

The Black Woman's Body, Disability and Reproductive Futurism in *Kindred*

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Kindred, by Octavia Butler, tells the story of Dana, who travels through time, navigating systematic racism and the oppression of slavery on her journey. Through Dana's story, Butler sheds light on the oppressive bio-politics of slavery which particularly target the black woman's body and her reproductive capabilities. In this paper, I will analyze how a white racist society in *Kindred* relies on slavery to protect the future of the white child through the exploitation of black women's bodies. My analysis draws on Lee Edelman's concept of reproductive futurism which argues that participation in the different aspects of life are solely done to create a better future for the next generations and thus the white child in the novel.

Reproductive futurism is a term coined by Lee Edelman in his work *The Future is Kid Stuff*. Edelman describes futurism as the understanding that "the Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). A society's socio-political and economic features all revolve around the child and the construction of a prefecture future for the child to live in. Edelman goes further into arguing that the race of the child also matters. Indeed, in most instances, it is the future of the white child which is cherished and protected at the expense of the black child and racialized bodies living in the present. Generally, scholars agree that the relationship between race and reproduction is heavily embedded within racism dating back to colonialism. Writers like Jacqueline Jones and Angela Davis have also reflected on the political implication of the activities black women do for their slave community but also for their masters and have concluded that black women's

work and bodies are the center of the exploitative system of slavery. Drawing on *Kindred* and incorporating Alison Kafer's argument that racialized disabled bodies are queer, I will demonstrate that a body considered disabled will affect how it is treated and how its reproductive capabilities are perceived and used for the future of the white child.

My analysis of the novel *Kindred* in relation to reproductive futurism reveals that black women's bodies are deemed abled-bodied or useful when they are capable of producing more slaves to contribute to the wealth of whites. Black women's reproductive capabilities are thus important to whites because they represent a way to colonize their bodies but also control their offspring. In contrast, black bodies are deemed queer when they do not add to the wealth of the system or do not follow the norm of how black women's bodies should be exploited. Edelman's claims can furthermore be seen through the plot of *Kindred*. What is interesting about her time travel is the fact that it is triggered by a succession of events that endangers the life of Rufus, a white child she finds herself having to protect to keep the slaves of the plantation alive but also to assure her own future. At this point, protecting the child becomes a necessity, "Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth" (Butler 29). Indeed, without Rufus staying alive and marrying her ancestor, she will not be born in the future.

Dana and all the slaves of the plantation find themselves having to work to protect the future of the child, Rufus. While the slaves of the plantation work to add to the wealth Rufus will inherit once his father dies, Dana realizes that her life is tightly linked to Rufus staying alive influencing the power dynamics of their relationship; "I didn't want him to get the idea that he could control it. Especially if it turned out that he

really could” (Butler 23). The slaves also represent the future wealth of the child as they are his future property. Drawing on Nira Yuval-Davis’ observations in “Women and the biological reproduction of the nation,” we can see how in the past, the institution of slavery has relied on the reproductive capabilities of women to acquire more wealth and build the future of generations of white children. In her paper, Yuval-Davis argues that the social position of women in intersection with their ethnicity and race “affect and can sometimes override their reproductive rights” (17). This is obvious in *Kindred*, in which black women are just seen as bodies adding labor to the plantation by producing more slaves. In this sense, black women are building a whole nation since “in addition to biological motherhood, women are producers in their own right, and reproduce the workforce through their role as carers and community activists” (Yuval-Davis 17).

Black women in particular suffer from this system because “she has to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic interests” (Davis 84). Jones similarly argues in her essay, “My Mother was Much of a Woman”, that black women face a double burden “represented in extreme form the dual nature of all women's labor within a patriarchal, capitalist society: the production of goods and services and the reproduction and care of members of a future work force” (236). This is relevant and takes place in both Butler’s novel, the American past and throughout history. In the novel *Kindred*, not accepting this system in which black women are supposed to prepare their children to be slaves and build the future of the white class will only result in punishment. As an example, when Dana fails to save Rufus’s father from dying Rufus blames her for it “you let him die” (Butler, 209). Punishing black women for failing to contribute to the “lives” of the white class also becomes a way to control them and control their community of slaves. As Yuval-Davis argues, “the rape of the black woman

was not exclusively an attack upon her. Indirectly, its target was also the slave community as a whole” (15).

Another scholar, Jacqueline Jones, also discusses the political importance of black women nurturing under slavery. In an era in which black women’s reproductive capabilities and the labor they add to the plantation were seen as one, it is important to see how the de-humanization of their bodies turned everything they do into a way to build the future of the white child. Jones argues that “[t]asks performed within the family context - childcare, cooking, and washing clothes, for example... contributed to the health and welfare of the slave population, thereby increasing the actual value of the master's property” (238). Simple activities such as getting married, bearing a child, having a family or social life all had a political implication in the American slave-holding culture before 1865.

In *Kindred*, whether Dana lives or dies depends on Rufus’ survival and his father, Tom Weylin, is aware of that and reminds Dana of this complex relationship. Even if Dana does not give birth to more slaves for the plantation, her body is still being used for labor and to protect the life of the white child. When she finally kills Rufus after refusing to physically give herself to him, she loses her arm because of the act. Her body physically suffers the consequence of being queer or not fully giving herself to what Rufus represents. In the novel *Kindred*, there is less choice for the other women of the plantation as they must physically give themselves to the white class by producing more slaves but also by rape. This also affects the relationship they have with other members of their community, as Davis points out, “the black woman is related to the slaveholding class as a collaborator” (82). Those collaborators, although valued by the white class, are

heavily criticized within their communities which does not see their collaboration as an act of survival.

Understanding how controlling the reproductive capabilities of black women affects kinship is important in the context of this paper because it sheds light on how accepting the exploitation of their bodies is a way to survive but also a form of resistance. Indeed, as Davis argues, “at the same time she could realize that while her productive activity was wholly subordinated to the will of the master, it was nevertheless proof of her ability to transform things” (89). Black women were the only ones really able to transform the lives of members of their communities.

Although Dana does not produce slaves, in a way she produces willing slaves by, for example, arranging the rape of her ancestor Alice by Rufus. Dana is thus still participating in the creation of Rufus’ future by providing him with a black body to abuse. However, Davis points out that the subordination of the black female body was “essential to the survival of the community. Not all people have survived enslavement; hence her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance” (89). In this instance, for the survival of her body and life, Alice must sacrifice herself by giving her body to Rufus. The importance of Alice going to Rufus herself has a greater symbolism as the slavery system does not only rely on black people giving their labor and bodies to the system, but also interiorizing the acceptance of such treatment for the future. Finally, controlling the reproductive capabilities of women by making them produce more slaves through rape was a way to control the whole community as “the master hoped that once the black man was struck by his manifest inability to rescue his women from sexual assaults of the master, he would begin to experience deep seated doubts

about his ability to resist at all” (Davis, 97). This is how the future of the nation and the future of the child is assured.

Black women’s bodies and reproductive capabilities are also exploited in relation to disability. Drawing on Alison Kafer’s definition of the term in her book chapter *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, a common understanding of disability conveys the idea that certain bodies are seen as not fit or unable to protect the future of the child as well as the idea that some genes are being viewed as negative while others are not.

In the context of *Kindred*, being black is seen as the negative gene that cannot be removed, no matter the relationship developed with the master. Imagining blackness as a form of political disability is important to analyze in the context of this novel because as Kafer argues, “Race and sexual orientation are often left out of disability debates, disability is being seen as more biological than the political” (81). Furthermore, this will shed light on the binaries drawn on the capabilities of the body as able or disabled and how this reflects on reproductive rights.

The novel *Kindred* presents a certain understanding of how black female bodies are considered either abled bodies or disabled/queer. Being queer is thus not contributing to the dynamics of reproductive futurism. An abled body is one that can add to the value of the plantation by giving birth to more slaves. Here the understanding of disability thus relies on black women’s reproductive capabilities. In contrast, a queer body is one that does not comply to these rules or does not add to the wealth of the future white child. Although Carrie is one of the only physically disabled character in the novel because she is mute, her disability is forgiven because she marries and produces more slaves for the plantation. The way queerness is understood in relation to disability is essential to comprehend in the context of this paper, because it helps understand how

the institutions of slavery are maintained by making the slaves themselves internalize what is considered queer. Carrie, the disabled character herself, is disturbed by the way Dana dresses; “She nodded, then plucked at my blouse, at my pants. She frowned at me. Was that the problem, then— hers and the Weylins” (Butler, 71). On top of that, Dana has never been pregnant which also disrupts the norms of the time she travels to, “no children by now? He frowned. You must be barren then” (Butler, 91). Dana is thus the only woman whose reproductive capabilities are not exploited for the future of the nation in *Kindred* and it is a problem as Edelman explains that “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (3). Being queer is thus also stepping outside of how this dynamic sets the norms of what is considered an abled body. This sheds light on the status of the black woman which Jones argues is dependent on the master; “when he needed a field hand, her status as able-bodied slave took precedence over gender consideration and she was forced to toil alongside her menfolk” (249).

In the context of the novel, an able-bodied woman is thus one who has accepted the loss of control of her body and consent to the institution of slavery in contrast to a queer one. “Not me” she said, he knows where I sleep at night” (Butler 183) says Alice once she understands how losing her reproductive rights and control over her body protects her. Remaining queer, however, leaves Dana with no choice other to kill Rufus, the child she was supposed to protect. Indeed, it is queer enough to love and hate Rufus at the same time but by not accepting being raped and losing control of her reproductive rights, she challenges the whole system of slavery and the dynamics of reproductive futurism, which I would say, cost her to lose her arm.

This paper has illustrated why it matters to control black women's bodies for economic reason but also for the sake of reproductive futurism. However, it also matters to control queer bodies because those have an influence because they threaten the norm. Indeed, in the context of the novel, one could say that Dana has influence not only on Alice's will to resist but also on Rufus' development from child to a less cruel slave-master than his father was; like when Dana says "maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come" (Butler 69). Queer bodies are thus a threat to reproductive futurism. As Edelman says it so well "The sacralization of the Child thus necessitates the sacrifice of the queer" (28). While some might see black women as contributors to reproductive futurism, I believe that rape and no reproductive rights also symbolize a form of resistance through the body because by sacrificing their bodies, black women protect their slave communities. In that way, even if black women were maintaining the institutions of slavery and assuring the future of the white child, they were also protecting their communities. It was an act of survival, whether recognized or not. On that note, analyzing the various ways through which black women used queerness as an act of resistance to challenge reproductive futurism requires further analysis.

Works Cited

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