Linda Scott

 Falmouth University

 25 Woodlane

 Falmouth

 Cornwall

 TR11 4RH

 Linda.Scott@falmouth.ac.uk

**Abstract**

Termed ‘the mother of Afro Futurism ‘multiple award -winning author Octavia Butler wrote one of her most renowned novels, Kindred in 1979. Often associated with the science fiction genre, this novel defies boundaries and highlights troubling themes, with Butler creating an ingenious narrative which enables the protagonist Dana to travel back in time to Antebellum America and experience the troubled world of her ancestors.

The focus upon Illustration is an analysis of the Graphic Novel adaptation ‘Kindred’ created by author Damian Duffy and illustrator John Jennings. Questions arise around the suitability of the format for such challenging themes and comparisons are made between the illustrations and those created for a Folio Society publication of ‘Kindred’ illustrated by James E. Ransome.

In her paper 'Saying Yes, Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's Kindred ', Marisa Parham suggests that ,'..texts like Kindred .. attempt to move specific histories away from the silent and shameful not by representing history .. but rather by bringing the historical past into the present tense, thus conjuring history's actualities - flesh, survival, and the things people do in the interest of the future’.

Through their creative collaboration Damian Duffy and John Jennings have brought these troubling themes to the attention of younger contemporary audiences who may not easily engage with purely text- based narrative and therefore enabled the conversation to evolve.

Keywords: Octavia Butler, Kindred, Transatlantic Slave Trade, John Jennings, James E. Ransome , Folio Society , Time travel

 **Dark Matter: Time Travel, Transmedia and the Transatlantic Slave Trade**

Award winning author Octavia Butler, hailed as the mother of Afrofuturism, wrote her most popular novel ‘Kindred ‘in 1979. Emerging out of the intersections of black music, religion, social movements, literature and technologies, the forerunners of the movement questioned the lack of representation of black people within science fiction pop cultures, whether that be in literature, art or comic book forms. In addition to the troubling central theme of the Transatlantic slave trade, ‘Kindred’ also explores time travel as a conduit for understanding the past of African American history ‘…this dance through time travel that Afrofuturists live for is as much about soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far - off future, the unchartered Milky Way, or the depths of the subconscious and imagination.’ (Womack,2013, p.2)

Butler, an African American woman is notable for being the first black science fiction author to be awarded the McArthur Fellowship, in addition to winning the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards. She cites ‘*a* *ridiculous*’ science fiction film that she watched when she was young as the catalyst for her writing, claiming that she could do better. Butler wanted to write books ‘*to put herself in them* ‘, a statement which reflected the lack of representation of strong black female protagonists in literature at that time. Black feminist author Bell Hooks stated that, ‘obviously, the dearth of affirming images of Black femaleness in art, magazines, movies, and television reflects not only the racist white world’s way of seeing us, but the way we see ourselves’ (Hooks, pg.6 ,2015 Gammage et al ) She goes on to comment further :’ These images become internalised and reflected in American understandings of black women.’(Hooks, pg. 6, 2015 Gammage et al) .

As Bell Hooks and Octavia Butler have both suggested, representations of black women at that time (70s) were caricatured and restrictive, there appearing to be two main roles attributed to them, one being the exotic and highly sexualised younger black woman and the other the ‘black mammy’. The first extremely reductive representation of black women is a sexually eroticised, exotic and somewhat predatory character. As author Shawan Worsley pointed out: ‘Mammy is a staple of antebellum Southern folklore. Typically depicted as asexual, she is rarely seen with a family of her own. She solely exists for her white master, her white mistress, and their children.’ (Worsley ,2009, p.13) Through repetitive exposure to limited and stereotypical representations, black women had internalised these restrictive roles. Literary pioneers such as Butler sought to redefine these limited templates and introduced characters into her work including her protagonist Dana, a young woman of her time who was feminist, strident, independent and free thinking.

Despite being the recipient of a number of science fiction literary awards Butler did not necessarily consider her writing as being associated with the genre, preferring to identify instead with the fantasy genre. Within the context of an interview published in ‘*Transcending Boundaries* ‘she forcefully claimed that she did not wish to be categorised as a science fiction author due to people’s perceptions of the genre being associated with a readership of fourteen -year -old boys. Much of her writing addresses challenging themes which are often political, historical, social, feminist and Afro Futurist. In addition to an ardent science fiction following, her work is also celebrated by the New Age community.

Butler used her novel *Kindred* as a vehicle through which to explore the thematically troubling Transatlantic Slave Trade as told through the perspective of Dana, the main protagonist of the story.’ No one wants to revisit the atrocities of slavery in the antebellum South. Forget the scariness of a dystopian future; the transatlantic slave trade is a reminder of where collective memories don’t want to go, even if the trip is in their imagination. But Octavia Butler defied time -travel norms by sending her heroine into American slavery …’

(Womack, p.154, 2013). Despite scholars suggesting that Butler had embedded slavery related themes in novels other than Kindred, she has contested this claim.

The novel was adapted as a Graphic Novel in 2017 by illustrator John Jennings and author Damian Duffy. Published by Abrams Comics it was the recipient of the Will Eisner Award in 2018 for best adaptation from another medium. Duffy has said that his work explores the intersections between comics and new media. Lauded as a trailblazer of the Afro Futurist aesthetic and an expert on Black Speculative Art, Jennings was an obvious choice when the team at Abrams decided to adapt Butler’s work. In addition to being an Illustrator, he is also a scholar within the fields of both African American Studies and Gender Studies and in addition, Duffy is a scholar within the field of comics. The pair collaborated on the development of the script.

Jennings’ visual representations of Dana and other black characters in *Kindred* are constructed from a personal, internalised and therefore subjective viewpoint. It should be pointed out that Jennings is an African American Illustrator and scholar and that the Graphic Novel was created years after Butler’s death, and although John Jennings was able to draw upon his personal experiences and those of other black Americans, Octavia Butler was absent from the equation regarding his visual interpretation of her characters. The question of an illustrator’s subjective representation of an author’s characterization is one to be considered, as it passes through a range of filters and subjective internalised images held by the visualizer. However, through undertaking research from the novel and elsewhere, Jennings’ visual representation of Dana is aligned with Butler’s written description of her. Her physique, clothing, hairstyle and behavioural traits align with Butler’s depiction of her character, and it has been suggested that there was more than a passing similarity to Butler’s own appearance, which has been described as masculine. On Dana’s first visit back to the plantation, she is described as looking like a man. Not unusually for the period (the 1970s) from which she travels, she is dressed in casual slacks and a shirt and wears her afro hair in a short style, which is in sharp contrast to the other African American women on the plantation.

As a young African American woman living in 1970s California, Dana is mysteriously and magnetically drawn back in time to Antebellum America in 1815 and finds herself embroiled in a narrative in which she at first, unconsciously plays a role in altering her own history as she is drawn further into a world inhabited by her ancestors. Within Science Fiction writing, the notion of the ‘alien’ has often been used in an allegorical sense to suggest racial difference and certainly, upon her initial calling to the Maryland plantation, from the perspective of other characters living and working there, Dana’s cultural and androgynous appearance sets her apart as a being from another world. *‘The contrast between time, space and location (antebellum Maryland and California during the nations bicentennial celebrations) foregrounds Kindred as a transcultural, transgenerational and historical novel.’*

We learn that aspiring writer Dana is married to a white, published author named Kevin. At the time of Kindred’s first publication such an interracial coupling was not impossible, however this was still considered radical in some circles. She discovers that she is somehow being called back in time to save the life of a young boy Rufus, the son of a white slave owner and as the story unfolds, we learn that Rufus is a distant relative. She is transported back to the past to ensure that history can successfully unfold so that Hagar her grandmother can be born. During the progression of the narrative, she returns multiple times to rescue Rufus from drowning, fire, a fall from a tree, an assault and illness. She does not travel of her own volition but appears to be summoned by Rufus, who somehow has the power to summon her when his life is endangered. As the plot thickens, we learn that the rape of a young black slave Alice, results in Dana’s birth further along the line. Butler received some criticism for including this particular theme as it was suggested that it perpetuated the Master/ Slave narrative, however as this was an accurate representation of the lives of many African American women who were slaves at the time and it was a key theme of the plot, she felt it relevant to retain.

In contrast to Jennings and Duffy’s adaptation, African American Illustrator James A. Ransome was commissioned to create a series of illustrations for ‘Kindred ‘by the highly regarded Folio Society in 2019. The tone of these images contrasts significantly from those created for the graphic novel, whose target audience is of a different demographic. Writing in the forward to the book award winning author Tannerive Due stated*:* ‘Butler asks the very challenging question of what would have happened if we had been alive during slavery? How different would our lives have been? Would we have our spirits broken…or would we have been defiant? What is the ultimate relationship between past, present and future?’ (Due, 2019). In her novel Butler attempts to tackle these questions through the experiences of the protagonist Dana and other characters in the story. Many contemporary black people have questioned the passivity of their ancestors who ‘seemingly ‘succumbed to slavery and this theme is alluded to in ‘Kindred. In his analysis of white artists’ visual representations of the transatlantic slave trade ‘Blind Memory ‘, Marcus Wood seeks to analyse and scrutinize a varied body of work related to the theme: ‘It constitutes a fascinating site for reconfiguring white anxieties relating to the capacities of African slaves to fight for their freedom.’(Wood ,pg. 9,2000) .Wood goes on to say that information he uncovered during his investigation is contradictory to the widely held belief that slaves were considered passive due to their supposed lack of resistance to the imposition of slavery upon them.

Ransome's illustrations convey a sensitivity in response to the challenging subject matter of the book. Unlike Duffy and Jennings’ adaptation, the illustrator chose not to include images of Dana travelling through time and of all the illustrations created, the only depiction of her in 1970s California is on the title page, where she sits in a hospital bed with her amputated arm in bandages - in fact, the point at which Butler begins her novel .In another image illustrated by Ransome, we see Dana on her first visit to the past, wearing the contemporary clothes of her time. Ransome skillfully uses the technique chiaroscuro to throw her figure into relief in contrast to the group of riders in the background who seem to recede into the night sky, an effect which is achieved through the use of muted colour palettes. His images avoid direct visual representations of violence, in one image there is a depiction of the white slave owner brandishing a whip – the point before the weapon makes contact with the skin. The allusion to violence is, perhaps more shocking than an actual representation of it. The reaction of the black slaves standing behind him, in terms of body language and facial expression provide cues as to what is happening or about to happen. The young boy grasping his mother conveys a sense of deep distress and other figures looking downward communicate the emotion of shame.

As the narrative of Kindred progresses, we witness Rufus’ growing desire for the young black slave Alice increase. It becomes clear that the young man’ displays a previously unchallenged entitlement to Alice’s body. When Dana informs Alice of Rufus’ intention for sexual access, Alice is adamant that she will resist if he tries to rape her.

In one particularly disturbing image, we see the character Alice hanging in a barn, having committed suicide after she has finally been raped by Rufus despite her rebuking his advances multiple times. The image is extremely potent - the use of cropping focuses the viewer's gaze to contemplate the shocking scenario in which Alice has taken her own life. The lifeless body hangs just above the ground and dominates the frame. Through the omission of the noose, Alice’s upper body and facial expression invite the reader to imagine the chilling scenario and the image is consequently all the more powerful. Again, Ransome treats a very sensitive issue with a real sense of empathy for the character and has resisted creating an image which might easily have segued into the realms of the grotesque, the limitation of visual information perhaps providing the character of Alice with some sense of dignity.

‘The social damnation of Black womanhood was introduced and enforced through Eurocentric systems of patriarchy that contradicted the indigenous social order of African communities. This foreign social order replaced the complimentarian and communal nature of African societies with a system rooted in individualism and male privilege. ‘(Gammage et al*,* p. 4, 2015)*.* As Gammage has pointed out, male privilege within the context of the plantation also included the violation of women and was commonplace.As conveyed through the heinous actions of Rufus, Octavia Butler demonstrated how he had inherited an almost unchallenged entitlement for sexual access to whichever black woman he desired whilst they were constrained within his family’s plantation and such unchallenged privilege enabled him to violate Alice, regardless of her resistance. *‘*Colonialism and European

enslavement of Africans further enhanced the hyper-sexualized treatment of Black femininity. Black females were seen as products to be bought and sold in the sexual marketplace, still reflected in the media today’ (Gammage et al, 2015, pg.8).

Ransome’s visual representations of the black slaves are devoid of caricature, which differs from many historical depictions of black people and therefore, his more realistic stylistic approach creates opportunities for identification and empathy from the reader. Such representations include variations in facial characteristics and as such, he renders each as an individual with humanity.

Butler does not spare her reader from the horrors of such a cruel system. By situating Dana within the plantation/narrative as a witness, she enables her to viscerally experience the intergenerational trauma of her ancestors. Author Toni Morrison, commenting on the theme stated:‘Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can’t do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanise, not just the slaves but themselves. They had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system true’(Wood,p.1 2000). As Morrison points out, in order to undertake such devastating brutality, one has not only to dehumanise those who have been made slaves, but also oneself. Ransome's image is both poignant and imbued with humanity. The compositional placement on the far - right hand side of the spread creates an anticipation of the force of the next lash. The reader's imagination is harnessed in anticipation of the force of the whip and the ensuing searing pain as it makes contact with the recipient of such violence. Themes addressed in the book include slavery, politics and gender – all of which still resonate powerfully throughout contemporary American society. Authors Spaulding and Steinberg’ view Butler’s work as both postmodern and revisionary and claim that *Kindred* is unparalleled in its ability to deconstruct both ‘body’ and ‘history’ through the lens of SF. ‘For centuries Black women have endured the continued social damnation that Dubois cites as a conflict between motherhood and work. These social orders forced Black women to operate as reproductive laborers, sexual laborers, and physical laborers and have not wavered in the 21st century’(Gammage et al , p.5, 2015 ).

As Duffy and Jennings’ adaptation progresses, we learn that Rufus is Dana's several times removed Great Grandfather, this shocking fact being revealed through the panel depicting the Weylin family tree in which Hagar Weylin (Dana's grandmother) who was born in 1831 is highlighted. The shift in colour palettes from subdued violets to Naples yellow and yellow ochre draws the eye to the panel and throws into relief a pivotal moment and shift in the storyline. Colour is used strategically here and elsewhere to punctuate key moments and shifts from one time and place to another.

Butler developed Dana’s character as a conduit through which she vicariously experiences the traumatic past of her ancestors. As the narrative unfolds, she becomes increasingly impacted by events that she both experiences and witnesses. From the very first to subsequent journeys through time, each event is preceded by her losing physical connection with her surroundings and being magnetically pulled into another time and dimension. Butler's written description of this force which draws Dana into the past resonates with what contemporary psychologist Peter Levine terms ' The Trauma Vortex '. In response to Butler’s description of these events, Duffy created visual representations of the vortex through which Dana transitions back through time, as a circular wheel of sorts, whose fragmented curvilinear marks suggest motion. In one panel Dana stands in front of the circular form which also contains a central, black vortex- like shape. She appears clearly distressed and clutches at her chest. The shift in colour palettes from dull yellow in the former panels to violet in the latter, visually signifies the shift from present day California back in time to Antebellum Maryland and in the bottom middle panel, we see Dana caught between the two worlds. Finally, the transition has been made back into the past as signified through a distinctive shift to a violet and mauve palette.

The amputation of Dana's arm towards the end of Butler’s novel, as she tries to free herself from the force which threatens to keep her forever suspended between the two worlds, is used as a plot device to reinforce the concept of the physical reality and embodiment of psychological traumas which are stored as memories within the body and is also a powerful symbol of the physical and psychological traumas that she experiences as a slave on the plantation. The amputation is an enduring visual symbol of her time on the plantation and perhaps it is also a signifier for that which resonated on a cellular level with regards to her ancestors, and which has now made a notable mark on her physicality.

As a consequence of this final traumatic event which occurs as she struggles to escape the past, Dana will always remain in her present life in California, physically altered both by her own experiences and those of her ancestors and as such, the amputation can be seen as a visual symbol of those events. If one accepts that trauma can be carried at a cellular level - present but unseen, the brutality of her injury shows the world beyond any doubt, that she carries the burden not only of present but ancestral trauma. Franz Fanon described the process of being colonized as a type of amputation and this aligns with Butler’s metaphorical injury to Dana: ‘Franz Fanon famously likens being colonized to being ripped apart and stitched back together. On one hand, for both the individual and the collective body, colonization is mutilization. ‘’What else could it be for me,’’Fanon asks, “but an amputation , an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood “.(Walter,p.63, The Blacker the Ink). Butler's decision to open the novel with a prologue heralding the story's ending, mirrors the circularity of inter -generational trauma which is alluded to in the narrative and is also a reference point to which one can return to as one is transported through Dana's experiences as she travels back and forth through time and is mimetic of traumatic memory as revisited through mind and body.‘Although African Americans today did not live as slaves, they nonetheless continue to experience the trauma of slavery. Indeed, slavery ﬁts the definition of a cultural trauma, which Ron Eyerman, quoting Neil Smelser, deﬁnes as “a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation’ (Worsley, p.5 2009).

**CONCLUSION**

As alluded to in Sheena C. Howard’s analysis of comics, there has historically been a lack of representation within the genre of more challenging experiences relating to African Americans. Damian Duffy and John Jennings’ adaptation of Octavia Butler’s ‘*Kindred ‘*can be seen as evidence of a process to redress the balance. ‘Over the last three decades there have been very little overt representations of the Black experience, though there have been several Black superheroes, including Spawn and Black Panther, amongst numerous others. Comics dealing with issues specific to the African American experience, such as racial profiling, discrimination, integration, etc. have been scarce, perhaps because these realities are swept under a rug in order to avoid state responsibility for them. This is an unfortunate reality for American youth, consumers of comics and popular culture at large.’ (Howard and Jackson, p.15-16 ,2013)

Jennings and Duffy, through their adaptation of ‘Kindred ‘have created a work that has the power to disseminate the theme of Transatlantic Slavery to a demographic of younger, marginalised and non - traditional audiences, who may not be as open to reading novels. In addition to themes alluding to slavery, the representation of Dana as a strong, black, female protagonist who challenges preconceived ideas of black women offers younger audiences and in particular girls, opportunities to internalise more positive and powerful role models. Dana has both agency and courage. ‘Black children often turn elsewhere to fuel their imaginations. The fantastical worlds of comic strips, cartoons, and comic books have the powerful potential to weave imaginary narratives that offer possibilities for seeing Black heroism. Nonetheless, it is possible to engage with these worlds and walk away with little understanding about either how Blacks have contributed to these genres or how Blacks have used these genres to transmit positive, political messages to consumers.’

(Howard and Jackson, p.12, 2013)

This comment by author Sheena C. Howard proposes that through the mediums described, black children might be exposed to images of more heroic black characters however, she also questions whether such representations are successfully assimilated and that a broader knowledge of how the genre might be harnessed to convey positive political messages might be overlooked. Perhaps the answer lies in how and where such material is accessed and absorbed and suggests that there may need to be further discussion that should ensue through engagement with both parents and educational institutions. Author Gareth Wood questions how visual representations might even begin to touch upon the gravity of the subject, ‘Art which describes or responds to trauma or mass murder always embodies paradox. How can aesthetic criteria be applied to describe the torture and mass destruction of our kind ? …the inheritance of the slavery and the memory of the slave trade, cannot be described in the sense of an objective recreation (Wood, pg.7, 2000). Perhaps, in consideration of Duffy and Jennings’ adaptation it could be seen as a tool through which the troubling concept of slavery might be introduced to younger, contemporary audiences who may feel disconnected from their ancestry. The concept could also serve as an initial gateway used for further investigation and analysis as is present in some school curriculums in America.

By writing ‘Kindred’, Octavia Butler was able to powerfully communicate the resonating trauma of her own ancestors. Through her character Dana, she created a young black woman who was seemingly liberated and living within the culture of 1970’s California whilst unconsciously carrying the burden of her ancestors. As she was drawn back into their past to live amongst them, their collective trauma was brought more fully into her conscious awareness and towards the story’s ending the physical injury to her arm became symbolic of a past she could never escape.

In his book*’ Blind Memory ‘*Marcus Wood has vehemently challenged historical visual and written misrepresentations of slavery by white artists. Focussing upon numerous images of the slave trade he analyses maps of slave ships, advertisements and illustrations in which black men and women are demonised. ‘Art can perform what is otherwise impossible: it can represent horror through beauty, it can see beauty in pain, it can force vision beyond the veil of salt tears, it can make the blind see. This achievement might not finally relate to orthodox morality, or a contented liberal ethics, very nicely, if at all…The challenge is to explore how art explores guilt, to come and see disaster through the unrelenting gaze of aesthetics…’(Wood,2000, p.305-6).

Whether the barbaric and tragic theme of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is explored through the mediums of art, music or literature, exposure to such challenging subject matter through these forms can continue to raise awareness of historical trauma. Abel Neeropol’s ‘StrangeFruit *‘*, written in 1939 and first recorded by Ella Fitzgerald powerfully and emotively communicated images that continue to haunt the psyche both through the metaphorical lyrics that depicted the murderous lynchings and through listening to Fitzgerald’s pained vocals which so powerfully convey the tragedy of historical abuses perpetrated against African American people.

That Octavia Butler, John Jennings and James E. Ransome, all African Americans, have attempted to bring the troubling theme of the Transatlantic Slave Trade before younger and contemporary audiences signals a shift in the dissemination of such challenging subjects. It is worthy of consideration to contemplate how Butler might have received such visual representations of her novel. Ransome’s sophisticated and nuanced paintings leave much to the imagination of the reader, whilst Jennings’ graphic representations of people and events aim to visualise the suffering endured by the slaves themselves with less restraint. As much as the illustrators themselves might wish to represent a particular ‘truth ‘with regards to the horrific treatment of slaves, there will no doubt, be constraints imposed by the art director, publisher and distributors of such work in addition to the marketing and selling of such work and in addition the geographical locations of bookshops will influence how the work is received.

That illustrators such as Jennings and Ransome have been commissioned to create more powerful visual representations of black women, could be seen as a progressive shift to empower a formerly marginalised demographic and is particularly noticeable in the case of Jennings and Duffy’s graphic novel adaptation of ‘Kindred’. Here Dana, a young black woman is shown to be physically and emotionally agile as witnessed through the depiction of her rescue of the character Rufus from drowning and in subsequent instances, she is seen to take charge of situations without any input from a male character. It is she who educates other slaves in the story and brings medication from her future world of 1970s California to help Rufus when he experiences physical pain. Through her novels, Butler represented African American women as powerful, intelligent and multifaceted beings. To create female characters who deviated from historical, racist and stereotypical representations, was a radical act of empowerment. She understood that in order for younger generations of black women and girls to fully embrace their own power and agency, she needed to create new role models with whom they could identify, internalise and thus challenge existing narratives.

Through their work authors and illustrators including Octavia Butler, John Jennings, Damian Duffy and James E. Ransome have created work for contemporary audiences that serve to remind us that the traumas associated with slavery still reverberate through communities today. Through her protagonist Dana, Butler attempts to cut through denial and enables her character to directly identify with her ancestors. ‘Slavery caused a mass of suffering which the victims might never understand themselves let alone be able to, or wish to, communicate……The testimony produced by slaves themselves, which is frequently projected through white creative and economic filters, is equally complicated in its relation to whatever we understand as historical truth’(Wood, p.8 ,2000).

John Jennings and James E. Ransome’s visual responses to Octavia Butler’s novel and Damian Duffy’s adaptation seek to address such inequities and attempt to enable the voices of those who were silenced to be heard. Author Rebecca Wanzo suggests that those working in visual media have the power to challenge existing historical representations of events and to create new work which will tell new truths from differing perspectives.

*‘*