

History and the Flesh Embraced: Time Travel, Slavery, and the Question of Roots in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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Introduction: Cyborg Feminism and Octavia Butler

In her acclaimed yet controversial “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” Donna Haraway theorizes women-of-color’s power and agency in the so-called post-modern society by using the metaphorical term “cyborg.” According to Haraway, cyborg identity is “a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities” (715). As Haraway states, the cyborg’s hybrid nature defies notions of overarching western Enlightenment discourses by confusing and deconstructing ostensibly “stable” socio-cultural boundaries, including race, sex, class, and nation. As such, Haraway’s cyborg has no “myth of original unity, fullness, bliss, and terror” (697).

It appears pertinent that Haraway considers Octavia Butler, a black female science-fiction writer, as one of the prominent “theorists of cyborg” (714). No doubt, Butler’s works concerned with “the hybridity of the android and androgynous, with femininity and reproduction, and with utopian and dystopian past or future worlds” denaturalize seemingly “natural” socio-cultural categories in the manner of Haraway’s cyborg (Loichot 16). Indeed, critics often read Butler’s works from the perspectives of cyborg feminism. Catherine Ramirez, for instance, asserts that Butler “redefines power and agency by theorizing a feminist, woman-of-color subject emblematic of Donna Haraway’s ‘cyborg’” (383).

Yet, it is ironic and problematic that Haraway’s formulation of cyborg identity is trapped in a similar logical process that the author tries to avoid and criti-

cize. When Haraway states “we are *all* chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs,” she incorporates every woman-of-color into her grand narrative (697; emphasis mine). Haraway’s concept of cyborg identity is too overarching to consider the specific socio-cultural history and experiences—or cultural “roots”—of each woman-of-color.¹ As Paula M. L. Moya astutely points out, Haraway “authorizes herself to speak for actual women of color, to dismiss our own interpretations of our experiences of oppression, our ‘need to root politics in identification,’ and even our identities” (132). What Moya suggests is that we need to (re-)interrogate the historically, culturally, and politically specific contexts of women-of-color’s identity formation instead of labeling them as cyborgs too easily.

In light of the critique on Haraway’s formulation of cyborg identity, we can read Butler’s work differently. Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred* consciously deals with the interplay of the past and the present, working to forge a complex social location where a contemporary African American woman can be situated.² Butler aptly foregrounds the significance of the cultural, historical origin of black Americans by making her narrator-protagonist Dana physically *experience* her genealogical history through the workings of a time warp. In this story, Dana’s body becomes a site of the peculiar embodiment of her ancestral history/roots. Butler indicates that bodies can be ultimate signifiers of socio-historical locations where identities are formed and manifested.³ Thus, for Butler, “History is immanent in and inseparable from the bodies of those who experience it” (Robertson 363). Taking Butler’s cue, my goal here is two-fold: to investigate how Dana’s past/roots are extended and inherited in the present, i.e., how such inheritance is projected on her social location as a black woman; and to analyze the complex ways Butler avoids a reductive essentialism. This is attempted while acknowledging distinct historical experiences that Dana ultimately fleshes out.

1. Scrambled “Now and Then”: Slavery and Marriage

Kindred depicts a series of Dana's surreal time travel. Dana, a twentieth century African American female writer, married to Kevin Franklin, a white novelist, repeatedly transports from her home in 1976 California back to Maryland in the antebellum South. Although she never understands how it happens, at least the purpose of her transportation is clear: to ensure her own existence by protecting Rufus Weylin, her ancestral white male slave-master. Whenever Rufus encounters life-threatening experiences, Dana is called to help him. It is only in cases of extreme danger when Dana transports back to the present. In the antebellum South, Dana, because she is a black woman, experiences slavery's cruelty. These include beating, whipping, and rape. Dana confronts what Christine Levecq refers to as “The sudden materialization of what until now had been known only through texts” (530). To be sure, Dana's slavery oppressions are graphic and real. Dana describes when she witnesses the whipping of a slave during her second trip:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (36)

It is significant for Dana to save Rufus's life until he fathers a child named Hagar with Alice, a slave woman. This slave woman, Alice, consequently initiates Dana's maternal family line. However, this causes tremendous moral struggle because Dana must assist Rufus in his conquest (i.e., rape) of Alice or her present will be irrevocably altered.

As this plot summery indicates, Dana's trans-historical journey unsettles the distance between “now and here” of the contemporary American life and “then and there” of the antebellum South. It thereby highlights the continuum between “now” and “then.” The structure of *Kindred's* narrative also emphasizes this point. Dana's trip is framed between two birthdays: the first trip

occurs on June 9th 1976, her twenty-sixth birthday; the last one on July 4th 1976, U.S.'s bicentennial anniversary. Dana's birth is in parallel relation to the inception of the nation's history. This suggests a close connection between the birth of an individual and the formation of the U.S. nation. More significantly, a pivotal thread that ties together the temporal gap can be found in the operation of the racial, sexual, and gender hierarchy. To be more precise, the intimacy between the past/history and the present/flesh is mainly presented through Dana's relationship with a host of white men, especially Rufus and her husband Kevin.

It is important to observe that such relationships are projected on two ostensibly distinct social establishments: slavery and marriage. Ultimately, Dana's marital relationship with her white husband becomes metonymic of slavery. During her third venture into the past that accompanies Kevin, Dana notes: "We are 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 we were acting" (98). By acting, Dana means that Kevin and she have to "pass" as a master and his slave. At this point, Dana believes that she can maintain the distance between acting and reality (or the past and the present). However, what Dana and Kevin's role-playing foreshadows is that Dana's contemporary California life becomes an uncanny extension of her temporary acting in the antebellum plantation. As Robert Crossley points out, Kevin is the most problematic character in the novel. Although Kevin loves Dana, "he is by gender and race implicated in the supremacist culture" (Crossley 276). When Kevin and Dana are together playing the roles of a master and a slave, they have no difficulty in fitting into the cultural climate of the antebellum South. As Dana uncomfortably states, "But for drop-ins from another century, I thought we had had a remarkably easy time. And I am perverse enough to be bothered by the ease" (97). While Dana shows her fear of the easiness they have in playing roles, Kevin has no such anxiety. He says, "This could be a great time to live in . . . I keep thinking what

an experience it would be to stay in it" (97).

This signals ideological affinities between Kevin, a liberal modern Californian and the white Southern slave masters. In effect, Rufus and Kevin are linked around the related interest in holding the black female body as their captive. Rufus forces Dana to be his amanuensis, making her write down his words. Despite her profession as a writer, Dana is not allowed to write her own words. This reminds her of Kevin's previous attempts to get her to type his manuscripts. The implication in these two cases is the forced deprivation of her voice and agency by white males. Dana's subjugation to white men is also highlighted in a scene when Rufus and Kevin first meet: "[Rufus asks] 'Does Dana belong to you now?' 'In a way,' said Kevin. 'She's my wife'" (60). In this scene, it is indicated that Kevin's relationship to Dana, like slavery, is based on ownership. Thus, Dana is doubly confined in the domestic space as Rufus's house slave and Kevin's wife. This suggests the trans-historical operation of power, creating unequal hierarchies between white men and Dana. As Katherine McKittrick points out, "discourses of ownership" are "One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race" (3). In this way, Butler depicts the synonymous relationship between slavery and marriage and master and husband. Butler, of course, dramatizes this analogy by making Kevin white.⁴ By unsettling the temporal boundaries, Butler depicts ways borders separating affection and subjugation, and pleasure and violence, are not firmly fixed. Rather, such borders are porous and precarious, making Dana's social location complex and ambivalent.

2. "Growing Out" and "Growing Into": A Paradox of Dana's Lost Arm

For Dana, a more profound way of embracing history is through her flesh. The most visible markers exhibiting Dana's trans-temporal journeys are inscribed on her body. Dana's body, full of scars and wounds demonstrates her slavery experiences: during this time, Dana loses two teeth; her face has a scar left by Weylin's boot; and her back has wounds from whippings. Just like the wounded female ex-slaves in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Toni

Morrison's *Beloved*, Dana's body becomes a text, a site of her slave experiences. Although Dana is not allowed to write down her words, her story becomes inscribed on her body. In other words, Dana's wounded body becomes "a site of historical interpretation" (Rushdy, "Families" 138).

Wounds of Dana's body signaling her bodily memory culminate in the loss of her left arm. After Alice is driven to commit suicide when Rufus pretends to sell their children (or his "property"), Rufus desires Dana as his sexual partner and tries to rape her. In response to Rufus's desire, Dana kills Rufus. Dana states, "I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. . . . I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover" (260). It is significant to note that for Dana to accept Rufus as her sexual partner means to commit incest and miscegenation. Here, Dana's body signifies a nodal point where sexual violence within slavery and family integrates. As Christina Sharpe astutely points out, "it is not possible to separate questions of kinship from property relations . . . because under slavery, system and sign, *lexico-legal acts of transubstantiation* occur in which blood becomes property . . . in one direction and kin in another" (29; emphasis in original). Even if Dana can accept kinship with Rufus ("I could accept him as my ancestor"), she refuses a sexual relationship with him because it would degrade Dana to his property. When Dana equates master with lover ("not as my master, and not as my lover") and refuses both relationships, Butler foregrounds this point. When Rufus becomes fatally injured by Dana's stabbings, an act of inverted insertion, Rufus grabs her left arm. At the very moment of Rufus's death, Dana transports to the present, feeling Rufus's hand on her arm:

Something harder and stronger than Rufus's hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it—painlessly, at first—melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving. Something . . . paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught some-

how, joined to the wall as though *my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it*. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus's fingers had grasped. I pulled my arm toward me, pulled hard. And suddenly, there was an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed. (260–61; emphasis mine)

Thus, Dana loses her left arm. It is noteworthy that Dana's loss of her arm has dual meanings—"growing out" and "growing into"—in terms of the relationship between history and the body. First of all, this signals an indelible marker of Dana's family history. Dana feels that her arm is melting into "something." In this scene, a part of her body is consumed by, or in her words, *grows into*, history. Her left arm literally merges into the past. After Dana loses her arm, she and Kevin visit contemporary Maryland to look for "solid evidence that those people existed" (264). Yet, the plantation is gone without any traces of it. All they can find is some evasive old newspaper articles reporting that Rufus was killed in the fire. The lack of material evidence of the plantation is sharply juxtaposed with the space created by the lost arm, the space that becomes a vehicle to pass on her experience. Unlike the plantation and the mansion that were completely destroyed and disappeared, the very absence of Dana's arm can never be destroyed or erased. This absence paradoxically becomes the presence of the "solid evidence" of Dana's physical encounter with her genealogical history. To put it more succinctly, Dana's body is dismembered in order to remember. On this score, Dana's body assumes a role of what Jay Prosser calls "autobiographical skin" (57). In "Skin Memories," an excellent study on the intimacy between memory and body, Prosser asserts that the primary role of the skin—the body's largest organ—is to "record":

Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resigning on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure

activities, even . . . our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body's memory of our lives. (52)

Prosser highlights the skin's function as a mirror of our social location as well as a repository of memories. In a similar way, the void inscribed on Dana's body becomes a perpetual reflection of her social location that is derived from "specificities of life histories."

Of equal importance, however, is the fact that Dana's loss of her arm corresponds with the death of Rufus and Alice, Dana's ancestral parents. This leads to the second meaning of the relationship between Dana's body and history—"growing out." Despite its role as a peculiar marker of the irresistible past, the void simultaneously works to sever Dana from her ancestors because, now dead, her great-grandfather will never be able to transport Dana to his historical period. Thus, in a metaphorical sense, Dana becomes an orphan even before her birth.⁵

Figuratively, Dana's separation from her genealogical roots traces the trajectory of her enslaved ancestors' dislocation from their roots during the period of the transatlantic slave trade. Dana's fragmentation, or permanent estrangement from her progenitors, dovetails with Orlando Patterson's notion of "natal alienation." According to Patterson, "natal alienation" is one of the critical foundations of slavery. The concept explains:

The slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood,' and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master" (7).

While this notion of "natal alienation" explicates the making of slaves and the consequent scattering of the black diasporic population, it also seems important to note that such alienation from genealogical roots (in this case, Africa or the "Motherland") can work productively to create fictive kinship ties and new identities among diasporic slaves. As Paul Gilroy explains, "The best way to

create the new metacultural identity which the new black citizenship demands was provided by the abject condition of the slaves and ironically facilitated by the transnational structure of the slave trade itself" (28). Here, Gilroy conceives of the Atlantic abyss as a creative space paradoxically serving to forge hybrid transnational identities among black diasporic populations in "the abject condition of the slaves."⁶ In a similar vein, the empty space at the end of Dana's stump, or bodily gap as a result of her amputation works as a symbolic womb/abyss where a new identity for Dana *grows out*. This void, like Gilroy's Atlantic, provides Dana potential to transcend her tragic roots, creating a new social identity just as her enslaved ancestors did. Thus, at stake here is how Dana will fill her literal and metaphorical gap.

Conclusion

Symbolically, Dana's narrative is diasporic. While Dana's flesh is unequivocally rooted in her slave-holding and enslaved ancestry, the void on Dana's body simultaneously signifies a departure from its origins. As such, Butler's attitude toward historical roots is sharply contrasted with Haraway's overarching cyborg identity formulation. Butler's complex view is further highlighted when we contextualize her work. In the 1970s, there was a surge of interest in the search for genealogy, mainly inspired by the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) (Rushdy, *Remembering* 14-5). Unlike Haley's highly romanticized narrative of a curative return to a pure origin or "Edenic Africa" (qtd. in Rushdy *Remembering* 15), a journey to be a "whole," Dana's return to her "roots" leaves her literally and symbolically fragmented. Her body is literally fragmented, and her genealogy symbolically originated in the miscegenation "New World."⁷ Problematically, Haley's rather naïve embrace of Africa as a case of sustainable, "pure" origins easily incorporates into discourses of the militant Black Power Movement, rampant in the 1970s, or myopic cultural nationalism at best.⁸ In contrast, Butler, creating the empty space on Dana's body, dexterously describes a formation of complex racial identities of African Americans that are derived from past experiences but not fettered by it. At the

heart of the void are registered *both* the memory of the familial past *and* possibility for future development. Therein lies the realistic power of Butler's speculative fiction.

Notes

¹ My argument here owes much to Prof. Fukuko Kobayashi's sharp analyses of the relationship between Haraway and Asian American women writers. For more details, see Kobayashi Ch.8.

² *Kindred* is often enumerated as a work typical of "neo-slave narratives" that illustrate "the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities" (Smith 168). My argument on this embodied history reflects one such element of this genre. See Govan; Rushdy; and Steinberg for further discussion on *Kindred* as a neo-slave narrative.

³ In fact, Butler endorses the significance of bodies in our social life: "the body is all we really know we have. . . . We can say that there're always other things that are wonderful. And some are. But all we really *know* that we have is the flesh" (Mehaffy and Kating 59; emphasis in original).

⁴ Butler's choice to describe the interracial couple is intentional: Butler notes "I gave her [Dana] that husband to complicate her life" (Kenan 497).

⁵ Importantly, even in her contemporary life, Dana is estranged from her parents. After her parents passed away, she is raised by her uncle and aunt.

⁶ Gilroy presents black music including jazz and hip-hop and musical strategies such as antiphony as primary examples of transnational cultures. While Gilroy's formulation of the distinct Black Atlantic syncretism echoes Haraway's concept of hybrid cyborg, a crucial difference lies in his attitude toward the historical origin of the diasporic hybrids. Unlike Haraway's cyborg, Gilroy's black diasporic hybrids have African, Atlantic and transnational roots facilitated by transatlantic slave trade.

⁷ As Butler notes, it is impossible for Dana to come back as a whole: "I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (Kenan 498).

⁸ Indeed, Butler became concerned with militant Black Nationalism Movement

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when she attended Pasadena City College. Butler acknowledges that *Kindred* “was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people are ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster” (*Ibid.*, 496).

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