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Defining a Genre: Octavia Butler's Kindred and Women's Neo-slave Narrative

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Since the last decades of the twentieth century, a significant number of African-American writers have shown a strong interest in the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and have recovered the narrative structure and some themes from them.[i] There are many reasons for this collective desire to rewrite and re-invent a text-type which seemed to have lost its usefulness with the abolition of slavery. One of the most important is the will to re-affirm both the historical and historiographical value of the original slave narratives. For a long time the latter genre was considered unreliable as a historical source, mainly due to ideological prejudice and the nature of history writing. In this essay I shall speak of a number of contemporary novels by African American women that take up the motifs and themes of the slave narratives. These novels range from Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) to Phyllis A. Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998), but I will give special attention to a particularly influential text, namely Octavia Bulter's novel *Kindred* (1979). Due to its popularity, this novel perhaps best exemplifies the purposes and ideals that have brought this new genre to prominence.

The slave narratives written and published before the Civil War were usually instruments of the abolitionist campaign against slavery and were profoundly imbued with abolitionist ideals. For this reason they were later discarded as reliable historical documents.[ii] Yet, as Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates explain, “no written text is a transparent rendering of ‘historical reality,’ be that text composed by master or slave. The slave’s narrative has *precisely* the identical ‘documentary’ status as does any other account of slavery” (Davis and Gates, xi). Although it sounds obvious, the truth of this observation was ignored for a long time. And for an equally long time the historiography of slavery depended on racist prejudices and criteria which aimed to assert a hypothetical cultural, intellectual and moral superiority of the white race. One of the most important texts exemplifying this kind of biased historiography is *American Negro Slavery* (1918) by Ulrich B. Phillips.[iii]

According to Phillips, slavery was a civilizing factor for blacks, who lived as savages in Africa. Not only did Phillips deny any historical value to the slave narratives, but he also overlooked the whole history of African-Americans, which he considered totally marginal to the development of the white civilization. This line of thought is part of the political and social culture that was dominant in the United States until the middle of the twentieth century. It is an ideology closely rooted in social Darwinism and is related to the charactorological ideals set forth in the frontier thesis of Frederick J. Turner at the end of the nineteenth century.[iv]

Since the 1930s and the *Federal Writers’ Project* (1936-1939), different works appeared which helped to overturn Phillips’s perspective. Among these works are *Lay My Burden Down. A Folk History of Slavery* (1945) by B. A. Boktin [v] (one of the editors of the *Federal Writers’ Project*), Marion Wilson’s PhD dissertation *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (New York University,1946*)* [vi], and Charles Nichols's dissertation *A Study of the Slave Narratives* (Brown University, 1948).[vii] Significantly, opposition to Phillips’s perspective on slavery also emerged in other fields of study - for example, in the field of anthropology with Melville Herskovitz's important book *The Myth of the Negro Past*[viii] (1958). Yet, Phillips’s work remained the most authoritative historiographical work right up to the 1960s. The cultural predominance of the ideology that supported Phillips’s perspective was broken only at the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s with the birth of the Civil Rights movement and and the new political agenda of minorities, from blacks and native Americans to immigrants and women.

From the late 1950s, a new historiography began to emerge, yet its perspective was still narrow. In *Slavery – A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*[ix] (1959), Stanley Elkins proposed a new reading of slavery, but he completely ignored the slaves's direct testimony. In addition, Elkins's work reduces women slaves to the status of mothers and continues to underscore the supposed feminine and childish qualities of male slaves. On the other hand, Daniel P. Moynihan's report to the Department of Labour, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*[x] (1965), is based on the idea of a black matriarchal society which led to a lack of self-confidence in black males.

Only in the 1970s can we speak of a real revision of Phillips's thesis. In 1972 we have *The Slave Community – Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*[xi] (1972) by John W. Blassingame, and then in 1974 the groundbreaking study *Roll Jordan Roll*[xii] (1974) in which Eugene Genovese introduces the Gramscian concept of subaltern culture to reevaluate slave life and agency. Blassingame's book is particularly significant because it bases its historical reconstruction of life under slavery on previously ignored life-writing by slaves. In this way, he helped to reestablish the reliability and documentary importance of slave narratives. Other revisionist historians included Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman with *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery*[xiii] (1974) and Herbert Gutman with *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*[xiv] (1976). All these works focus on black men in an effort to reinstate their dignity and agency. Yet, all of the works cited above tend to overlook the role of black women, either by completely ignoring them or by reducing them to cultural insignificance.

During and after the 1960s, interest in slave narratives increased, and the feminist movement played an important role in the recovery of a series of slave narratives written by women, texts which broaden the slaves' perspective on the antebellum society. This rediscovery was also accompanied by a philological interest in sources and authors – it should be recalled that only in 1981 was Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*[xv] definitively accepted as authentic and could therefore achieve equal status with the classic autobiographical narrative by Frederick Douglass.[xvi] The slave narratives written by women introduce gender issues and questions of sexuality that were generally absent in the narratives written by men. As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu notes, the paradigm established by Douglass's narrative is based on the formula literacy-identity-freedom, "precisely the point at which male-authored slave narratives and female-authored slave narratives diverge.… Literacy becomes [Douglass's] key both to identity and to freedom" (Beaulieu, 8). Of course, literacy is also important in the slave narratives written by women, but it is not the symbol of freedom par excellence. According to Beaulieu, "Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, suggests an alternative paradigm, one representing family-identity-freedom" (Beaulieu, 9). In discussing the importance of women's slave narratives, Mary Helen Washington observes,

> When [Harriet Jacobs] comes to write her story, she encounters a problem that no male slave autobiographer had to contend with. The male narrator was under no compulsion to discuss his sexuality or his sex life; he did not have to reveal the existence of children he may have fathered outside of marriage. However, neither Linda Brent's [the protagonist of Jacobs's narrative, and obviously a pseudonym for Jacobs herself] sexual exploitation nor her two half-white children could be ignored in the story of her bondage and her freedom. The male narrator could write his tale as a reclamation of his manhood, but under the terms of white's society's ideals of chastity and sexual ignorance for women Brent certainly cannot claim 'true' womanhood. (Washington, 4)

In those same years (1960s - 1970s) in which the slave narratives were being rediscovered and republished,[xvii] a new phenomenon took shape, namely the rewriting of slave narratives by contemporary African-American writers. These novels are part of a broader cultural effort to rewrite and reimagine history from the subaltern's point of view, and can be said to constitute a new literary genre (which I shall call, along with others, the neo-slave narrative). Among the works written by women – and which seek to recover all those aspects of the female slave narratives that are absent in those written by men – we should mention Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Phyllis A. Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). These novels constitute a new genre *in fieri* and they all include narrative topics and conventions taken from a variety of different literary genres. As a consequence, it is hard to fit them into a single generic frame.

In fact, the different interpretations of Octavia Butler's novel exemplify the difficulties in categorizing these texts. *Kindred* is a novel about American slavery in the nineteenth century and, more specifically, about the condition of enslaved black women. But it also has a twentieth-century setting so that 1976 California alternates with antebellum Maryland. The protagonist, Dana, is a black woman who lives in California in 1976, the bicentennial year of American Independence.[xviii] On the day of her twenty-sixth birthday, she suddenly and inexplicably disappears from her home and finds herself transported through time and space to antebellum Maryland. Narratively, the journey back in time is not imagined or due to some process of mental or psychic displacement. It is all too real, as Dana realizes with her own body and as her husband Kevin witnesses. Six times Dana is transported to antebellum Maryland and then back again to twentieth-century California. Although these journeys through time and space remain unexplained, they are strictly connected to the life of the Maryland slave-holder Rufus Weylin. During her second time trip, Dana finds out that Rufus is, in effect, her white ancestor. By and by, she also learns that she is transported back to antebellum Maryland whenever Rufus's life is in danger; and she returns to twentieth-century California when her own life is at stake, or at least when she thinks it is. In antebellum Maryland not only does Dana directly witness life under the peculiar institution, but she also experiences it in person as she is forced to endure the harsh conditions of a woman slave.

Several generic labels seem to fit this work: historical novel, science fiction, memoir. In truth, *Kindred* exploits elements from all of these genres. The critic Robert Crossley affirms that "Butler's novel is an experiment that resists easy classification by blurring the usual boundaries of genre" (Crossley, xii). According to Sandra Y. Govan, Butler's *Kindred* is a rich text "which neatly defines the junction where the historical novel, the slave narrative, and science fiction meet" (Govan, 1986, 82). It is true that the novel presents science-fictional elements, but it also presents a very realistic portrayal of the conditions of blacks in the antebellum South. As a number of critics have noticed, *Kindred* is based on and indebted to the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, particularly those written by women (with pride of place being given to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*). Beaulieu defines *Kindred* as a neo-slave narrative, a genre that includes the novels I mentioned above (Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Sherley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.). Also Angelyn Mitchell argues that Butler's novel belongs to this kind of fiction, but she does not use the term "neo-slave narrative." Instead, she refers to it as a "liberatory narrative … a contemporary narrative that seeks to recuperate the past by engaging the tradition of the emancipatory narratives [i.e. the slave narratives]" (Mitchell).

This multiple terminology further underscores the innovative value of these novels and the fact that they are difficult to define. On the other hand, we can identify a series of elements which are common to the majority of the texts I have cited. I shall introduce them through a closer reading of *Kindred*. According to Crossley, "apart from the single fantastic premise of instantaneous movement through time and space, *Kindred* is consistently realistic in presentation and depends on the author's reading of authentic slave narratives and her visits to the Talbot County, Maryland, sites of the novel" (Crossley, xii). Crossley also observes that "Butler's own preferred designation of *Kindred* as 'a grimy fantasy' is a more precise indicator of its literary form and its emotional tenor" (Crossley, xii). Sandra Y. Govan sees *Kindred* as a historical novel and argues that "slave narratives, the first Black autobiographies, have a great deal in common with our understanding of the attributes of the historical novel" (Govan, 1986, 80); "*Kindred* is a neatly packaged historical novel which uses scenes of plantation life and the techniques of the slave narrative to frame the plot" (Govan, 1986, 88).

Simply by rewriting (after a century or more) the stories of lives and events of the past, the neo-slave narratives intend to assume a special historical value. In addition, they explore the closely woven bilateral relations between individual history and national history, which is typical of the historical novel. But contrary to the traditional historical novel, neo-slave narratives do not conform to official historiography or support any conservative vision or bourgeois ideology. These novels mean to be innovative as they seek to rediscover and rewrite a significant part of history that was deliberately forgotten and denied by the winners. In this sense we can actually speak of a rediscovery and recovery of African-American micro-history. This point has to do not only with a change in the scale of analysis. As Jacques Revel explains, micro-historians seek to detach their object of study from the commonly accepted model of social history which was, from its beginnings, explicitly or implicitly inscribed in a frame of macro-history (Revel, 554). According to Carlo Ginzburg, the choice of a rigorously defined and highly focused perspective is meant to express a dissatisfaction with the macroscopic and synthetic model of historiography (Ginzburg, 516-517). The close, small-scaled perspective allows us to deal with a level of experience that often escapes a comprehensive view (Ginzburg, 524). The results obtained using a microscopic focus cannot be automatically transferred to a macroscopic ambit, and vice versa. This foregrounding of the heterogeneity of scales embodies at the same time the greatest potential richness as well as the greatest limitation of micro-history (Ginzburg, 532).

The history of slavery was neglected for a long period because the nation's premier historians privileged the history of the so-called white nation. But also African American intellectuals tried to forget slavery when they fought for against segregation during the 1950s and 1960s. The figure of the slave was generally perceived as a symbol of the blacks' inferiority and subjugation. Even Malcolm X, one of the first leaders of the cultural and political struggle that led to the recovery of African-American history, aimed to recover his people's African history, namely the past that took place before the Middle Passage. Slavery in the new world was considered a long dark period during which the blacks were denied individuality and even humanity. Reduced as they were to the condition of animals or even things, the slaves could not possibly be perceived as cultural or historical subjects.

Neo-slave narratives set out to recover the African-American culture that was born and developed inside the plantation economy and culture, and they explicitly refuse all those stereotypes that were once accepted acritically by the black community and even appear in some of the slave narratives themselves. Take, for example, the figure of the obedient house-slave. Within a given plantation one could distinguish the slaves who worked in the fields from those who worked in the master's house. The stereotype of the house-slave depicts her/him as an obedient servant who accepted her/his condition happily, wanted to please the master at all costs and was even ready to betray other slaves in order to obtain a few privileges. This figure is connected to the master's point of view and to the latter's psychological and moral need to idealize his benevolent and paternal role. The house-slaves were probably less inclined to rebellion than the field-slaves. Nevertheless, they adopted subtle ways of resistance, perhaps less explicit and open, but nonetheless effective. An example of covert resistance to slavery is represented in *Kindred* by the character of Luke, a black overseer. Luke explains his way of resisting slavery to his son Nigel in these terms: "Don't argue with white folks … Don't tell them 'no.' Don't let them see you mad. Just say 'yes, sir.' Then go 'head and do what you want to do. Might have to take a whippin' for it later on, but if you want it bad enough, the whippin' won't matter much" (*Kindred*, 96). Significantly, Weylin, the master of the plantation, sells Luke because of his bad behavior and thus shows that even the masters understood that resistance to slavery did not need to be overt and explicit to be effective and subversive.

Neo-slave narratives further detach themselves from historical novels in that they give more importance to historical memory than to the narration per se. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy emphasizes the close relation between history and memory in *Kindred* and argues as follows:

> [Dana's] time travel is less important to the way she defines herself and her place in history than her narrative version of that time travel, a narrative version in which memory is the most important means of transportation. … Dana's act of memory … is more than a framing device for narrating her story. Her memory is a performance of history, a performance of such potency that it incorporates her into the past. (Rushdy, 137)

Not only is the novel a memoir of Dana's experience, but it is also introduced as a narration based on memory. At the very beginning of *Kindred*, in the prologue, the protagonist-narrator says that she "lost an arm on [her] last trip home" (*Kindred*, 9). Then she goes on to tell her story and explain how it all happened. Memory plays an all-important role in this novel. After her first and second trips back to the past, Dana tells Kevin, her husband, what happened and her narration assumes the guise of a historical reconstruction. History and memory fuse thanks to the device of time travel, a metaphor for the recovery of "what Ellison calls 'unwritten history' [a tool] necessary for African-American subjects precisely because the history is unwritten" (Rushdy, 138).[xix] We must remember that while the original slave narratives aimed to recover history, neo-slave narratives are based on a re-invention of history. According to Rushdy, in *Kindred* history and memory function to deconstruct and rebuild the concepts of community, home and family, so that Dana can reject her blood relative Rufus (her white ancestor) and yet recognize Kevin, her white husband, as a kindred spirit.

In their effort to re-present unwritten history the neo-slave narratives are part of a broader context which is characterized by the importance and necessity of remembering, testifying and passing on those parts of history that are so negative, horrible and traumatic that they seem unreal. The need to remember makes the history of black people under slavery similar to the Jewish experience of the Shoah. The two phenomena are very different, but in both the necessity to recover and value memory is present. In his book *Racism: A Short History*, George M. Fredrickson discusses in depth the analogies and differences between racism in the South of the US and anti-Semitism in Germany. But he does not compare the situation of the slaves with that of the Jews. Instead, he compares the racism used against the Jews in Nazi Germany with the racism levelled against the blacks in the southern states of the American Union in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the Jim Crow segregation laws were invented and applied. Also, Fredrickson explains that after WWII the virtually unanimous reaction to Hitler's final solution caused a general opposition to racial segregation in the public opinion of the western countries and helped to support the emancipation of the blacks in the United States.

American slave-holders in the seventeenth and eighteenth century never set out to kill their slaves, as Hitler did with the Jews. The two situations are completely different. Yet, the need of African-American scholars and writers to recall and restate the awful conditions of the slaves - conditions which were systematically overlooked by the nation's historians - parallels the need of the concentration camp survivors to tell their story. Again, although the two forms of racism were admittedly different and had incomparable consequences, both Jews and African Americans share the urgent need to remember. In *Kindred* there are a couple of explicit references to the parallel between the situation of the black slaves in America and that of the European Jews under Nazism. While Dana searches and reads books on slavery – "everything [she] had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject" (*Kindred*, p. 116) – she runs across one of her husband's books about World War II. It is "a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors. Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though" – Dana significantly comments – "the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred " (*Kindred*, p. 117). This comparison is striking, but it may seem superficial, since the Nazis planned to completely eliminate the Jews, while American slave-holders saw their slaves as valuable property. In both situations, though, there is a basic reification of people which helps to support the logic of extermination and exploitation of people as mere property.

Another reference to Nazism is introduced when Dana is obliged by Rufus to burn a book on the history of slavery that she had brought from the future. The protagonist thinks about "Nazi book burnings. Repressive societies always seemed to understand the danger of 'wrong' ideas" (*Kindred*, p. 141), she bitterly reflects. On this occasion, Dana also observes that the book Rufus had defined as "the biggest lot of abolitionist trash [he] ever saw … wasn't even written until a century after slavery was abolished." In it one could read about the positions of those who maintained "that slavery is good because, among other things, it gives poor whites someone to look down on" (*Kindred*, p. 140).

As I have already suggested, in *Kindred* we can find the science-fictional motif of time-travel[xx] and another typical characteristic of science fiction, namely the literalization of metaphor. Through this process Dana experiences first-hand the reality of a period that we can learn about and experience only through reading and interpreting the fragmentary historical reports that have survived. Significantly, Dana lives days, weeks, and months in the past, but when she comes back to her own home she learns that she has been away only for a few minutes or, at the most, hours. Thus, by the end of the novel Dana is one year older; but she has spent almost all that time in the past, as a slave, while in the time-frame of 1976 only a few weeks have passed. These temporal discrepancies suggest that although the recovery of the past seems to take a short time, reliving that same past is a dense experience in which the meaning of time expands, changing minutes into days, hours into weeks and days into months and years.

On the one hand, the science-fictional element has led some critics to identify *Kindred* as science fiction.[xxi] On the other hand, the science-fictional motif in *Kindred* is paralleled by the presence of supernatural elements in other neo-slave narratives, like Morrison's *Beloved* and Perry's *Stigmata*. We could trace a time-line that joins *Beloved*, *Corregidora*, *Kindred*, and *Stigmata* according to their use of historical setting and to the way in which they use memory and supernatural elements. In Morrison's novel the overwhelming presence of a ghost works as a central metaphor and as a way to recall the Middle Passage. In Jones's *Corregidora* historical memory of slavery and its abuses is passed on orally from mother to daughter. In *Kindred* time-travel represents a literalization of the metaphor of remembering. Finally, in *Stigmata* we could even speak of a form of supernatural memory (or metemspychosis) that again takes the reader back to the trauma of the Middle Passage.

The recovery of lost history and historical memory marks a substantial difference between such neo-slave narratives as Morrison's *Beloved* and Williams's *Dessa Rose* on one hand and Butler's *Kindred*, Perry's *Stigmata*, and Jones's *Corregidora* on the other. All these novels deal with the influence of the past and of slavery on (African-)American history. Yet, in *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* reference to the twentieth century is extra-textual and connected implicitly to the author's and readers' world. Instead, in *Kindred*, *Stigmata* and *Corregidora*, we have twentieth-century protagonists, characters and settings. Butler's novel analyzes the past and tries to relive and re-interpret it. Besides, it explicitly suggests that in the past and by means of the process of historical memory we can find the means to change the present and potentially the future. According to Lisa Yaszek, for authors like Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, both African-American writers, “science fiction provided more than just a way to re-present history; it allowed them to explore how such revisions might lead to new and more egalitarian futures as well” (Yaszek, 1058).

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[i] We must point out that, after the abolition of slavery, the structure of this kind of narrative and its rhetorical strategies notably changed. The opposition that lies at the basis of these narratives opposes the terms slave and master and not black and white. This is the reason why the very nature of the slave narratives changed after the abolition of slavery. Yet, the fact that black authors have continued to use these texts as sources of inspiration suggests their value within a logic of intertextual references and as fundamental elements on which any history of the African-American tradition has to be based (Davis and Gates, p. xiii).

[ii] This kind of prejudice also influenced the reception of the narratives written and published after the abolition of slavery and up to the interviews with ex-slaves collected in the 1930s, thanks to the *Federal Writers' Project*. These interviews were published in 1972 by George P. Rawick (in 1972 a first group of 18 volumes; in 1977 another 12 volumes; in 1979 the remaining 10 volumes; all these volumes were published by Greenwood, Westport, Co.) and are now available on the internet on the Library of Congress web-site:

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html

[iii] Phillips, Ulrich B. *American Negro Slavery*. New York and London: D. Appleton & co., 1918.

[iv] Turner's work denied any historical value to the native Americans' societies and nations. The latter were removed from the history of the white nation's development since they were considered savages and barbarians, and represented only an obstacle to be overcome. The speech Turner delivered in 1893 at the congress of the American Historical Association was then collected in Turner, F. J. *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920).

Following the same ideals that had inspired Turner, J. R. Commons edited and in part wrote *History of Labour in the United States* (4 Vols., New York: Macmillan, 1918-1935). This work excluded the immigrants (more than three quarters of the industrial workers in many cities) from the workers' movement. Vernon Louis Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927 [Vols. I-II], 1930 [Vol. III]) proposed a literary historiography which dealt only with the culture of the white civilization.

[v] Boktin, B. A. Ed. *Lay My Burden Down. A Folk History of Slavery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945.

[vi] The dissertation was published as a book in 1949. Wilson, M. Starling. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. New York: New York University, 1949.

[vii] In 1963 Nichols also published *Many Thousand Gone. The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

[viii] Herskovitz, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

[ix] Elkins, Stanley M. *Slavery. A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.

[x] Moynihan, David P. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington DC, 1965. The report was commissioned by the Department Of Labour, Office of Planning and Research in March 1965.

[xi] Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

[xii] Genovese, Eugene. *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

[xiii] Fogel, Robert and Stanley L. Engerman. *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1974.

[xiv] Gutman, Herbert. *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

[xv] Jacobs, Harriet (Brent). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. L. M. Child. Boston: Published for the Author, 1861.

[xvi] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.

[xvii] One of the first collections of slave narratives was published by Arna Bontemps in 1969. Bontemps, Arna. *Great Slave Narratives*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

[xviii] The reference to the meaning of this anniversary is openly stated in the novel. Moreover, Dana returns definitively to twentieth-century California on the 4th of July, the day the nation celebrates its independence.

[xix] Ralph Ellison introduces this concept as follows: "It is well that we keep in mind the fact that not all of American history is recorded. … Perhaps this is why we possess two basic versions of American history: one which is written and as neatly stylized as ancient myth, and the other unwritten and as chaotic and full of contradictions, changes of pace and surprises as life itself. … in spite of what is left out of our recorded history, our unwritten history looms as its obscure alter ego, and although repressed from our general knowledge of ourselves, it is always active in the shaping of events. It is always with us, questioning even when not accusing its acclaimed double" (Ellison, 594).

This unwritten history is closely tied to the development of democracy, since "in the underground of our unwritten history, much of that which is ignored defies our inattention by continuing to grow and have consequences. This happens through a process of apparently random synthesis, a process which I see as the unconscious logic of the democratic process" (Ellison, 596). This democratic process is nourished by all the cultures and ethnic groups that were and are part of the American nation, and that in turn have dominated some aspect of the nation's collective experience. Ellison explains: "What is more, our [American] unwritten history is always at work in the background to provide us with clues as to how this process of self-definition has worked in the past. Perhaps if we learn more of what has happened and *why* it happened, we will learn more of who we really are, and perhaps if we learn more about our unwritten history, we won't be vulnerable to the capriciousness of events as we are today" (Ellison, 612).

[xx] Another science-fictional motif appears as Dana, a black woman assumes the role of the "alien other" and represents both female alienness to patriarchal society and black alienness to a society ruled by white people. According to Yaszek, "for Butler, truly emancipatory engagements with – and revisions of – racist and sexist discursive practices depend on black women recognizing themselves as the alien other of those practices" (Yaszek, 1062-63).

[xxi] The identification of *Kindred* as science fiction is reductive and it is principally due to the fact that Octavia Butler is a science fiction writer. Yet, the mix of realistic novel, science fiction, and historical novel that we find in *Kindred* helps us to point out that Butler also brings original and innovative themes to science fiction inasmuch as she deals with race and gender issues. The fact that she is one of the few black, and probably the only noteworthy black woman SF author, puts her in a class of her own. She deals with themes that common SF writers have treated only marginally. Black protagonists are rare in SF and black women protagonists can probably be found only in Butler's work. This doesn't mean that all of Butler's SF has to do with questions of race or women's identity. Yet, she can deal with these themes from a privileged point of view, since they were never or seldom developed in the field of mainstream SF. Feminism is not a novelty in SF. There are many interesting works by women SF writers which deal with feminist issues. Instead, black female identity has not been developed, not even by Delany.

According to Crossley: "In the 1940s and no black writers and almost no women were publishing science fiction. Not surprisingly, few black readers – and, we can assume, very few black girls – found much to interest them in the science fiction of the period, geared as it was toward white adolescent boys. Some of it was provocatively racist, … Other books tried resolutely to be 'colorblind,' imagining a future in which race no longer was a factor" (Crossley, xiv-xv). Butler began to write science fiction when things were changing, especially thanks to the innovations introduced by women writers. "Butler's formative years and her early career coincide with the years when American science fiction took down the 'males only' sign over the entrance. Major expansions and redefinitions of the genre have been accomplished by such writers as Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ, Pamela Sargent, Alice Sheldon (writing under the pseudonym of James Tiptree, Jr.), Pamela Zoline, Marge Piercy, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Butler herself. The alien in many of the new fictions by women has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien (sometimes more specifically, the black woman, or the Chicana, or the housewife, or the lesbian, or the poor woman, or the unmarried woman). As American women writers began to abandon the character types that predominated in science fiction for a richer plurality of human types, they have collectively written a new chapter in the genre's history.

But the dramatic numbers of women writers subverting and transforming the conventions, stereotypes, and thematic issues of science fiction have not been matched by an influx of black writers of similar proportions. Samuel R. Delany, the first and most prolific black American writer to publish science fiction (beginning in 1962 with *The Jewels of Aptor*) has specialized in stylish and highly complex structured fictions more closely tied to European literary theory than to black experiences" (Crossley, xv-xvi). As a consequence, Butler's role in the possible redefinition, or at least renovation, of science fiction is central and very important for the genre itself and for its relation to so-called higher literature. Crossley underscores the importance of Butler' SF as follows: "If any contemporary writer is likely to redraw science fiction's cultural boundaries and to attract new black readers – and perhaps writers – to this most distinctive of twentieth-century genres, it is Octavia Butler. More consistently than any other black author, she has deployed the genre’s conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them, stories that speak to issues, feelings, and historical truths arising out of African-American experience. In centering her fiction on women who lack power, suffer abuse, and are committed to claiming power over their own lives and to exercising that power harshly when necessary. Butler has … generated her fiction out of a black feminist aesthetic. Her novels pointedly expose various chauvinisms (sexual, racial, and cultural), are enriched by a historical consciousness that shapes the depiction of enslavement both in the real past and in imaginary pasts and futures, and enact struggles for personal freedom and cultural pluralism” (Crossley, xvii).

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