Independent project, 15 credits

Counteracting racist attitudes and prejudices in the EFL-classroom:
An investigation on the effects of the social environment around the white character Rufus Weylin in the Antebellum South as depicted in Octavia E. Butler’s novel Kindred.

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Date: 16-03-2018
Subject: English
Level: G3
Course code: 2ENÄ2E
Abstract

The multicultural classroom is becoming more prominent in Sweden. Students from different cultures and ethnicities meet to learn in the same environment. In a changing society, the need to develop acceptance towards others is more important than ever. Thus, in this essay, post-colonial and social influence theories have been applied to the analysis of Octavia E. Butler’s novel *Kindred*. This essay argues that by integrating post-colonial literature in the EFL- classroom, students can gain deeper intercultural knowledge and learn to understand the power of the social environment concerning its influential effects on people’s racial attitudes and prejudices.

Keywords

Post-colonialism, social influence, EFL, racial prejudices, literature instruction, upper secondary school, Kindred
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1 Introduction

I was the worst possible guardian for him — a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children. I would have all I could do to look after myself. But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. (Butler 68)

These are the reflections of the protagonist in Octavia E. Butler’s novel *Kindred* (1979). The black woman Dana has involuntarily travelled back in time from California 1976 to the Antebellum Maryland in 1815. There, she discovers her mission of keeping her ancestor, the white boy Rufus Weylin alive in order to guarantee her own existence by ensuring the birth of her great grandmother Hagar.

The novel depicts racial socialization from the perspective of the narrator, a modern black woman who repeatedly and without control travels back to a society where color consciousness is pervasive in the culture. Accordingly, time is a significant factor in post-colonial theory. In fact Sanelma Lisalo argues in her article “Postcolonial Counter-discourse in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass” how the prefix post implies the meaning of such theory. She argues that “postcolonialism is in one sense understood in temporal terms tied to historical circumstances” (10). Thus, since the effects of Dana’s time traveling play a crucial role in the novel as it portrays some historic circumstances that have shaped our society today, post-colonial theory is included in this essay.

Dana travels back in time to a society where black people are being treated degradingly in a white dominated society and are forced by the white people to work as their slaves. The character Rufus Weylin was born into a society where white people are privileged and considered superior to black people. This belief is brought upon Rufus since early childhood. His father Tom Weylin owns a plantation on which he forces black slaves to run his household and work on the fields under subhuman conditions where the fear of being whipped motivates them to work harder. When Dana travels back in time to save Rufus’ life, she challenges the racial socialization which Rufus has been taking for
granted by questioning his worldview. Thus, with help of social influence theory, the aim of this essay is to analyze how Dana tries to change Rufus’ mindset about black people. Rufus’ character development will be analyzed with a chronological thematic method resulting in a close up view between Dana’s first meeting with him as young boy to her last meeting with him as a man.

I believe that *Kindred* is a relevant piece of literature which demonstrates how racial prejudices are created within a social group and can be just as relevant now as they have been throughout history. It is true that some may question the complexity of analyzing a white character created by a black author, however as Sandra Govan puts it in her article “Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel”:

> Octavia Butler emerges as a forthright and honest author. She is a writer very conscious of the power of art to affect social perceptions and behavior and a writer unafraid to admit that, when appropriate, she borrows from tradition, that she takes and reshapes African and Afro-American cultural values, that she has heuristic and didactic impulses which she transforms into art. (79)

Post-colonial novels such as *Kindred* are important to incorporate into the EFL-classroom because themes such as attitudes, prejudices, and racial discrimination are current topics not just in our history books but in our modern society. Swedish society has been changing recently due to an unstable political climate in the world which has led to an increasing amount of refugees as a natural consequence. Thus, Lundahl stresses the fact that Swedish classrooms will gradually change into a multicultural learning environment (91). Keeping in mind that Swedish classrooms most likely consist of students with varied ethnicities, I believe that it is important to talk about attitudes and prejudices in the classroom in order to promote equal value. Furthermore, since teaching students about these topics is a complex endeavour, a post-colonial novel such as *Kindred* may serve as material for engaging students in issues regarding discrimination and racist attitudes. In addition, such a novel correlates well with the curriculum’s requirements about preventing discrimination in school. The following is stated in the curriculum for the upper secondary school: “All tendencies to discrimination or degrading treatment should be actively combated. Xenophobia and
intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures” (4). Therefore, a didactic analysis of strategies for how this novel can be used in the EFL classroom will be presented which pays extra attention to fulfilling the aforementioned criteria on confronting discrimination in varied ways.

This essay argues that *Kindred* serves as a suitable novel to discuss in the EFL classroom in order to teach students about post-colonialism and the power of the social environment when it comes to shaping attitudes and racial prejudices. In addition, this essay investigates how *Kindred* portrays the post-colonial terms displacement and diaspora and furthermore, how the social environment affects Rufus Weylin’ attitudes and racial prejudices towards black people.

2 Theory

In order to investigate my thesis statement and aim, post-colonial theory and social influence theory will be explained in this section. The effects of Dana’s time traveling can be connected to the post-colonial terms; displacement and diaspora. Thus, these post-colonial terms and the clarification of the development of post-colonial studies are presented in this section. However, in order to understand in what ways racial prejudices are shaped, the theory behind social influence is explained in this section as well and serves as the baseline for the analysis of Rufus’ character development. These two theories correlate as they depend on each other in order to establish an understanding of the effects of the colonial past that shaped the racist society in the Antebellum South, and continues to shape our present society. In addition, the final subsection presents why post-colonial theory should be incorporated in the classroom.

2.1 Post-colonialism

John McLeod explains in his book *Beginning Postcolonialism* how in the beginning of the 20th century, many areas around the world such as India and African countries were under the British Empire’s reign. This was the result of the British colonization where the British Empire conquered international territory and settled there. Although the British Empire had managed to increase their territory massively during the 18th and
19th centuries, a hundred years later, at the beginning of the 21st century, Britain had lost a majority of their conquered land. Consequently, people all over the world were a part of a process of decolonization, where countries once held under the British crown gained independence from the powerful empire (7). McLeod explains that the effects of colonization and decolonization led to the creation of a new literary field in the 1950s which literary critics called “commonwealth studies”. These studies describe the English literature which had emerged from former colonized countries. “It incorporated the study of writers from the predominantly European settler communities, as well as writers belonging to those countries which were in the process of gaining independence from British rule” (12-13). Commonwealth studies developed into theories of colonial discourse and McLeod claims that these studies have been “fundamental to the development of postcolonialism” (19). Consequently, Hans Bertens argues in his book *Literary Theory The Basics* how these studies of literature planted the seeds of post-colonial studies in the 1980s where questions such as recreating the voice of the oppressed people emerged (27). However, Bertens claims that not until Edward Said published his book *Orientalism* in 1978 where he analyses how Eastern texts were presented through Western writings, the post-colonial theory as we see it today was formed (203).

Thus, post-colonialism is a broad literary field that includes several literary aspects and the identification of these has led into divided opinions. Consequently, there seems to be a dispute between scholars whether or not African-American literature should belong to the post-colonial genre. Some critics argue that in settler colonies such as America, the post-colonial field can only be drawn to the encounter between the settlers and the native people (Bertens 202). However, as Ashcroft et al. argue in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, the term post-colonial covers “all the literature affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Thus, they argue that American literature should also belong to this category:

[American literary texts] emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumption of the imperial centre. It is this that makes them distinctively post-colonial.
Identifying American literature as post-colonial is, as Ashcroft et al. argue, correct. However, opinions about a definition of the post-colonial genre are diversified. As Deborah Madsen says in her book *Beyond the borders: American literature and post-colonial theory*, the term post-colonialism has different meanings depending on the individual. However, she argues that there are a number of themes which seem to be recurring for many post-colonial writers. Themes which continue to emerge are e.g. “displacement or diaspora, exile, migration” (1). Likewise, Ashcroft et al. identify these themes and highlight displacement as a major aspect in postcolonial literature. They argue that it is because of displacement “that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place” (8). Identity and place go together, and due to displacement and its effects; enslavement and migration, the colonized people’s identities may have been eroded.

Post-colonial literature which portrays the lives of the black slaves in the Antebellum South often deals with more post-colonial features than only displacement. Ashcroft et al. stress that the black people suffering under enslavement must have struggled with social and linguistic alienation. The first refers to a matter of a foreign hierarchy; master and slave relationship and the latter refers to the encounter of a new language. However, displacement was a prominent effect of enslavement and the product of it was a questioned self-image (9).

Another prominent feature in postcolonial writings would be diaspora. McLeod defines it as “the movement and relocations of groups of different kinds of peoples throughout the world” (236). Post-colonialism is based on the effects of imperialism which caused peoples to submit to foreign leaders who had invaded their countries and consequently spread out around the world.

Although readers of Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* have been questioning whether or not her story should belong to the fantasy or science fiction genre, scholars do not seem to hesitate when it comes to identifying Butler as a post-colonial author. Cassandra Jones sums up in *FutureBodies: Octavia Butler as a Post-Colonial Cyborg Theorist* how scholars have found
Butler’s work useful in understanding questions of postcolonial memory and the cognitive dissonance felt by some African Americans as they try to put the history of physical and sexual subjugation of American chattel slavery in conversation with contemporary expressions of interracial romance and marriage. (3)

Thus, Butler’s work can provide readers with a historic context which spreads the postcolonial memory of slavery. Similarly, Lisa Yaszek claims in her article ‘A Grim Fantasy’: Remaking American History in Octavia Butler’s Kindred” “that Kindred in particular is a story which represents the history of African American women”. Moreover, she argues that Butler’s work “is increasingly recognized as participating in African-American traditions of historical fiction” (1053). Therefore, the protagonist Dana can also be identified as a fictional character which portrays the lives of many African slaves in the Antebellum South.

Another African-American author who has written several novels on slavery etc. is Toni Morrison. Hanan Abdullatif writes in Toni Morrison: Rethinking the Past in a Postcolonial Context how Toni Morrison’s novels have had a pervasive theme of reclaiming “the past from the oppressive history of slavery” (2). Furthermore, he argues that

the quest for a cultural identity on the part of the recently emancipated subject has evoked a rewriting of the past and of forgotten communal histories. This reclamation has been achieved through the process of (re)constructing those erased ethnic and cultural traditions. (2)

Such literature, he claims “restores a subject position to the victims of slavery by re-animating the voices of the silenced (2). Likewise, Butler’s novel Kindred can be seen as literature which enhances the voices of the oppressed i.e. the slaves. Accordingly, Anne Donadey defines in her article “African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler’s Kindred and Assia Djebar’s La femme sans sepulture.” Butler’s authorship as “skilled writing” where she uses “fiction to reconstruct women’s experiences during historical events that were central to the constructions” of America’s identity i.e. the past of slavery in the Antebellum South (66). Such reading enhances the relationship between the readers and fictional characters and establishes an
understanding of the historical past. In fact, Lawrie Balfour argues in “Octavia Butler and Political Memories of Slavery” that Butler’s “account of Dana’s sojourns enables readers to examine multiple stories about the life and afterlife of slavery” (173).

Stories which present the voices of the silenced are within the literary field defined as a neo-slave narrative. Rushdy Ashraf explains in *Neo-slave Narratives Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* that such narrative style is identified in “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the Antebellum slave narrative” (3). They claim that the neo-slave narrative emerged when the manner in which slavery was depicted in fiction started to change in the 1960s. This was a consequence of civil rights and Black Power movements which once again highlighted slavery and thus, generated a change in the study of the American past and the social movements of the decade. Moreover, Ashraf argues that

African American fiction in general has undergone a virtual renaissance since the sixties, assuming new importance in the literary canons and curricula of educational institutions, and consistently receiving important cultural awards. Within this large and diverse body of fiction authored by African American writers has emerged a large and diverse body of fiction about American slaves and slavery. (3)

Having this in mind, it is clear that African-American literature has increased its influence in culture throughout history.

2.2 Social influence theory

In order to analyze Rufus Weylin’s character development a clarification of the terms attitude and prejudice must be made. However, although social influence theory is usually applied only to real humans, I will analyze the fictional character Rufus Weylin as if he were a real human being. Gerd Bohner and Michaela Wanke define in *Attitudes and attitude change* an attitude as feelings or opinions which “represent an evaluative response towards an object” (5). Aronson et al. explain in *Social psychology* that “attitudes are evaluations of people, objects, or ideas” (211). In addition, they argue that attitudes are essential when it comes to determining people’s actions (211).

Furthermore, Aronson et al. claim that attitudes and actions take form through operant conditioning which constitutes that we learn to adopt behaviors which are encouraged
with a reward. Actions associated with punishment will be neglected in favour of a rewarded behavior. Racism can be formed with operant conditioning. If parents express strong disapproval towards African American people in front of their children and forbid them to interact with them, the children will associate such an interaction with something negative. Consequently, the children grow up adopting their parents’ racial attitudes (212).

Attitudes such as feelings, thoughts and acts fall under the phenomenon of social influence. Social influence is often expressed in the form of persuasion where people try to change each other’s behavior. Although persuasion is often understood as a deliberate action, social psychologists claim that the presence of other people is a way of persuading and influencing people. It is worth mentioning that people are influenced by others despite their physical presence. A person is influenced by others when making decisions alone due to the fact that he or she knows what other people’s opinions are (Aronson et al. 35).

The term prejudice can be interpreted in several ways. Martha Augoustinos and Katherine Reynolds define in *Understanding prejudice, racism, and social conflict* that the basic ideas of a prejudice “refer to negative attitudes or behaviors towards a person because of his or her membership of a particular group” (2). Accordingly, children can develop prejudices and negative attitudes towards others because of the influence from their parents. On the same note, Andrea Hunter and Alethea Rollins write in their article “Racial Socialization of Biracial Youth: Maternal Messages and Approaches to Address Discrimination” that it “is through interactions with others, especially parents that children and youth gain insight regarding their racial heritage and learn to assume, resist, or negotiate the statuses associated with racial group membership” (140). Thus, parents have a major influence on their children when it comes to shaping prejudices.

In Western discourse, white people have been assumed throughout history to hold a superior position against other ethnicities. Such thinking may have been empowered by the white dominant group’s opinions which influenced people to adopt an “us and them” thinking. In the Antebellum South, Bruce Collins argues that the white people shared “powerful social bonds that bound together southerners of all classes” (Collins qtd. in Fraser, 955). This feeling of shared identity which “fostered racial pride and
unity” among the Southerners developed during the era of black enslavement (955). On the same note, Margareta Hagermann investigated in her article "White families and race: colour-blind and colour conscious approaches to white racial socialization” how this “us and them” thinking occurred in the 21th century and conducted a study to analyze how white families approach racism. She argues that white parents’ choices of neighborhood and school have an impact on children’s awareness of inequality and “the process of childhood racial socialization“(2608). Her research indicates that “the reproduction of white privilege at the ideological level is connected to the racial context in which kids live and interact, especially in middle childhood” (2611). She discovered that families who situate themselves in white dominated neighborhoods and schools tend to transfer a racial unawareness to their children where they are not even aware of their own whiteness (2609). On the other hand, families with children “growing up in color-conscious contexts are better able to identify and discuss what they perceive to be acts of racism in their daily lives” (2609). Thus, it is important to bear in mind that social influence is prominent in our lives not just by our opinions but by the way we choose to live. Parents’ decisions about living conditions will send messages to their children perhaps uncousciously, but can affect the children’s view on races.

In “Peer Group Rejection and Children’s Intergroup Prejudice” Drew Nesdale identifies the school-age as an important period when it comes to shaping intergroup prejudices. He argues, that children from the age of six to eighteen, “acquire social knowledge and attitudes that have the potential to lead to short-and long-term psychological, if not physical, harm to the members of the targeted groups” (32). Moreover, he argues that prejudices which have been formed during this time may “endure to adulthood and foster intergroup divisions that are long-lasting” (32). Furthermore, scholars have investigated methods for reducing prejudices and have come to the conclusion that prejudices can be reduced when members of different groups interact with each other. This theory is by scholars referred to as the contact hypothesis. In addition, such interaction between different group members can be seen as a cross-group contact which has been successfully used in racially integrated schools and in cooperative learning groups (Cameron and Rutland 192).
2.3 Post-colonial literature in the EFL-classroom

There are many benefits with choosing to work with post-colonial literature in the classroom. Christina Lütge stresses in her article “Postcolonial Literature and Transcultural Learning in the EFL Classroom: Crossovers, Trodden Paths or Winding Roads?” the link between post-colonial studies in the EFL classroom and intercultural knowledge. She argues that post-colonial literature enhances individual reflections and increases the possibilities for students to analyse and compare their own viewpoints with those of the literary texts. Consequently, students are made aware of their own views and learn how to coordinate and change perspectives to meet other cultures (160). On the same note, Donna Norton argues in “Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum” that one of teachers’ most essential tasks is to introduce a varied range of literature in their teaching and thus, provide students with the right tools to “develop an understanding of literary heritage” (28). She claims that literature which represents different cultures can help students to increase cultural awareness. Moreover, such a choice of literature can help students gain insight about other cultures and cultural backgrounds and thus, lead to a growth in understanding of themselves and others (28).

In theory, teaching literature to make students aware of racial prejudice is an excellent method. However, in reality, dealing with racial questions in the classroom is far more complex. Leading discussions with students from different backgrounds and with varied opinions can be challenging. Nonetheless, literature can serve as a starting point to introduce the students to controversial topics and as Emma Duren sees it in her article “Critical multiculturalism & racism in children’s literature”, literature “as written narratives provide a way for us to conceptualize the word and locate ourselves in the context of the experience of others” (17). With the help of fictional characters, the students can develop an understanding of other peoples and cultures which might lead to a reduction of racial prejudices.

Raising awareness of other cultures has always been important but maybe even more in Swedish classrooms in the current era. As mentioned in the introduction, Lundahl discusses how the increasing wave of immigrants will affect the school classrooms as we have been used to seeing them. Instead of having classrooms with Swedish students
only, the multicultural classroom is becoming more prominent. He explains that the amount of students from other countries keeps increasing (91). In fact, as Gary Howard puts it, the “growing presence of diversity in our public school population is the current reality in our classrooms and will become even more prominent in the face of our future” (6). Thus, Lundahl stresses that teachers must adapt their teachings to the multicultural classroom where students from cultures and ethnicities meet in order to prevent negative group dynamics which enhance the “us and them” thinking (94-95). In order to prevent such group dynamics literature teaching plays an important role. As Norton argues, literature is a great way of developing students’ cultural awareness; however it is not always as easy as it seems (28). On the same note, concerning the teaching of African-American literature in the classroom, Vincent Prince argues in “Flipping the Coin: Towards a Double-Faced Approach to Teaching Black Literature in Secondary English Classrooms” that a flawed teaching method, can enhance the “us and them” thinking. Thus, he argues that teachers should make sure to plan their lessons with thoughtful consideration. He problematizes the general tendency among teachers to focus on either commonalities or differences when working with such literature and argues that their focus can colour the classroom environment and affect the group dynamics where students confine groups of others “to their features of difference or, for the sake of maintaining shakeable unity, refusing to value their uniqueness” (54). Thus, he stresses the importance to include both commonalities and differences for best possible outcomes.

As aforementioned, there are many strategies which a teacher must have in mind when teaching classes. Not only is the multicultural classroom a challenge in itself, where students with different background meet, but the teacher must also manage to structure their teachings of post-colonial and African-American literature to raise cultural awareness and prevent the “us and them” thinking. In addition, the outlines of every teaching plan must be supported in the syllabus. In the syllabus for English 6 in the Swedish upper secondary school it is stated that the teaching of the English subject should cover “Living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (7). Moreover, concrete “and abstract subject areas related to students’ education and societal and working life; current issues; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; ethical and existential issues” should be taken into the
language teaching (7). As mentioned in the introduction, the curriculum for the Swedish upper secondary school states that an anti-discrimination policy must be pervasive throughout the teaching and actions must be taken to prevent discrimination among students (4). By involving post-colonial literature in the classroom, students are exposed to new perspectives of our history which could help them increase their cultural awareness and decrease discrimination. When students gain cultural knowledge, negative attitudes and racial prejudices could be changed and prevented.

3 The development of Rufus Weylin

In the following section, a literary analysis will be presented where I will investigate Rufus Weylin’s character development regarding attitudes towards the black slaves in the Antebellum South. The two theoretical building blocks; social influence theory and post-colonial theory serve as the cornerstones which this analysis is based on. They correlate as the post-colonial concepts of diaspora and displacement are instantiated through social influence by the influx of racial prejudices and attitudes. Thus, this analysis exemplifies how Dana experiences diaspora and displacement due to the social environment in the Antebellum South.

The protagonist Dana travels back in time six times in total. Each time she is being sent back to the past in order to save Rufus’ life. Thus, I will present an analysis of each of the times that she time travels. Each section is named after the chapters in the novel, starting with “The River” etc. These names of the chapters indicate what caused Dana to time travel to Rufus. I have chosen to analyse each one of Dana’s visits in the past because I believe that each travel is significant for the development of Dana’s influence on Rufus. Together these travels make a timeline where Butler illustrates the development of a typical white boy into a young man in the Antebellum South.

3.1 The River

In the first chapter, Dana is celebrating her 26th birthday together with her husband Kevin in the year of 1976. Suddenly, everything changes, she is feeling ill and everything goes blurry. She explains that her “house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place”
(Butler 13). This is how Butler describes Dana’s first time traveling. She found herself in nature hearing a scream of a boy in need. Dana saves Rufus from drowning in the river, however the mother who witnessed the rescue from the shore believes that Dana tried to kill Rufus. The father, Tom Weylin arrives and points his rifle towards Dana, but just as he is about to fire, Dana travels back to her husband in 1976. With the help of this event, Butler presents the first colonial feature. The way Dana drastically and unwillingly is forced to a different unfamiliar place can be compared to the post-colonial use of the term diaspora. McLeod defines this concept as the scattering of people due to imperialism (236). I believe that Butler uses the time travel as an example of the effect of diaspora where she enhances the dreadful experience of being forced to leave your own people and migrate to new places which happened to many people in colonial times. Consequently, Dana as well as her ancestors must have felt like they are in exile from their real homes. Butler depicts Dana’s feelings of displacement with the help of a narrative technique which Ashraf defines as the neo-slave narrative (3). By using such narrative, Butler can use Dana as a representation of the voices of the black slaves who lived during an era of racial socialization in the Antebellum South. Moreover, the idea of diaspora also affects the reader who travels in time with the protagonist, leaving familiar surroundings behind and entering into the physical presence of slave owners.

Tom Weylin’s strange reaction to seeing Dana who saved his son’s life introduces the problem which this novel highlights. Butler illustrates in this chapter that Dana has arrived in a place where her appearance intimidates white people, even to the extent that she could get shot for it. Racial prejudices are pervasive throughout the culture in the Antebellum South and Butler illustrates what effects this will have on Rufus Weylin.

3.2 The Fire

The second time travel experience is triggered by a fire in Rufus room. He set the curtains on fire to get back at his father but did not manage to put the fire out before it went out of his control. When Dana attempts to take the wooden stick, that caused the fire, away from Rufus, he screams you “lay a hand on me, and I’ll tell my daddy!”(Butler 21). This behaviour might seem strange due to the fact that Dana just saved his life, but looking at this interaction from the perspective of social influence one can see that Butler demonstrated how Rufus’ behaviour was most likely influenced by
how he saw his own father treat his slaves; with degrading comments, punishments, and overall distrust. Tom Weylin’s influence on Rufus has taught him that he can treat Dana the same way by threatening her in order to save his own skin.

Later in this chapter when Dana attempts to put the pieces together regarding why she is having these time travel experiences, Rufus explains to Dana that his parents thought she was “just some strange nigger” when she saved him from drowning (Butler 25). Dana is shocked by the choice of word he uses and asks does “your mother always call black people niggers, Rufe?” (Butler 25). Rufus, surprised by such a question just answers “sure, except when she has company. Why not?” (Butler 25). Now it is clear to the reader, that Rufus’ innocent questioning must indicate that the social environment, in which he lives, has a view on black people which is completely different to the year of 1976. Rufus’ unawareness of racial discrimination could, in my opinion, be the first sign of the significance of social influence when it comes to impacting people’s attitudes and prejudices. The responsibility for Rufus’ choice of degrading word cannot be laid upon him. Rollins and Hunter discuss how parents have a major responsibility when it comes to transferring insight about race. They argue that children learn how to “assume, resist, or negotiate the statuses associated with racial group membership” through their parents (140). Thus, Rufus must have picked up words and phrases from his parents without understanding their negative meanings.

Scholars claim that post-colonial literature can retell the story of the oppressed (Abdullatif; Ashcroft et al.; Madsen). Butler manages to depict the absurd relationship between white and oppressed black people that was rarely questioned in the Antebellum South. Rufus explains that Dana must call him master which at first she thought was a joke and laughed. However, she realizes that he is telling her the truth and as she struggles to understand, she reasons with herself thinking “his seriousness stopped my laughter. What was funny, anyway? He was probably right. No doubt I was supposed to give him some title of respect” (Butler 30). Dana’s confusion can be connected to Ashcroft et al.’s discussion of how the effects of displacement can lead to an identity crisis due to the confusion of self and place (8). Similarly, Dana has arrived to a place where her own self-worth is questioned by even a child due to her skin color. The dominant racist culture in this foreign place goes beyond her frame of reference and may lead to a questioning of her own identity. Thus, Butler depicts how feelings of
displacement can be recognised in post-colonial stories which retell the destinies of some black people in the Antebellum South. Furthermore, Dana’s confusion serves as a fictitious illustration of Ashcroft et al.’s argument for how social alienation is a natural effect of displacement in post-colonial literature (9). Just as they argue that slaves would feel displaced due to the master/slave hierarchy, Dana too struggles with this realization. Furthermore, Balfour argues that Butler’s fictional story provides us with the knowledge which enables us to some extent understand a tragic past which describes the life of slaves that once was a normalcy (173). I believe that Butler succeeds with the help of these fictional characters to bring life to our horrifying history. Dana can be seen as the reader’s stand-in to an involvement in the Antebellum South. Butler positions the readers to sympathize with her by letting them experience the story through her perspective. Consequently, the readers are displaced in time together with Dana and are forced to put themselves in the experience of the slaves. One the same note, Rufus functions as a catalyst that makes the readers question the horrific treatments of the slaves during this era.

3.3 The Fall

Dana is called back a third time when Rufus falls from a tree and hurts his leg. This time, Dana’s husband Kevin travels with her by mistake. Immediately when they meet Rufus the depiction of racial socialization is prominent when Rufus questions their relationship: “niggers can’t marry white people” (Butler 60). Such statement falls under Augoustinos and Reynolds definition of a racial prejudice which can be seen as a negative attitude towards persons due to their belonging to specific groups (2). Due to Dana’s black skin color, Rufus has been taught that she cannot be associated with a white person, especially not marry one. To him, this is unthinkable due to the society he lives in and based on the opinions of the people he is influenced by. Dana confirms this by explaining to her husband: “the boy learned to talk that way from his mother” (Butler 61). These statements sum up what I believe Butler wanted to show through her novel, viz. the superior power of the dominant group when it comes to shaping general racial attitudes among the majority. Similarly, Collins explains how the feeling of shared identity developed in the Antebellum South where black enslavement “fostered racial pride and unity” in whites. He claims that this was the effect of a strong social bond that united Southerners of all classes in their enthusiasm for embracing the Confederacy (Collins qtd. in Fraser, 955). Concerning this historical context, the pervasiveness of
slavery is understandable. Thus, I see this piece of post-colonial literature as a warning to the readers to understand the effect that our society can have on us. Butler demonstrates the importance of parental awareness when raising their children into functional members of the society. In this case, Rufus is just a young boy and does not understand how degrading his word choice is because he has heard his mother use it and thus, learns to do the same.

In this part of the story, Rufus has reached the school age and is thus according to Nesdale more accessible to prejudices. Furthermore, around this age the prejudices he hears will shape him as a human being and may follow him into adulthood. Consequently, the attitudes and prejudices which reach impact can lead to “short-and long-term psychological, if not physical, harm to the members of the targeted groups” (Nesdale 32). Having this in mind, Dana plays an important role as a new close member in Rufus’s life and she realizes the she should strategically use position she is in to influence Rufus. Thus, in a discussion with her husband, she convinces him and herself that her purpose of being sent back in time may be to challenge history by influencing Rufus not to be defined by his social environment and instead to become a man of the future:

‘I want him to have as many good memories of me as I can give him now.’ ‘He might not remember you past the day you leave here.’ ‘He’ll remember.’ ‘It still might not work. After all, his environment will be influencing him every day you’re gone. And from what I’ve heard, it’s common in this time for the master’s children to be on nearly equal terms with the slaves. But maturity is supposed to put both in their ‘places.’ ‘Sometimes it doesn’t. Even here, not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be.’ ‘You’re gambling. Hell, you’re gambling against history.’ (Butler 83)

With these statements I believe that Butler enhances the major role that social influence plays for shaping prejudices. Accordingly, Hunter and Rollins claim that children are made aware of their racial heritage through interaction with other people. In addition, such interactions can shape their preconceptions related to a specific group membership (140). Thus, by illustrating the effects of Dana’s presence around Rufus, Butler instantiates how the power of social interaction can affect racial prejudices. Therefore,
Butler depicts how Dana is made aware of the possibilities her time with Rufus gives her and she is not afraid to challenge the social norms in an era different to hers. She does not let Rufus call her whatever he pleases because it is acceptable in his world; instead she makes him reflect on the words he uses by making him the target: “Rufe, how’d you like people to call you white trash when they talk to you?” (Butler 61). By doing so, she motivates him to think about the consequences of his language and furthermore, she forces him to put himself in the situation of black people by making him feel like the victim.

During Dana’s third stay with Rufus, he starts to develop an attachment to her. When his father arrives to help his injured son he whispers: “don’t go, Dana” (Butler 63). In this scene, Butler reveals Rufus’ true colours. He is just a scared boy who wants someone to look after him. As time proceeds their friendship continues to grow and reaches a point where Rufus starts to develop empathy for his friend and realizes the danger of having a black woman as a close friend in a time where white and black people are treated differently. One evening he expresses his inner fear of seeing Dana leave: “I keep thinking you’re going to go home— that somebody will come and tell me you and Kevin are gone. I don’t want you to go. But I don’t want you to get hurt here either” (Butler 89). Rufus manages to look beyond himself and his selfishness. The fact that Dana can get hurt due to her skin-color makes him want to put his own selfish needs aside to save her life. Butler’s depiction of Rufus relates to Aronson et al. statement that attitudes and actions correlate. They claim that a person’s attitudes will have an impact on their actions towards others (211). Accordingly, Butler’s depiction of Rufus’ unselfish act may indicate that he is slowly shifting his negative attitudes towards black people in general and Dana in particular, into positive ones.

3.4 The Fight

Several years pass and by the fourth time that Dana is called to Rufus, he has grown up into a young man. Dana’s time travel is triggered by a fight between Rufus and a black man named Isaac. She arrives just in time to save Rufus from being beaten to death. She discovers that Rufus has put himself in trouble by raping his childhood friend Alice. When Dana questions his actions about hurting a friend his reason is: “when we were little, we were friends,” he said softly. “We grew up. She got so she’d rather have a buck nigger than me (Butler 123). Rufus acted out of hurt because Alice chose to marry
a black slave instead of him and thus, he seems to think that her betrayal justifies his actions. The time spent away from Dana since her last time travel has clearly affected him negatively. The hope Dana had to turn him into a better person by influencing him to be different than his surroundings seems to have faded: “I gazed down at him bitterly. Kevin had been right. I’d been foolish to hope to influence him (Butler 123).

Consequently, Rufus’ lack of remorse gives Dana reason to fear for her safety: “I stared at him. Heaven help Alice and Isaac. Heaven help me. If Rufus could turn so quickly on a life-long friend, how long would it take him to turn on me?” (Butler 123). Rufus change of attitude could be connected to the theory behind the contact hypothesis. Cameron and Rutland define this theory as a method to reduce prejudices by encouraging contact with members of different groups (192). However, through this fictional story Butler problematizes such a hypothesis where she illustrates how Rufus’ negative attitude towards black people has increased since Dana has been gone. The earlier interactions between Dana and Rufus have made Rufus aware of his racial prejudices, however, through this chapter, Butler demonstrates that shorter contact between different groups might not be enough to prevent racial prejudices completely.

3.5 The Storm

During Dana’s next, second to last, time travel, Rufus’ attitude towards her and the slaves on the plantation changes intensely. Rufus’ father Tom Weylin dies of a heart attack which Dana failed to save him from. As an act of punishment, Rufus forces Dana to work on the fields under the watch of Mister Fowler and his whip. Dana questions his drastic punishment and fears the new side developing where Rufus tries to “make himself that much more like his father” (Butler 221). Rufus seems to be ambivalent about his actions towards Dana. He despises her and wants to punish her whereas on the other hand, he seems to find himself as a saviour who ensures her safety: “Fowler would have given you a good whipping if I hadn’t stopped him, …That’s not the first beating I’ve saved you from”(Butler 214). This rather bizarre way of manipulating Dana could be the result of the social influence which he has been exposed to. Aronson et al. claim that humans are not just influenced by others when other people are present; instead, they tend to be influenced by others also when they are alone because the other people’s opinions are kept in memory (35). Accordingly, Dana sees how Rufus is becoming more like his cruel father who is not alive anymore, he exposes her to torturing acts instead of protecting her. Butler portrays with the help of these fictional
characters how Rufus’ father has influenced him with his attitudes and prejudices throughout his childhood. She demonstrates how Rufus even as a man, cannot seem to let his father down by acting differently than him. This behaviour can be connected to Bohner and Wanke’s argument on how people’s actions are affected by the operant condition. Children learn to adapt to behaviours which have been encouraged with a reward. The opinions and actions which parents express and execute in front of their children will teach them to connect certain people and actions to either something negative or positive (212). In this case, Tom Weylin’s treatment of his black slaves may have affected Rufus into believing that bad treatments of the slaves will reward him in some way, maybe by gaining power and superiority just like his father used to have on the plantation. Dana could also be seen as a reward which he is striving to possess. However this feeling of sudden superiority seems to fade when Dana questions him for putting her through the exhausting shift on the field which almost took her life, the reader gets a glimpse of Rufus’ insecure and ambivalent personality: “Don’t you ever walk away from me again!’ he said. Strangely, he began to sound a little afraid. He repeated the words, spacing them, emphasizing each one. ‘Don’t you ever walk away from me again” (Butler 214). Rufus is scared of losing her and thus, takes advantages of his superior position as a white man. His need to have Dana close seems to be developing into an obsession where his fear of losing her makes him act like his father to punish and to scare to receive his reward; her presence.

3.6 The Rope

In the final chapter, the mother of Rufus’ children, the slave Alice hangs herself. Dana is being forced back a final time when Rufus discovers Alice’s dead body. The slaves on the plantation blame Rufus: “Even if he didn’t put the rope on her, he drove her to it. He sold her babies” (Butler 249). Through Alice, Butler gives the reader a glimpse of the many sexual abuses of female slaves in the Antebellum South. Dana hoped to influence Rufus into becoming a kinder plantation owner but instead, he goes beyond Dana’s mission by forcing Alice into a sexual relationship with him which causes her to give birth to his children, one of whom is Dana’s ancestor. However, Dana struggles with their abusive relationship since she knows that in order for herself to be born, Alice must give birth to Rufus’ children. In this context, the scholar Cassandra Jones argues that Butler’s work contributes to a post-colonial memory where she depicts the physical
and sexual oppression which female slaves were victims of (3). On the same note, Donadey argues that Butler’s writing reconstructs the experiences of black women during the enslavement of black women in the Antebellum South (66). Accordingly, Butler creates Alice and her fate as a representation of the suffering of black women in the Antebellum South. Butler brings life to our history and just as Abdullatif argues that African-American literature about enslavement retells the voices of the silenced (2), Alice could be seen as a fictional tool which Butler uses to let the story of black sexual victims be heard. Thus, Alice’s destiny to give birth to the children of the slave owner Rufus could be seen as a representation of the lives of many African slaves in Antebellum South. Butler uses Alice as an example of some of the degrading treatments that some of these female slaves had to suffer. Accordingly, she instantiates such treatments by illustrating how Rufus sells Alice’s children, the final act which drove her to take her own life. Such an unselfish act questions the contact hypothesis which Cameron and Rutland discuss as a theory where interaction between different groups can reduce prejudices (192). Dana has been trying to influence Rufus throughout the novel and yet Butler demonstrates that their interactions were not satisfying enough for Rufus to develop empathy for his own black children. Nevertheless, Butler shows awareness of the complexity of the hypothesis as she depicts how Rufus in fact never sold his children but sent them away to relatives instead. Therefore, although Dana’s presence around Rufus did not affect him not to neglect his children, Butler illustrates how it did, however, plant a seed of empathy which made Rufus care enough for his children to send them to his relatives instead of selling them to strangers where they could have been treated just as badly as he and his father had been treating the slaves on their plantation. Thus, although the contact hypothesis can be problematic concerning a potential positive influence on someone, Butler shows that its claims about interactions with people from different groups may to some extent be helpful to fight racial prejudices.

When Rufus arrives at the plantation with the children, the reader sees another glimpse of how this empathy is changing Rufus into accepting his role as a father for his children by allowing them to address him as “daddy.” Dana is surprised by his choice of words and reasons with herself: “The boy had spent his short life calling his father “Master.” Well, now that he no longer had a mother, I supposed Rufus thought it was time he had a father” (Butler 253). To some extent, Rufus might feel guilty for the death
of the children’s mother and by bringing his children back; he wants to prove to himself and to Dana that although he could not be a partner to Alice, he can be a father to his children. Dana’s presence around Rufus might not have affected him fully to change his behaviour completely; however, she gave him the tools to treat his children better. Although Dana to some extent manages to influence Rufus, the seed of her ideas planted in his mind did not grow to its full potential where many slaves including Alice lost their lives due to the consequences of Rufus’ cruel acts. However, Butler demonstrates how social influence plays a major role for affecting prejudices and attitudes; it calls assumptions into question and challenges people to question their mind-sets. Through Butler’s exemplification of the contact hypothesis, she draws attention to the complexity of cross cultural interactions by illustrating their varied effects through Rufus’ acts towards the black slaves. Thus, I interpret Kindred as an encouragement from Butler never to stop to plant ideas by interacting with others. Butler demonstrates how such interactions may not help the people closest to us but in the long run, generations after may harvest what we sowed and Rufus’ children’s ticket to freedom from enslavement would serve as a fictional example of such effects.

4 Working with Kindred in the classroom

Students’ daily lives are filled with input from news, media, internet etc. All of these represent ideas and topics concerning places and people all over the world and their messages expose us to foreign cultures. In a time like this where the multicultural classroom has come to replace the typical Swedish classrooms, discussions about attitude and racial prejudices are more important than ever in order to prevent racist history from repeating itself. As I see it, Sweden can still be seen as a segregated country where neighbourhoods differentiate from each other. Matters of race, ethnicity and income affect students’ living conditions. Therefore, just as Hagermann concludes that many white students are unaware of their whiteness and oblivious to discrimination of race (2609), teachers should introduce topics about discrimination in general and racial attitudes and prejudices in particular to educate students to gain intercultural awareness. Lütge argues that post-colonial literature can contribute to develop students’ intercultural knowledge (160). On the same note, Norton discusses how teachers should make sure to introduce a varied range of literature to their students and especially literature that represent different cultures to develop student’s cultural awareness (28).
Thus, by working with a post-colonial novel such *Kindred* which represents the culture in the Antebellum South, I believe that teachers could help their students to develop cultural awareness in general and raise awareness of racial attitudes and prejudices in particular by discussing the effects of racial prejudices in the novel. By doing so, just as Durren argues, the story could provide a way for the students to conceptualize experiences of the past and put themselves in the experience of others (17). By providing students with an insight into the experience of an oppressed culture, I believe that it meets the curriculum’s requirements regarding the prevention of discrimination (Nat. Ag. For Ed. 4). When allowing students to reflect and relate to other cultures, they not only gain cultural knowledge, they can develop an understanding and acceptance for others which is crucial in order to change negative attitudes. To open up for such reflections, the students could discuss how racial prejudices are presented in the novel and how these prejudices affected the slaves. Furthermore, in order to make the students aware of the “us and them” thinking which Lundahl warns about (94-95), they could discuss how peer pressure and social influence affect the characters in the books and also draw parallels to their own lives and society in general. Such discussion would correspond well with the syllabus for English 6 where it is stated that the teaching of the English subject should include topics about e.g. social issues, attitudes and cultural conditions (Nat. Ag For Ed.).

Having Prince’s advice in mind about including both commonalities as well as differences when teaching African-American literature (54), it is my belief that in order to prevent a negative group dynamic in the classroom the same value of all humans must be stressed. When introducing a novel such as *Kindred* the students should be able to recognize the differences in the lives of the African slaves and the White Americans through a fictional and historical perspective. However, the teacher should, in my opinion, emphasize commonalities as well to enhance a “we”-thinking attitude instead of an “us and them” one. By relating the discussions to our modern society, students will hopefully understand our horrifying history; see the progression we have made, and realize the possibilities to make our world friendlier by questioning and extinguishing racial prejudices.
5 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to analyse how the protagonist Dana tries to influence Rufus to change his racial prejudices and attitudes. With the help of social influence theory, I identified that Dana to some extent manages to change Rufus’ opinions about black people. Early on in the story Dana challenges Rufus’ choice of degrading words towards black people by making him feel like the target instead. Such method proved to affect Rufus mind set positively since Butler illustrates how he develops empathy for Dana where he puts his needs of having her close aside due to the danger her skin-colour puts her in, in a society where white people are superior to black people. Butler demonstrates how preconceived opinions are created within social groups and she strengthens the theory that parents play a crucial role concerning transmission of attitudes and prejudices. Nevertheless, I argued that Butler problematizes to what extent prejudices can be influenced. Her novel questions the contact hypothesis as mentioned in the theory and discussed in the analysis since Rufus tends to learn from Dana when she is on the plantation but fails to proceed as a man of the future who stands up for black people when she is no longer present to help him question his world view. The result of Dana’s mission of keeping Rufus alive and influencing him to become a better person who treats everyone equally comes to an abrupt end when the mother of Rufus’ children dies. Rufus may not have made the lives better for the slaves on his plantation but I made the conclusion that Dana had successfully influenced him to treat his children better. It is my belief that Butler uses the events in Kindred as an illustrative encouragement to the readers that they should never stop questioning racial prejudices. She leaves the reader on a rather optimistic note where she demonstrates that social influence may not affect the closest people around us but by working towards anti-racism in our society, we may change the preconditions for generations after us.

Butler uses post-colonial tools throughout her story. I argued that the Dana’s experiences in the social environment of the Antebellum South highlighted the effects of the post-colonial terms diaspora and displacement. The first term diaspora is instantiated by the depiction of Dana being forced to leave her familiar surroundings and travel back in time to a new culture. The latter term displacement can be seen as the effect of Dana arriving at a place foreign to her home with social alienation and an identity crisis as consequences. With the help of Butler’s illustrative examples, I argued that readers may gain deeper understanding about our horrifying history where they will
have to put themselves in the experience of others. It is my belief that teachers can use *Kindred* in their teachings to raise intercultural awareness which in the long-term can be a part of the work towards an anti-discrimination policy where students support the idea of same value of all humans. By encouraging students to discuss how Butler depicts racial prejudices in the novel and reflect on the effects which such negative attitudes have on the black slaves, I believe that teachers provide opportunities for students to start reflecting on the consequences of racism. Such initiatives should be prioritized in today’s multicultural society in order to prevent an “us and them”-thinking.

Working with a post-colonial novel such as *Kindred* in the classroom could be further elaborated. Due to limited space it has not been possible to develop the ideas about teaching post-colonial literature to prevent racism and promote anti-discrimination to its full potential. Thus, further research could be conducted which pays attention to real classroom situations where the use of post-colonial literature is analysed to discover its correlation to a potential anti-discrimination progression.
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