

WHERE FACT BEGINS & FICTION LEAVES OFF: THE COMBINATION OF HISTORY &  
FICTION AND IT'S EFFECTS IN AFROFUTURISM

EMMA LAUGHLIN

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT**

African American novelists have continuously been drawn to antirealist genres, including science fiction and fantasy in order to revisit history. Focusing on the literary works of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and the theme of merging fact with fiction, I will be exploring the ways these modern African American female writers employ science fiction literary devices in order to revise, critique or reconfigure the past, present, and future of black culture. While doing so I will be questioning: is the use of paranormal or supernatural narrative devices effective at having audiences better understand the past or does it inhibit the understanding of the true horrors of slavery?

This project's purpose is to focus on merging the factual past with the future and how the cycle of marginalization and racism continues to transcend space and time. Each novel can be seen as a social critique that reveals the repercussions of slavery and how it continually disturbs American culture for those who have historically been ignored or unaccepted. These novels use fantastical elements such as the haunting afterlife, the metaphorical past in the present, and time travel mechanisms in order for readers to see the parallels of the past and present day. Through their emphasis on embodiment, healing and documenting, these two authors have tried to make it possible to retreat to the future so as to better understand how to approach the idea of the neo-slave movement and the unforeseeable future. Did they succeed at using Black science fiction to gain control of space, time and the autonomy of black people or did they purposely use anti historical and anti realist fiction in order to cast doubt on the racial progress of society today? More importantly, did these novels accomplish both?

**KINDRED**

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is about a young black woman and her white husband who are mysteriously transported to the antebellum South. Here they must adapt to society -- with Kevin "acting" like a slave owner and Dana who must face enslavement. Dana must continue her journey as a slave, as her birth depends on the life of slave owner Rufus, the antagonist of the novel. Dana must be resilient, strong mentally, physically and emotionally in order to survive. Her struggles remain constant as she has to deal with the physical and psychological agony of slavery in the past and the transcending emotional and relational punishments in the present. The transportation of Dana and her husband through space and time explores the nature of slavery, survival and interracial relationships of the past and present.

Sherryl Vint, author of "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives", explores the novel from the perspective of the genre of science fiction. She addresses how *Kindred* disrupts the traditional neo-slave narrative and the limitations it has on reality for contemporary, traditionally white, readers.

Vint stresses the influence of this novel, assuring that it has the potential to heal the fractures in American culture due to the issues that it brings up, that continue to arise today, such as interracial relationships, the sexualization of black women, and the psychological consequences of the past.

Vint proclaims that science fiction elements allow for a separation of the intellectual mind and body in the figure of Dana, proving that the consequences of slavery are not contained in the past. Dana, a very intelligent and capable woman knows the challenges of slavery on an intellectual, academic level. She keeps books about the past in her home, knowing it is part of

her culture and identity, however, not until she is faced with the real, physical struggles of slavery, does she understand that no one will ever know what it is like until it happens to them. This suggests that realism is insufficient for representing the truth about slavery and the institutionalized racism that still pervades American Society. The use of science fiction when balanced with traditional African American slave narratives demonstrates how we need to change modern thinking, not events of the past. It epitomizes the concept that we cannot change the past but we do have the ability to change the present. To this point, Vint says, “*Kindred* focuses our attention on the fact that the future is not sufficiently different from the past; that despite the Emancipation Proclamation, systematic racism persists in ways akin to the continuation of slavery” (Vint, 2007). After reading her critique, Sherryl Vint prescribes a way in which fantastical elements are deemed as necessary when trying to have readers better understand the past while also critiquing the lack of progress of the present. She claims in her introduction, “For authors such as Butler the reality of slavery and its unrelenting effects are thematically crucial; and combining the fantastic and the realist modes enables past and present to be mixed in such a way that the reader cannot simply treat the story as happening in a reality ontologically distinct from our own” (Vint, 2007).

Another few crucial elements of *Kindred* were the themes of physical embodiment and screened history. Marisa Parham examines these themes in her article “Saying “Yes”: Textual Traumas In Octavia Butler’s “Kindred.” She notes that these themes are present in our modern lives as well as in Butler’s famed novels. Throughout her article, she discusses Dana’s interactions with characters that reveal these themes and how they relate to the present. For example, Dana and Rufus display a racial power struggle that can be analogized to mean the past

versus the present. Dana and Alice's relationship represents accepting the past, and Kevin symbolizes the stagnant present. His ignorance and naivety is a metaphor for how much more we still need to learn.

*Kindred* is a non-traditional fictional novel on purpose so readers can relate to the events of the past more easily than through a traditional slave narrative. Parham believes that Octavia Butler's purpose was to make this book as easily accessible and understandable as possible so people could relate and empathize with the characters on a personal level. If we are unable to relate we cannot understand. This makes Parham rhetorically ask, if society will refuse to tie itself to the past, how can it ever change in the present? Butler's writing encourages us to observe and learn about the past differently and be more open to what it means to us and our identity.

Furthermore in the section titled "Screened History", Parham speaks about the time travel aspect of *Kindred*. She writes about how Dana and Kevin have knowledge about "how" they must live when they are sent to the past, however, she claims they could never truly know how to live. "In her novel, Butler creates for us a world in which the comprehension of history is only possible through bodily, actualized experience...Butler insists that there is no possibility for an experience of the past outside of the first-person experience." (Parham, 1322). This statement means that one must physically experience history in order to have real knowledge, otherwise what you believe you know will be inadequate and glossed over, like Dana and Kevin's experience. The time travel aspect is crucial for the purpose of the novel (Laughlin, 2019).

However, other critics may not agree, such as Myungsung Kim. Kim writes in her dissertation that, "While critics pay particular attention to the antebellum scenes of the neo-slave

narrative, seeing the novel as a historical document deeply anchored in the antebellum political milieu, the novel's future setting, 1970s California, remains much less observed. Reading *Kindred*'s time travel trope simply as historical realism postmodern variation falls short of recognizing Butler's critique of persistent racism in the supposedly post-racial world. It fails to notice, for example, modern U.S. culture false claims of racial blindness, depicted in the interracial marriage of Dana and Kevin" (Kim, 2017). This is an excellent observation for the opposite side of the argument: maybe fantastical elements DO affect how well readers understand the past or the major themes authors try to convey in their writings.

## **BELLOVED**

Next, we have Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This story is based on a real incident that occurred in 1856 where a fugitive slave killed her child when they were found in order to save herself and the child from the brutalization of slavery. Morrison reconstructs this occurrence in the eyes of Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, in order for readers to understand this particular mother's intention from the past and the real horrors of slavery. The purpose of this novel is to reclaim the unrecognized, inhumane past and to share this story with the future to ensure that history doesn't repeat itself. It also illustrates how the trauma of the past can haunt the present. Through factual events and fictionalized voices, Morrison recognizes the forgotten people in the history of slavery.

Again we can use Marisa Parham's article to understand the importance of science fiction devices when discussing history, especially thanks to her section about re-memory. Parham writes, " Butler evolves what could have been a very straightforward text about traumatic repetition into a book about haunting, into a text that stakes claim in the notion that one might be

required to experience a past that is not proper to one's self, but that nonetheless resonates with something in the self, a transmutation of history into an experience of reading, into a memory over which one can now claim ownership, rememory." (Parham, 1326). Though she is writing about Octavia Butler's *Kindred* in these few sentences, the statement remains the same in *Beloved*. This explanation capitalizes on the theme of self-identification. Through re-memory people can claim ownership of a story that speaks to them and that makes them who they are. This fantastical element is essential when trying to understand the past and think consciously about the present, as *Beloved* teaches us.

The novel focuses on how the African-American community has the ability to strengthen their identity and healing through the reconstruction of the past. Jewell Parker Rhodes explains, "Memory is a disorienting, disjointed function which Morrison captures through the complex layering and interweaving of her narrative structure. The process of memory itself becomes an event as states of mind provides for the incremental catharsis of the self. Rememory, on the other hand, is a revisionary process of memory, of seeing things for what they were, not for what you thought them to be at the time, of seeing things again in the light of present circumstances, and of weighing the value of past events in order to build a foundation for living in the present and the past simultaneously. Rememory is a way of finding your bearings in a historical context"(Rhodes, 1990).

The fantastical theme of re-memory is used to heal Sethe and encourage her to realize that all slavery was brutal and dehumanizing. Though for a long time she may have believed she had it easier than others at Sweet home, in reality, re-memory changed her perspective and

reminded her that her enslavement was just as cruel as anyone else's and that it ultimately left her unprepared to live soundly in the present day.

Throughout the novel we see Sethe building emotional walls up and fighting against her memories, becoming a reclusive homebody. However, when Beloved, (who could be the ghost of the daughter Sethe murdered while trying to escape slavery or the physical embodiment of grief as a whole), comes to Sweet Home 124, she becomes the perfect catalyst for Sethe to become integrated back into the community.

This supernatural or paranormal aspect of Beloved, whether she is a physical embodiment of grief or a ghost is one of the most memorable fantastical aspects seen in the Afrofuturism genre. This "ghost," is not just a supernatural element that puts *Beloved* in the Afrofuturism genre, but also it is the "spiteful," ghost of Sethe and the community's trauma. There is a reason to believe that her purpose is to bring up the trauma of the past and only when the main characters learn how to accept this grief does she disappear.

Sethe is most affected by Beloved's presence in the novel. Sethe loves her children and refuses to succumb to the notion she is not allowed to love them too much. She realizes her time as a slave was traumatizing, and she would rather kill her children than to ever have to witness them face that kind of brutality. In fact, she tries to murder them in order to protect them from slavery. She fails and only ends up murdering her youngest child. Her act of defense and harbored memories of Sweet Home consume Sethe. Her obsession with the past is described early in the novel, "But her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (Morrison, 79).



She holds onto the pain, the trauma and the guilt of her sorrowful life, until Beloved “returns.” Over time, she becomes consumed by Beloved’s demands to the point where the relationship between them becomes parasitic. The spiteful ghost is what enables Sethe to avoid her memories, instead, she chooses to tolerate Beloved rather than exorcise her. Rhodes explains, “Exorcism would require an examination of painful associations and though her brain deviously sends her snippets of memory, these snippets are less frightening than confronting the nexus, the core of her pain, her dead daughter, Beloved” (Rhodes, 1990). However, by not doing so Beloved uncovers many psychological and emotional layers--the sexual, familial, and sense of belonging to a community. Though her presence was necessary as a fictional element and a coping element, this relationship ultimately distracts Sethe from coming to terms with the loss of her sons and the living relationship of her reclusive daughter. Nostalgia and denial are easier to cope with than pain. Rhodes says, “Nostalgia becomes a force as the "quality of memory" carries its own truth which is distinct from the "truth" of the literal past” (Rhodes, 1990).

The once loving, assertive, strong-willed Sethe becomes a weak, ill victim at the hands of Beloved. At the end of the novel when Sethe chases Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick and Beloved disappears, that is the moment Beloved understands Sethe for the infanticide. Beloved sees how much Sethe ferociously loves her other children. After the disappearance of Beloved, it is difficult to come to terms with her absence. Sethe lays alone in the house and describes how tired she is. Paul D returns to be supportive while Sethe reverts back to her old ways of focusing on the past instead of the present. He tells her that they should remain together because they have a history together, which is something she can understand, but in order for her to learn and grow, she needs to focus on creating a future too.

Paul D's suffering was also explored by Beloved. The physical and emotional brutality and lack of security in his manhood caused Paul D to hide his feelings in the "tobacco tin" of his heart. Through this abuse, he discovered how to repress his memories by never loving anything. Though he finds that repressing his feelings works best for him, he somehow believes that using Sethe and 124 will guide him towards manhood. He has sex with Sethe and feels ashamed after, he begs to start a family, thinking to be the controller of a home will define his manhood and is rejected but, then there comes Beloved. There is a scene between Paul D and Beloved describing their sexual encounter, "She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, "Red heart. Red heart," over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (Morrison, 117).

Paul D's tobacco tin of a heart begins opening up once he and Beloved have sex. When she approaches him, this tobacco tin that was rusted and shut for so long begins to open up. This encounter made him feel like a man. This encounter made him want to redefine his future. This is a clear example of how Beloved confronts the trauma affecting the characters and breaks down the walls they created around themselves.

Finally, Denver desires a friend or a sister, especially since she has been experiencing emotional isolation her whole life. Denver believes she needs to depend on people, but Beloved helps her realize that she is strong on her own. The relationship began with Denver adoring Beloved because she no longer felt alone in 124. "Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged

her, hid like personal blemish..." (Morrison, 54). However, as the relationship progressed Denver found her love was not reciprocated -- Beloved only loved Sethe. When this love turned into possessiveness and malevolence, Denver learns to take matters into her own hands. She was forced to step outside of 124, find a sense of community and begins taking lessons with Miss Bodwin. Stepping out of her comfort zone in times of adversity made the once naive girl become a sincere, experienced young woman.

Each character has a very complex relationship with Beloved. Each relationship signifies what each character had to confront themselves. Sethe dealt with guilt and being stuck in the past. Paul D struggled with masculinity, manhood and releasing his sexual tension in healthy ways. Denver grappled with social isolation. Beloved guides these characters to open up and share their feelings to come to terms with the past, present and future, which is the "more" Denver speaks of. There is "more" to life than being stuck in the past and that all the characters are greater than what they have endured (Laughlin, 2019).

Beloved is the embodiment of an unacknowledged past, which ultimately links the factual history of slavery and the fictional elements of Afrofuturism. Based on the critiques and analysis of *Beloved*, the fantastical elements were necessary for readers to see the repercussions of slavery in the present day.

## CONCLUSION

Through the science fiction literary devices of time travel, re-memory, and physical embodiments, readers of the present day are able to revisit history. The use of these paranormal or supernatural narrative devices is seemed to be very effective at having audiences try to better understand the past, even if they fail in the process of doing so. These elements make the very

complex past of slavery, a bit more simple for the average reader to understand or empathize with. Morrison and Butler alike write novels for readers to understand that though they will never experience the trauma of the past, it still pervades the progress of the present day. The fact begins in the past. We must accept it for what it is and stop imagining what it may become. The fictional portion of these novels prepares us for the future. It gives us the courage to empathize, to understand and to aim for knowledge that can create a better future. In conclusion, each novel contributes to the Afrofuturism genre, the push for social progress in the future and the encouragement of African-Americans to take agency over their past, present and future.

Works Cited

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

Laughlin, Emma. "Kindred Article Summary & Critical Response." (2019). Unpublished manuscript. Western New England University.

Laughlin, Emma. "Beloved's Representation & The 'More' Denver Speaks Of." (2019). Unpublished manuscript. Western New England University.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.

Parham, Marisa. "Saying 'Yes': Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Callaloo*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2009, pp. 1315–1331., doi:10.1353/cal.0.0564.

Rhodes, Jewell Parker. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Ironies of a 'Sweet Home' Utopia in a Dystopian Slave Society." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 1990, p. 77. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=4109091&site=eds-live.

Sherryl Vint. "'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, p. 241. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4241524&site=eds-live.