FEATURES

Transcendence: Facing Intergenerational Trauma through Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* and “Bloodchild”

Candice Thornton

In “Bloodchild” and *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler’s characterizations and use of time travel permits readers to examine the implications of their own intersections of identity within existing and imagined societal infrastructures. *Kindred* illustrates the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impact that descendants of enslaved Africans experience, inherit, embody, and transcend. In “Bloodchild,” Butler depicts the complex dynamics and intergenerational implications of colonial hegemony for the Tlic and Terran people. Through the characters in *Kindred* and “Bloodchild,” alongside her manipulation of time and setting, Butler contextualizes moral dilemmas in multi-dimensional perspectives. Butler’s works convey the persevering implications and infrastructures of capitalistic cisheteropatriarchy that contribute to the commodification, erasure and subjugation of, and violence against, marginalized individuals and communities.

In *Kindred*, Dana’s relationships with Rufus, her enslaver ancestor; Alice, her enslaved ancestress; and Kevin, her Caucasian husband; illustrate the long-reaching impact of chattel slavery on African American people’s bodily agency and ability to safely engage in consensual, equitable, and loving relationships. Dana, who is an interracially wed African American woman, is transported from her middle-class California life into enslavement in antebellum Maryland. In “Bloodchild”, Gan’s relationships with his mother Lien and T’Gatoi highlight how oppressive infrastructures limit marginalized peoples’ ability to consensually engage in relationships that respect their bodily agency. In “Saying ‘Yes’: Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*,” Marisa Parham asserts that “Butler immediately concretizes the uncanny sensation, as she makes the briefly unfamiliar domestic present double as the site of an unfamiliar domestic past, a slippery traversion made possible by the convergence of race, gender, and history—a convergence which, once revealed, resituates Dana’s home as a place of danger and vulnerability” (1321).

In *Kindred*, Dana’s relationship with Rufus is inherently non-consensual because she is unable to consent to being summoned to Rufus’s era and is only transported back to her own era when faced with the threat of death. After being transported with Dana to the Weylin plantation, Kevin asserts that he will not leave Dana alone to be harmed. Dana replies, “You’ll try. Maybe that will be enough. I hope so. But if it isn’t . . . I’ll have a better chance of surviving if I stay here now and work on the insurance we talked about. Rufus. He’ll probably be old enough to have some authority when I come again. Old enough to help me” (89). Kevin counters, “It still might not work. After all, his environment will be influencing him every day you’re gone” (89). As Rufus ages, he does, in fact, assume more authority; however, as Kevin suggests, he does not grow into a helpful person.
On the contrary, Rufus develops into an entitled, immature, and violent man. In the chapter titled “The Fight,” Dana is once again transported to Rufus’s era. She finds him beaten with “his nose . . . bleeding. His split lip . . . bleeding . . . His face was a lumpy mess, and he would be looking out of a couple of black eyes for a while” (121). Rufus was beaten by Alice’s husband, Isaac, after having assaulted Alice. In her private thoughts, Dana expresses that she “should have been used to white men preying on black women. I had Weylin as my example after all. But somehow, I had hoped for better from Rufus” (119). Dana asks Alice, “wasn’t Rufus a friend of yours? I mean . . . did he just grow out of the friendship or what?” Alice responds “Got to where he wanted to be more friendly than I did . . . He tried to get Judge Holman to sell Isaac South to keep me from marrying him” (119). Learning that Isaac is enslaved, Dana advises them to run while she tends to Rufus, to mitigate the chance that they will be killed once Rufus regains consciousness.

After Alice and Isaac leave, Rufus awakens and asks Dana where they’ve gone. Rufus threatens, “He’s going to pay!,” to which Dana responds by attempting to persuade Rufus to blame his injuries on a fight between drunken men. Rufus vehemently retorts, “What in hell are you talking about? You know Isaac Jackson did this to me!” Dana reminds him that “You raped a woman—or tried to—and her husband beat you up . . . You’re lucky he didn’t kill you. He would have if Alice and I hadn’t talked him out of it. Now what are you going to do to repay us for saving your life?” (122). Dana asks if he managed to rape Alice, and Rufus “looked away guiltily.” She asks him, “why would you do such a thing? She used to be your friend,” and he responds, “When we were little, we were friends . . . We grew up. She got so she’d rather have a buck nigger than me!” (122). Dana counters, “Do you mean her husband?” and in her interior thoughts, admits that “Kevin had been right. I’d been foolish to hope to influence him” (122).

Dana tends to Rufus, and “after four days of freedom together . . . [Alice and Isaac] were caught” (143). Alice was terribly beaten, and Isaac was sold South after having his ears cut off. Dana realizes that “Rufus had done exactly what I had said he would do: Gotten possession of the woman without having to bother with her husband. Now, somehow, Alice would have to accept not only the loss of her husband, but her own enslavement. Rufus had caused her trouble, and now he had been rewarded for it” (149). Through this heartbreaking series of events, Dana and her enslaved ancestress Alice are subjected to Rufus’s violence. They are continuously stripped of their agency, yet reliant upon one another for survival.

In “Beloved and Betrayed: Survival and Authority in Kindred,” Novella Brooks de Vita provides insightful perspective about Dana’s relationship with Alice and Rufus. She asserts that Dana “holds some authority over Rufus as his instructor and protector” (18). Arguably, Dana’s authority over Rufus is limited at best, in that Rufus ultimately impacts Dana’s agency. It is through Rufus’s near-fatal encounters that Dana is transported to his side. Brooks de Vita further explains that “Dana grows to see Rufus as both a detestable chore and a pitiful child. She is unable to create in her mind an effective balance between the two views” (18). Through Rufus’s rape of Alice and attempted rape of Dana, Butler illustrates the perpetual legacy of sexual violence against African
descendants by European and Anglo-American people in order to commodify, control, and otherwise subjugate them.

In “Bloodchild,” Gan and his Terran family are non-consensually enmeshed with the Tlic person T’Gatoi. Although Butler describes both the Tlic and Terran as people, the Tlic are the ruling class and differ from humans in that their reproductive survival relies upon using the Terran people as hosts for their eggs. The short story begins with the protagonist, Gan, describing the last night of his childhood. Gan recounts his Terran family being visited by T’Gatoi, the Tlican government official. Gan explains that “when [he] was little and at home more, [his] mother used to try to tell [him] how to behave with T’Gatoi—how to be respectful and always obedient because T’Gatoi was the Tlic government official in charge” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 3). Although Gan’s mother, Lien, explains that “it was an honor . . . that such a person had chosen to come into the family,” Gan observes that Lien “was at her most formal and severe when she was lying” (4). Gan’s last night of childhood begins with T’Gatoi offering the family some sterile eggs that “prolonged life, prolonged vigor” (3). Despite their life-sustaining and euphoria-inducing qualities, Gan’s mother Lien declines the offering, which causes Gan to question “why [his] mother denied herself such a harmless pleasure” (3). He also reveals that his father, “who had never refused one in his life, had lived more than twice as long as he should have. And toward the end of his life, when he should have been slowing down, he had married my mother and fathered four children” (3). As the story unfolds, Gan explains that T’Gatoi’s people, the Tlics, “wanted more of us made available . . . we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people” (4). While Gan naively describes his people as independent, the dynamics and subsequent exchanges between the Terran and Tlic people illustrate the hegemony that strips the Terran people of their agency.

Although Butler does not rely on time travel in “Bloodchild,” she infuses elements of science fiction to create a society that reflects the breeding practices and societal dynamics which are akin to the institution and practices of chattel slavery. Despite the characters in “Bloodchild” having fictionalized racial identities, Butler’s classifications of each race and the subsequent dynamics are similar to those between European and Anglo-American people and people of the African diaspora. The Tlic people’s survival is contingent upon their ability to procreate, and their procreation is sustained by depositing their eggs into Terran hosts.

In Kindred, Dana is unable to choose when she will be transported to rescue and otherwise care for Rufus, Alice, and other enslaved people; in “Bloodchild,” Gan’s family has little agency to liberate themselves from the breeding practices of the Tlic people. Similar to Dana, Gan and his mother understand that their safety and survival are reliant upon their compliance with and participation in the harmful practices and systems established by the ruling class. The protagonists in Kindred and “Bloodchild” “survive the tension between understanding their bodies as their ‘own’ and also recognizing their bodies in relation to pasts that exceed, leak into, the present moment” (Parham 1318). Butler uses the protagonists and their families to depict how race, gender, and class impact one’s agency. Butler’s juxtaposition of enslaved and enslaver/ruler and ruled, contextualizes how marginalized peoples are forced to negotiate what little
agency they possess to preserve and protect themselves and their loved ones. Ultimately, through her manipulation of time and setting, along with her characterizations, Butler illustrates the persevering implications and infrastructures of capitalistic cis-heteropatriarchy that contribute to the commodification, erasure and subjugation of, and violence against, marginalized individuals and communities.

Works Cited


Often described as an innovative and passionate multi-hyphenate, Candice Thornton (they/them/their) is a second-year humanities doctoral student and adjunct English professor at Clark Atlanta University. Candice earned their B.A. in art history from the illustrious Spelman College and their M.A. in English literature from Texas Southern University. While attending Texas Southern, Candice was awarded the Most Outstanding Student for the English department, Most Impactful Award from the Student Academic Support Services department, and the Outstanding Thesis Award from the Graduate School. Broadly speaking, Candice's research interests combine their love of Black folx, linguistics, comparative literature, and hermeneutics to examine how oral and literary traditions of the African Diaspora articulate the complexities of Black consciousness. Beyond academia, Candice enjoys tending to their loved ones, their business MN8Beauty, and their houseplants, as well as creating mood-based playlists, painting past-life portraits, and eating all the snacks.