

Octavia Butler's *Kindred*: The Cultural Context of Production

Marietta KOSMA*

Abstract

Through Butler's Kindred, numerous tensions are raised around the notions of accessibility, disability, equality and inclusion exposing the crisis of black futures. My analysis focuses on the way that disability informs Dana's experiences in the context of slavery, her positioning in the contemporary discourse of neo-liberalism and her positioning in the prospective future. Very few scholars perceive Dana's subjectivity as an actual state of being that carries value both materially as well as metaphorically. The materiality of disability has not constituted part of the larger discourse of the American slave system. Through rendering disability both figuratively and materially, I establish a connection between the past, the present and the future. The different figurations of space and time exposed through Dana's time travelling help conceptualize her accessibility in different structures. Previous scholarship has been extensively focusing on the origin and legacy of trauma, inflicted on the black female body of the twentieth century, however, there has been too little, if any criticism in relation to the active construction of black female subjectivity, located at the level of the body. I wish to explore how spectacles of violence against black female bodies function in the wider political imagery of the twenty-first century. The physical and psychological displacement of Dana, as a black female body, exposes her traumatization and the difficulties she faces in order to reclaim her subjectivity in a society burdened by a history of violence and exploitation. Even though Kindred was written before the Black Lives Matter movement emerged, it could be analysed in a way that asserts the continuity of African-American trauma, the perpetuation of systematic racism in USA and the crisis of blackness in the future. Systematic violence threatens black women's wholeness and renders their bodies at risk.

Keywords: *postcolonialism, disability, trauma, black lives matter, queer futurity*

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) is in conversation with the socio-political debates and movements of a distinct historical moment, the 1970s. This novel engages with the Black-Nationalist movement, the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement. It is important to note that Butler wrote fiction from a developing black feminist standpoint to represent female voices that were being ignored during the Civil Rights movement. Ransby confirms that "the voices of black women writers have seldom been given recognition outside or even within the Civil

* University of Oxford, UK, marietta.kosma@ell.ox.ac.uk

Rights Movement" (2001: 59). It is further argued that Butler engages with the political movements of her period to forge a more complex understanding of how oppression, resistance and power intersect. In this paper, I will be distinguishing the way in which the neo-slave narrative is in conversation with a largely black masculinist political tradition that frames endurance as nothing more than survival and then I will argue that there is a counter-discourse that disrupts the equation of endurance to survival: black female itinerancy. Butler is in conversation with other writers of the same tradition, including Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade-Bambara, among others.

Butler is in dialogue with a largely masculinist black political tradition that underestimates endurance and equates it to mere survival. More specifically, *Kindred* engages in conversation with first person narratives that are concerned with the self-revelation of experience but overlook the experience of the intimate self while solely placing emphasis on the survival of the individual. Such texts include Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912), Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). In these masculinist narratives, endurance is portrayed as mere survival. No emphasis is placed on the personal history of their protagonists, as attention is always directed outside of the self. The events of their personal lives are described solely in relation to the social implications they have.

Endurance is examined here as a form of psychological and physical resilience of black female bodies in the face of hardships of slavery as members of a closely knit community. The existence of this community depends on the creation of generations and often on a stance of accommodation. In other words, through endurance emphasis is placed on the communal aspect of one's identity, instead of his individual needs. Endurance is directly linked to the notion of embodiment, as "the body has served to justify the abjection of certain groups [in this case, women of colour] and as the means through which collective identity and resistance to such destructive stereotyping has been articulated" (Vint 2007: 245). I examine endurance as a term that describes the physical and psychological consequences of existing as a body that is always in relation, that is both dependent upon and vulnerable to the actions of others, and that is resistant to being wholly identifiable. The importance of the community is highlighted as

invaluable to the uplift of race. Forming collectivities, unity and solidarity were fundamental to the Black Power Movement. I will revisit the strategies that Dana's foremothers employed in the antebellum past to endure the psychological and physical hardships they faced. I will focus on their resilience as members of a closely knit community, the existence of which depends on the creation of generations and often on a stance of accommodation. For black power activists, endurance signified little more than submission to ongoing white tyranny. There was nothing ethically or politically admirable about this form of endurance.

Then, I will examine the notion of black female itinerancy as an extension of black female endurance. Itinerancy is the physical-geographical and psychological escape from the hurdles of slavery that leads to attaining a more complex understanding of the self in the present moment by using one's own resources. In other words, black female itinerancy is the process of shifting positionality in the present moment by devising individual strategies to overcome the physical and psychological hurdles of slavery and reaching a more complex understanding of one's self. Even though most readings of *Kindred* expose the personal as inseparable from the communal, I would like to disrupt this connection. By employing the term itinerancy, I interrogate the reiterated ideals of community and unity without diminishing the value of solidarity. A critique within a collective does not necessarily devalue the collective itself. The question that arises is: under conditions of constraint, can itinerancy be a legitimate resource for escaping vulnerability from one's communal longing? To what degree does the reformulation of community allow one to think about a different type of political consciousness? These questions are at the centre of how Butler responded to the ideologies underscoring Black Nationalism.

I view *Kindred* as a political text that calls for shifting attention to the individual's private desires. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the formation of an individual subjectivity is intricately related to the creation of a communal self. Jones's work differs from the masculinist writings of the Black Power movement through which she attempted to build communal solidarity. Instead of solely making a contribution to the Black Power Movement's political collectivism, Butler brings to the forefront the importance of the individual's standing. In this context, it is equally important to also take into consideration the way in which the community is being affected by the

individual's actions. By examining the individual's needs and the degree to which they are related to her communal obligations, I would like to emphasize the importance of black female itinerancy.

In *Kindred*, Dana designs her own strategies of resistance by exhibiting itinerancy. By rethinking the narratives of violence in which her foremothers were implicated, Dana is able to overcome what Elaine Scarry defined as "the inexpressibility of physical pain" (1985: 3). Through itinerancy, Dana reaches a more complex understanding of herself. In *Kindred*, Dana achieves to reach a more expansive understanding of herself through disrupting the mandate of reproduction and by killing Rufus. By exposing itinerancy, Dana not only endures the hardships she was faced with at the present moment, but she also unravels the possibility of self-development by adapting to the conditions of the present.

Kindred is set in Los Angeles, California, in 1976. It begins with Dana Franklin's twenty-sixth birthday on America's bicentennial year, when suddenly she is transported to nineteenth century Maryland, the antebellum past. When she gets there, she finds a drowning child, Rufus, her white slave holding ancestor, and saves him. She only finds out about their connection later in the narrative. Over the course of the novel, Dana is involuntarily summoned to the past to save Rufus when his life is at ultimate danger. Each time she goes back to the past, Dana forms a better understanding of her family's history. Dana, a twentieth-century racially conscious black woman "is made a slave." [1] in the sense that she needs to endure the physical burden of slavery, (multiple beatings, attempted rapes, lashing and forced labor) but also the psychological burden of slavery. More specifically, Dana's ultimate torment is whether to help her ancestor Alice to preserve her life or whether to become complicit in her rape to ensure the continuation of her African American family's ancestral line and by extension, her own life, both in a literal and metaphorical way. Dana is skeptical towards this responsibility of hers from the first time she encounters Rufus. She wonders "Was that why I was here? Not only to ensure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own survival? . . . If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (O. Butler 1979: 29). This paradox opposes the stance that Butler's contemporaries would have adopted in order to denounce systemic violence. The decisions of hers are guided through the instinct of self-preservation and fall into the dialectic of endurance.

Through time-travelling, Dana emerges as an itinerant subject. As a woman that belongs in 1976 California, Dana feels disdain towards her foremothers who belong to the antebellum past. At first, she exposes contempt and disdain towards Alice who chooses to do “the safe thing” and views her as “the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy' in some other household” (Rushdy 1999: 163). Alice is viewed as embodying the stereotype of the Mammy, the female equivalent of “Uncle Tom”. Dana separates herself from Alice’s stance and refuses to enact the role of the mammy. She disrupts the collective mandate placed on her to create generations. Therefore, viewing Dana as a maternal figure is extremely troubling. Beaulieu and Mitchell perform such reading and disrupt Dana’s positioning as the mother of Rufus. Even though Dana takes care of Rufus, being his mother would go against the designing of her personal strategies of self-preservation. Dana is viewed as a queer figure, as she encompasses many characteristics that were diverse to other women of her community. Her actions are acts of “resistance to being confined to the roles of motherhood and domesticity” (Miletic 2016: 273). She further develops other roles in relation to her standing in the present. More specifically, Butler states from the beginning of the narrative that Dana is a writer. Dana and Kevin meet through their common interest in writing, as they work at “a casual labor agency” that “regulars called... the slave market” (O. Butler 1979: 52).

As Rufus grows up, he becomes increasingly violent. Dana is called back to save him after Alice’s husband Isaac, who is a slave, beats him. This is a turning point in the narrative because it is the first instance in which Rufus asserts his power as a master. Isaac is tortured and sold south. Alice is punished for aiding him by being sold into slavery and purchased by Rufus himself. Despite Dana’s conscious empathy and identification with Alice, she unwittingly becomes a conduit for Rufus’s destruction of her. Dana needs to employ her wit in order to achieve self-preservation. The climactic moment in Dana’s dilemma occurs when Rufus enlists her to convince Alice not to resist when he rapes her. Dana initially refuses to help him, but Rufus compels her to reconsider:

“You want her to get hurt?... All I want you to do is fix it so I don’t have to beat her. You’re no friend of hers if you won’t do that much!” Of hers! He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn’t refuse to help the girl – help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn’t think

much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself."
(O. Butler 1979: 163-64)

Dana is deeply conflicted in whether she shall help Alice or not. At first, she hesitates to help Alice but then rationalizes her fear in order to prevent her from suffering at a greater level. Dana questions whether her non-violent stance is adequate in facing Rufus' increasing brutality.

Alice's strategy of enduring physical and psychological violence by developing an accommodating stance mirrors the stance of other women of her community. Alice's sexual violation is necessary for Dana's personal benefit. Rufus's obsession with Alice compels him to demand Dana to convince her foremother to sleep with him. He threatens her by saying "You talk to her – talk some sense into her – or you're going to watch while Jake Edwards beats some sense into her" (O. Butler 1979: 163). Alice has to endure Rufus's advances because Dana's survival depends on her. Alice is going to give birth to Hagar, Dana's mother. What seems odd is that Dana needs to keep Rufus, her white slave-owning grandfather alive, in order to ensure that her own life is preserved. Alice exhibits what Missy Dehn Kubitschek frames as the "material strength of surviving rape" (1988: 49). Slavery forced African-American women to expose endurance, survive and carry on with their daily lives after the traumatic event. Dana is stunned by the ability of slave women to adapt to violence and hardship and views herself as unfit for such adversity for the interests of the black community. She disrupts the ineffable expectation that women needed to serve as breeders for the preservation of their communities.

After Alice's rape, she compares her own stance with Sarah's. As an itinerant subject, Dana poses criticism towards Sarah:

She had done the safe thing – had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called "mammy" in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow (O. Butler 1979: 145).

Dana is extremely critical of her foremothers as their decisions are informed by the historical moment in which they exist. She judges them for adopting a non-violent stance, accepting mistreatment. Dana initially experiences disdain towards Sarah because she believes that she is superior to her due to her militant stance, but ultimately she understands that the only available resource for these women was to create generations.

Another instance during which Dana's itinerant stance is evident is when Dana and Kevin observe some children of the slave community, playing an auction block game. Dana and Kevin remain hidden and look at the children while they

went on with their play. [...] "Now here a likely wench," called the boy on the stump. He gestures toward the girl who stood slightly behind him. "She cook and wash and iron. Come here, gal. Let the folks see you." He drew the girl up beside him. "She young and strong," he continued. "She worth plenty of money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars? The little girl turned to frown at him. "I'm worth more than two hundred dollars, Sammy!" she protested. "You sold Martha for five hundred dollars!" You shut your mouth," said the boy. "You ain't supposed to say nothing. When Marse Tom bought Mama and me, we didn't say nothing (O. Butler 1979: 99).

This passage shows that the ideology of slavery is passed on to the community from a very young age. The stance of endurance of the children is in opposition to Dana's itinerancy. These children unconsciously reproduce the roles that were prescribed for them by the antebellum south. By engaging in this game through role-playing, the actual auction block becomes normalized. This is troubling because it entails children from a very young age to reiterate the structure of slavery. In this game the little girl seems to be at a more disadvantaged state than her male counterpart as she is taught by her mother to endure the commands given to her by the boy in order to avoid greater harm. She knows that she needs to follow the boys' commands and she employs endurance as a strategy of survival. In this context, having a black body is synonymous to objectification, degradation, subjugation and dehumanization. It carries the power to suffocate and stifle the individual. The black female body is reduced to being a silent object, that needs to remain invisible, unseen, protected from the male gaze,

while embodying resilience. This scene brings to the forefront the way that black women are continuously negotiating questions of racialized denigration. The black body was rendered as having flesh made of the color of obscurity. Franz Fanon claims that the other lived a life rendered with conflicts, as its existence is an agitated one and the subject is constantly in alarm.

In this section, after examining Dana's response to her foremothers' stance, I will further explore Dana's positioning as an itinerant subject. Time travelling is the mechanism through which Dana revisits her past to form a more complex understanding of her present. Instead of remaining a mere spectator of violence, Dana becomes an actor. She projects resistance by devising personal strategies through which she differentiates her standing from her community's. Dana differentiates herself by employing itinerancy and clarifies that she is a voyeur of the violence inflicted on the black female bodies of her community, setting limits for her own body. Her standing as a member of the post-civil rights era helps her conceptualize the action of rape as criminal, while members of the antebellum era had to endure such criminality. Dana says to Kevin that:

[Rufus] has to leave me enough control over my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying." "If your black ancestors had felt that way, you wouldn't be here," said Kevin. "I told you when all this started that I didn't have their endurance. I still don't. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what. I'm not like that" (O. Butler 1979: 246).

She believes that she has to have the right to make her own choices instead of her whole life being dominated by Rufus. Dana as an itinerant subject, believes that she needs to employ nonviolence, "a practice of resistance, that becomes possible, if not mandatory, precisely at the moment when doing violence seems most justified and obvious" (J. Butler 2020: 27). Dana's choice not to harm Rufus is a conscious one. Dana is complicit in rendering Alice a victim of violence for her own interests. While pursuing her self-preservation, Dana makes sure to establish Rufus as the patriarch, even though her action entails violence towards a member of her community. She rather adopts an individualistic stance due to her itinerancy and does not stop Alice from committing suicide when Rufus stages her children's kidnapping. Alice hangs herself because she believes that her children are taken away

from her forever. She bases her whole sense of self on her offsprings. Even though Dana encourages Alice to do whatever it takes to survive – and thus ensure her own survival – she unequivocally states that she will not do the same. She would try to escape the predicament of victimization. For Dana self-preservation means more than just surviving.

At the end of the novel, Dana escapes rape, as she views it as an occurrence that is even worse than death. She refuses getting raped by exposing itinerancy. She refuses the role of the victim and, for the first time, imposes her own conditions on her relationship with Rufus. She says, “I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover” (O. Butler 1979: 260). When Rufus attempts to rape her, Dana kills him and returns to the present. Dana’s newfound sense of herself leads to an emancipatory revision of history. A few seconds before Rufus dies, he desperately tries to grab Dana’s arm. When Dana comes to consciousness she is at her house in Maryland. She realizes that her arm is fused into the wall of her bedroom. Through the trope of time travelling, Dana escapes the communal longing of reproduction and reconstructs her community’s history. She manages to survive and at the same time she rewrites history by reaching a more complex understanding of her standing in the present. She operates at her best interest as she ultimately kills the person who she was previously committed to and was protecting up to this point. The ultimate strategy that Dana devises is to not allow Rufus to rape her. By killing him, she asserts her own authority. She decides that she would not succumb to rape. She asserts her subjectivity by resisting sexual victimization. She sets Rufus’s plantation house on fire, actively challenging the white master’s authority. By destroying the house, she renders impossible the continuation of the lives of slaves on the plantation. She provides them the possibility to escape from Rufus’s domination. By burning down the house, she gives them the opportunity to flee to the north and escape the plantation site. I read Dana’s act as liberatory to herself and others as she gives them a chance to escape their positioning. She has also provided the other members of the plantation with the psychological outlet of escape from slavery, as she gave them the opportunity to conceptualize a different future. However, it should be noted that she cannot be sure of the effects of her action on the slaves of plantation. Even though Dana acted in “self-defense”, she is aware of the danger in which she places the other

members of her community. She voices her fears that the outcome of her own choice would have a “cost... [on] Nigel’s children, Sarah, all the others” (O. Butler 1979: 264). She values their lives but gives ultimate value to her own self-preservation. Dana’s violence takes on an institutional form, as it is addressed against the institution of slavery that renders the female body as property. Dana contests Rufus’s institutional power and intends to diminish the system that had previously enslaved her. Dana wants to protect her story as an individual, sustain herself and reach a more complex understanding of herself. There is no final resolution in the narrative, nor does Butler provide an insight to the afterlife of the other members of the plantation. As Dorothy Allison states, “Butler offers no resolutions at the end of *Kindred*...Dana is left wounded... [and] we do not know what will become of her marriage to Kevin, a white man” (1990: 476). Butler does not provide a resolution in the end, however, she allows Dana to reach a more complex understanding of herself, as she now understands the ways in which her past has affected her present. Dana “will always bear the mark of her kindred” (Salvaggio and McKee Chamas 1986: 33). Her individual needs and her communal obligations are in conflict, but at the same time, they are mutually supportive to a point. Even though she is in conversation with the history of her foremothers, at the same time she moves away from it.

In conclusion, in the 1970s, the period in which Butler wrote her work, there was an imminent need to address the issue of resistance to oppression and the right of self-defense. Butler needed to confront the gap between her generation’s militancy and the perceived passivity of the previous generations. To explore these tensions, I employed the terms black female endurance and black female itinerancy. More often the term endurance has been employed in performance studies. More particularly, it has been associated “with performance art practices that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s” (Shalson 2018: 4). In this paper, I have examined endurance as the physical and psychological experience of resisting the hardships of slavery over an extended period of time by placing emphasis on the communal aspect of one’s identity. Endurance is in conversation with the Black Power movement that called for the formation of a new communal identity, as there was a renewed sense of black pride. As Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton confirm, the mission of Black Power “is a call for black people in this country to unity, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a

call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations, and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society" (1967: 44). I placed emphasis on the strategies that black women devised as members of a closely knit community to overcome the physical and psychological hurdles of slavery. Endurance shall not be reduced to the mere survival of black female bodies, as even under the direst conditions of slavery, black women's legacy has been celebrated. Eugene Genovese argues that the enslaved exposed "accommodation and resistance to slavery" whereas accommodation is interpreted as "falling prey to the pressures of dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred" (1974: 597-98). I do not side with this interpretation of endurance as a non-conscious choice, a "non-revolutionary [medium of] self-assertion" (Harb 2008: 128). Working through questions of endurance in the context of African American literary tradition, opens up distinct ways of reading black female itinerancy, as an extension of the category of endurance.

I think of black female itinerancy as the physical-geographical and psychological escape from the hurdles of slavery that leads to the attainment of a more complex understanding of the self in the present moment. Dana reaches a more complicated sense of self by devising their own strategies and relying on her own resources as an individual. Even though she forms, throughout her respective narratives, small alliances with other members of her community to be able to escape from the hardships of the legacy of slavery, she mainly relies on her own resources and devises personal strategies to escape victimization and reaches a more complex understanding of self. Dana also contests her identification as a mother and serves her own needs by murdering Rufus. She celebrates her individuality in the present moment by rethinking her positioning in the past and acknowledging its importance, but by moving from it. Dana breaks apart inflexible constructions of black collective identity. I specifically contest the role of women only as reproductive vessels, placing them at the centre of the quest for civil rights. As a black female fiction writer of the 1970s, Butler refused "the assumptions and terminology of colonial, capitalist, racist, and gendered versions of" who the black woman is (Taylor 1970: xi). She vehemently opposed sexist (re)constructions of black female sexuality and created characters that contested the construction of women solely as breeders. Black women's worth lies on multiple sites and is unique for each individual. By revealing the pathology of the

social (though not wholly erasing it), Dana brings to the forefront a space for the articulation of the personal. Dana creates new spaces of being through extensively designing her personal strategies of self-preservation and reaching a more agential sense of self. Such crossing to the unknown is both personal and collective and necessary for their attainment of radical agency. Itinerancy can be viewed as an attempt of self-protection, as a response to the dangers of communal order yet a complete detachment from one's past is impossible. Dana as an itinerant subject prioritizes her personal well-being.

Kindred is part of an effort to enable diverse communities of black people to develop an intersectional black consciousness. As Tate argues, "the black text mediates two broad categories of experience: one that is historically racialized and regulated by African American cultural performance; the other is the individual and subjective experience of personal desire signified in language" (1998: 10). In my reading, I examine how one's communal obligations intersect with his individual desires, which in some cases might even go against the collective. In order to attain fully fledged citizenship, it is necessary to project one's voice as well as maintain the autonomy of his body. Voice is a "radical creative space which affirms and sustains ... subjectivity, [...] a new location from which to articulate [a] sense of the world" (Hooks 1989: 153). There is the need to articulate the past as part of the present, as the body constitutes the site through which recovering takes place.

Notes

[1] My reference is to a chiasmus from Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an African Slave* (1845). "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 294).

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Cultural Intertexts
Year VIII Volume 11 (2021)

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