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Restoring Black Women's Political Power in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*

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Abstract

This essay argues that in *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*, Octavia Butler restores Black women's historic role within communal power structures. Drawing on Imelda Whelehan's view of feminism as a contested territory, we show how Butler's protagonists deploy strategies of subversion—ethical transgression and gender crossing—to unsettle patriarchal norms and to build situated forms of political leadership. The analysis foregrounds three axes: (1) women's emancipation against patriarchal premises; (2) Black women's cultural politics of subversion; and (3) the projection of a free and egalitarian polity. Ultimately, Butler's speculative fictions model forms of Black female agency that link personal autonomy to collective transformation.

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Introduction

Robert Crossley contributed a critical essay to the 2003 edition of *Kindred* by African American science fiction writer Octavia Estelle Butler. In his commentary, Crossley echoes Charles Saunders's earlier concern:

> In 1980 Charles Saunders, himself the author of African-based heroic and mythic fantasies, wrote a lament titled 'Why Blacks Don't Read Science Fiction.' Twenty years later he published a more sanguine sequel in the *Dark Matter* anthology: 'Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction.' (Crossley 273)

This alert exposes the longstanding absence of Black voices in a genre that flourished in Europe. Emerging as a literary mode grounded in techno-scientific progress, science fiction initially reflected the ideological aspirations of European societies. Brian Stableford notes in *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia* that the term "science fiction" (Stableford 462), was first coined by Scottish poet William Wilson, who envisioned fiction dramatizing scientific discovery. Later, Hugo Gernsback popularized "scientifiction" through his 1926 magazine *Amazing Stories*, which ultimately solidified the modern term. Yet, these early conceptualizations of science fiction excluded Black experiences and struggles for freedom and self-definition. Only after the Civil Rights Movement did Black authors begin to use the genre as a space to reclaim memory and history, embedding Black life and politics within speculative futures.

Among the most prominent figures of African American science fiction are Samuel R. Delany, N. K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, and Tomi Adeyemi. Yet the most celebrated voice remains Octavia Estelle Butler. Born in Pasadena, California, Butler was raised by her mother and grandmother after her father's death. Witnessing her mother's subservience to white employers profoundly shaped her understanding of racial and social injustice, inspiring her lifelong engagement with Black women's condition and agency.

This essay examines Butler's *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*. *Kindred* follows Dana Franklin, a young African American woman transported from 1976 California to antebellum Maryland in 1815, where she confronts the brutal legacy of slavery. *Wild Seed* stages a struggle for domination between two immortal African beings: Doro, a male spirit driven to sustain his power through others, and Anyanwu, a female healer whose resilience resists his control. Both narratives open a space for reflection on feminine authority and the dynamics of power in African and African American contexts.

Through these novels, this essay explores the historic role and political power of Black women within structures of domination. From their African origins to the American diaspora, Black women have historically been central to communal and sociopolitical organizations. Consequently, this study asks:

what kinds of struggles do Black women confront within their historical and sociopolitical contexts? What distinguishes their assertion of power in patriarchal structures? Drawing on feminist criticism, particularly Imelda Whelehan's claim that "feminism is portrayed as a territory over which various women have to fight to gain their ground" (Whelehan 78), this study examines how Butler's female protagonists subvert patriarchal constraints to forge transformative models of leadership and equality. Accordingly, the analysis proceeds in three parts. The first section discusses women's struggle for emancipation against patriarchal premises; the second addresses Black women's politics of subversion of cultural norms; and the third evaluates Butler's envisioning of a free and egalitarian society.

1- Struggling for Women's Emancipation in the Landscape of Patriarchy

The narratives in *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* put forward the heroism of Black female characters. Indeed, the spatiotemporal travels of Dana and the voyage of Anyanwu all the route up to the American soil have shed ample light on the precious contributions of representative Black female figures in the meliorative changing of their community. Their contributions have had these impacts because of their distinctive traits of character and their tenaciousness to stand against the social barriers that hinder their accession to leadership.

Black women's leadership in Butler's novels inscribes a struggle against patriarchy and its authoritarian rules. In fact, the social politics of the societies depicted in her novels gives an overwhelming power to manhood. On the contrary, the female representative figures throughout these novels have never inherited social or political privileges. They have always steadily built their power and influence. In fact, Black women often confront a double-layered oppression. These oppressions are whether racism from the wider society or patriarchal norms within their communities. Struggling, thus, becomes not just a physical act but a deeply gendered and political one. For instance, in *Kindred*, the White masters used to work at "inspiring fear" (Butler 30) to the Black people be them males or females but instead of crawling under fear like all her Black counterparts, Dana shows to be different. In this way, she asserts her independence vis à vis the sociopolitical context dominated by racism and patriarchy. That is what bewilders Sir Tom Weylin, the Master of the plantation where Dana returns in her travels back to the past. Noticing the emancipated mindset of Dana, he bitterly recognizes that:

> You're something different. I don't know what—witch, devil, I don't care. Whatever you are, you just about brought a girl back to life when you came here last, and she wasn't even the one you came to help. You come out of nowhere and go back into nowhere. Years ago, I

> would have sworn there couldn't even be anybody like you. You're not natural! (Butler 205).

This confession by Sir Tom Weylin unveils his own fear and bewilderment before a Black young woman that, according to the social norms, should be of the most unprivileged people of the social strata. However, she clearly acts and behaves as if she is not concerned by the discriminatory and racist rules at work in that antebellum society against Black people. This is the result of a mind emancipated of all the submissive complex.

Consequently, the female figure in Butler's novels epitomizes the bodily inscription of women's resistance against sexism and patriarchal oppression. In fact, Dana's resistance in the face of Tom Weylin does not only symbolizes the resistance of the Black women against the patriarchal oppression, but it also schematizes the protestation of the Black community against racist subjection. In this vein, the figure of Dana releases the heroic hope of the Black community's quest for freedom. This quest of freedom thwarts the political agenda in course in that antebellum society of 1815. Dana holds up this protestation by replying without fear to Tom Weylin as depicted in this fierce dialogue:

> "You're threatening him!" he stammered. "By God, you are crazy!"
> "Crazy or sane, I mean what I say." My back and side ached as though to warn me, but for the moment, I wasn't afraid. He loved his son no matter how he behaved toward him, and he knew I could do as I threatened. "At the rate Mister Rufus has accidents," I said, "he might live another six or seven years without me. I wouldn't count on more than that." "You damned black bitch!" He shook his cane at me like an extended forefinger. "If you think you can get away with making threats … giving orders …" (Butler 201).

This bad-tempered argument between Tom Weylin appears to be of the more unexpected between a White master and a Black person whether his own slave or not. But Dana demonstrates her independent mind and fearless outspokenness as a way of resisting the sociopolitical order that categorizes Whites men as the top of the social hierarchy meanwhile it rejects the Black woman at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Fully knowing that withstanding the White master entails serious consequences, Dana dares defy Tom Weylin in order to break the psychosis amidst the Black slaves in his household.

By doing so, the narrative in *Kindred* offers to the reader a space for the reflection on overthrowing of their less honorable status as slaves, Black and women. Actually, Frances M. Beale coined the term "double jeopardy" to emphasize the fact that Black women are oppressed both because they are women and because they are Black. In *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, talking about Black women, she says, "as blacks they suffer all the burdens of

prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men" (Beale 90). Indeed, Black women experience oppression in an intersectional way, and this is such status quo that the character of Dana demolishes in *Kindred*.

In addition, through the character of Anyanwu, *Wild Seed* reinforces the power of the Black women, pinpointing to their position in the sociopolitical sphere that most of the time empowers them. In reality, Black women play important role in the political realm in many African cultures. This power positions themselves above the rules of patriarchy. Anyanwu gives such example for: "she was not used to men who could demand more. Though she came from a culture in which wives literally belonged to their husbands, she had power and her power had made her independent, accustomed to being her own person" (Butler 27). By this passage, it appears clear that power and women have never been dissociated in the Black people's culture. Going further, Asante and Mazama's *Encyclopedia of African Religion* provide important information on the highly political role of the Asantehemaa or Queen Mother in these words: "When a new king is required, the Asantehemaa or Queen Mother chooses the person for the role, and he is then selected by the council of elders and, with their permission, becomes the Asantehene" (73). Therefore, it can be seen that the Asantehemaa or Queen Mother in the Ashanti and Akan traditions plays the role of what is currently known as the President of the Supreme Court in the United States of America or the President of the Constitutional Court in Côte d'Ivoire and many other francophone countries.

Thus, the analysis in this part of the essay demonstrates that the female heroines of Octavia Butler are women who have chosen to assert themselves despite the hostile environment in which they find themselves. They are adopting a feminist stance in order to fight against the patriarchal and sexist oppression to which they are subjected. The stance taken by Dana and Anyanwu is perfectly illustrated by this statement from Bell Hooks, according to which "feminism is (…) necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates the Western culture on various levels" (Hooks 24). In fact, both protagonists Dana and Anyanwu fight for an egalitarian world in which they can exist as women without having to apologize for it. The following part of this work, will examine how the main protagonists of *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* resist cultural norms that promote their subjugation not only as women, but also as Black individuals.

2 – **Challenging Cultural Norms**

The female protagonists in *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* show an endowment with individual skills that allow them to slide from shapes to shapes or to attributes

deemed masculine or masculinizing. For example, Anyanwu's ability to transform herself and change identities depending on the situation and her own will aligns with Judith Butler's concept of performativity. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler argues that "there is no gender identity behind expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 33). Knowingly, Anyanwu challenges the rigid classification of culturally and socially recognized genders by transforming into multiple entities — even into a boy — thereby demonstrating that being oppressed for being a woman is shown to be contingent and performed, as gender is not stable but rather dynamic, shaped by each individual's experience.

The assumptions of Judith Butler's performativity match enough with the subversion of the traditional conception of femininity and masculinity. Indeed, performativity undoes the attachment of these psychological dispositions to a supposed biological determinism. Therefrom stems out the derivative construction of the individual sexuality and gender identity. Thus, this contestation appears as an insurgence against biological essentialism for it questions the pertinence of biology in the determination of the gender versus its construction as a social and cultural possibility. This clash on the conceptions on gender issues is depicted in *Kindred* when that highly patriarchal society's norms are challenged by Dana on one of the strict elements that make its cultural conventions.

In *Kindred*, Dana transgresses the ethical codes touching the how-to-dress. Granted that the antebellum society is a highly Victorian society, the effects of patriarchy were visible even in the way of dressing of the individual. When the so-called purity of the woman, and especially the white woman is to be expressed in her way of dressing; long and flowing dress, tight and loose garments can be allowed to the man. Instead of respecting these ethical rules dictated by the moral principles of the time, Dana chooses to transgress the dressing code in course in that society by proudly keeping wearing her tights with which she came back from her life of the year 1976 in California. Expectingly, Dana's attitude bewilders the inhabitant of Tom Weylin's plantation. This is what she recounts here:

> My jeans and shirts were too well known to Rufus's neighbors, and the dress Alice had made me looked too much like the dresses every other slave woman on the place wore. Besides, I had decided to become a boy. In the loose, shabby, but definitely male clothing I had chosen, my height and my contralto voice would get me by. (Butler 170)

Therefore, she willingly transgresses the dressing code of the Weylin's

plantation and even she conjugates that effort with her own natural endowment that are her heights and manlike voice so as to challenge the cultural norms of the antebellum society. The fact for Dana to insists and even willingly underlines masculine traits in her way of dressing and behaving demonstrates enough that she wants to re-imagine Black womanhood of the antebellum era according to the charms of the emancipated woman of the California of 1976.

Moreover, Dana subtly challenges the cultural norms of the antebellum society as a way to enfranchise the Black slave people. Undoubtedly, the fact of behaving differently as a Black young girl in a plantation full of Black slave makes a path for them to imagine a life with more freedom. When Alice, for example, sees the way Dana dresses herself, she can be tempted to overstep the dressing code of the plantation. In the same way, the fact for the Black slaves to see Dana taking some liberties with the plantation's codes inspires in their mind ideas of freedom. As far as he is concerned, Tom Weylin finds Dana's habits outraging as testified in this account:

> He stopped, looked at my dripping, clinging—to him—immodestly short dress. It was the kind of loose smocklike garment that little children of both sexes wore before they were old enough to work. It clearly offended Weylin more than my pants ever had. "Haven't you got something decent to put on?" he asked. (Butler 199)

This account is the testimony that confirms that Dana never works to adapt herself to the antebellum rules but rather she works to shake the sociopolitical and cultural norms of the antebellum society. Indeed, Dana's figure epitomizes the resistance to patriarchy, to racism and to the politics of domination. In this way, she resets the political power by inventing the way. In Weylin's plantation, she is a pathfinder in the politics of emancipation by her implementation of the agenda of performativity instead of remaining submitted to conservatism and its essentialist trend.

Furthermore, in *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu stretches farther the limits of gender. In fact, she overthrows patriarchy and its privileges among which domination and sexism by playing with gender identity. For her, gender identity is far from being a binary reality. Despite her current appearance as a female, she will pass from femininity to masculinity as soon as she must show power to be respected or to withstand a sexist violence. Such an example can be observed whenever she feels in danger as recounted in this narrative:

"No one will harm you," he said. He looked down at her. She always spent her days as a small, muscular man, but somehow, he could never think of her as masculine. He had asked her once why she insisted on going about as a man. "I have not seen you going about in women's bodies," she retorted.

"People will think before they attack a man – even a small man. And they will not become as angry if a man gives them a beating" (Butler 37). In this narrative, Anyanwu explains the reason why she changes her body and crosses the barrier of gender identity. For her, crossing gender frontiers goes back to struggle against the patriarchal rules and sexist violence. In the same way, crossing the gender frontier is an expression of power, power against patriarchal hierarchization that summarizes the existence of women to the satisfaction of males' domestic needs.

Anyanwu expresses the freedom of women as equal sex with men while contesting any subservience of the female to the male. Accordingly, she rejects the basis of the traditional gender roles. This rejection of the traditional values touching to the family by Anyanwu aligns with Colette Guillaumin's protest against women's exploitation in the household. Guillaumin refers to 'sexage' to denounce the numerous forms of exploitation women are submitted to. She observes that even for free women, that is non-slave women, sexage occurs to them under four main forms: "(1) the appropriation of women's time, (2) the appropriation of the products of women's bodies, (3) women's sexual obligation, and (4) women's obligation to care for whichever members of the family can't care for themselves as well as for healthy male family members" (Guillaumin 99).

Instead of accepting these cultural norms as part of womanhood, Anyanwu rejects the appropriation of her own life, desire and her body to be at service of Doro. This is, certainly, such a protestation against sexage that leads Anyanwu to activates her special powers as a means of contraception. She demonstrates how independent she is by showing her powers to control her pregnancies as detailed here: "Within her body, she killed his seed. She disconnected the two small tubes through which her own seed traveled to her womb. She had done this many times when she thought she had given a man enough children. Now she did it to avoid giving any children at all, to avoid being used" (Butler 114). As a result, the image of Dana and Anyanwu anchors the counter-discourse on femininity in the face of the patriarchal assumptions presenting females as weak and unproper for power.

3 – **Conceptualizing a free and Egalitarian Society**

The female figures, as seen in the novels of Octavia Butler, are donned with a power of counter-discourse on femininity that counters the patriarchal assumptions. When male figures are most of the time celebrated in white males' science fiction works as holders of power, Butler's science fiction novels put forward Black women as the story-makers. Assuredly, this partakes in the general politics of the subversion of patriarchy but rather this literary style reveals the importance of the feminine voice.

The novels of Butler also make the way through a comparative approach to the apprehension of the exertion of power according to the male/female and White/Black dichotomy. This comparative approach helps understand the male authority and his conceptualization of power in confrontation to the female authority and also his conceptualization of power. In so doing, *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* construct a new conception of power built on the basis of freedom and equality as respectively promoted by their protagonists Dana and Anyanwu.

Truthfully, the travels back in time of Dana hold a highly political discourse. Indeed, the psycho-historic force that calls her back in the past is a political, national, and even emotional call to recourse that is addressed to her as a Black and American woman; it is a call to cure her personal and national history. The fact that Rufus, her great great-grandfather, is a White man is a symbolism that calls for meditation on interracial issues in America. It sounds like a call for prudence against racist behaviors that are still perpetuating nowadays in America for the margins of racial classes show to be permeable.

Dana answers fittingly to the historic call to her inasmuch as she presses Rufus toward manumission practices. This political influence exerted by Dana onto Rufus knowing that she just had the status of a young Black slave girl describes the kind of power women can hold in the political sphere. In reality, through the figure of Dana, Butler's *Kindred* invites each one to meditate on the qualitative contribution that women can bring to the public and political affairs in a society in crisis as she testifies:

> And I, slowly, delicately, went to work on Rufus, began to push him toward freeing a few more of them, perhaps several more of them—perhaps in his will, all of them. I had heard of slaveholders doing such things. The Civil War was still thirty years away. I might be able to get some of the adult slaves freed while they were still young enough to build new lives. I might be able to do some good for everyone, finally. At least, I felt secure enough to try, now that my own freedom was within reach. (Butler 254)

This testimony by Dana reveals her positive role by Rufus' side in the freeing of many slaves well before the Civil War. This is praiseworthy because in a position, she has played on her soft-power as the only Black girl that Rufus could listen to positively influence and free some slaves for the happiness of some broken families.

Seemingly, in *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu struggles to found her own community of African people sold to be slaves on the American soil. The leadership and governance of that community is so exceptional that it is experienced as a severe sanction to be chased out of that community after an act that violates its moral and ethical rules. Anyanwu's exceptional leadership

and governance skills are described in this account:

> They were misfits, malcontents, troublemakers – though they did not make trouble for Anyanwu. They treated her as mother, older sister, teacher, and, when she invited it, lover. Somehow, even this last intimacy did nothing to diminish her authority. They knew her power. She was who she was, no matter what role she chose. And yet, she did not threaten them, did not slaughter among them as Doro did among his people. The worse she did was occasionally fire someone. Firing meant eviction. It meant leaving the safety and comfort of the plantation and becoming a misfit again in the world outside. It meant exile. Few of them knew how difficult it was for Anyanwu to turn one of them out – or worse, turn a family out. Few of them knew how their presence comforted her. She was not Doro, breeding people as cattle, though perhaps her gathering of all these special ones, these slightly strange ones would accomplish the same purpose as his breeding. She was herself, gathering family. (Butler 199-200)

This narrative shows a scathing difference between the management of power between a female figure of authority comparatively to the male figure of authority. In fact, while the figure of Doro is linked to authoritativeness, callousness, and the destruction of his people, Anyanwu's case is radically different. She is presented as a tender-hearted mother for her community. The foundations of her community are set on the principle of equality and righteousness so that being evicted from there is considered as a catastrophe. In her people's understanding, being expelled from Anyanwu's community equates to "leaving the safety and comfort of the plantation and becoming a misfit again in the world outside" (Butler 200).

Anyanwu's politics of management of her community is based on the principles of the emancipation from all kinds of dominations. In her community, no subjection nor sexist violence is admitted. The allusion to the life in the "plantation" is also a way of tackling the institution of slavery in the United States. As a result, Dana and Anyanwu symbolize the restoration of the Black women in the structure of power. Octavia Butler's heroines stand out as agents of peace and social cohesion, much like the Black women abolitionists who, during the antebellum period in the United States, fought tirelessly for the abolition of slavery.

Discussing the involvement of Black women in both abolitionist and feminist movements, Shirley J. Yee emphasizes their fundamental role in the pursuit of inclusive social justice and the challenges they faced. She says in *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860* that "black women abolitionists, by virtue of being black and female in antebellum America, confronted a particular set of tensions" (Yee 11). Despite the difficulties they

faced, Black feminists' activism went beyond the defense of their own rights and extended to a broader denunciation of racial injustices suffered by the Black community. Yee further notes: "throughout their writing, speeches, petitions, and participation in antislavery and self-help organizations, these women established a pattern of black female activism–centered on community-building, political organizing, and forging a network of friendships with other activist–that served as a model for later generations of black women" (206).

Thus, the ultimate goal of these activists was to promote a society based on freedom, equality, and human dignity for all. In this light, Dana and Anyanwu clearly embody the legacy of antebellum Black women abolitionists by adopting a feminist and antislavery stance aimed at ensuring freedom within their communities.

Conclusion

At the end of this discussion, the reflection on the historic role of African and African American women in the structure of power in their society reveals three realities. On the one hand, it clarifies that the existence of Black women as representative figures in the structures of power have always been the result of a steady and thorough struggle for their emancipation against patriarchy. This struggle goes from the expression of a counter-leadership in the face of the authoritarian rules of patriarchy to a resistance to its effects. Indeed, Black women reject the meekness as a quality of womanhood. They reject what Frances M. Beale designates as the "double jeopardy" of women. That is their alienation as Black and women.

Accordingly, Black women have considered as an avoidable walk on the paths on their freedom to challenge the socio-cultural norms that stem out of patriarchal cultural constructionism. In this vein, they go further by transgressing the gender identity. As a matter of fact, the insurgence against some ethical codes touching their role and their physical presentation in the society has been implemented as a politics of subversion against patriarchy. Black women also extend their insurgence against the social patriarchal codes to the crossing of the gender and sexual identity opting to the performativity in the sense of Judith Butler's conceptualization of the gender identity.

All these struggles have shown to point to main objective; the acquisition and exertion of power according to a new paradigm. Thus, the Black female protagonists in Butler's *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* epitomize the hope in a new political order built on the premises of the emancipation of the systems of the patriarchal dominations that are racism, sexism, and violence. Instead, they propose a society set upon equality, freedom, and the respect of human rights. By staging agency as practices of care, transgression, and

community-building, Butler's fictions reframe Black women's political power as both historically grounded and future-oriented. Speculative fiction emerges not as escapism but as a laboratory for egalitarian institutions.

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-***Science Fiction and Slavery Remembrance: Postmemory and the Power of History in Octavia Estelle Butler's Kindred*** (Lambert Academic Publishing)

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