

Octavia Butler: (De)Constructing Identity Through Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores the political work done by Octavia Butler's stories, and the efficacy of speculative fiction in creating productive dialogues around race, gender, and justice. By using the conceits of the genre, Butler is able to argue more effectively against racism and other power structures than many theorists and writers of realistic fiction. In giving a close analysis of two of her novels, *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, we can see how she uses science fiction and fantasy elements to peel back layers of normalization and reveal the inner mechanisms of injustice and systems of power. By reading her work within the contexts of other works by women of color activists, we can see how Butler's works of fiction function as activist texts in their own right.

For decades, speculative fiction – defined as the aggregate collection of the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres – was considered the realm of white men. Philip K. Dicks and Arthur C. Clarkes dominated the industry, the characters and worlds they wove inspiring millions, but their stories generally reflecting no more diversity than the authors who wrote them. A few men of color had made inroads to the world of science fiction by the 60s and 70s, but it was not until the publication of *Kindred*, Octavia Butler’s first novel, in 1979, that a black woman was able to make a name for herself in the world of science fiction. Though certainly, plenty of black women before her had been writing and conceiving of alternate worlds, other realities with their fiction, Octavia Butler is to this day considered to be the first African American woman science fiction writer. Despite the fact that most every speculative fiction narrative has its roots in real-world struggles of race, class, gender, and war, in its early years, these issues were only expressed through allegory and metaphor. Alien species might wage wars and bear prejudices unmistakably reflective of those here on Earth, but almost always, these works of fiction took on an airy stance of “transcending” race. Octavia Butler’s work, however, took this racial commentary to a level as of yet unseen in her time: actually including race in the narrative.

In a genre full of white humans re-enacting real world racial conflict with aliens and fantasy species, Butler took it upon herself to not only comment on issues of race, gender, and sexuality, but center these narratives around women of color. Karen Gagne, in her doctoral thesis, *Fiction as a Guerilla Activity*, argues that the responsibility of “rethinking the historically constructed Black/White duality of our time” (Gagne 4) lies with artists and academics. The creation of knowledge through art, fiction, and poetics is a key battleground on which the fight to define racial and social identities is waged, and to ignore this duty as an artist is tantamount to

complicity in the machine of racism itself. From her very first published novel, Butler unflinchingly takes on this political labor of addressing racism at its root. Black characters are at the center of every one of Butler's stories, and their race is never incidental. In some way or another, every story grapples with the historicity of blackness, decontextualizing it from the real-world backdrop against which we have learned to see these social constructions as normal and natural, and projecting it into an alternate present or a strange, unsettling future, in which its contradictions and injustices can clearly be seen.

Butler's work is not political *in spite* of genre; science fiction and fantasy are vital tools that she uses to pick apart the social relationships and constructions we see as inherent to human existence, pulling them open and inverting them in ways that might be almost incomprehensible through the lens of realism. One of the greatest challenges of evolving speculative fiction into a more effective tool of political work and social commentary, is to produce work that "imagine[s] political/social futures in which race does not simply wither away but is transformed, changing into something different and perhaps unexpected" (Kilgore 1), and Butler meets this challenge at every turn. Though her body of work is vast in subject matter and in the real-life political struggles it depicts and metaphorically addresses, this emphasis on using race and its constructions, not just as a metaphorical framework for entirely fictionalized struggles, but as a literal, core element of plot and theme is constant throughout her stories.

Any of her books could be used as the basis of a cogent analysis on Butler's political project, but two books in particular epitomize the political work Butler enacts through speculative fiction: *Kindred*, her first novel, and *Fledgling*, her last before her death in 2006. *Kindred* is a story about a black woman in the 1970s who accidentally travels back in time to the early 19th century to meet and live amongst her ancestors, a slave owner named Rufus and an

enslaved woman named Alice. Throughout the story she is pulled into the past against her will, away from her new house and her new husband, to save a white child from repeated brushes with death, only to realize that he is her distant ancestor, and that she and her family were borne of his rape of an enslaved woman owned by his family. The narrator, Dana, is forced through the science fiction function of literal time travel to deal directly with the historical trauma that black Americans must deal with more abstractly every day, and to face the violence of her own family history.

Fledgling is a novel about a black girl named Shori who wakes up wounded in the middle of the forest with no memory of who she is or what happened to her. As she begins seeking out her story, she discovers that she is a member of a vampire-like species called Ina, and that her family and her home were destroyed in a huge attack that left her without her memory. As she re-establishes contact with her family and her people, she learns that she is the only black Ina, and that she was the result of genetic experimentation to give Ina the ability to survive in daylight. Throughout the story, Shori's blackness both gives her unique advantages over makes her a target of physical violence and assassination attempts by other Ina whose prejudices cross the boundary between fantastical racial allegory and real-life white supremacy. Both of these stories uniquely use speculative fiction to address and pick apart race, gender, and sexuality through the lens of black womanhood, and in the sections that follow, I plan to outline the ways that they each seek to engage with history as a continually shaping force on contemporary identity, deconstruct notions of race as inherent and natural, and examine the ways that sexuality, gender, and race mean when taken out of the context of the social structures that created them.

Kindred

Kindred is, at its heart, a contemporary slave narrative. Slave narratives have been a staple of African American literature for as long as the genre is known to have existed, and even in the hundred and fifty years since American abolition, these narratives continue to be written in the form of historical novels. Barbara Christian, in her essay “Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something,” outlines the history of black women’s use of the historical novel as a way to examine and tend the open wounds that racism has left on them and their families. Throughout the history of slavery, memory was a rare, intangible commodity. Slave owners pulled parents away from children, separated partners, rewrote the narratives of their cultural roots, because “to acknowledge that slaves had memory would be to threaten the very ground of slavery, for such memory would take them back to a culture in Africa where they existed ‘in terms other than those imposed upon them by America’” (Christian 225). This artificial damming of the flow of history, of the passing of stories between generations for so many centuries is why history and memory are such vital functions in the work of many African American women’s writings, Butler’s included.

When Dana travels back in time to witness the brutal reality of her own family’s history, only three generations back, Butler engages directly with this resurgence of cultural and familial history that has so defined the work of many African American writers of her time. But unlike other writers, Butler is able to simultaneously engage with the scars of the past in the historical novel format, and work through the traumas that contemporary black women continue to face by placing a contemporary black woman into that context. History as a force that continues to push itself into the present is a common thread throughout this genealogy of African American women’s historical novels, but only by using the fantastical, the science fiction elements that many would consider a fair basis for discounting the novel as a legitimate literary text, is Butler

able to literally show how “the past finds its way back into our memory” (Christian 231). History – her family history, her racial history, the histories that never would have gotten told if not for her – draws Dana in inextricably as a maze, demanding that she come to terms with, as Christian puts it, “the brutality of the African-American past” (220) before she is allowed to move forward with her life and her current place in the world.

Explorations of the historical roots of race with gender, sex, and sexuality too, feature heavily in this novel, though their context is significantly less rooted in the fantastical than in some of Butler’s other works. The underlying conflict of *Kindred*, beyond her forced travel between the past and the present, is that in order for her to have ever been born, she will need to not only keep alive the rapist of her great-great-great grandmother, but also facilitate the rape itself. In the present day, the atrocities of slavery are often thought of in the abstract, as a distant memory that simultaneously has laid out the framework of our current reality and lies too far in the past to have any bearing on today. The rapes, the coercion, the countless assaults against black women that allowed for the continuation of slavery are painted as despicable in contemporary history, but intangible. This kind of normalization of the abuses that allowed slavery to sustain itself has the distinct aim of allowing, as Audre Lorde says in her essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” “racism to be accepted as an immutable given in the fabric of your existence, like eveningtime or the common cold” (3). Dana is faced with the reality that, just as these abuses and crimes against her female ancestors necessitated her very existence, “present-day constructions of black female sexuality are inextricably tied to slavery” (Lindsey and Johnson 181), and Butler insists that this not be normalized. By placing Dana, a stand-in for the audience’s contemporary viewpoint, side by side with a woman who is just like her, a few hundred years removed, Butler refuses to allow readers to see the sexual exploitation

and the histories of sexual abuse inherent to slavery as natural and normal. She does not allow them to be desensitized to the continuing impact of these histories on the lives, cultures, and psyches of black women.

Kindred takes on the mantle of the historical novel and twists it in a way that does not allow readers the ease and comfort of physical and temporal buffers. Dana is snatched up from her living room in modern America and thrown into the past. She is not safe, no matter how far she runs, and so readers, by extension, should not feel safe or comforted by their perceived distance from the violent history of blackness in America or from present day structures of racism. The persistence of history in African American women's historical novels, outlined by Christian, is made literal and present through science fiction. In line with this heritage, history is made into a character as tangible as Dana herself or either of her ancestors, its nature both insatiable and chaotic, like Rufus, and complex and life-giving, like Alice. History, trauma, and survival are inextricably interwoven in this novel, and Butler leaves the burden of the heavy tapestry they weave squarely on readers' shoulders.

Fledgling

Like *Kindred*, *Fledgling* also decontextualizes constructions of race and racism and moves them onto fresh ground, where their abnormality can be more readily identified, albeit in a very different way. *Fledgling* focuses on a fictional, vampiric, humanoid species called the Ina, and one young Ina named Shori's quest to remember her past and understand her place in the world. By placing this stronger, faster, near-immortal species alongside the world of humans, Butler creates a new racial dynamic unto itself. But rather than allowing readers to draw extrapolations from this fantasy dynamic and project them onto real-world racial issues, Butler

weaves in actual, real-world racism as a core function of the narrative. Most of Shori's struggles stem not from being inhuman, but from looking, physically, like a black woman.

In most popular narratives of science fiction, "race is envisioned as something we shuck off when we leave our bodies" (Kilgore 1). When we leave our human-ness behind, most speculative fiction racial allegories contend, we leave our concepts of race as well. Many speculative fiction stories that masquerade as enlightened and post-racial simply leave race and racism out of the formula, talking about the racial conflicts of today through the apparent vacuum of fictionalized struggles. But Butler's vision of race in a fantasy world does not insist simply on a transcendence of race, and captures even more incisively the ways in which race is constructed and how those constructions intertwine themselves insidiously into society. In the case of Shori, race literally is constructed, her skin tone the product of experimental genetic modification by her Ina family. Her genes were mixed with that of a black human woman's, making her not only of mixed race, but of mixed species background, and despite looking like a black girl, she has no more understanding of or connection to the African American heritage and culture than she does to any other human. Human concepts of race are projected onto her, and yet these concepts have very real impacts on the way she is treated.

Shori is the ultimate in the white psyche's fear of "miscegenation." While she is in the court of the Ina, seeking justice for the murder of her family, two outbursts from her would-be assassins highlight the multi-layered nature of their racialized hatred for her. While the accused are trying to defend themselves, fighting for their innocence, they claim "We are Ina. You are nothing" (*Fledgling* 272), and later, when the chips are down and they are found guilty, the accusation turns into more familiar racialized language, "Murdering black mongrel bitch" (*Fledgling* 300). Rather than having fictionalized interspecies conflicts act as a stand-in for

racism in her speculative fiction, Butler places the fictionalized conflict and real life racism side-by-side, so that readers are forced to really see the true nature of the rhetoric. She does not hide the real-life implications of racial or “species” purity from readers, but rather lays it out plainly and peels it open, so that we can better see how it functions and how it fails. From the mouths of vampires, typical human racism sounds absurd. Why should they care about the color of their people’s skin when they live for centuries, tending to their own society and pretending to be above petty human conflicts? By pulling out the roots of racist rhetoric and placing them in fantastical, foreign territory, the contradictions and absurdities of racism are made impossible to ignore.

Shori and the Ina in general also have a complex relationship to notions of sex and family. Their familial structures are complicated, living in sexually segregated groups and surrounded by “families” of symbionts, or humans from whom they regularly feed and who are addicted to their venom. Ina generally have sexual relationships with their symbionts, but much different from the procreative relationships they might have with other Ina. This unusual family structure, coupled with the fact that Shori, though she is over fifty years old, appears physically as a pre-teen, create a complicated landscape of consent and sexuality. In this way, it feels like Butler is not so much trying to make a specific moral statement about the sexuality inherent in the story, as she is trying to pull out and examine constructions of monstrous sexuality so often projected onto black women.

Despite being among the kindest and gentlest with her symbionts, Shori’s relationships, familial, sexual, and romantic are constantly called into question due to her mixed species (and more subtly, her mixed race) status. When she begins seeking an Ina mate, the legitimacy of the match is called into question, claiming that “here in the United States, even most humans will

look down on” (*Fledgling* 272) the children from such a match. When one of her symbionts is killed, too, claims of the inauthenticity of her connection to them used to again cast doubt on her belonging as an Ina. The sexuality of Ina is already set up as completely strange and unfamiliar to the sensibilities of human readers, but even within this context, Shori’s sexuality is twisted, made monstrous and “other” in a way that is distinctly reflective of the ways that black women’s sexuality has been twisted from the time of slavery until now. Treva Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson posit in their essay “Searching for Climax” that “the notion of race and its existence, are wrapped up almost entirely with the afterimage of slavery’s ‘monstrous intimacies’ and the shackling of black female reproductive power” (Lindsey and Johnson 181), and Shori’s experience of her perceived race, her status in the community, and her sexual life tangle together in a way that bears echoes of this history of sexual repression and control.

Reimagining Identity as Activism

In her famous essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde insists that real change to oppressive systems cannot be expected by using the language and the systems of oppression themselves. Liberation and justice cannot truly be gained through those same channels that hold us back from racial, gender, sexual, and economic justice. “What does it mean,” she asks, “when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?” (89). Octavia Butler, in every one of her works, refuses to fall into this trap of examining issues of justice and identity from a “transcendent” perspective. She uses the lens of black women to talk about the experiences of black women, and fantasy and science fiction are used to supplement, rather than replace, narratives of race and justice. Her work is not a high-minded fantasy, imagining a world without race, free of the problems we face

today, but rather a vivisection of constructed notions of identity and of the oppressive narratives that keep them in place.

Butler does not protest in the streets or seek political office, but through her platform of fiction, Butler generates a form of “social capital,” as theorized in Haunani-Kay Trask’s essay “Native Social Capital.” The political weight of her work, especially after the positive reception of *Kindred* soon after its publication, generates a kind of currency that can be spent again and again on causes of justice. Though placed in imaginary, alternate worlds with vampires and time travel, Butler uses her work to produce conversation, analysis, and criticism of the oppressive social structures that are so often accepted as inevitable parts of life. In this way, Butler heeds the call that Gagne sends out two years after her death. Historically, “American intellectuals performed this function [...] of providing intellectual arguments for a profitable legal and dehumanizing institution” (Christian 231), but Butler, first making space for black women in a literary canon they had long been excluded from, then insisting on a critical look at the realities of black womanhood through that canon, challenges the white-centric institutions of the arts and academia, just as Gagne prescribes.

The unique power of her work can be found in her use of the fantastic. Though many have written successfully and politically about race, gender, and identity through fiction before and after her time, Butler approaches issues of deconstructing and reconstructing identity from an entirely new angle that allows for a unique level of complexity, nuance, and depth. She makes literal that which is done metaphorically or theoretically in both the speculative fiction and in African American literature, using elements of the fantastic, the futuristic, and the strange. Butler uses the “symphony of anger at being silenced” (Lorde “Uses of Anger” 4) that so many black women experience, and turns it into a symphony of her own, a body of work that is both a love

letter and an inspection through microscope of black female identity. Sherry Farrell Racette's essay "This Fierce Love" outlines the intensity and the deep political work involved in women of color rediscovering their histories and creating art about their experiences. Butler's work shares a sibling bond with this canon of art, engaging unapologetically with the complicated histories and structures that shape notions of race, gender, and sexuality and working through both the joys and traumas involved in the heritage of her identity. When creating art that is reflective of personal and cultural identity, "the desire to generalize and idealize is a powerful force" (Racette 30), but throughout her works, Butler stays true to the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the formation of human identities. Her work dredges up racial and sexual histories from the depths of social consciousness, deconstructs the narratives that normalize and reproduce the inherent nature of racial oppression, and investigates the shifting and evolving nature of race, gender, and sexuality across contexts. As much as any theoretical text, Butler's fiction is a vital lens through which notions of identity are deconstructed and reimagined, and should be considered a form of political labor as intensive as that of any activist.

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