Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Preface

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Contents

Kindred

Octavia Butler

(Full name Octavia Estelle Butler) American novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry presents criticism of Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) through 2005. For discussion of Butler's complete career, see *CLC,* Volumes 38, 121, and 230.

INTRODUCTION

One of Butler's best known and most critically acclaimed novels, *Kindred* tells the story of a twentieth-century African American woman who is transported through time to antebellum Maryland, where she confronts, and ultimately becomes complicit in, the institution of slavery. *Kindred* represents somewhat of a departure from the strict conventions of science fiction, the genre with which Butler is primarily identified, and it was marketed by her publishers as a mainstream novel. Nonetheless, *Kindred* features Butler's characteristic explorations of how supernatural occurrences bind together people from different periods in time. The idea for a novel set during the era of American slavery came to Butler as a student at Pasadena City College, where she was widely exposed to black authors, becoming particularly interested in the career of Frederick Douglass. Research for the novel included a visit to a restored plantation at Mount Vernon and a trip to Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass's birthplace and the setting for the plantation scenes in *Kindred.*

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

As *Kindred* opens, a black woman named Dana is celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday with her husband. Suddenly, she is transported from her home in southern California, in the year 1976, to an antebellum Maryland plantation. When she arrives there, the young son of the plantation owner, Rufus, is drowning; in his panic, Rufus has discovered his ability to summon Dana across time and space to help him. Despite her confusion over what has happened to her, Dana reacts almost automatically to save Rufus. After the rescue, Dana is approached by the boy's parents, but her own panic sends her inexplicably back to present-day California. This is the first of many instances throughout the story in which Dana and, eventually, her white husband, Kevin, are thrown back in time to the plantation. During one such trip, Dana learns that Rufus is her "several times great grandfather" and that he has the power to summon her when his life is in danger. Each of Dana's successive visits becomes increasingly longer in duration, and she gradually comes to assume the role of house slave to Rufus. And since Rufus must live long enough to father a child by the slave woman Alice Greenwood in order to ensure the existence of Dana's family, Dana becomes a slave in the role of protector to Rufus as well. It is the contrasts—and perhaps even more the similarities—between Dana's life in contemporary California and her experiences in the stratified plantation culture of early nineteenth-century America that create the plot interest of the story. Alternating between two worlds, Dana and Kevin experience firsthand the powerlessness of the enslaved blacks, particularly the subjugation of females. Dana and Kevin's mixed-race marriage with shared gender roles is placed in stark opposition to the gender and race hierarchies of the American South in the early 1800s. Yet at the same time, Butler invites readers to make analogies between the two cultures, especially with reference to the power struggles between men and women in the modern world, both in the home and in the workplace. Dana's experiences force her to confront the profound effect her husband's travels might have on their happy marriage: "A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn't want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew, but if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. . . . The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility." Upon their final return to California, Dana and Kevin begin to reevaluate their place in society from a new perspective that takes into account the long-term effects of slavery on American culture. Slowly they come to recognize aspects of virtual slavery in their own technologically advanced

culture. As *Kindred* ends, Dana and Kevin are moving to Maryland in an attempt to discover what eventually happened to all the different people they encountered in the past.

MAJOR THEMES

At its core, *Kindred* examines how African Americans managed to survive their enslavement during the nineteenth century and the lasting effects of their struggles on American society. The use of time travel as a device for uncovering the past naturally changes the way the narrator, and thus the reader, perceives historical events. Dana and her husband become active participants in some of the most painful aspects of American history, lending greater energy to Butler's study of the inequalities among the races, the sexes, and even within classes (field slaves versus house slaves, for example). As critic Christine Levecq notes, the relationship between Dana and her slaveholding white ancestor Rufus illuminates the power struggles that, for Butler, "constitute the substance of history." Butler also uses Kevin's experiences in the past to illuminate these power struggles. Dana is pulled back to the past involuntarily, but Kevin is allowed to choose whether he will go back in time. Kevin, by virtue of his race, does not experience the brutalities of slavery, while Dana is continually victimized. As Kevin readily adapts to his superior role in antebellum society, Butler asks the reader to question whether he is completely uncaring or just ignorant of the horrors of slavery. Butler's inquiry into gender and racial inequality is further layered through the contrast between Dana and the character Alice. Dana enjoys some freedom from the power dynamics of the era because she still thinks like a modern woman, but even she realizes the need to comply with the constraints of her bondage as a means of self-preservation. Most significantly, Dana must passively watch as Alice is raped by Rufus, if only to ensure the birth of her foremother Hagar Weylin and her own existence. Alice cannot claim the same detachment as Dana because she has little control over her own circumstances. Yet Alice's eventual suicide represents a singular defiance of Rufus and the institution that he represents. Dana's relationship with her historical past takes place on several levels. She is linked back in time because of her heritage and because of her new perspective on modern events. She is also inexorably linked physically to the past because at the end of the novel, Rufus violently grabs her arm, literally pulling it off in a last attempt to keep her from permanently returning to the present. Dana's physical deformity, then, symbolizes the lasting scars of slavery on the fabric of American culture.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Prior to the publication of *Kindred* Butler's novels had achieved a solid reputation among both readers and critics of science fiction. Her initial difficulty finding a publisher for *Kindred* had less to do with the quality of the novel than with the difficulty in classifying it as part of any one particular genre. When the novel finally did appear, it met with nearly universal praise, although critics expressed some confusion over why a writer of science fiction would choose to set a novel in the pre-Civil War South. Nonetheless, Butler's manipulation of the genre was considered very successful. Critic Joanna Russ, for example, called Butler's use of time travel a "new and eloquent use of a familiar science-fiction idea" that allowed her to demonstrate both the individual's inexorable connection to the past and the "tangled interdependency of black and white in the United States," Butler herself classified *Kindred* as "fantasy," but in the years since the novel's publication, it has found an audience among a wide spectrum of readers. Science-fiction and history enthusiasts are drawn to its mechanism of time travel to the past, and *Kindred* is also a frequent subject of study in both women's studies and African-American literature classes. Commentary on the novel has underscored the crossover appeal of *Kindred,* which has made it Butler's most popular work, despite the enormous success of her numerous science fiction novels. Writing in *Ms.,* Sherley Anne Williams noted Butler's "cult status among many black women readers" and recognized in the novel a poignant commentary on the complex legacy of American slavery. Levecq echoed Williams in her analysis of the ways in which the novel examines history; arguing that *Kindred* challenges the reader's understanding of history by calling into question received versions of historical events. Levecq states that *Kindred* "stands out precisely because of [its] reinstatement of the cognitive value of fiction about history alongside its criticism of representation." It is perhaps Butler's imposition of a modern perspective on a work that in many respects resembles a slave narrative that is the source of *Kindred*'s greatest strengths. As Robert Crossley expressed it in his introduction to the novel, "Octavia Butler has designed her own underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

**Patternmaster* (novel) 1976
**Mind of My Mind* (novel) 1977
**Survivor* (novel) 1978

Kindred (novel) 1979
**Wild Seed* (novel) 1980
**Clay's Ark* (novel) 1984
†*Dawn* (novel) 1987
†*Adulthood Rites* (novel) 1988
†*Imago* (novel) 1989
The Evening and the Morning and the Night (novella) 1991
‡*Parable of the Sower* (novel) 1993
Bloodchild and Other Stories (novella, short stories, and essays) 1995
‡*Parable of the Talents* (novel) 1998
§*Lilith's Brood* (novels) 2000
Fledgling: A Novel (novel) 2005
‖*Seed to Harvest* (novels) 2007

*These works comprise the "Patternist" series.

†These works comprise the *Xenogenesis trilogy.*

‡These works comprise the "Earthseed" series.

§This work contains the complete *Xenogenesis series: Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago.*

‖This work contains the novels *Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clay's Ark, and Patternmaster.*

CRITICISM

Diana R. Paulin (essay date spring 1997)

SOURCE: Paulin, Diana R. "De-Essentializing Interracial Representations: Black and White Border-Crossings in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred.*" *Cultural Critique,* no. 36 (spring 1997): 165-93.

[*In the following essay, Paulin examines the ways in which racial and gender inequalities in love relationships further the plots of Spike Lee's* Jungle Fever *and Butler's* Kindred.]

> As a writer of science fiction I was free to imagine new ways of thinking about people and power, free to maneuver my characters into situations that don't exist. . . . I've been told again and again that my characters aren't "nice." I don't doubt it. People who must violate their long-held beliefs are rarely pleasant. I don't write about heroes; I write about people who survive and sometimes prevail.
>
> —Octavia Butler qtd. in Mixon, "Futurist Woman"

> Filmmaking is a craft, and it can be learned like anything else; of course, it takes talent, but forget about it being something magical and mystical. . . . Film is a powerful medium; it can influence how millions of people think, walk, talk, even live, plus you can make an enormous sum of money. The idea is to keep the industry confined, let a small group of people have the control and make all the money. This is why one of my goals has been the demystification of film.
>
> —Spike Lee, *The Films of Spike Lee*

Despite the complexity of racial identities, discussions of race in the United States too often center on the opposition between black and white. Such historical and newsworthy events as the O. J. Simpson trial, the Rodney King case, and the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings specify and polarize black/white relations in the United States. The "blackness" and "whiteness" of an individual becomes the defining measure by which to determine whether she/he is right or wrong, guilty or innocent.[1] Although black/white distinctions may be useful in discussions of U.S. American identities, they also work to limit the possibilities for certain political or social interventions. Binaries that reduce identity to one exclusive position obscure historical complexities and contemporary realities. Once these distinct categories are established, those who do not conform to dominant standards disrupt the well-drawn borders by "illegally" crossing them. Hence, acts of border-crossing become criminalized, because they directly challenge mainstream categories constructed precisely to police boundaries. The disruption of racial categories represents one of the most controversial forms of border-crossing, a "transgression" frequently labeled race trading or half-breeding. The underlying and often blatant articulation of "crossing over" in mainstream society is represented by discourses of disease, contamination, and destruction,[2] fueled by the fear that something sacred, powerful, or pure is in danger of losing its authenticity and effect through miscegenation.[3]

In fact, race polices other intersecting identities—such as class, gender, and sexuality—by determining acts acceptable to dominant standards for a specific group. Both "marginalized" and mainstream cultures respond to the "threat" of mixing but, far from being identical, their different positionalities shape their particular discourses and strategies. White supremacist discourse, for example, often defines nonwhites as inferior or threatening to white "superiority" or "purity" in order to preserve and contain power. However, decentered communities, more often than not, articulate similar nationalist or separatist ideologies in order to combat domination and oppression.

Although there are many different situations in which racial definitions are challenged and boundaries crossed (black/Native American, latina/white, white/Asian, etc.), I foreground here the power of black/white racial categories, precisely because of their op-

positional and emblematic status in this country. By exposing the ways that popular discourse is informed by monolithic notions of race, particularly those concerning black and white, my critique questions, complicates, and challenges static representations of race and of (inter)racial relations.

A close examination of *Jungle Fever,* by black filmmaker Spike Lee, and ***Kindred,*** by black science fiction writer Octavia Butler, reveals how these texts rearticulate and incorporate dominant notions of black/white interracial relationships and desire.

In Lee's *Jungle Fever,* a professional married black man, Flipper, has an affair with his white Italian working-class assistant, Angie. Upon discovering their affair, Flipper's wife, Drew, kicks him out of the house, and he and Angie move into an apartment together. Soon after, Angie breaks off her engagement with Paulie, her white Italian fiancé, and he initiates a relationship with Orin, an educated black woman who frequents the corner store where he works.

In Butler's ***Kindred,*** Dana, a black woman, and Kevin, a white man, meet, fall in love, and get married but do not necessarily live happily ever after. Both are abruptly and inexplicably thrown back in time from the bicentennial to the early 1800s. They quickly learn that they have traveled back to a plantation where Dana's ancestors are owned by a white family—the Weylins. Dana eventually discovers that she is related to these white slaveowners, because the son, Rufus, raped her great-great-great grandmother, Alice. In order for history to unfold, Dana must help Rufus survive long enough to father the child who will become Dana's great-great-grandmother.

In the course of this discussion, I address, if not necessarily resolve, the following questions. How do these representations (*Jungle Fever* and ***Kindred***) reinforce or destabilize limiting definitions of race and class? Do interracial relationships merely oppose distinct racial identities and boundaries or do they open borders and help to broaden racial definitions? How do race, sexuality, and class intersect, particularly in terms of black/white identities and relationships? How does racialized desire get represented? How do Lee's and Butler's representations of black/white distinctions function as examples of border-crossing and/or transgression?

Treating Jungle Fever

Spike Lee's film *Jungle Fever* reiterates various dominant representations of interracial relationships, such as the underlying discourse of contamination implied by the clichéd title. However, the title is never deconstructed, and, thus, *Jungle Fever* effectively reinscribes the notion that interracial love is the result of irrational, racialized, heated passion—which manifests itself as a sickness—confirming the dominant belief that interracial sexual relations are wrong or immoral. By naming this intimate black/white desire a "fever," the film serves to reproduce the notion that interracial desire is transgressive and that it contaminates pure blood lines.

The promotional photograph of a dark black hand grasping a pale white hand presents the interracial theme of *Jungle Fever* in the all too familiar and simplistic emblem of race relations in America: black versus white. This seemingly positive positioning of the two hands distinguishes this gesture from other confrontational emblems of black/white race relations, such as combative fists. This symbol also exceeds conventional icons of platonic racial harmony by distinguishing the male's hand from the female's. The black hand is considerably larger and broader whereas the white hand is smaller and the nails are painted bright red. The gender distinction of these hands immediately complicates the dynamics of the relationship by suggesting multiple meanings. It is unclear whether these clasped male and female hands indicate friendship, sexual involvement, or, at least, desire.

During the opening credits, the camera pans and focuses on multiple street signs, some of which merely warn against interracial relations and others which flatly prohibit them. Familiar symbols of black and white male/female figures holding hands with red slashes stamped across them forbid interracial intermingling. These interracial prohibitions are represented by road signs located in two distinct New York City neighborhoods, Bensonhurst and Harlem. The respective predominantly white (Italian) working-class and black communities provide the loci for the opposing racial and class identities that emerge throughout the film. The film's setting also reveals class distinctions within the black community by placing most of the central black characters in brownstones on an affluent block in Harlem, surrounded by run-down buildings and graffiti-decorated streets.[4]

The film opens with an "innocent," upwardly mobile black family striving to maintain its identity and cohesiveness in the face of an intruding "uncivilized" white culture. The affair, initiated by a temporary "lapse of judgment," between Flipper Purify and Angie Tucci represents the ultimate transgression of their supposedly well-drawn borders. Narrowly defined representations of family, race, class, and sexuality

perpetuate the notion that black and white communities should and can function as two self-contained separate entities and that the power dynamics which delimit both communities are fixed, impenetrable institutions, in and of themselves. Moreover, static binaries of black and white manifestly inform the racial positions and possibilities of the film's subjects and police the subjects' sexual, class, and gender identities.

The film easily reproduces the familiar distinction between black and white by symbolically and visually repeating black and white "identifiers," such as an uptown soul food restaurant and a "friendly" Italian-neighborhood corner store. These racially and ethnically marked arenas clearly and quickly establish the differences between the two worlds and set the scene for the stereotypical communities. Yet, they also suggest border ambiguities in that the characters are "free" to move (with)in and out of these marked areas. Despite some resistance, Flipper Purify and Orin Goode, the educated black woman who passes through L. Carbone's store (the Italian neighborhood hangout in Bensonhurst) on her way to work every day, maintain their right to move in and out of these arenas.[5] Similarly, Vinnie, a white supremacist and bigoted Italian man, also demonstrates this "mobility" by exercising his right to enjoy the sounds of Public Enemy, a militant neonationalist black rap group singing "Cain't Do Nothin' for Ya Man," which he blasts from his car stereo. The interjection of rap music in this scene reveals the interrelatedness of black and white cultures, undermining the notion that they can and do exist as two separate entities. The fact that this particular group shares the separatist discourse asserted by both black and white characters throughout the film makes sole ownership of it impossible and suggests further the shifting nature of its meanings and political purposes. White supremacists, for example, may be reassured by the black nationalist desire to remain separate; whereas black separatists may feel more empowered by maintaining strict exclusive boundaries.

In an attempt to reverse mainstream expectations of the down-and-out struggling black family or the broken homes that constantly occupy space on our televisions and in our newspapers, the black families presented in this film are upper-middle class, "cultured," and corporate. In addition to fulfilling conventional standards of "success," the wife and the husband live in the same home (happily), both are actively and responsibly present for their child, and both occupy respectable positions in their community. Yet, they are not quite the traditional Cosbyesque bastion of family values. Instead, Flipper Purify, a dark-complexioned black man, and his wife Drew, a light-skinned black woman, depart from the standard model of "ideal" parenthood in the display of their mutual passion and sexual desire, as evidenced in their intense love-making scene at the beginning of the film. At first, Drew's light skin obfuscates her racial identity and suggests that she may be "the white woman" who is involved with "the black man." And it is not until her status as Flipper's legitimate wife is revealed that her "blackness" is confirmed. In contrast to her light complexion, Flipper's dark skin reiterates the implications of his last name, Purify. This label suggests that he is an uncontaminated black man whose skin and blood have not been diluted and attests to the authenticity of his African American lineage. The quick fade to the other bedroom reveals their innocently delighted daughter, Ming, who discreetly relishes the knowledge that her parents have sex and feigns sleep in order to conceal her secret. Later that morning at breakfast, Ming asks: "Daddy, why are you always hurting Mommy?" Supermom Drew comes to the rescue, explaining to Ming that they are not hurting each other and that they are making love, just like the birds and the squirrels that they saw doing the "spring thang" in the park. They quickly shift the conversation when Ming wants to know whether they do it to make a baby or whether they do it just to do it.[6]

In contrast to Flipper's immediate family, the oppressive patriarchal structure of his extended family reveals a failed attempt to convert and control. Although Flipper's father, the Good Reverend Doctor Purify, has been present to help rear his children, his participation has produced negative rather than positive results. In fact, his dysfunctional relationship with both of his sons—he cannot speak with them, he can only preach at them—demonstrates the destructive nature of his tyrannical paternal guidance. His declaration that he is a "good" father whose primary concern is to lead his children down a straight and narrow path directly contrasts with Flipper's version of a "good" father to his own child, Ming.

The Reverend's outspokenness and extremism contrast with his wife's silence, further illustrating the deterioration and dysfunctional nature of this black family and, by extension, the black community. According to the "race as family" trope, in which "[t]he family is the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced" and in which "women are identified as the agents and means of this reproductive process," Mrs. Purify does not fully or successfully occupy her position (Gilroy 307). She does not challenge her husband and cannot help her drug-addicted son, Gator. The ultimate failure of this family's attempt to maintain purity and absolute

control of its members is represented in the murder of Gator, the movie's tragic sacrificial character.[7] Despite their strict adherence to racial and familial borders, this family's inability to avoid violence and drugs exposes the ineffectiveness of repressive patriarchal domains.

Ironically, this same notion of purity and authenticity is also professed by the white Italian American family and community. Angie's home provides a stereotypical and comic portrait of a working-class, sexist, provincially minded family. Despite the potentially privileged position associated with her skin color, Angie is marginalized because of gender and fulfills her subservient role as surrogate mother, laborer, and passive sister. Her father and brothers, on the other hand, control, oppress, and abuse her at the same time that they claim to protect and preserve her honor. They continuously struggle to impose their power and superiority over her and over others in an attempt to reinforce their self-worth.

The vulgar language, violent behavior, and macho attitudes of the male characters, alongside the garish outfits of "their women," feed into commonly used characterizations (or caricatures) of members of white working-class communities. Their Italian ethnicity, however, adds a significant difference. They are not quite like the "regular white people," as Paulie, Angie's open-minded Italian boyfriend who runs L. Carbone's corner store, terms the Anglo-Saxons who lynched the Sicilians for giving equal status to black factory workers. They recognize their differences from the blonde, blue-eyed people and constantly work to attain the dominance, power, and socioeconomic status that these white features represent. In fact, they are willing to listen to rap music and engage in sex with black women as long as they maintain a superior, separate, and safely distanced position. Paulie's friend Frankie expresses his limited interest in women of color when he declares: "I'd fuck a nigger or a spick in a second." And his friend Vinnie chimes in with another degrading remark, stating: "I'd do it too. But I wouldn't let anybody see us together. No way I'd be down on 18th Avenue with a black on my arm. No fuckin' way."

Both Angie and Paulie break loose from these static characterizations in ways that are considered transgressive and threatening to their white counterparts. They jeopardize their "peers'" and families' sense of security by challenging such racist beliefs. Although each one acts rebelliously, her/his behavior is portrayed distinctly and (can be) interpreted differently, according to conventional gender constructions. Angie's entrance into a relationship with Flipper is considered an act of weakness, resulting from her lack of identity and self-control. She is derided and her value is reduced because she interacts with not just a black person but a black man—the ultimate threat to the macho, white Italian male ideal. However, in her relationship with Flipper, she is still denied voice and agency. Her interpretation of the relationship is never vocalized or revealed, leaving the final analysis to viewers and to other characters in the film. Flipper interprets, names and defines the terms of their relationship. For example, he rules that they will not have any children because "a lot of times them mixed kids come out all mixed up," and he doesn't want any "mixed nuts." Angie has no say in the matter. In addition to his decree against having children, he also proclaims that their entire affair is merely the result of racial curiosity.

Although Angie seems trapped in the role of the dependent woman, she does not emerge completely powerless at the end of the film. Her curt response to his accusations attests to her refusal to accept Flipper's flippant denial of their feelings and interactions. Near the end of the film when Flipper tells Angie that he doesn't love her and that he seriously doubts whether she ever loved him, Angie responds by saying: "Don't tell me what I felt or didn't feel." Their final conversation reveals Flipper's insistence that his analysis of their affair is correct and appropriate, and Angie's refusal to concede:

FLIPPER.

> You got with me to spite your family cause you were curious about black.

ANGIE.

> Is that what you think it was?

FLIPPER.

> Yeah I do. And I was curious about white.

Although Flipper attempts to relinquish any obligation to Angie by erasing the significance of their relationship, she makes the choice to leave him rather than waiting to be left. Her actions suggest he has failed to silence or to pacify her. In her refusal to accept his terms and his interpretation of her actions, Angie demonstrates agency and asserts it in her relationship with Flipper.

Unfortunately, sovereignty doesn't appear to transfer to other aspects of Angie's life. The tragic moment when Angie's father opens his door to let her back into his "home" at the end of the film suggests a