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Beyond Alternative History: Time Travel and Historical Continuity in *Kindred* and *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*

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Abstract

Time travel in science fiction, a subgenre distinct yet often overlapping with alternative history, often explores historical contingency through counterfactual scenarios to produce alternative histories. Yet some works deliberately negate this potential, presenting time travelers who refrain from altering the past despite possessing the apparent ability to do so. This essay examines this underexplored narrative mode through a comparative analysis of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Miyabe Miyuki's *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*. Framing the narrative device as a non-interventionist history, it explores how both novels deploy time travel not to revise history but to confront the ethical, emotional, and cultural implications of engaging with historically traumatic events that remain causally intact. Drawing on science fiction theory and historiographical debates, the essay argues that these texts redirect the function of time travel toward ethical reflection, embodied experience, and the formation of national identity. While *Kindred* presents history as an ongoing system of racialized violence that resists reconciliation, *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* frames historical violence through affective memory and postwar nostalgia, facilitating symbolic closure. Together, these novels demonstrate how time travel can serve as a critical apparatus for negotiating national trauma without recourse to historical revision.

Keywords: time travel; science fiction; Japanese literature; American literature; alternative history; comparative literature

1. Introduction

Science fiction has long been a fertile ground for exploring the intersections of imagination, history, and human experience. Among its many narrative devices, time travel has proven particularly potent, allowing authors to juxtapose past and present, to speculate on alternative outcomes, and to interrogate the ethical and philosophical dimensions of historical causality. Yet not all time-travel narratives pursue the speculative "what if" scenarios often associated with the genre. Some works, instead, employ time travel to reinforce the immutable course of history, foregrounding the experiential, moral, and emotional engagement of protagonists with historical events. This essay examines two such texts from distinct national and cultural contexts: Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, a novel that situates a contemporary African American woman within the antebellum South, and Miyuki Miyabe's *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* [*Gamō-tei Jiken*], in which a teenage Japanese boy is transported to the eve of the 26 February 1936 coup attempt.

There are several reasons why these two texts are particularly significant for examining time travel fiction. The destinations of time travel in both narratives correspond to some of the most traumatic and ethically fraught moments in each nation's history—periods

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that have profoundly shaped subsequent cultural and national identities. These moments are not merely historical turning points but are widely recognized as sites of national wrongdoing that continue to occupy a central place in collective memory.

In *Kindred*, the destination of time travel is the era of American slavery, selected by the author as the historical site through which a Black woman confronts the origins of her African American identity. Dana's journeys force her to witness—and physically endure—the conditions under which that identity was formed, defined not only through genealogical descent but also through resistance to the institution of slavery and the racial hierarchy embodied by the white master. *Kindred*'s enduring relevance is reflected in its widespread adoption in high school and college literature curricula in the United States, where it is frequently taught as both a historical and cultural intervention.[1]

In *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*, time travel brings a teenage boy to the eve of the 26 February 1936 Incident [*Ni-niroku jiken*], an event now widely regarded as a critical turning point in modern Japanese history. The incident marked a decisive shift toward ultranationalism, militarism, and imperial expansion, developments that would culminate in Japan's involvement in World War II. Aside from repeated reprints, the novel was adapted into a television drama (1998) and a radio drama (1999), both broadcast on NHK, Japan's public service network. It was later adapted for younger audiences and published as a juvenile paperback edition in 2013. These adaptations underscore the text's perceived educational and cultural value.

Furthermore, both novels share a central feature: time travel does not serve to rewrite history, but rather to illuminate the enduring consequences of national trauma. In *Kindred*, the brutality of slavery is encountered firsthand by Dana, whose bodily suffering and ethical dilemmas underscore the systematized violence at the foundation of American identity. In *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*, Takashi's journey to prewar Japan similarly confronts him with the ideological violence of ultramilitarism and imperial expansion, yet the trauma is mediated through historical memory and affective experience rather than corporeal suffering. In both cases, the protagonists' temporal mobility amplifies the reader's understanding of the past and its implications for the present, highlighting the tension between the desire to intervene and the imperative to preserve historical continuity.

The two texts also share notable extratextual contexts, as both were published at moments of national commemoration: one at the bicentennial of American independence and the other a few years after the end of the era of Emperor Shōwa, circumstances that amplified their potential impact on the shaping of national memory. Considering these parallels across multiple textual and extratextual layers, the similarities between the two works make them particularly compelling cases for examination across cultural differences.

By comparing these works, this essay explores the value of time travel narratives that refuse the conventional speculative potential of altering history, instead emphasizing ethical, emotional, and cultural reflection. Rather than correcting historical wrongdoing through intervention in the past, these narratives encourage an acceptance of historical continuity and a recognition of the present state of the democratic nation, however imperfect it may be. It argues that Butler and Miyabe use time travel to confront the formative violences of national history, allowing their protagonists—and their readers—to witness, experience, and reassess the past without altering it. Through this lens, *Kindred* and *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* reveal the distinct ways in which national identity, collective memory, and historical consciousness are mediated through imaginative literature, demonstrating the power of science fiction to interrogate both personal and societal histories.

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2. Time Travel and Alternative History

Science fiction has long been fascinated with alternative history as a subgenre, a fascination that begins with the speculative question of "what if" applied to the past. Alternative history, also referred to as alternate history, imagines parallel worlds in which key historical events unfold differently from what is generally accepted as historical fact. Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, for example, depicts a world in which Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan emerge victorious from World War II and dominate global geopolitics. While the novel presents a radically counterfactual history, its continued popularity, most notably through Amazon's television adaptation in 2015, demonstrates the enduring appeal of narratives that reimagine historical outcomes.

Time travel can be understood as a distinct yet frequently overlapping subgenre with alternative history. Within this shared space, time travel often functions as a mechanism for generating alternative histories. Such temporal movement may occur through advanced technology—such as a time machine—or through unexplained supernatural phenomena or abilities. Early science fiction often framed alternative history as a speculative experiment made possible by technological innovation. Isaac Asimov's short story "What If—" and his novel *The End of Eternity* exemplify this approach, presenting scientists who manipulate time in order to test hypothetical historical outcomes. Such works tend to focus on pivotal moments—often traumatic events—that irrevocably altered the course of nations and shaped collective memory. As Gavriel D. Rosenfeld argues, alternative history fiction "explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world" (Rosenfeld 2005, p. 10). Time travel frequently serves as the narrative mechanism that not only transports characters (and, by extension, readers) into the past, but also urges them to reflect contemporary concerns and to reconsider how the past is remembered, interpreted, and valued. David Wittenberg observes that in time travel narratives, "the fundamental historiographical question—how is the past reconstructed by or within the present?—becomes a literal topos, is told as a tale" (Wittenberg 2012, p. 18). Time travel thus literalizes historiographical inquiry, transforming questions about historical mediation into narrative action.

From this perspective, stories in which no alternative history emerges—where the course of events ultimately remains unchanged—might appear indistinguishable from historical fiction. Yet, as Wittenberg suggests, time travel functions as a narrative tool that bridges gaps between readers and unfamiliar historical contexts, enabling a process of familiarization that differs from conventional historical fiction. If all acts of reading involve a temporal and perceptual gap between the reader and the text, time travel fiction foregrounds this gap by dramatizing it. The insertion of time travel as a narrative device may therefore produce a familiarizing effect for readers encountering the historical past, while also heightening the consciousness of the time-traveling protagonist, who arrives at a pivotal historical moment, recognizes the possibility of intervention, and nevertheless refrains from altering the course of events.

The refusal or restraint from intervening in history may arise for different reasons. Many time travel and alternative history narratives depict history as possessing its own corrective force or self-healing tendency that restores the established course of events rather than allowing its trajectory to be altered. In some cases, the intervention itself is revealed to have always been part of the historical timeline, as in *By His Bootstraps* by Robert A. Heinlein. In other narratives, characters learn that even small attempts to change the past produce severe distortions or catastrophic consequences beyond history's capacity for correction, as in *11/22/63* by Stephen King. Still others foreground the ethical question of whether history should be manipulated at all, emphasizing the value of preserving the past, as in *Time and Again* by Jack Finney.

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The two novels discussed in this essay may be seen as belonging, to some extent, to this final category. Rather than treating the past as a site for intervention, they emphasize the ethical undesirability—or impossibility—of altering historical events, even when those events are widely regarded as unjust or even catastrophic. This narrative mode is particularly intriguing because it presupposes a metacritical awareness of time travel as a genre convention. The time traveler implicitly "knows" the logic of alternative history, its promise of correction or improvement, and consciously refuses it. In this sense, such narratives operate as a self-denying form of alternative history: they acknowledge the genre's speculative power while withholding its most recognizable outcome.

Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Miyuki Miyabe's *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* exemplify this distinctive narrative mode. Both novels, written by contemporary women authors, depict protagonists who acquire the capacity to intervene in historically traumatic moments yet ultimately refrain from altering them. While time travel narratives that foreground historical change are typically classified as alternative history, this study focuses instead on what might be termed *anti-alternative* time travel fiction: works that explicitly deny historical intervention in order to interrogate how the present confronts, inherits, and remains accountable to the past.

3. *Kindred* and the Ethics of Historical Continuity

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* may be described as a work that employs a science fiction device primarily in the service of concerns that are not conventionally associated with science fiction. For some readers, particularly those invested in science fiction as a genre of rigorous speculative logic or conceptual experimentation, this emphasis may render the novel comparatively modest in terms of its engagement with formal extrapolation. Yet it is precisely this quality that has facilitated *Kindred*'s broad acceptance within the domain of mainstream literary studies, in contrast to the more limited academic reception of Butler's other, more overtly speculative works.[2]

The central "non-science fictional" concern of *Kindred* is a sustained interrogation of the history of American slavery. The novel follows Dana, an African American woman living in late twentieth-century California, who is repeatedly transported to the antebellum South. There, she encounters Rufus Weylin, a white ancestor who exercises near-total authority over an enslaved population on a Maryland plantation. Dana gradually realizes that an unnamed force draws her back to the past whenever Rufus's life is in danger; in effect, "history" itself compels her intervention in order to preserve the established course of events. She is thus placed in an ethically untenable position: Rufus must survive in order to father the lineage that will lead to Dana's own existence. As a result, Dana is forced to sustain a system of violence and coercion, including sexual assault, in order to secure her own birth. The novel's irony lies precisely in this contradiction, exposing how African American identity is genealogically and historically entangled with the brutal realities of slavery.

There are several reasons why *Kindred* is often classified as a work that employs a science fiction device rather than fully participating in the genre. One such reason lies in readers' concern that framing slavery through science fiction might undermine the gravity or truth-claim of its historical representation. For readers who value the realism and immediacy of Dana's experiences, science fiction may be perceived as an escapist mode that risks distancing the narrative from historical reality. As a result, some readers resist categorizing *Kindred* as science fiction precisely because of the ethical seriousness of its subject matter.

Lisa Long, for example, argues that *Kindred* addresses what she identifies as America's lack of "an experiential and bodily connection to slavery" (Long 2002, p. 459) by deploying

an otherwise impossible narrative device—time travel. Rather than diminishing historical realism, time travel in this reading enables the transmission of slavery's physical pain across generations, rendering historical violence materially and bodily present. This interpretation also carries important pedagogical implications. The novel's frequent inclusion in high school and college curricula reflects the belief that time travel facilitates affective engagement, allowing contemporary American readers to more readily "relate to" the lived experience of slavery while maintaining its historical seriousness.

Dana's gradual transformation illustrates the pedagogical and affective effects of this narrative strategy. Initially, she occupies a position closer to that of the contemporary reader, conscious of her limited ability to fully inhabit the historical moment:

> And I began to realize why [my husband] Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were actors. (Butler 1988, p. 98)

As Dana repeats her experiences of time travel and becomes increasingly familiar with the historical context—mirroring the reader's process of immersion—she gradually ceases to perform, often before fully recognizing the change within herself:

> I turned and went back out of the house, out toward the woods. I had to think. I wasn't getting enough time to myself. Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped? (ibid, p. 221)

These features of *Kindred* have led some critics to read the novel primarily as a form of slave narrative, valuing it less for its engagement with science fiction's speculative capacities than for the autobiographical authority associated with Butler's racial identity.[3] Such readings, however, risk overlooking the novel's deliberate and strategic engagement with (or rather its intentional refusal of) the conventions of science fiction. *Kindred* employs time travel while withholding what is typically understood as the genre's central speculative payoff: the production of alternative histories. The narrative Dana inhabits does not require temporal displacement in order to represent slavery, racial violence, or genealogical coercion; these structures could be depicted without recourse to science fiction at all. The presence of time travel therefore raises a critical question: what function does it serve if not historical revision?

Whereas science fiction often derives its rhetorical force from counterfactual speculation—posing questions about how history might have unfolded otherwise—*Kindred* enforces instead the imperative that "it must happen." Dana could, in principle, risk her own future existence by intervening more radically: by preventing sexual violence, disrupting the plantation economy, or organizing rebellion. That she does not is not merely a matter of narrative restraint or individual character psychology but a structural principle governing the text. The novel posits History as an impersonal yet coercive force that demands preservation rather than correction. History here does not function as an abstract chronology but as a system that reproduces itself through embodied suffering, racialized power, and genealogical continuity. Time travel thus becomes the mechanism through which historical violence is rendered unavoidable, binding both the protagonist and the reader to the necessity of its occurrence.

Karen Hellekson's concept of "anti-alternative history" offers a useful framework for understanding this narrative logic. In her study of alternative history science fiction, Hellek-

son identifies works that deliberately resist counterfactual divergence and instead reaffirm historical continuity. She argues that anti-alternative history does not fundamentally differ from alternative history in its underlying assumptions, since both share a teleological or eschatological view of history. In both modes, history is governed by a transcendent force that surveys and regulates events—a force exemplified in Poul Anderson's Time Patrol stories by the Danellians, whose task is to preserve the "correct" historical trajectory (Hellekson 2001, pp. 97–98).

In *Kindred*, this governing force takes the form of History itself. Dana is repeatedly pulled back into the past whenever the continuity of events is threatened, compelled to repair historical fissures that might otherwise destabilize her own existence. Unlike Anderson's Time Patrols, however, this force lacks institutional or human embodiment. Its impersonality shifts narrative emphasis onto Dana as the locus through which History operates. Her subordination to History is not a matter of professional duty but of existential necessity, underscoring the novel's emphasis on vulnerability rather than authority.

This shift leads to Hellekson's second defining feature of anti-alternative history: the empirical value of experiencing history subjectively (ibid, p. 107). Rather than extrapolating alternative outcomes, such narratives foreground the perspective of the individual and the significance of singular events (ibid, p. 99). *Kindred* consistently reaffirms history as it occurred, exemplifying what may be called non-interventionist time travel fiction. Even when Dana attempts to influence Rufus by introducing democratic ideals, her actions amount to what she herself describes as "gambling against history"(Butler 1988, p. 83)—a gamble that inevitably fails. The significance of Dana's compelled obedience thus lies not in her capacity to alter the past but in the ethical and emotional truths the novel articulates about slavery. Time travel becomes a means of registering the lived experience of historical violence rather than a tool for escaping it.

In this sense, *Kindred* directs attention away from abstract or collective History and toward the empirical and affective dimensions of particular lives, moments, and social relations. Dana is not a passive instrument of History, but neither is she its master; she functions instead as its mediator and interpreter, bearing responsibility for witnessing and surviving its violence. Through this positioning, the novel binds historical understanding to embodiment, insisting that identity and historical knowledge are inseparable from lived pain.

Kindred thus exemplifies the logic of historical continuity by narrativizing the formation of a Black woman's national identity through the expansion of personal experience into collective historical consciousness. Dana's identity develops from the individual to the communal, functioning analogously to Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community. By situating her personal genealogy within the brutal continuity of slavery, the novel constructs a collective figure of Black womanhood that is historically grounded rather than abstract. Rufus's presence as both ancestor and oppressor further reinforces this dynamic, binding Black identity to intimate proximity with white power and violence that constituted nation building.

Moreover, the novel's conception of History aligns with a dialectical philosophy often described as Marxist or, more precisely, Hegelian. History is presented as a diachronic process of synthesis, in which modern democracy emerges through—and not despite—the violence of the past. Dana adopts a perspective akin to that of the Marxist historian, capable of apprehending history as a structured totality, or a form of supra-history, in which subsequent outcomes are intelligible as structurally determined. This transcendental awareness enables her to trace the origins of her own existence within historical violence, rendering her able, however uneasily, to contextualize ancestral suffering, including sexual violence, as constitutive of the democratic present she inhabits. The novel thus confronts the

disturbing implication that the freedoms of modernity are inseparable from the injustices that produced them.

Kindred thus succeeds in narrativizing a personal history that is inextricable from the national history of the United States, exposing the unsettling implication that the moral atrocity of slavery underwrites the democratic present. The novel's conclusion is particularly revealing in this respect. Dana's final act of time travel becomes "final" only when Rufus's natural death is secured and witnessed, ensuring the continuity of the historical trajectory that leads to her own existence. With this confirmation, Dana is returned to 4 July 1976—the bicentennial of American independence—an emblematic moment of national self-celebration. The juxtaposition is stark: the freedom commemorated in the present is anchored in a past structured by racialized violence. In binding Dana's bodily survival to this historical closure, the novel fuses the experience of a Black woman with the narrative of the nation itself, compelling an acknowledgment of slavery not as a regrettable aberration but as a constitutive (and unresolved) element in the unfolding of American History.

4. *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* and the Role of Time Travelers

Miyuki Miyabe's *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*[4] demonstrates notable parallels with *Kindred*, particularly in its use of the cognitive framework of anti-alternative history discussed above. At the same time, important differences emerge. *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* blends elements of mystery, specifically, detective fiction without an official investigator, with science fiction. Miyabe is widely recognized as one of Japan's best-selling contemporary mystery writers, and the hybridization of genres is a common feature in Japanese novels and media texts, exemplified by works such as *Death Note*, which combines supernatural elements the criminal can use to obstruct criminal investigation.

However, the combination of mystery and time-travel science fiction raises a set of narrative challenges. For instance, the presence of a time-traveling character complicates the logic of criminal detection, as conventional spatial alibis become meaningless when temporal mobility is possible. The problem becomes particularly acute in scenarios such as the locked-room mystery, a staple of detective fiction, which is precisely the type of puzzle that occurs in this time travel narrative. The novel thus foregrounds both the genre conventions of mystery and the conceptual demands of science fiction, creating a distinctive narrative tension.

The narrative centers on Takashi, a teenage *rōnin*[5] who comes to Tokyo in February 1994 to take an entrance exam for a prep school. While staying at an old hotel in central Tokyo to prepare for the exam, he discovers that the hotel is located near the site of the February 26 Incident and that the date coincides with its eve. Through a television talk show that Takashi watches, the reader is introduced to key historical facts about the event.

On 26 February 1936, a group of twenty-one young army officers, commanding approximately 1400 soldiers, staged a coup d'état in Tokyo. Their political manifesto claimed that politicians and government officials were undermining the nation for personal gain and needed to be overthrown. The officers, who professed deep loyalty to the emperor, aimed to purge the corrupt government and establish an ideal state directly led by the emperor. They seized control of the Nagata-chō district, the political heart of Tokyo, and assassinated several officials, including two cabinet ministers. The emperor, however, disavowed the uprising and ordered that the perpetrators be punished. In despair, many of the junior officers either committed suicide or were executed. While their ultra-rightist political ideology is now widely regarded as misguided, their failed coup is often interpreted as the last attempt to prevent Japan from pursuing an aggressive militaristic path that would ultimately lead to World War II. *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* positions this revolt as a

pivotal moment in Japanese history, marking the turning point that condemned the nation to become a belligerent power in the global conflict of the 1940s.

That night, the hotel catches fire, and a mysterious man staying at the same hotel saves Takashi's life by taking him along on a time-travel journey. This man, Hirata, is a natural-born time traveler who has come to the present from 26 February 1936. Takashi is transported to the mansion of General Gamō in 1936, where he assumes the role of a servant, disguised as Hirata's nephew. Through Hirata, Takashi learns that General Gamō will gain renown as a wartime pacifist after 1945.

During the February 26 Incident, the inhabitants of the Gamō residence discover General Gamō dead in his locked room, alongside a letter condemning Japanese militarism and predicting Japan's eventual defeat. Hirata's aunt, Kuroda, who served General Gamō until her death some years ago, likely informed him about Japan's postwar history, thereby shaping his anti-war stance, as she, too, is a time traveler. Takashi initially hopes to prevent the tragedy of World War II, but his ambition is gradually diminished by Hirata's accounts of repeated, yet futile, attempts to intervene even in minor events ("minor" compared to war), such as fires, airplane crashes, or murders. The novel thus depicts a mysterious force governing historical continuity, rendering time travelers impotent—prophetic observers of the future, akin to the cursed Cassandra of classical mythology. Ultimately, Takashi returns to the present with mixed emotions: disappointment at the limitations of the time traveler's agency, tempered by a sense of comfort in experiencing the unchanged present-day Japan.

If read strictly as a mystery, the novel centers on whether General Gamō's death in the locked room constitutes suicide or murder. However, once the narrative incorporates time travel that transcends physical constraints, the narrative shifts its focus from "who did it" to the ethical and philosophical implications of time travel in relation to Japan's wartime imperialism and militarism. Rather than pursuing the investigation of the General's death itself, the narrative develops around the existential and moral anguish of the time travelers, who observe both imperial Japan and postwar democratic Japan across the temporal divide. Hirata, for instance, refers to himself as *magaimono no kami* [a fake god] (Miyabe 1999, p. 173), acknowledging his knowledge of fate while remaining powerless to alter it.

The figure of the time traveler as an impotent god is not unique to Japanese or American science fiction, and it recalls earlier narratives such as the ironic conclusion of British writer Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*.[6] Like *Kindred*, this motif serves a distinct purpose in *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*: time travel becomes a vehicle for engaging with Japan's war memory, amplifying a collective sense of ethical responsibility and historical guilt, rather than resolving the mechanics of the mystery itself.

Several features of *Gamō Residence* reflect Japan's collective attitude toward its own history. Takashi's general ignorance of wartime events functions as a didactic device, similar to how *Kindred* educates its readers about slavery. What stands out for the reader of *Gamō Residence* is that Takashi's lack of knowledge is not unusual—it is emblematic of many young people in contemporary Japan, highlighting a systematic national forgetting.[7] Takashi is a rōnin preparing for college entrance exams, which include Japanese history, yet he is unfamiliar with the February 26 Incident. When he overhears a reference to the event on television, he realizes that, although he has heard the term, he knows very little—or virtually nothing—about it. He recalls that in high school, history classes rarely extend into the twentieth century, typically concluding around the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The narrator explains:

> Japanese history classes in junior high and high school rarely cover modern history, because it is not required for university entrance exams. Moreover, history classes generally begin with the Jōmon period [?–300 B.C.], and by the time students reach the Meiji Restoration and memorize the Meiji Elders [*genrō*],

> final exams are already imminent. This is an extreme example, in a school where the teacher moves at a particularly fast pace. Takashi even remembers that a junior-high history teacher advised students to read the period after the abolition of feudalism on their own, outside of class, because it could not be taught in class. (Miyabe 1999, p. 99)

Takashi recognizes that the phrase "it could not be taught" reflects teachers' practical limitations: they must cover two thousand years of history within a constrained curriculum. Yet he simultaneously perceives a deeper reason: educators avoid addressing the sensitive issues surrounding Japan's wartime actions or framing the Japan of the past as an aggressor in the world war. This historical period rarely, if ever, appears on university entrance exams, owing to its controversial status. For students—even those diligently preparing for Japanese history exams, which often resemble obscure knowledge quizzes due to the overwhelming volume of material—the first half of the twentieth century is effectively absent. The omission of wartime history thus reflects a broader reality in contemporary Japan, the historical context from which the protagonist departs for 1936.

Time travel allows both Takashi and the reader to reconstruct historical consciousness, revealing the common perception in Japan that national history experiences a discontinuity across 1945. Scholars have argued that this cultural rupture and historical break constitute a core element of Japanese identity and serve to reconstruct collective "memory," even if (or rather because) such memory may be partially imagined or forgotten. Upon arriving in 1936, Takashi's primary impulse is to guide Japan toward what he perceives as the correct political ideology—democracy. However, Hirata moderates his emotional desire to intervene by reminding him that Japan will naturally evolve into a prosperous and peaceful democratic nation without any interference from time travelers, allowing history to follow its predetermined course.

The only alteration Takashi makes to the past concerns General Gamō's suicide note, which condemns Japan's ultra-militarism and authoritarian expansionism and retrospectively appears to "foresee" the nation's defeat. In the present from which Takashi originates, General Gamō is remembered as a military officer who died by suicide on 26 February 1936, and the existence of this note later earned him recognition as an anti-war figure, one who neither joined the coup plotters nor aligned fully with the wartime regime. For Gamō's son, Takayuki, the note functions as a crucial means of postwar survival, as it secures public acknowledgment of an inherited anti-war stance at a time when many wartime military figures were tried and condemned.

This situation raises an ethical dilemma: does Takayuki's use of the note constitute an exploitation of history, a postwar attempt to justify his wartime position by retroactively claiming dissent? As Takashi investigates the circumstances of Gamō's death in the role of a detective, the mystery gradually resolves into a confirmed suicide, complicated by the unexplained disappearance of the weapon. The narrative ultimately suggests that the question is less who removed the gun (later revealed to be Gamō's niece, who acted in panic without clear intent) than whether the suicide itself must be preserved in order to secure Takayuki's future. Takashi confronts Takayuki over the fairness of making the note public, but returns to 1994 without a definitive resolution to this moral question.

Ultimately, General Gamō's reputation as an anti-war officer disappears from the historical record after Takashi's return. This outcome reassures Takashi, as it confirms that Takayuki did not benefit from the note or live on as a postwar "coward" (ibid, p. 529) who falsely claimed moral foresight. This ethical erasure, rather than any political or structural intervention, constitutes the sole substantive change, a "correction," Takashi effects in history.

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This minor change, resulting from Takayuki's decision to act ethically with history, reflects a broader shift in perceptions of the past. The accusation of "cowardice" alludes to a postwar phenomenon in which individuals claimed, retrospectively, that they had opposed the war—a theme famously depicted in Akira Kurosawa's 1946 film *No Regrets for My Youth* [*Waga seishun ni kuinashi*]. The novel implicitly critiques the abrupt reversal of Japanese politics from imperialism to democracy across 1945, suggesting that these seemingly opposing systems may, in practice, serve the same function: allowing Japanese society to align itself with whichever ideology holds power at the time. The conclusion, in which the protagonist acknowledges Takayuki's "brave" decision to forgo using General Gamō's letter, symbolically represents Japan's acknowledgment of its own past. By relinquishing the letter—which could have retroactively justified anti-war sentiment during the conflict—Japan effectively confronts and accepts its historical mistakes as an integral and undeniable part of its national history.

5. Historical Continuity and National Memory

Plot-level similarities underscore the shared logic of *Kindred* and *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*. In both works, the protagonists are transported to the past and confronted with the apparent possibility of "persuading history"—that is, altering its course in order to prevent catastrophic outcomes. Yet in each case they ultimately refrain from intervention, not primarily because of explicit ethical prohibitions or external constraints, but for pragmatic reasons. The historical events they witness are presented as tragic yet necessary conditions that have produced the present, including the emergence of relatively democratized societies characterized by greater degrees of peace and equality, however incomplete these conditions may remain.

Upon returning to the present, the protagonists do not bring about sweeping historical transformations but instead gain a renewed capacity to reassess their own social circumstances and national identities. The consequences of time travel are therefore deliberately modest when measured against the magnitude of changes that might have been possible, such as initiating an antislavery revolution or altering the outcome of World War II. By limiting the effects of temporal intervention to shifts in perception rather than historical causality, both narratives reinforce a model of time travel grounded in historical continuity rather than historical revision.

Although the protagonists effect no change in the course of history, their understanding of the nation's past and of their own historically constituted identities shifts profoundly. They come to perceive themselves as outcomes of historical necessity, situating their individual existence within broader networks of meaning. This produces a didactic effect: like the readers, the time travelers occupy the position of observers rather than agents of historical transformation. Time travel thus functions primarily as a means of historical familiarization and critical reflection, highlighting the political and cultural conditions of the present by reexamining their origins in the past.

The apparent simplicity of these novels—"simple" in the sense that they ultimately affirm the historical conditions that already exist—signals a narrative approach largely uninterested in exploiting the speculative possibilities traditionally associated with the genre. In both texts, the protagonists are primarily observers whose ethical and psychological development alters their perception of the present rather than the past. Historical confrontation is achieved not through temporal intervention but through reflection and comprehension, and both narratives explicitly resist change to avoid paradoxes that could erase the present—a relatively stable late-twentieth-century reality.

Engaging with non-altering time travel narratives intensifies the awareness of historical constructedness by foregrounding continuity and causal linkage rather than rupture.

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Derek Thiess's concept of relativist historiography is useful here. Drawing on postmodern theory, Thiess argues that reading history as fiction invites critics to examine not only historical narratives but also their own interpretive practices (Thiess 2015, p. 3). Time travel narratives that resist alteration not only adopt a similar metacritical stance but further problematize the sense of historical construction: they acknowledge the tenuous, constructed nature of historical narratives while nevertheless accepting historical continuity as ethically and narratively binding.

While both novels depict protagonists confronting historical violence that shaped the nation prior to democratization, the nature of that violence differs significantly. *Kindred* focuses on systemic, racialized violence: slavery as an ongoing structure that commodifies bodies and intimacy. Slavery is represented as corporeal damage—first, because Dana's existence results from the rape of a black woman by a white slave owner—and systemic, because Dana must ensure that these acts occur and recur to secure her own future. In this sense, History internalizes and perpetuates slavery as a necessary system.

This system violence is expressed through bodily experience: the antebellum South is depicted as a time of vulnerability to injury and illness, where Dana's painkillers become valuable commodities. Near the conclusion of the novel, when Dana is transported back from the antebellum South to 1976, her left arm has been crushed and severed, and she returns with the injury still present; the arm is literally embedded in the wall of her modern home. The injury persists across temporal boundaries, suggesting that the bodily experience of historical violence cannot be contained within the past. This stands in stark contrast to Takashi, who is rescued from being burned to death through time travel. In his case, temporal displacement operates as an escape from corporeal experience, suspending the body's exposure to violence rather than transmitting it across time.

This corporeal trauma in *Kindred* conveys that history is not a safe space to visit: one may incur irreversible harm when confronting the past. By emphasizing these bodily and systemic costs, the narrative resists closure, moral simplification, or reconciliation with history (Setka 2016, pp. 93–124). The past remains materially present within the body of the protagonist and within the structures that produced her existence.

Gamō Residence similarly confronts the nation's historical wrongdoing by framing history as a continuous trajectory rather than a rupture, a move that implicitly challenges dominant patterns of Japanese wartime memory. The form of violence represented in the novel, however, is fundamentally ideological rather than corporeal: agency is attributed primarily to the coercive force of military nationalism, while ordinary civilians are largely depicted as nonparticipants. The destructive momentum of history is shown to originate in the misguided ideology of political and military elites, with commoners and working-class figures positioned as victims, bystanders, or reluctant followers rather than as agents who actively sustain the system. General Gamō's suicide, retrospectively framed as a concealed act of anti-war resistance, reinforces his status as a casualty of the era's ideological constraints. Yet Takashi himself remains insulated from this historical violence. Unlike Dana in *Kindred*, he does not experience the past as bodily or systemic suffering; instead, he occupies the role of an observer-detective, investigating the suspicious circumstances of Gamō's death without being implicated as a victim. Takashi's ethical response lies not in intervention but in restraint: by refusing to exploit the suicide note, he acknowledges historical wrongdoing without attempting to retroactively absolve it.

This act of acknowledging the past through remembering and revisiting history poses a challenge to a Japanese national identity as it tends to frame 1945 as a moment of rupture. Yet the novel ultimately renders this acknowledgment narratively "safe," in part by channeling historical reflection through the affective closure of romance and nostalgia. While Takashi works as a servant in the Gamō residence and learns about the political

climate of 1936, he meets Fuki, another servant in the house, an honest and kind young woman of about twenty. When Takashi prepares for what is likely his final time travel back to the present, he offers Fuki the chance to accompany him and live in contemporary Japan, avoiding the impending war and the severe bombings that threaten her survival. Fuki declines, aware that her brother will soon go to war, but they promise to meet at the famous Kaminarimon Gate in Asakusa on 20 April 1994—just two months after Takashi's first time travel, though fifty-eight years later for Fuki. Fuki does not appear as expected; instead, Takashi meets a girl of his own age, Fuki's granddaughter, who presents him with a letter from Fuki.

The letter reveals that Fuki survived the war (contrary to Takashi's initial assumptions), struggled through the postwar period alongside the nation, and is now approaching death from an incurable illness given her advanced age. Takashi imagines his reply to her:

Fuki, you survived the war, and then the postwar years. I heard your husband was a good person. I also heard he worked as a chauffeur—did he ever drive you around?

I have studied the history of the Showa period extensively since then. I read that the emperor's radio speech announcing Japan's surrender was difficult to hear because of the poor sound quality. Fuki, how did you feel when you heard the voice of someone considered a god?

I imagine that securing food in the postwar period was very difficult. Did you have terrible experiences? With Tamako, who grew up in more comfortable circumstances, it must have been challenging to sell even a kimono without being cheated. My grandmother can't hear well these days but loves to talk about wartime and the postwar period. Can you imagine—she even said General MacArthur was handsome! Is that true? What did you think?

Japan's economy improved around the time of the Korean War, and life began to stabilize, right? Did your brother return safely from the war? Were you able to go to the movies together? When the Socialist Party leader Asanuma was assassinated, weren't you worried that the dark age might return?

Where did you live at the time of the Tokyo Olympics? With whom did you watch the five colored smoke rings drawn in the sky by airplanes?

Have you been to Tokyo Tower? When did you first see a television? Were you a fan of Rikidozan? I heard he was very strong. Did you attend Expo '70 in Osaka?

And soon—less than half a year from the time you are writing this letter—the Showa era will end... (Miyabe 1999, pp. 527–28).

Fuki wrote the letter and passed away before the end of the Showa era (1926–1989), and this makes Takashi's recollection of the postwar period unbearably emotional. This is partly because the Showa era, encompassing both wartime and postwar Japan, carries profound emotional weight. As Gluck notes, the end of Showa resonated deeply in the mass media and among the public (Gluck and Graubard 1992, p. 6). Regarding this phenomenon, Karatani Kōjin observes that the imperial-year system, which allows the Japanese to segment modern history differently from Western chronological methods—dividing it into the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa eras—creates the illusion that each historical stage exists as a self-contained paradigm (Karatani 1990, pp. 9–10). Toward the end of Showa, roughly from the 1960s to the 1980s, the sense of Showa identity diminished, while an international conception of history, segmented by decades (e.g., the '60s and '70s), gained prominence. This shift simultaneously strengthened the internalized view of Japanese history as conditioned by the Meiji-Taisho-Showa divisions, enabling the Japanese to part from the past "happily" with the emperor's death (ibid, p. 32), and this is the emotion the end of Showa bore to people too.

The Incident at the Gamō Residence achieves a literary representation of this interplay between remembering and forgetting by narrativizing a young man's recollection of the Showa era. Interestingly, Takashi's efforts to relearn and remember wartime political ideologies are supplanted by an affective memory of Fuki and many civilians who suffered, struggled, and collectively contributed to Japan's postwar economic revival in the 1960s and 70s. Takashi experiences history through Fuki's perspective, as a flood of sweet and bitter images of monumental postwar events he did not personally witness.

This bittersweet emotion at the novel's conclusion ensures that the national experience of wartime imperialism and the physical suffering Takashi witnesses through the unique device of time travel is supplanted by a personal and affective remembering of the postwar period. Wartime wrongdoing is thereby symbolically redeemed, and the nation's moral debt is implicitly "paid" by those who endured the hardships of postwar reconstruction during the latter half of the Showa era. For Takashi, an eighteen-year-old living in the new Heisei era (1989–2019), this process of redemption appears complete, culminating in an overwhelming sense of nostalgia. Crucially, however, this nostalgia is not generated by Takashi's own lived experience; it is mediated through Fuki's memories, articulated from the perspective of a life already concluded at the imminent end of Showa. In this way, affective remembrance comes to supersede the ostensibly corporeal experience of time travel itself, neutralizing the speculative force of temporal displacement and reorienting the narrative toward emotional continuity rather than historical rupture.

6. Conclusions

Through their shared narrative device and structural approach, the contrasts between *Kindred* and *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* illuminate profound insights into the formation of national identity. Both novels harness the science-fiction tool of time travel to confront foundational national traumas—slavery in the United States and imperial militarism in Japan—traumas that remain central to collective memory and identity. In each story, the protagonists' journeys through time do not alter the course of history, despite their desire to correct past injustices. This choice is not simply due to the past being immutable or in need of preservation; rather, from the protagonists' perspective as beneficiaries of contemporary, relatively affluent democratic societies, much of the historical injustice has already been addressed or mitigated, making direct intervention unnecessary and potentially disruptive to achieving justice in the present.

Kindred renders racialized violence as an enduring, self-perpetuating system, encompassing both political and personal dimensions, including slavery and sexual violence. This trauma is embodied physically and psychologically, persisting as a lived experience of the body in present-day America. The novel's conclusion resists conventional closure, leaving a resonant echo of pain and refusing reconciliation with the nation's historical injustices. In contrast, *The Incident at the Gamō Residence* confronts Japan's imperialism and ultramilitarism by insisting upon the act of remembering a past systematically obscured. Yet, this remembrance is shaped by Japan's culturally specific frameworks, such as the imperial-year system, and mediated through personal and affective memory. The Showa era is remembered as encompassing both wartime suffering and postwar redemption, creating a poignant and bittersweet nostalgia. In this sense, remembering becomes an act of engagement that allows Japanese identity to coexist with historical memory while avoiding the reliving of trauma, forging a reconciliatory yet emotionally resonant connection to the past.

These novels further demonstrate how time travel, as a narrative device, enables an intense engagement with history while deliberately withholding its conventional speculative function of altering past events. Narratives of non-interventionist time travel foreground a

productive paradox: by granting characters direct access to the past, these texts make the contingency, constructedness, and potential alterability of history acutely visible, even as the narrative ultimately insists on historical continuity. Time travel thus becomes a means of inhabiting the past with full awareness that it could be changed, while simultaneously confronting the ethical implications of choosing not to do so. In *Kindred*, this awareness is rendered viscerally through Dana's repeated bodily and psychological suffering, which exposes slavery as a historically contingent yet systemically entrenched structure whose consequences persist into the present. In *The Incident at the Gamō Residence*, historical violence is encountered through affective memory, filtered by personal experience and collective remembrance, emphasizing interpretation rather than physical endurance.

By refusing historical intervention despite recognizing its possibility, both protagonists come to accept the present as the outcome of past violence and ethical failure rather than as an accidental or correctable error. The contemporary settings of each narrative—the bicentennial of American independence and the closing years of the Shōwa period—anchor these realizations in the present, juxtaposing national celebrations of democratic achievement with an acknowledgment of unresolved historical injustice. In doing so, the novels reveal the narrative power that emerges in the interstitial space between time travel and alternative history: by denying the genre's promise of historical correction, they integrate science-fictional imagination with questions of national identity, collective memory, and democratic aspiration, exposing the deeply political stakes embedded within narratives of the past.

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Notes

1 *Kindred*'s publication history itself best testifies the change in the book's status in academic institutions. The novel was first published in 1979 by Doubleday, a publisher specializing in commercial books. In 1988, Beacon Press, which claims to be a publisher of serious non-fiction and fiction, released a new edition of *Kindred* with an introduction by Robert Crossley. This introduction situates *Kindred* in the historical contexts of African American women's literature. *Octavia Butler's "Kindred": A Study Guide from Gale's "Novels for Students"* a guidebook for students to prepare for tests and essays in literature class, has been in print since 2000.

2 It is worth noting that Octavia Butler herself has said several times *Kindred* is not science fiction but fantasy because "there is no science in *Kindred*." (Butler 1992, p. 498).

3 Most of the existing critical essays about *Kindred* are concerned about African American identity and history and/or women's narratives. Aside from Long's, the essays that particularly focus on these issues are Bedore (2002) and Paulin (1997).

4 The novel was originally published in 1996 by Mainichi shinbunsha.

5 A high-school graduate who has failed in Japan's notorious entrance examinations for universities, which are usually held in February. A *rōnin* spends a year normally studying at a *yobikō*, a prep school, and waits for the next exam season, which is one year after the failed exams.

6 *Behold the Man* tells a story of the time traveler, seeking the "real" historical Jesus, ultimately becomes Jesus himself by enacting the events recorded in the Gospels. Rather than uncovering an authentic origin behind religious myth, the novel reveals that the myth retroactively produces its own historical referent. In this closed temporal loop, scripture functions not as a record of history but as a script that compels performance.

7 Hein and Selden (2000) point out that Japanese textbooks have often downplayed their coverage of Japan's army crimes and colonial rule, suggesting state control on what students learn.

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