aligns the literal transportations in time of the protagonist with the section breaks provided by the numbered parts within Butler's long chapters, but we also find narrative shifts to different points in time that are not part of the time travel plot. Within Dana's first-person narration, the processes of memory shape some movement in time. The start of each of the chapters entitled 'The Fall' (*Kindred* 52) and 'The Fight' (108) tell the backstory of Dana and Kevin's 1970s relationship via extended reminiscence. Although these narrative jumps are smaller than the plotted time travel, staying within the decade, they operate as punctuations of the telling of the nineteenth-century action and have a jarring effect as preceding chapters end preoccupied with slave times and 'The Fall' and 'The Fight' both start *in medias res* with the couple's recent twentieth-century past. Such formal features remind us that we are reliant on Dana's memory

and reconstruction of the past throughout, and draw attention to how our reading often takes us across or through different moments in time.

A further aspect of the experience of time in *Kindred* is variation in time lapse, something signaled at the draft stage as the novel was at one point potentially to be titled *Time Lapse*. Indeed, we find the suggestion of multiple temporalities, not just multiple slices of one temporality, via the different rates of time passing in the two settings of California in the 1970s and Maryland in the early nineteenth century. That is, from the disparity we can extrapolate the disruption of a sense of time as one universal constant that has always worked in the same way and is experienced in the same way wherever or whoever you are. What becomes clear as Dana's jumps in time go on is that a few minutes and hours in her own time in California are equivalent to days and sometimes months spent in antebellum Maryland. The reader is aligned with Dana as she realizes this further disjunction: 'I learned that it was Friday, June 11, 1976. I'd gone away for nearly two months and come back yesterday – the same day I left home' (116). The extended period when Kevin is stuck in the past without Dana is an eight day absence for Dana while for Kevin it is five years spent in slaveholding society. The variation in time lapse is helpful in practical, plot terms for Butler: the different rates allow Rufus to age from being a young boy on Dana's first visit to being of a similar age to her (in his mid-twenties) by the novel's conclusion. In Dana's own time, events in the novel span from just June 9 to July 4, 1976, but her visits to the Weylin plantation punctuate about twenty years of Rufus's life. This allows Butler to draw out the possibility of Rufus growing to exert power over Dana sexually, as he has previously done with her ancestral double Alice, and this course of action is what brings his entangled, co-dependent relation with Dana to a crisis and close. At the same time, the different time lapses also open up a sense of plural and non-uniform temporal zones, a recognition of time difference if you will.

Informed by contexts of colonialism, the regime of labor in slavery, and the unequal distribution of waiting for resources during segregation, Hanchard's ideas of 'temporal discrepancy' offer a suggestive point of reference here (Hanchard 263). Indeed, *Kindred*'s different rates of lapse approach, and outwork, what Hanchard calls 'the disparity of racialized time' in metanarratives and lived experiences of modernity and progress (265). Slavery is experienced in the time of slavery, meaning Dana's longest trip involves enduring for eight damaging months on the plantation, although on her return she has been missing for only a few hours. The shuttling of the narrative between time zones creates an effect of heightened awareness for the reader, while the multiple rates of lapse can be argued to work to undermine a monolithic sense of time and chime with Eshun's Afrofuturist case for 'temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress' (Eshun 297). To press further along the lines of Wittenberg, the varying experiences of time lapse in addition reflect and enact for us how narrative compression and narrative expansion occur all the time in all storytelling.

Before moving on from *Kindred* some comment is necessary on the novel's prologue. In this opening Dana speaks from a later point in time, having survived her final trip back to Rufus. After the prologue, the narrative loops back to tell of the first time she is transported to Maryland and continues on from there. Such a retrospective frame is not unusual; however this one further sensitizes us to how narratives move us around in time, and rather than reassuring readers via knowledge of its retrospective, encompassing viewpoint instead introduces an element of uncertainty. From the outset totalizing understandings of time and accounts of the past are thrown into question by the intriguing incompletion suggested by Dana's line 'The trouble began long before […] but June 9 is the day I remember' (*Kindred* 12).

If we next consider the narrative construction of Butler's Parable novels, which are not time travel stories, the significance of her self-reflexive staging of more than one temporal frame becomes all the more evident. *Sower* is made up of a sequence of dated journal entries written by Lauren, starting in July 2024 when she is fifteen. Each chapter contains several entries in chronological order, progressing through to October 2027 when Lauren is eighteen and she, Bankole and others have arrived at the future site of Acorn in Northern California. The installments are not as frequent as daily but are fairly regular and unfold Lauren's life, evolving belief system, and the deterioration of the world around her. The recurrent date headings direct our attention to time and time passing. The entries combine personal memories and reflective commentary on the news with a sense of immediacy in terms of a first-person account of events as they happen, working to draw the reader into the action and identification with Lauren. An effect of realism is produced when, once Lauren is traveling on the road after the loss of her home, Butler signals the practical difficulty of keeping up with writing diary entries in these circumstances. For example, Chapter Twenty begins with the heading 'Saturday, August 28, 2027 / (from notes expanded Tuesday, August 31)' (*Sower* 245). This offers a kind of account of the act of writing up and also introduces recognition of retrospective composition, drawing attention to the chronology of not just events but authorial construction. If *Sower* quietly indicates Lauren interpreting what has happened to her and her companions, shaping her story after the fact in her journal entries, then the second Parable novel amplifies these issues in a fashion that makes the reader notice the contrast.

In *Talents* Butler presents a more complex approach to time and narrative. The novel is divided into labeled parts, namely a short prologue, a short epilogue, and three main

sections entitled 2032, 2033, and 2035. Using calendar years to organize the narrative foregrounds our ordered systems of marking time, although within sections content comes from different sources and different points in time, and the lack of a '2034' heading indicates elision or partiality. Most of the narrative of *Talents* is again made up of Lauren's journal entries, this time covering the period 2032 to 2035. However, we also have the editorial commentary of Lauren's daughter Larkin, speaking as an adult from a point much further in the future, and a few interspersed pages of writing by Bankole, which appear to have been collected later after his death as *Memories of Other Worlds*. In addition, there are a couple of extracts from a memoir by Marc Duran, Lauren's estranged brother. These voices intersect with each other and give the reader other perspectives on Lauren's life and mission than just her own. In particular, Larkin's first-person narrative runs alongside Lauren's diary entries, reflecting on her mother's life as a young woman and creating a layering of at least two present tense temporalities. This serves to not only offer a critical view on Earthseed, but also self-reflexively reveal that Larkin is selecting the diary material to share, having been especially drawn to the period of her own conception, birth, and infant years (see *Talents* 127). Larkin's role in putting together the text raises questions about the writing of accounts of the past, confirming *Talents* as another novel concerned with historiographical issues. In terms of timeframes, in *Talents* the reader navigates between the immediacy of, say, the attack on Acorn in the 2030s, and an undated narrative present decades later, from which the adult Larkin speaks, also remembering her own childhood after State removal by Christian America. The published life writing of Lauren's brother introduces another retrospectively fashioned account. A dilated time span or jump forward is reinforced late in the novel when the epilogue includes one journal entry from towards the end of Lauren's life, telling of watching the first departure of Earthseed followers in space shuttles in 2090. Meanwhile Butler's prologue frames the whole narrative via Larkin's voice from an even later point,

after her mother has died.[16] Such complex construction creates an impression of plurality and of temporal reach, at the same time exposing forms of discontinuity and disagreement, and modeling how we time travel in narrative.

The retrospective prologue in *Talents* signposts survival (i.e., from the start we know that both Lauren and Larkin will survive that which is covered in the 2030s diaries). Importantly, it also includes Larkin explaining how the written words of her mother and father themselves have been preserved and passed on via a kind of time capsule:

> In order for me to understand who I am, I must begin to understand who she was. That is my reason for writing and assembling this book […] And I have copies of all that was saved of her writings. Even some of her early, paper notebooks have been copied to disk or crystal and saved. She had a habit, during her youth, of hiding caches of food, money and weaponry in out-of-the-way places or with trusted people, and being able to go straight back to these years later. These saved her life several times, and also they saved her words, her journals […] and my father's writings. (8)

Here Larkin's prologue sets up the edited reproduction of multiple intersecting stories and the survival of 'words' via Lauren's caches. We gain a sense both of time lapse, for example via changing information technologies (notebooks, disk, crystal), and of texts as time machines, defying erasure as the years pass to give partial access to past experiences. If we consider the narrative differences between the two Parable novels, *Sower* leaves basic chronology and one first-person diary voice intact while *Talents* far more obviously makes us negotiate multiple timelines simultaneously, stages the selective preservation of stories from the past via Larkin's editorial comments, and also indirectly reframes the whole first novel, as well as its own earlier journal entries, from a retrospective viewpoint. Moments that highlight

[16] In both Parable novels, Earthseed verses feature at the start of each chapter and there is, at the very end of each text, the inclusion of biblical passages that tell the respective parables of the sower and the talents.

temporality by featuring forms of time capsule also work to direct awareness to knowledge making practices. Larkin's assembly of the text does something familiar in signaling narratorial unreliability, yet what we also see here is an inquiry into the archive as always already a reconstruction of the past. Butler thus enacts for us, and thereby exposes, the processes by which understandings of past, present and future come into being.

Conclusion

Unfolding the retrospective and anticipatory as contested, active fields; denaturalizing the (re)production of uneven futures; complicating grand narratives and temporal logics of progress; exploring temporalities of the subordinated, including staging rupture, discontinuity, time disparity, entrapment and foreclosure: Octavia E. Butler's engagement with time and movement in time stands as political, and as self-reflexively revealing the politics of time, chronopolitics if you will, to her readers. In *Kindred* and the Parable novels we find protagonists who look beyond their times as Butler centralizes those who risk and defy from a marginalized position in attempts to meet history on their own terms. However, not only does Dana intervene to combat slavery's logic of replication and Lauren invest in remodeling the future with her survival kit and caches, but the narratives themselves perform – and thus permit an examination of – a plurality of timeframes, jumps in time and memory, and the made, partial nature of our accounts. These aspects all contribute to a counterdiscourse and a set of critical or histo-futurisms that put pressure on orders, power relations, and metanarratives that have, in the assignment of temporal modalities, reserved modernity and the future for others.

Prompted by Connie Samaras's 'reconstructed time capsule' to renewed awareness of the ideological constitution of the archive, the museum, and the capsule, I have looked at

forms of capsule in Butler's work that attempt to reach through time and to shape another time, finding therein time machines that pull our attention to chronopolitics and, in some cases, the process of knowledge making. In parallel, drawing on Wittenberg's propositions regarding the work done by time travel plots, I have explored Dana's experience of transportation in time as enabling us better to understand other manipulations of time and their significances. We might say Dana's traversal of time in the plot of *Kindred* directs greater consideration to narrative temporality – its leaps, returns, expansions, and contractions – throughout not just this novel but Butler's body of fiction. More particularly, the different rates of time lapse, for example, play out and theorize plural, non-uniform temporalities that both reflect racialized time difference and, in their articulation, challenge the totalizing claims of monotemporal advancement. Readers of *Talents* too negotiate multiple timeframes due to Butler's narrative layering of several, sometimes discordant, perspectives, which together can be viewed as temporal experimentation and enact incompletion, dispute, and the ongoing construction of representations of the past. Butler's fiction invites us to give further thought to 'this time thing' and sets out the urgency and importance of interventions from the margins in time's narrative (*Kindred* 136).

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