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**“BETTER TO STAY ALIVE”:
DANGEROUS SPACES IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S *KINDRED***

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Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, as an example of the neo-slave narrative genre, differs significantly from other similar works by incorporating the element of time travel. Its position between high and low literature resulted in limited critical attention in the second half of the 20th century. Recently scholarly readings have increased: the present paper is an attempt to build on their findings by investigating notable dangerous spaces in the novel and how they encourage or negate dehumanization as well as by providing some thoughts on gender power dynamics. The protagonist’s journey south into the past reveals hidden aspects of human relationships and timeless issues.

Key words: space, place, slavery, race, gender, motherhood

Octavia Butler’s 1976 novel *Kindred* defies strict and clear classification if we take into account typical literary conventions and expectations. As a neo-slave narrative, it predates other famous examples of the genre like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986) by a decade¹. Besides that, Butler’s effort differs significantly from these other works with its inclusion of sf tropes and plots: most obviously the utilization of time travel. Even though *Beloved* reframes reality by making use of ghosts (in other works Morrison introduces magic, flying and other supernatural elements in a similar attempt to link the spiritual and material world), her novel is seen by many to be more firmly

¹ Butler proves prescient and examines slavery in a way that would ultimately evolve into a literary genre. In a similar way, she produces *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a book that takes a dystopian perspective on ecological changes before many people thought and wrote about these issues, and foreshadows a long line of books nowadays classified as eco-dystopias.

grounded in reality than Butler's. Most critics have difficulty reconciling a story that is supposed to mimic reality with time travel. As Butler herself explains: "The idea of time travel disturbed them. Their attitude seemed to be that only in the "lower genre" of SF could you get away with such nonsense, that if you're going to be "realistic," then you must be completely realistic" (McCaffery 1990: 65). In the 1970s sf writing or genre writing for that matter had still not attained a stable position in the American canon, so division across notions of high and low was particularly well established and kept. *Kindred*, as a book that neither answered the expectations placed upon traditional contemporary literature, nor continued the writer's sf interest in alien worlds and civilizations, did not receive that much critical attention initially. Some of the early articles and essays dealing with the novel's complexity appeared in the middle of the 1980s², almost five or six years after its publication.

Over the next decade, following the success of similar treatments of slavery, diverse readings of the novel emerged, but they still felt insubstantial. For example, in 2001 Angelyn Mitchell claimed that *Kindred* is a "novel which has not yet received a great deal of critical attention" (Mitchell 2001: 52), signaling the continued inherent bias involved in reading and analyzing the book. In the last twenty years there has been a definite increase in scholarly articles, including several published in the *African American Review*, one of the most authoritative and reliable journals grappling with the shifting African American reality and literature. Regardless of the fact that there have been one or two readings³ tackling the representation of space and place in the novel, none of them have been exhaustive, because for the most part they have considered space/place in connection to other leading thematic fields such as time, history or gender, without relying on geocritical theory to explain phenomena. As a result, the analysis of space/place appears as an addition to other more important questions rather than as the primary object of investigation. The present examination will not be exhaustive either, but it will attempt an alternative reading of space and place from a geocritical perspective. The analysis of physical spaces will lead to the discussion of other topics – such as

² See Govan, S. Y. Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel. // *MELUS*, 1986, № 13.1/2, pp. 79 – 86, and Salvaggio, R. Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine. // *Black American Literature Forum*, 1984, № 18.2, pp. 78 – 81.

³ See Myles, Lynette D. *Female Subjectivity in African American Women's Narratives of Enslavement: Beyond Borders*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 and Ampadu, Lena. Racial, Gendered, and Geographical Spaces in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. // *CEA Magazine*, 2004, № 17, pp. 70 – 78.

interracial relationships, gender power dynamics, movement/freedom, danger/safety, violence, belonging – and not vice versa. Ultimately, the article will raise the question whether it is better to stay alive in a space (and time) that degrades personhood, by tracing the main character’s (Dana’s) constant journey from Los Angeles to Maryland and back, and taking a closer look at the danger and possibility of a home some specific spaces allow for. Mapping the heroine’s journey, the researcher would be able not only to better understand her painful transition from place to place, but also to gain insight into the revealing use of spaces to encourage or negate dehumanization.

Even just a brief glance at *Kindred*’s plot makes it clear that this is a story about relations between the races. Dana, a young African American woman, who aspires to be a writer, starts traveling back in time to save one of her white ancestors, Rufus, from various dangers, so he would be able to survive and establish the necessary relationships that would lead to the main protagonist’s birth. While their relationship changes from mother-child to friendship to master-expected concubine, Butler ponders over the (un)healthy attachments that they form and the conflicting feelings they harbor. In the present, Dana is involved in another interracial relationship with her husband Kevin, which runs parallel to Dana’s repeated movement across time and space. The multiplicity and importance of interracial relationships have made some critics believe that the trips back to slavery, with their evocation of violence and oppression, function as a “narrative ruse” which hides the true purpose of the novel, which is to comment on interracial relationships in the second half of the 20th century. According to Guy Foster, the novel shows “deep anxiety” about “interracial sex and marriage” which “has more to do with the experiences of the text’s modern-day interracial couple and the difficulties they face as a result of oppositions to their relationship” than with “the forced sexual relations between enslaved women and white men” (Foster 2007: 144). It stands to reason that Dana’s present-day life, including her relationship with Kevin, would be essential to understanding the character’s motivation, but it would be too extreme to suggest that it is the core concern of the novel, which further inspires other questions about slavery. As literal and figurative orphans, Dana and Kevin grow close through their shared experience of underpaid labor, frequently compared to enslavement, and their love of literature and writing. To a great extent, Dana finds a place she belongs to when they start going out, later move in together and organize their shared space. After their first date she explains: “Sometime during the early hours of the next morning when we lay together, tired and content in my bed, I realized that I knew less about

loneliness than I had thought—and much less than I would know when he went away” (Butler 2018: 57). Only when Dana starts sharing her life with Kevin, does she realize how lonely she previously was. This opens an interesting avenue of inquiry: does she remain with him because she loves him or is she perpetuating this relationship because this is the first time she feels *not-alone*? What cannot be denied is the fact that there is a romantic spark between them, but it is unclear whether it would have endured if Dana had more options.

As a couple, they are immune to the dominant gender power dynamics of their day. A spatial example seems to be the most revealing of their expected underlying inequality. When Kevin and Dana attempt to merge their lives and households in the process, he suggests she get rid of some of her books so she could fit into his home as a space. “Kevin did suggest once that I get rid of some of my books so that I’d fit into his place. “You’re out of your mind!” I told him. “Just some of that book-club stuff that you don’t read.” (Butler 2018: 116). The books are a metaphor for Dana’s personality and drive. Kevin seems to feel as if she should mold and reduce herself to accommodate him and become a fixed part of his male domain⁴ (by mentioning book-club stuff he denigrates her activities and her dedication to writing). This is very similar to what Rufus attempts in the past when he polices Dana’s behavior and actions, but still does not want to let go of her because he is very attached to her. In both cases Dana does not back down and comes up with innovative ways to counter attempts to delimit her space and personhood. In Kevin’s case she turns the question around, asking him to remove some of his books, and the problem is never raised again. With Rufus her methods require more resolve: when he forbids her from communicating with eligible male slaves or going to their assigned places, and she has just one conversation with Sam James, he sells him to the highest bidder. In an act of rebellion and agency, Dana slits her wrists so she can go back to her own timeline. Butler supplies Dana with frequent boundaries to her position in different spaces as well as to her agency, but the heroine repeatedly aims at disrupting and overcoming them. At one point, however, she feels she has become complacent about her current state. She asks herself: “Was I getting so used to being submissive?” (Butler 2018: 245),

⁴ The other oft-mentioned scene where Kevin tries to draw a line of power between himself and Dana is the one involving his asking her to type a manuscript for him. When she refuses this perceived subordination, he almost ends their relationship, surprised at her strong reaction. Later, he will tell Rufus the story of Dana’s refusal, only for Rufus to try to use her for the same activity. In the past she is unable to refuse, which is indicative of the stricter limitation to existence during the time of slavery.

which indicates her incessant struggle to preserve a sense of strong identity. Her experiences in the past inform her opinion of her relationship in the present and at times make her unable to communicate with Kevin. For example, when she wants to explain how she feels about Rufus and his slaves, the only thing that Kevin cares about is whether she had a sexual relationship with Rufus. He says, “I had to know” (Butler 2018: 275) as if nothing else matters for the continuation of their marriage. Moving from dangerous places to places of miscommunication, Dana has a hard time preserving her self and body.

Kevin travels back in time with Dana only once, but he spends a prolonged period of time there – about five years. He is able to lead a more secure existence, which is still not completely safe; he does end up with a big scar across his face. What distinguishes his time in the past from Dana’s is his ability to move through different places without incrimination or punishment. While Dana is firmly attached to the Weylin plantation, Kevin has the opportunity to explore a broader variety of states plagued by the institution of slavery. Gillian Rose claims that restrictions on women’s lives become clearer when one looks at “differences [between women and men] in mobility, in movement through time-space, and in the constraints which caused this differential geography” (Rose 1993: 25-26). In Dana’s case her inability to move through spaces in the past is indicative of her limitations; her gender and race presuppose the cartography available to her. When she tries to escape, she gets caught almost immediately, having been betrayed by another slave. An earlier symbolic gesture foreshadows that her attempts will be unsuccessful: Rufus makes her burn the map of the area she has brought with her. Burning the map, she tells him: “I can manage without it, you know,” to which he replies, “No need for you to” [...] “You’ll be all right here. You’re home” (Butler 2018: 156). He convinces her to discard her ticket to freedom by attempting to instill a false sense of belonging to a home that so far has only wounded her body and psyche. Home as a concept then is utilized to restrict the available spaces of existence for women in the 19th century and not to provide momentary relief from trouble and struggle. Even though Butler sets the action in Maryland, so there would be a theoretical possibility of escaping north, she does not allow her female characters such obtainable and hard-earned freedom dissimilarly to Morrison’s freeing of Sethe in *Beloved* or to the usual path of protagonists in classical slave narratives such as Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1881).

Maryland is an interesting choice of state for a book that portrays slavery in the 19th century, because it is not the first place general audiences

think of when they consider the horrors of slavery. Despite the fact that it falls under the Mason-Dixon line and is the birthplace of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, it is not part of the emblematic region of the deep South. Angelyn Mitchell believes that this choice was not arbitrary and that Butler's purpose was to remind "her readers of how widespread slavery was and that slavery was not confined to the deep South" (Mitchell 2001: 53). In other words, Butler avoids preconceptions about history and place by selecting a state known for supporting slavery, but not predominantly remembered for it. This blurring of lines is similar to the one critics and readers experience when attempting to classify her book and fit it into neat literary categories. The past environment she paints is one of complex understanding of ownership, danger at every corner and extreme physical and psychological exploitation. None of her characters feel content – from the slaves who work at the Weylin plantation to the masters themselves. When analyzing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), William Cunningham suggests that "Morrison's invocation of the transatlantic slave trade frames the story of *Beloved* within the context of spatialized violence – a complex industrial and capitalistic endeavor that specifically targeted black identity" (Cunningham 2021: 273). The concept of spatialized violence, which emphasizes the spatial dynamics of violence and shows how types of racialization are created within physical space, might be applied to Butler's description of Maryland as well. For example, Mr. Weylin sells Sarah's (the cook and housekeeper's) children to pay for his wife's redecoration of the master's house, and Rufus does not stop the sale of some of his slaves due to financial troubles. To keep the system of spatialized violence running, masters and patrollers are ready to use whatever means possible (an escapee has his ears cut off, while his companion is given to the dogs to eat) to convince slaves that their condition cannot be changed, so they have to accept it. When Dana first travels to Maryland, the moment she hears what year it is, she starts thinking: "What was I going to do? Why hadn't I gone home? This could turn out to be such a deadly place for me if I had to stay in it much longer" (Butler 2018: 22). Dana is keenly aware of the danger lurking around her, though this first impression is only based on knowledge of history. When she sees and experiences violence firsthand her perspective does not change significantly, but her fear grows heavier with every return to Maryland. Danger becomes a leading motif throughout the novel as it serves not only as a force moving Dana from present to past and back but also as a presence always in the immediate vicinity.

Dana becomes a witness and victim to violence when she attempts to find the house of her female ancestors, who happen to be free blacks. What

she thought was a place of refuge quickly reveals itself to be one more space dominated by dangerous outside forces. Alice’s father, who is an enslaved man, decides to spend the night with her mother at her *cottage of freedom* without his master’s permission. Patrollers soon catch up with him. The scene that follows would not surprise modern readers but it was certainly a novelty for audiences in the 1970s, who had not read such an explicit depiction of dehumanization and abuse⁵. As Dana explains: “I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on” (Butler 2018: 33). Portraying the experience as one that invades a number of Dana’s senses (smell, hearing, sight), the author delves deep not only into the emotions of the person who has to go through the punishment, but also of the one who witnesses it on the sidelines. For the first time, Dana truly realizes the danger that looms over her. Worse than that, she internalizes her fear, making it a fixed part of her identity. While discussing Dana’s future, Octavia Butler was asked about her decision to leave the main heroine without an arm at the end of the story and she said: “She could not have come through this experience without having scars. This scar is physical but there are many other kinds” (qtd. in Ampadu 2004: 70). The other kinds she hints at most probably include behavioral transformations like the ones caused by being overcome by crippling fear. Dana is not able to inhabit her environment and relationships in the same way she did before returning to the 19th century. When all is over, she continues to peer back into the past. At the library, in search of records detailing events after her final journey, she says: “Why did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past” (Butler 2018: 295). The heroine is unable to let go not only of her physical wounds, but also of her psychological ones. To return to her initial attempt at finding refuge at Alice’s house: when the father is captured and the situation is supposed to de-escalate, things go awry as one of the patrollers decides to stay behind and take advantage of the available female bodies. Dana quickly learns that free slaves’ quarters are no safer than plantation spaces – a black person may not be beaten frequently, but they are still under (lawfully or not) sanctioned threat.

Further dangers await Dana at the Weylin house, where she eventually has to spend a prolonged period of time, helping Rufus recover from his

⁵ Slave narratives of the 19th century mostly kept a semblance of decorum, including sanitization of scenes of violence, because their authors wanted to attract white readers to the abolitionist cause.

latest near-death experience. Spaces like the fields and the cabin where slaves receive their punishment are immediately associated with severe threat and dehumanization. Initially, Dana only hears of (or is called upon to witness) what takes place there: complete bodily exhaustion, exploitation and abuse. These experiences serve their purpose of further increasing her anxiety and fear. In her words: “The whipping served its purpose as far as I was concerned. It scared me, made me wonder how long it would be before I made a mistake that would give someone reason to whip me” (Butler 2018: 97). In time, she is made to endure them herself and she nearly dies. Even though such spaces have a dominant role in the scholarly research of the reality of the period, they present no ambiguity as to their intended use and the danger they present. Other locations, which are originally presented as safe from outside forces, but later appear to be subjected to the same forces that define established treacherous spaces, are more telling of the danger permeating the environment. The cookhouse is probably the best example of such a location. When Dana first steps into it, she is shocked to learn that slaves do not mince their words there, as they feel that it is not under their masters’ control. Dana would even say it out loud at some point: “For as long as I had been on the plantation, it had not happened—no white had come into the cookhouse” (Butler 2018: 113). Sarah, frequently calls Mrs. Weylin “a bitch”, while the others openly discuss freedom and literacy.

Sarah seems to be the main driving force of the space. She not only nurtures her white masters by supplying them with a clean house and well-prepared food, but she transforms the kitchen into a space where slaves can find guidance, understanding and safety. With her coming there, Dana is quickly taught to cook, to clean and in a more general sense to take care of a household. According to Doreen Massey, “social relations always have a spatial form and spatial content. They exist, necessarily, both in space (i.e., in a locational relation to other social phenomena) and across space [...] the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location” (Massey 1994: 168). In other words, the social relations that transpire in any given place presuppose its use, boundaries and functionality. Sarah as a mother figure (one who has lost her children, but has continued to serve as an *othermother* to many of the other slaves) has repurposed the cookhouse into a place of nurturance, which allows for freer social interactions among the enslaved. At some point Dana mentions that she has taken “cookhouse advice” – a type of advice that can only spring in that specific location, which is free of the masters’ control. However, by the end of the novel, the cookhouse is no longer as safe as previously expected. When Dana decides to teach Nigel to read and write

there ⁶, the lessons proceed smoothly until one day when Mr. Weylin unexpectedly enters the kitchen. The heroine’s first thought is: “It wasn’t supposed to happen” (Butler 2018: 113), but it does happen. A vicious beating follows, which leaves Dana incapacitated and proves that all places on a plantation are dangerous. The description of the scene is harsh and vivid. “I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing as he beat me. By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain” (Butler 2018: 114). The real experience of abuse proves that the crippling fear she felt on the sidelines was not groundless. In the end, there is no place where escape and freedom in any real sense would seem attainable or existent.

So the question remains: Is it better to stay alive in such a dangerous place? Are characters able to find a home regardless of exploitation, violence, and exhaustion? Bell hooks famously said:

At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.

(hooks 1990: 148)

Hooks believes that home is a location where the individual is able to change their outlook on the world and think in a different way. She explains how she made the transition from a small-time southern lifestyle to university and racially desegregated places. If hooks progresses with her spatial movement, then Dana regresses when she returns to a slave past, but that does not mean that she does not entertain the illusion of home. In time, it does become clear that home is *nowhere* for Dana, even though she gains a fresh perspective in the new place. She does not fit so effortlessly in the 1970s anymore, while the 1810s continue to give her reasons to run away. Comparing past and present, she explains:

[I had to] remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place [the

⁶ On the topic of literacy, reading, and writing, the library is also an interesting place for exploration in further research. Dana’s experience of it oscillates between permission and prohibition. For more on writing, see Rushdy, A. H. A. Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. // *College English*, 1993, № 55.2, pp. 135 – 157.

Weylin plantation] as home. That was more than two months ago when I went to get help for Rufus. I had been home to 1976, to this house, and it hadn't felt that homelike. It didn't now.

(Butler 2018: 211)

Even though she feels unhappy in the past, her prolonged periods there affect her and she does find something to tether her to the Weylin house. It is not complacency keeping her there, but the relationships she forms with her struggling people; in the 1970s she cannot escape from her orphanhood and lack of meaningful community. Her bond with Alice becomes especially strong as they are frequently compared physically and psychologically. In a conversation with Dana, Sarah tells her:

[...] You and her was like sisters.”

I didn't need the reminder. I got up, feeling that I had to move around, distract myself, or I would cry again.

“You sure fought like sisters,” said Sarah. “Always fussin' at each other, stompin' away from each other, comin' back. Right after you left, she knocked the devil out of a field hand who was runnin' you down.”

(Butler 2018: 279)

This information is not new to Dana: she has already considered Alice as a sister-like figure. Throughout the story they fight and protect each other in equal measure, to unite against struggle and oppression. One of the reasons she is eager to return to Maryland as a place resembling a home is to help Alice cope with her imposed sexual relationship.

Dana's last arrival makes her too late. Rufus lies about selling his and Alice's children. Unable to face the pain, the heroine takes her own life. Connections between parents and children seem to be even more poignant when evaluating the possibility of finding a place of belonging. Children become anchors that fix characters and especially mothers into one place even though the children themselves do not receive description or detailed characterization. This is the case with Sarah, Carrie and Alice, the three main enslaved heroines. Weylin sells Sarah's children, but leaves one at the plantation to ensure her mother would not leave her. Carrie is encouraged to have a relationship and children with Nigel, so he would not attempt to run away again. Alice tells Dana directly: “I'm tellin' you, he uses those children just the way you use a bit on a horse. I'm tired of havin' a bit in my mouth” (Butler 2018: 263). Alice does not want to be a restricted animal anymore that is threatened with the disappearance of her children's prospects. She instead decides to escape with them in tow, rather than stay and protect them

on the plantation as Sarah and Carrie have done. Her plan will eventually fail and lead to her death. According to Linh U. Hua, Alice “finds only mixed pleasure in her children when she remembers their status as slaves” (Hua 2011: 398), but this does not sound completely reasonable. Would her feelings be mixed if she is ready to run away with them while they are still slaves? At any point, they might be captured and brought back to an even harsher environment. Early on Dana has no doubts about Alice’s feelings for her offspring when the latter tells her how the doctor killed her babies instead of healing them; only one survives: Joe. “I met Alice’s thin pale little boy and saw with relief that in spite of the way she talked, she obviously loved the child” (Butler 2018: 233). Alice’s later incessant desire to escape and her suicide only intensify the impression that she is ready to go to immeasurable lengths for her children. Without them, she feels that there is no possibility for a home, in either a safe or a dangerous environment.

Kindred raises a lot of interesting questions regarding the experiences of different times and spaces. The article’s focus on Dana’s time traveling, influenced by impending danger, reveals not only the explicit brutality usually associated with plantations and masters, but also the constant fear and threat instilled in all available places (even the ones considered safe like the cookhouse or free blacks’ houses). At one point or another, all enslaved characters have asked themselves whether it is better to stay alive in such circumstances – some survive, others are not so lucky. A particular emphasis is put upon children as a variable when slaves take such decisions. Further, slaves have entertained the idea of home, which sounds impossible, yet tangible due to strong human bonds. In fact, social interactions and relationships (be it husband-wife, master-slave, parent-child) drive the plot and the characters’ (non)-existent movements, though it is clear that Butler would not allow her struggling characters to escape. Dana is the exception but she is left with physical and psychological wounds to remind her of the past. Fifty years later, the novel feels as prescient and contemporary as when it was originally published.

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