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Abstract

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* problematizes the nature of objective reality through a character who exists at the intersections of agency, perception, time, and embodiment. Through speculative fiction, authors are able to uncover new layers of truth and analysis. Passing through the "real" allows them to interrogate the nature of reality. They complicate understanding not only of the world's functioning, but also of the way the world exists in the first place. Octavia Butler's science fiction writing interrogates these questions. This paper outlines critical readings of *Kindred* that seek to avoid placing it among science fiction tropes. Traditional readings of *Kindred* rely on Cartesian assumptions of the "complete" and intelligible subject that offers "objective" and "rational" experience for interpretation. In contrast, Butler gives us the radically embodied protagonist of Dana. Dana occupies spaces of blackness, womanhood, and disability, all while time traveling between California and the antebellum South, complicating the notion of an objective reality. This paper uses this embodied subjectivity to examine and deconstruct traditional notions of rationality through generational trauma, the representation of body, and time travel.

Keywords: *Kindred*, *Rationalism*, *Historiography*, *Subjectivity*, *Baudrillard*

*Cogito ergo sum*¹ is the defining phrase of Enlightenment Rationalism. Commonly thought of as the beginning of reason, empiricism, and the wisdom of the West, René Descartes's affirmation centers around the agent as conceptually reducible to the thinking "rational" subject with a "particular construction" (Bast 153): "The world of healthy Cartesian subjects is a *home* of comfort and security, familiarity, and acceptance" (89). In this world, truth centers around an objective reality perceived by this particularly constructed subject. Importantly, this truth always requires intelligibility, as Rationalist focus on thought implies the necessity of understanding. While notions of subjectivity centered around Rationalism have dominated the West for centuries, they have become difficult to recognize and even more difficult to challenge. These notions further became the basis for much of the violence of the 20th century and embedded themselves in the doctrine of conceptual structures such as Christianity in the form of mind-body dualism. Additionally, they have assumed an objectivist view of narrative centered around abstract Cartesian logic (155). Barbara Christian contextualizes this movement, writing that individuals outside the rational subject position, particularly People of Color, participate in theoretical propositions of a different order (155). This order is "often in narrative form, in the stories we create" (qtd. Bast 155). Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is just the kind of theorizing Christian recognizes. *Kindred* participates in a narrative theorizing that problematizes the nature of Rationalism and objective historiography through a protagonist who exists at the intersections of reality, agency, perception, time, and embodiment.

Kindred occupies a unique position in the history of literature. Repeatedly categorized as science fiction, which Butler opposed (Setka 101), it is "the most renowned novel by the first African American woman to write science fiction successfully" (Bast 153). Its genre categorization mirrors other forms of categorical resistance in the novel, including ontology, narrative realism, and historiographical positivism. Each of these categories plays a unique role in the novel's opposition to Enlightenment Rationalism.

A Brief Word on Genre Complications and Theoretical Approach

Kindred complicates previously accepted narrative boundaries; it has been interpreted in science fiction contexts, trauma narrative contexts, and is considered a canonical example of a neo-slave narrative (Bast 163). The novel places Dana, an African American woman, at the center of the story, her life disrupted by an "infringement of...time travel" that she is "utterly powerless to control" (157). However, as Butler argued, this experience includes "absolutely no science" (Black qtd. Setka 101) and the novel should not be treated as if it does by being placed in a science fiction context. These time travel experiences take Dana from California in the 1970s back to the antebellum South, where her ancestors are both plantation owners and slaves. These time jumps set the conceptual landscape for the novel to problematize "narrative realism" (Setka 93) by questioning structures of intelligibility associated with Rationalism.

Kindred includes characteristics associated with a variety of genres, a multiplicity which has led to confusion surrounding its categorization. This confusion ought not to deter scholars from studying the novel. Its scholarship, while to some degree inconclusive, has allowed for a questioning of pre-inscribed "real" categories and definitions, which may reflect its deeper purpose more conclusively than scholarly consensus. While some scholars would take this as an indeterminate position on the novel within narrative history, this paper will argue that this ambiguity is intentionally formulated by Butler in order to reflect the transgression of boundaries through the entirety of the novel. Vint contextualizes this perfectly when she writes:

Instead of trying to sort out whether *Kindred* is "really" sf (how are we to understand its refusal to provide a scientific rationale for time travel?), we should instead consider how it enables us to think about sf in new ways. Just as realist representations must be understood not as the neutral reflection of "the way things are" but as ideological constructs, so traditional claims about what "counts" as sf should be understood as tending to exclude the perspective and experience of peoples of color (241-242).

In this way, *Kindred* is an ideal example of the purpose of problematization. Problematization in the novel is

¹"I think, therefore I am."

never for its own sake or for the sake of undirected confusion. Rather, through the narrative, the reader is able to see how genre expectations and boundaries of historical ontology are constructed and codified through racialized structures that ignore boundary-transgressive narratives, especially from Black, female authors.

Ontology

Ontology, as it relates to narrative context, is the commentary on *what* exists and *how* it exists. While sometimes difficult to interpret, narratives all assume a given framework of ontology in order to create the story. Science fiction narrative ontology differs from magical realist ontology, which differs from realist ontology. These differences allow us to interpret the implications of ontology within *Kindred*. Not all narratives, however, intend to make a commentary on structures of ontology. It is through *Kindred*'s transgressing of boundaries in multiple areas that the reader can see that this commentary is implicit and intentional. While post-Enlightenment America tends to presume one ontological narrative that codifies what qualifies as "rational," *Kindred* uses narrative to problematize structures of ontology that are taken for granted in several ways.

The first way that this problematization occurs is through Dana's radical embodiment within the context of the neo-slave narrative, an embodiment which is in direct opposition to the detached, thinking subject of Cartesian Rationalism. Butler's novel problematizes this construction of subject through Dana and the importance of physicality, a dimension that is neglected in the Cartesian formulation. Stella Setka notes that one method of doing this is through the narrative's use of time travel, writing, "the neo-slave narrative that arose in the postmodern cannon of the 1960s critiques and re-defined white patriarchal understandings of history and identity by...rejecting the parameters of narrative realism in order to blur the boundaries between the past and the present" (93). The implications of this blurring are twofold, as it implies confusion within linear understandings of time as well as positions this confusion within a concrete body. Setka contextualizes this effort as the "phantasmic trauma narrative" which builds on magical realism (94). *Kindred* is phantasmic by operating through the implications of *phantom* history and "denying Western delineations of time and being (93). Through the time travel motif, Butler questions Western

conceptions of ontology and blurs boundaries that are implicit within it. This complication functions as a commentary on both ontology and Setka's recognized "cultural memory." This memory highlights the importance of non-empiricist historiography and its role in cultural trauma. Importantly, the boundary-blurring does not stop at past and present but challenges a wide variety of dialectics across the course of the novel (Setka).

Setka argues that *Kindred* not only challenges Eurocentric ontology in favor of reimagining temporal delineations, but that it also "recovers the slave past...on Afrocentric terms" (95). To this end, Setka argues that Butler actually privileges and posits an alternative in the form of the Igbo *ogbanje* figure, "a spirit being capable of traveling between worlds and known as the born-to-die" (94). She dubs this effort "an American ogbanjism" (96). Interestingly, Setka notes that scholars "agree that the idea of ogbanje was introduced to the American colonies by enslaved West Africans, who gradually integrated their native beliefs with the Christianity of their masters" (99). Though Setka fails to take this point to its fullest conclusion, the implications of this alternative reach far.

Dana's time travels, while unwilling, are not random. As Setka notes, "Rufus unknowingly calls her to him when death menaces him, thereby yoking her into a seemingly endless cycle of appearances and disappearances, mimicking the traditional death and rebirth cycle of the Igbo ogbanje" (105). The word choice here reflects the full extent of this argument; "yoking" reflects the same Biblical implications as the ogbanje figure that are unexplored in the critical literature. This is more than a positing of African cosmology. The depiction of the savior that appears just before death is the kind of Americanization of ogbanjism that Setka names but does not evaluate. In this way, Dana operates as not only ogbanje, but also as a kind of quasi-Christ figure that becomes more complex as the novel continues. This is another form of challenging boundary delineations and Enlightenment Reason in the novel. While Setka argues that this is merely the imposition of a new ontological structure, this seems to ignore the radical transgression of boundaries. In fact, this move by Butler problematizes not just the ontological structure but the entire notion of Eurocentric "Truth" as represented through Christian (implicitly Cartesian) modes of understanding the world. By blurring the definition of the Christ figure in the narrative, Butler indicates a much wider issue with

Enlightenment thinking: no understanding of the world is discretely correct. By hooking Dana's time travel to Rufus's lifesaving needs, Butler is problematizing not just American ontology but existing approaches to ontological systems altogether. In some ways, this seems to be a precursor to the rejections of historiographical positivism discussed later in this paper.

It is worth cataloging the ways that this contrary ontological framework clashes with Enlightenment Rationalism. First, the ogbanje figure "galvanizes...border-crossing potential" (Setka 94) that problematizes Rationalist categories and the priority of intelligibility implicit within American ontology. Second, it posits an alternative kind of subject formation to Descartes'. Rather than seeing the subject as primarily a mind, or a thinking thing, ogbanje ontology interprets the subject as existing in spirit, with the capability to bridge formally exclusive areas (Setka 94). This position of subjectivity has more theoretical import than a reader might imagine. Setka writes, "the phantasmic trauma narrative privileges the subaltern subject position and therefore avoids situating the reader in a hegemonic position from which she can essentialize and fetishize the 'irrational' subaltern as an exotic object" (95). It is in this way that Dana's embodiment not only problematizes the position of Cartesian subjectivity but also proposes alternative subjectivities that resist reader fetishization. This is further modeled by the narrative's commentary on ontological colonialism. By transgressing religious boundaries in the ogbanje figure, Butler creates a subject that is both subaltern and not able to be coopted. The reader is not simply reflecting upon a traumatic past that they are able to intellectualize; rather, they see through Dana's eyes, a person "for whom boundaries between the real and the imaginary, past and present, are not circumscribed" (Setka 108). This positioning makes readers not mere readers but rather "witnesses to the horrors of slavery and, in so doing, open[s] [them] up to the possibility of achieving a *felt* connection to the past" (Setka 110, emphasis added). As Vint writes, "being black and knowing 'the facts' is not enough. Instead, something equivalent to sentimental literature's contraction of the distance between narrated events and the reading experience is required" (248). Importantly, this emphasis on felt and embodied experience as contrasted with abstract Rationalism pairs and supports the notion that *Kindred* operates additionally as a historiographical commentary.

Subjectivity

Cartesian subject formation, expanded on by Hobbes and Locke, relies upon the notion of subject as "rational, disembodied, self-determining and -defining individual, clearly distinct from the world around him and conceptualized as a white, heterosexual man with a coherent and stable identity" (Bast 153). Bast need not clarify that subjectivity has been conceptualized within a white heterosexual male framework. The characteristics of Rational, disembodied, self-determining and -defining individuals are only able to exist within the white subject in a postcolonial world, as they are defined around these subjects. This "reason" touted by Rationalists like Descartes is reliant upon a disembodied abstraction, hence *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes does not begin his meditations with a reflection on his corporeality, nor a reflection of the history of his community. Rather, he begins with his mind, over which he has the ability to isolate and abstract from the rest of the body in favor of individualized subject formation (Setka 155). The ability to remove the body from subject formation presumes a position of privilege. The notion that knowledge and material conditions are separable is predicated on a theory of knowledge that privileges those who have control over their material conditions—in other words, those who are fully recognized subjects: the white heterosexual male. Nonwhite subjects do not operate in the same framework. As Bast writes, "agency forms the connection between the philosophical concept of subjectivity and a concrete body: Agential acts by the body can claim its status as subject, and a subject can choose to express his or her agency through bodily acts" (153). In this way, and through the transgression of the body in the beginning of the novel, Butler establishes a central premise of the novel: the nonwhite male subject never gets to exist without the body being a factor. The Person of Color as agent in the postmodern world can never divorce herself from material conditions, which is why "the theme of embodied agency remains ubiquitous until the very last page of the novel" (Bast 156).

Bast recognizes that this ubiquity is often present in the form of physical mutilation (152). She notes the scene in which Dana is whipped, during which "she loses all rationality" (158). The postmodern reader understands that rather than a mere loss of rationality, this scene is yet another method to problematize conceptions of rationality that are focused merely on the mind; the

novel “insists that any notion of subjectivity must take into account the embodiment of the subject” (Bast 159), and yet continuously refuses “subm[ission] to any one unifying theory” (Bast 166). In this resistance, Butler affirms the existence of “bodily knowledge” (162). This is significant from a historiographical and philosophical perspective, as Butler paves the way for emerging African American writers who oppose the notion that knowledge is found only within the Rational Cartesian mind.

Interestingly, scholarship on this topic has connected this commentary on subjectivity in Butler’s work to the importance of disability representation. The commentary highlights the division that the Cartesian system forces on the Black subject, as full bodily subjectivity cannot be recognized. In his article “The Domestic Politics of Disability in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*,” Todd Comer writes, “this ‘torn’ or wounded condition forces African Americans to juggle two mental registers at the same time. It is physically debilitating, slowing one down and risking, at every moment, a violent hemorrhage, both mental and physical...ontological confusion (or over extension) equals physical disability” (85). In this way, *Kindred* both problematizes accepted categories and shows the ultimate impossibility of their transgression. Questioning the systems that refuse liberation does not cause them to dissipate; rather, *Kindred* represents the problem that is their fortitude. In contrast to some science fiction literature, “Butler rejects a kind of ableist ‘transcendence,’ which is often the cliché... and instead, attempts to work through a politics of finite transcendence, of connecting with the other through and with the vulnerable body; and *all* bodies are vulnerable” (Comer 88). In this way, Butler shows the reader how a narrative structure centered around the unreal is simultaneously able to reveal deeper levels of reality. Dana’s passage through time and space leads to physical disability, and her liminal existence between ontological religious understandings of reality culminates in the murder of her ancestor. The novel shows the true unforgiving and uncompromising nature of Enlightenment Rationalism, as well as the impact it has had on ontology and historiography.

Historiography

In addition to problematizing Enlightenment rationality through conceptions of ontology and subjectivity, *Kindred* also has significant historiographical impli-

cations: “In *Kindred*, history books, as several scholars have pointed out, do not convey an adequate picture of the past” (Bast 164). History has a narrative archival nature that is codified through approaches to subjectivity centered around the Rational Cartesian. This approach implicitly assumes an objective reality that is defined through the Cartesian subject—an approach which is problematic, as it denies the incoherence of a disembodied, objective history. Scholars have documented the problems associated with objectivist accounts of historiography and reality. Comer writes, “we are all already subjects and do not have any access to the real because we live and have our being through language, which communicates ideology to us” (92). This is to say that the Cartesian subject itself is mythic, in the sense that it assumes a view of subjectivity and hence historiography that does not, and cannot, exist. The disembodied subject can never encounter the Real, because it can never have experience; it can never include the Black female, as it is never embodied; and it can never interpret history, as it never steps into space or time.

Time travel plays an important role here in the novel’s impact. In the context of its literary tradition, *Kindred* “utilizes...an Afrofuturist tool that further challenges that notion of ‘blowing away’ the past” (Miletic 4). Bast notes that the novel “expends enormous energy in depicting the complex interdependencies between the past and the present” (163). These arguments document the novel’s problematization of historical narrative as “scholarly commonplace,” (163) which underscores the narrative theme of “the impossibility of simply transcending the past” (163). This recognition, however, goes far beyond the recognition of the difficulty in accurate historical account. In fact, Butler’s novel can be read as a far deeper critique of the possibility of objective historiography in the first place. The novel does more than problematize the forgetful nature of the American consciousness. Butler goes on to contest the idea of a coherent historical consciousness altogether. Setka briefly extrapolates this position. She writes, “Butler’s novel reinvents the American past by imbuing it with an African sensibility, thereby not only rejecting a Western view of history as a linear progression of events but also insisting that a reappraisal of the slave past be framed within a non-Western cultural context” (Setka 100). The novel, then, not only rejects the notion that history can be left behind, but also that history can be intellectualized and understood as the Rationalist project would

recommend. Bast notes that “[i]n their respective ways and within the context of their respective theoretical approaches, virtually all readings of *Kindred* comment on how ‘history bleeds itself into a supposedly enlightened present’ (Yaszek qtd. Bast), pointing to the text’s insistence that the past is not something objective, separate, and inconsequential” (163). Similar to the impossibility of the abstracted objective mind, there is no abstracted objective history to be documented, as history is always experienced and—as previously noted—felt by subjects.

While some scholars would argue against this reading on the grounds of historiographical positivism, the novel assumes a quite different position. When positivist accounts are completely absorbed in determining *what* happened *when*, they erase important pieces of the historical archive. As seen through Dana’s attempts to survive the antebellum South through research, “slave narratives, themselves both agential acts and examples of narrative theorizing on the basis of embodied knowledge of slavery, would offer her concrete help where her history books do not” (Bast 165). Narrative theorizing is interested in not merely reporting the facts of history, but in creating the embodied history that is necessary for the neo-slave narrative, and for an appropriate historical approach. It is in fact the case that this factual reporting has always been through a body, though it has been the implicitly white, male subject. In this way, the historiographic, ontological, and subjective implications of the novel are inextricable from each other and have bled into each other through the course of this paper.

Stepping outside the science fiction tradition into other contexts where *Kindred* has been explored allows for further inquiry on historiography. In his article “Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism,” Eugene Arva explores the notion of historiography within the magical realist discipline. He writes, “the magical realist image stands apart, first because it is the result of an aporetic attitude toward reality, and second because it recreates the real—the limit events that resist representation—as an immediate, *felt* reality” (60). Through images of impossible representation, *Kindred* problematizes notions of Rationalist objectivity and adds yet another layer to its opposition to Enlightenment Reason.

The motive for operating in a magical realist mode for this kind of reflection is not difficult to find. Arva notes that “magical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding

itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death” (61). The importance of this method, particularly as it relates to feeling, is clear; through the method of “traumatic imagination,” readers and characters are able to approach and “reconstruct violent events” (Arva 61). In the case of *Kindred*, this practice translates to important representations of the antebellum South for the historiographic record. Through the use of fantastical elements, “magical realism foregrounds, somewhat paradoxically, the falsehood of its fantastic imagery exactly in order to expose the falsehood—and the traumatic absence—of the reality that it endeavors to re-present” (Arva 61). Arva explores the Baudrillardian claim that too much information, representation, or depiction is what ultimately leads to a world of the hyperreal, in which all signs are merely signifiers of other signs. Arva argues that these circumstances are where magical realism allows us to contest the nature of the sign and the signified in order to launch a reclamation project for the Real. “Magical realism constitutes an attitude toward and a way of approaching reality—a reality that is rarely what it seems and is seldom perceived in the same way by subjects in different places or different times” (Arva 68). This begins to become increasingly important in the case of neo-slave narratives. While *Kindred* could be read as a mere imaginative reflection of the antebellum South, it in fact provides readers with an entirely different historiographic framework. Arva’s point that reality is never seen in the same way through different places and times centers Dana in this reflection. A female protagonist from 1970s California being transported back to the enslaved South can hardly be read as a method of realist reflection on colonial circumstances. Rather, Butler’s foregrounding of Dana allows the reader to place herself in the ulterior position of the differently placed, alternatively timed subject looking back on a traumatic history that can only be represented through referential monstrosities, evils that resist depiction, and violence that resists intelligibility. Echoing the central claim of Vonnegut’s classic novel *Slaughterhouse 5*, the novel shows us “there is nothing intelligent [“rational”] to be said about senseless violence.”

The Enlightenment Rationalist position would be to reject these claims of subjectivity in favor of an “objective” and “realist” depiction of history that might be received without metaphor. However, this is exactly the point Arva underscores: there is no history without nar-

rative, there is no history without subjectivity, and there is no encountering the truth of violence without metaphor. Magical realism serves to “substitute a fictional, felt reality for an extremely real event” (Arva 71). “On such shaky ground, history and ‘truth’ become relativized and dependent, more than ever before, on the texts and metaphors that reconstruct them” (Arva 71). However, this is not where the magical realist project ends; rather, it continues to problematize rational boundaries by “not...only signifying other signs, but also engag[ing] in...creating new ones” (Arva 72). The image of the neo-slave narrative is an example of this method. The image of Dana having lost her arm in her California apartment underscores this point perfectly: her husband is incapable of comprehending what has occurred. Butler writes the exchange between Dana and Kevin after the first disappearance:

He frowned a little, shook his head. “You vanished.” He seemed to have to force the words out. “You were here until my hand was just a couple of inches from you. Then, suddenly, you were gone. I couldn’t believe it. I just stood there. Then you were back again and on the other side of the room.” “Do you believe it yet?”

He shrugged. “It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts.”

“I reappeared wet, muddy, and scared to death.”

“Yes.”

“And I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They’re no crazier than yours.”

“I don’t know what to think.” (16-17)

In this exchange, the reader sees the challenge of representing and approaching historical monstrosities. Importantly, Butler highlights this difficulty in the end of the scene when she pays homage to the importance of subjectivity in the historical record by referencing differing experiences and facts. In this way, *Kindred* operates as a kind of magical realist text on a level that shows us the true impossibility of confronting a realist history. Arva contextualizes this by writing, “it is an ingredient that reconstructs a ‘felt reality,’ the often elusive reality of extreme events that fail to be grasped in their entirety when they first occur; it is a catalyst that neither negates reality nor creates a super- or parallel reality. Magical realism constitutes an attitude toward and a way of approaching reality—a reality that is rarely what it seems

and is seldom perceived in the same way by subjects in different places or in different times” (68). *Kindred*, then, operates as a reflection on the elusive nature of extreme reality by highlighting the importance of subjectivity.

Through all of these methods, *Kindred* foregrounds unintelligibility. Rather than approaching the horrors of slavery from a Rationalist perspective, the reader encounters new truth via the transgression of realism. Comer writes that “traditional narratives operate similarly to create an ideologically coherent picture of reality that sidelines the undomesticated real, i.e., violence social exclusion, and so on” (90-91). This reason is exactly why Butler utilizes the unintelligible structure. It is only through incoherence and the rejection of Enlightenment Rationalism that the reader has any chance of approaching the Real.

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