



**The Black Female Body and Time Travel through the
Works of Octavia E. Butler**

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Abstract

This project argues that time travel functions as a literary device represented through the Black body in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*. This project includes four parts. The introduction begins with an intensive examination of the representation of Black women's sexuality and identity in American popular culture. Popular culture is essential to discussing the impact of Octavia Butler's work. Each of her protagonists operates against stereotypes of Black female physicality and identity. Specifically, this chapter explores Black female sexuality, and Black feminist and womanist theory to culturally ground the shift that Butler's work creates in the prescribed notions about Black women's physicality. Chapter 1 begins with a brief personal history of Octavia Butler. Chapter 2 is an examination of Butler's impact on the science fiction genre. Chapter 2 explores the genre of science fiction, its history as a white male-dominated field, and the shift that Butler's work makes due to her centering Black women. Butler presents characters that are non-white, and ungendered into the science fiction genre. Before Butler, race and gender were not discussed in science fiction. Characters that were identifying as something other than white males were voiceless background characters or incoherent aliens. Chapter 3 discusses time travel in Octavia Butler's novels *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*, focusing on the effects of slavery and violence. This chapter will discuss how the protagonist in both novels is the physical embodiment of the past. Chapter 3, specifically, explores how Butler's work on time travel and in historical context transforms the Black body. My conclusion ties together the works of Octavia Butler as a lineage for Black female writers from the past, present and future.

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Introduction: Black Identity in American Popular Culture

My interest in Octavia Butler began on the day after her death. I was pulling my middle school classroom back together at the end of the day. I turned on the news for a bit of current events and the afternoon broadcast when I heard “Black female science fiction writer found dead in her home.” I was startled by her death and intrigued by the fact that she was Black and wrote science fiction. The reporter went on to say that Butler had been a recluse and had recently denied interviews because of her failing health. As I researched Butler, I found interviews and lectures that left me asking: How does Butler see herself?” As the days passed after her death, interviewers began to ask questions about her sexuality. I haven’t read of any real-life partner that Butler had; however, she created deep meaningful relationships involving humans and other beings in all of her novels. I believe she viewed herself as one of the aliens she wrote about. Butler’s image of herself and her discomfort with being labeled, allowed her to create female characters that deal with their personal identity and sexuality. In my opinion, Butler’s own self-image was poor. On more than one occasion she referred to herself as a “freak” and characterized her own deep sultry voice as “masculine.” Butler was one of the first to struggle with being labeled androgynous. She did not fit the labels of Black writer or science fiction writer; she struggled not just with her place in the science fiction genre but her placement as a Black woman in America.

This introduction will examine the representation of Black women’s sexuality and identity in American popular culture. Specifically, this chapter looks at preconceived notions and stereotypes about the Black female body: the preconceived notions that we have of ourselves and

those that others label us with. I will briefly examine Black feminist and womanist theory and how Octavia Butler's writings contribute to representations of Black women through these frameworks.

Black women in America are in a constant struggle against the stereotypes and preconceived notions about how Black females should be sexually, and how their bodies move and operate. Saidiya Hartman, in "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," speaks directly to the treatment of the enslaved Black bodies. Hartman examines the body as subject to criminalized violence, inherently deserving of punishment, and a vessel for legitimized rape.¹ Hortense Spiller, in *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, examines the importance of recognizing the Black body as a historical place for "cultural and political maneuvers,"² Black women writers in American literature make particular efforts to formulate the perception of their bodies and define their sexualities in the United States. An example of this is the story of Saartjie Bartman. She was taken from an unknown part of Africa as a slave and then paraded around and caged in England and France as a freak because her physique did not correspond to Western standards. Instead of being treated as a human being, she was objectified and derogatorily dubbed as the Hottentot Venus. Hartman and Spiller's words encapsulate the static vision of the Black female body. These two articles, and the lived experience of Saartjie Bartman carve a roadmap to violence for the Black female body in America.

Evelyn Hammond in *Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality*: *The Problematic*

¹ Hartman, Saidiya. "Seduction and the Ruses of Power." *Callaloo*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 537–560. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3299219

² Spiller, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65. *ProQuest* <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/1297866645?accountid=10598>.

Silence, presents three issues arising from the construction of Black female sexuality from the nineteenth century to the present day. She says that,

The construction of the Black women's sexuality, from the nineteenth century to the present, engages three sets of issues. First, there is the way black women's sexuality is constructed in binary opposition to that of white women: it is rendered simultaneously invisible, and visible (exposed), hyper-visible, and pathologized in dominant discourses. Secondly, ...how the resistance to the dominant discourses has been coded and lived by a various group of black women within black communities at different historical moments...Finally, the limitations of these strategies of resistance in disrupting dominant discourses about the black women's sexuality...³

Hammond's themes of invisibility, visibility and hyper visibility coincide with the popular images of Black women on television. Although this article was written twenty years ago, there is still an oversexualized image permeating the identity for Black women. In recent news broadcasts, black women are pulled from cars, kicked in the face, and young Black women are brutalized in schools: American popular culture builds an image of the Black women that is extremely skewed. Media consumption has infected America from celebrities to unknown young teens, overly concerned with their outward appearance. "Gendered- racial stereotypes combine racial and genre myths to create specific salient misrepresentations of African American women. Black women are not in tune to these messages about themselves and may too

³ Hammonds. Evelyn "Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence". J. Alexander and C.T. Mohanty(eds), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

endorse these stereotypic views.”⁴ The images of Black women presented in popular culture have always focused on the Black female body. One of my objectives for this paper is to understand Butler’s interest in the connection between Black women in America and continued violence against Black bodies. Another goal is to explore Butler’s representation of the Black female body in a state of immortality, as supernatural and protected from harm and oppression. In the novel *Wild Seed*, Butler creates a Black female body that escapes death and can heal itself. What parallel is Butler making to real Black female heroes like her mother by creating the women in *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*? The works of Octavia Butler are deeply rooted in Womanist and Black Feminist Theory. Alice Walker, an American novelist, short story writer, poet and activist created and defined the term Womanism. “As Walker’s literary scope expanded and she developed into a more mature writer and political activist, she became aware of the need for a movement which would be different from feminism and which would offer colored women a space to formulate their own policy. She named it Womanism. Walker states: At the center of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment.”⁵ Walker defines a womanist as “a Black Feminist or Feminist of color who loves other women and /or men sexually and/or non-sexually appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s’ emotional flexibility and women’s strength and is committed to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”⁶

⁴Anglin, Deidre M. “Book Review: Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America.” *Journal of Black Psychology*, vol. 32, no. 3, Aug. 2006, pp. 390–394, doi:[10.1177/0095798406290471](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798406290471).

⁵ Izgarjan, Aleksandra (12/01/2012). "Alice Walker’s Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present". *Gender Studies* (1583-980X), 11 (1), p. 304.

⁶Walker, A. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic.

Walker firmly locates womanism with Black matrilineal culture deriving the word from “*womanish*” used by Black mothers to describe girls who want to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good for anyone” and whose behavior is “outrageous, courageous, or willful”⁷ “ Womanism reflected the decision of colored women to clearly state their objection to such an exclusive position of white feminists and to create a paradigm which would incorporate values important to them... Womanist wanted to decenter white feminist and challenge the normality of their perspective⁸ “Thus, womanism continues to reinvent itself and functions as an operational paradigm which carefully monitors processes of creation and definition of the roles women play in their communities so that previous mistakes can be avoided and essential balance maintained. Womanism is still dedicated to the struggle against oppression and fragmentation and against any kind of behavior whose goal is to denigrate a community or an individual based on the difference in race, culture or class. It can therefore be asserted that Womanism evolved from a policy to a philosophy of life. Walker voices this philosophy in her call to all women to create a platform based on the communality of female experience which would allow them to communicate better with one other. “⁹

Black Feminism aims to empower Black women with new critical ways of thinking that center around how to deal with racism and sexism. The aims to work together to address Black

⁷ Walker, A. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic.

⁸ Bryson, V. 2003. *Feminist Political Theory*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan.

⁹ Izgarjan, Aleksandra (12/01/2012). "Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present". *Gender Studies* (1583-980X), 11 (1), p. 304.

women social issues and inequalities.¹⁰ Butler provides clear and concise correlations between the Black body and the American timeline of cruelty against Black women. Butler constructs a scenario where the 19th and 20th century bodies of Black women are looked at simultaneously as subjects in struggle for equality and humanity and fighting against rape, and interrogation.

Octavia Butler's novels act as a paradigm shift. She provides a different scope for the Black women. On a broader level, it is imperative to express the tremendous implications, Octavia Butler's work has had in the past and currently has on the science fiction genre. While several of Butler's critics claim most of her work surrounds race, that assessment of Butler does not leave room for the political and social justice movements birthed out of her novels. Butler's black bodies perform in constant resistance to white dominance. These bodies are intolerant of stagnation and move through pain. Butler strategically makes race a conduit to a much bigger conversation about the societal issues surrounding the inability to accept difference.

¹⁰ Thomas, Linda. Womanist Theology, Epistemology and New Anthropological paradigms. CrossCurrents, Summer1998, Vol.48 issue 4.

Chapter 1- Octavia Butler

"Choose your leaders with wisdom and forethought. To be led by a coward is to be controlled by all that the coward fears. To be led by a fool is to be led by the opportunists who control the fool. To be led by a thief is to offer up your most precious treasures to be stolen. To be led by a liar is to ask to be lied to. To be led by a tyrant is to sell yourself and those you love into slavery."¹¹

-Octavia E. Butler

The writings of Octavia Estelle Butler have evolved through time and space. Her analysis of human behavior is specific to the treatment of and formation of the Black body. In each female protagonist, Butler places an element of physical difference, a body enhancement or body defect for the character to work through. Butler creates worlds where Black bodies are standing alone as able, intelligible and unconnected to whiteness. In Butler's future the idea of being "humane" is carefully examined. Octavia Butler uses time travel to draw parallels between Black women's experiences, during and after slavery. This chapter will address the importance of Octavia Butler as a science fiction writer, it will also examine Butler's impact on science fiction genre. This chapter explores the genre's dominant white male culture versus culture that Butler creates centering the Black female body.

Octavia Estelle Butler was born June 22, 1947, in Pasadena California. Her parents were Octavia and Laurice Butler. Laurice Butler was a shoeshine man. He died when Octavia "Jr" was a baby. Butler was raised by her grandmother and her mother. Her mother worked as a maid in order to support the family. As a girl she was known as Junie, this may have been derived

¹¹ Rogers, Stephanie. "Conversations with Octavia Butler." *Femspec*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 187-190,207. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1726394717?accountid=10598>.

from “Junior” her mother was also named Octavia. Always conspicuously tall for her age, Octavia Junior grew up paralytically shy, losing herself in books despite having dyslexia. Octavia Senior could not enjoy books, but brought home tattered books from the white families for whom she worked. Octavia Junior began writing stories as a child and soon turned to science fiction. She spent most of her time at the local Pasadena Library. She learned to love reading and eventually writing. She once pleaded with her mother to buy her a Remington typewriter but, not knowing how to type properly, she remembers “I pecked stories two-fingered.” Octavia faced undue criticism from nearly every corner of her life. Her aunt Hazel, upon learning of her nieces’ intentions to become a writer, tried to break it gently to the young dark-complected girl, saying “Honey, Negroes can’t be writers.” Butler didn’t stop. Butler attended Pasadena Community College, working simultaneously to pay tuition, and received an associate degree with a focus in History in 1968. She later took additional writing courses through UCLA. Butler also enrolled in the Screen Writers Guild Open Door Program at California State, Los Angeles. There she met Harlan Ellison¹², who encourages her to attend Clarions Writer’s Workshop. In 1971, Butler published her first story “*Crossover*” in a Clarions Anthology. In 1976 she published *Patternmaster*, in 1977 *Mind of my Mind*, in 1978 *Survivor*, in 1979 *Kindred*, in 1980 *Wild Seed* and in 1984 *Clay’s Ark*.

Despite the wide array of places, Butler was interviewed, there are a number of consistencies. Butler repeatedly tells interviewers that she is interested in social power and that she understands humans to be a hierarchical by nature. She tells interviewers that she “I aimed to challenge the conventions of science fiction by writing about the world as I knew it, a world

¹² Harlan Jay Ellison (May 27, 1934 – June 28, 2018)^[4] was an American writer, known for his prolific and influential work in New Wave of speculative fiction.

which included few white swashbuckling men and happily inexplicably submissive women.”¹³

The *Patternist Series* marked Octavia Butler's place in the science fiction world. The 5 novel series showcasing a matriarchal ruled society, where the strongest individual is a young Black woman was unheard of in science fiction before Butler. Butler created the art of actualizing the Black female body as powerful and independent through her protagonists. Butler dismantled the archetype for strength and power in science fiction and speculative fiction.

Joshunda Sanders: What about the science fiction or speculative fiction titles attached to your work.

Octavia Butler: Really, it doesn't matter. A good story is a good story.

If what I'm writing reaches you, then it reaches you no matter what title is stuck on it. The titles are mainly so that you'll know where to look in the library, or as a marketing tool, so they know where to put it in the bookstore so, booksellers know how to sell it. It has very little to do with actual writing.

This comment by Butler about science fiction and speculative fiction is very important.

Speculative fiction has many definitions. Speculative fiction is considered any story or sub story that is attempting to forecast or give clues toward what may happen in the future. Years after her passing, critics are still trying to stuff Butler's writing into categories and labels she didn't agree with. When an interviewer tries to label Butler as a science fiction writer this was her response:

“*Kindred* is not science fiction. The only reason I’m called a science fiction writer is because that’s the reputation I got early on. It’s like people have to have a label for you or they’re just not happy, and when I tried to sell *Kindred* that really gave me trouble,

¹³ Rogers, Stephanie. "Conversations with Octavia Butler." *Femspec*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 187-190,207. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1726394717?accountid=10598>.

because nobody wanted to buy it...People kept rejecting it, they said “Well gee, we like this, ... it’s well written, but we don’t know what it is. What they were really saying was “We don’t know how to sell it.”¹⁴

This interview showcases Butler ‘s focus. The importance of her work relied on whether or not she was reaching the reader. Butler explores the challenges around preconceived notions of race, gender, sexuality and humanity. Butler was writing about utopian and dystopian societies when it was not a part of American popular culture. Butler places Black women and people of color in battles of control against the dominating people and cultures. In the novels the dominating culture takes the form of aliens and hybrid species. Butler opens a world of possibilities to other Black female readers like herself who may not have thought science fiction suited them.

The 1980’s brought a great deal of recognition from the science fiction community to Butler’s work. She won the Hugo Award¹⁵ for short stories in 1984 for “Speech Sounds” and received the award again the next year. In 1985, Butler also won the Locus Award¹⁶ and the Science Fiction Chronical Reader Award¹⁷ for best novelette for her story “Bloodchild”. She

¹⁴ Kenan, Randall. “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, pp. 495–504. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2931654.

¹⁵ The Hugo Awards, first presented in 1953 and presented annually since 1955, are science fiction’s most prestigious award. The Hugo Awards are voted on by members of the World Science Fiction Convention (“Worldcon”), which is also responsible for administering them.

¹⁶ The Locus Awards are an annual set of literary awards by the science fiction and fantasy magazine *Locus*, a monthly based in Oakland, California, United States. The award winners are selected by polling magazine readers.

¹⁷ The Science Fiction Chronicle Reader Awards sponsored by the magazine Science Fiction Chronicle. The winners were selected by polling magazine readers. Discontinued in 1998.

then traveled to the Amazon rainforest and Andes mountains to research for her next novels, *The Xenogenesis Trilogy: Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989).¹⁸

Octavia Butler: I got my idea for the *Xenogenesis* books from Ronald Reagan, because he was advocating this kind of thing. I thought there must be something basic, something really genetically wrong with us if we're falling for this stuff. And I came up with these characteristics. The aliens arrive after the war and they tell us that we have these two characteristics that don't work and play well together. They are intelligent, and they tell us we're the most intelligent species they've come across. But we're also hierarchical. And I put this after the big war because it's kind of an example. We've one-upped ourselves to death, just our tendency to one-up each other as individuals and groups, large and small.

Butler's ideas about race and tolerance have led to a generation of activists, artists, and musicians and invite into the science fiction world. The genre of science fiction should engage diversity and create multiple identities the way Butler's writing does. In 1990's Butler wrote *Parable of the Sower*, and *Parable of the Talents*. The setting of "*The Parables Series*"¹⁹ were in the 2020's. In this dystopian future, society is vanished due to climate change, vast wealth inequality and corporate greed. In 1999, Butler moved to Lake Forest Park, Washington, following the death of her mother. She attempted to continue *The Parable Series* with *Parable of Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of the Chaos*, and *Parable of the Clay*, but found the writing and research

¹⁸ Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood: The Complete Xenogenesis Trilogy*, Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy, 2012. ProQuest E-book Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=1803171>.

¹⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Seed to Harvest: The Complete Patternist Series*, Open Road Media, 2012.

too depressing to continue. Instead she turned her attention to something more diverting, eventually producing her vampire novel, *Fledgling* (2005). Butler inspired a reimagining of the origin of vampires. Since her publication of *Fledgling* several authors have unsuccessfully and successfully created vampire novellas and dramas, exploring the ideas of body transformation and ungendered identities in vampires.

Chapter 2- Race and Science Fiction

"Science fiction and the criticism of the genre have so far paid very little attention to the treatment of issues relating to race and ethnicity...Whites write most English-language science fiction. While some African American writers produce work that has a fantastic or magical element this work is generally not grouped with science fiction or fantasy; it is instead published as and treated by critics as African- American literature."²⁰ - Elisabeth A. Leonard

In her essay, "Race, and Ethnicity in Science Fiction," Elisabeth Anne Leonard discusses the way race is discussed and not discussed in the genre of science fiction. She explains that "the majority of science fiction deals with racial tensions by ignoring it," or "the characters' race is either not mentioned and probably assumed to be white or if mentioned, is irrelevant to the events of the story and functions only as an additional descriptor, such as hair color or height." Butler's writing defies this pattern, she develops storylines and characters dealing intimately with their race placement in community. Butler revel in creating the outcast that can emerge into a leader and become the center of things.

Butler focuses on dystopian and utopian societies; while including communities and people of color. The description and detailed image of a society is one of the crucial elements of basic science fiction. By Butler not making race an "additional descriptor" and placing an array of people from different nationalities and species in a society; Butler creates a wholeness that the genre of science fiction lacks.

²⁰ Leonard, Elisabeth Anne. "Race and Ethnicity in Science Fiction." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendelsohn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 253–263. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

Each science fiction story includes one or more of these elements, (1) Setting-Every sci-fi story begins in unknown and strange environment, different from earth, a faraway land or world it can be into the future, or on a different planet. It can be in the past or an imagined fantasy world. This distinction differs science fiction from fiction in general. (2) Non-human characteristics-aliens are a stereotype of science fiction, but they are a necessary component. Aliens signify the “other”. They either vehemently represent the dominant or the non-dominant. Non-human beings also include robots, and cyborgs, and any humans that have been altered genetically. (3) Allegory- In all science fiction there tends to be some hidden meanings around social and political systems in the human world vs. non-human world. (4) Science and Technology- the story includes some elements of the laws of science. (5) The journey- at some point in the story, the protagonist takes a trip or journey that is significant (6) Dystopia /Utopian society – A dystopian society will be any environment where inequality and suffering exist. A utopian society would be an environment where there is complete equality, and no suffering exists. (7) Time Travel- any movement through time, forward to the present or back to the past.²¹ These elements of science fiction create a storyline that is meant to examine our current state in the world. However, if everyone in the world is not included in the examination what are we looking at? I believe we live in a world dominated by race. As the prominent and sometime only Black female voice accepted into the science fiction genre, Butler has been categorized as dealing with very specific topics.

This quote from the post-modernist icon, Frederic Jameson, is a perfect example of

²¹ Roy, Georgina. Key Elements of Writing Science Fiction. WritingtipsOasis, 27 July, 2015. <https://writingtipsoasis.com/5-key-elements-of-writing-science-fiction-stories>

Butler's work being dismissed as "Race Work." In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005)²², Jameson details his thoughts on a full shift in science fiction from that of social class and modes of production to themes of gender and sexuality. He states: "As for race, its thematic is relatively neutralized by the presupposition of alien life in the first place—which can, to be sure, stand as the allegory of race, as in Octavia Butler." With this statement, Jameson clarifies two points on his ideas about Black representation in the genre and race in science fiction. He believes race can be "neutralized" by the substitution of an alien life for Black life. Jameson also exhibits his lack of knowledge on the collection of Butler's works, which also includes themes of characters who carry no gender, or race. Octavia Butler created societies that question and examine the social and political issues of The United States. However, where is the shift in the genre that Jameson speaks about if it is not here with Ms. Butler?

Jameson's statement explains his comfort with the current science fiction genre as being white, male and heteronormative and using hidden messages and anecdotes to discuss race and gender. With that said, it is unsurprising that Octavia Butler reinvents modes of science fiction by examining social systems and politics of America, through the Black female experience. If Black bodies are always seen through a dominating gaze how is a true self-image created and maintained? While researching a black science fiction website, I found the author Nisi Shawl, in her astounding article, *A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction*, Shawl outlines two lists dating from 1859-1990, and from 1991-2007 (not included here). While enjoying this list, I realized the placement of Black writers in science fiction was ever present.

²² Duda, John. "Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions." *M/n*, vol. 120, no. 5, 2005, pp. 1245-1249. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/223326926?accountid=10598>.

Nisi Shawl's Crash Course in The History of Black Science Fiction²³

- 1859- Martin R. Delany-*Blake, or Huts of America*
- 1887-Charles Chesnutt-*The Goophered Grapevine*
- 1903- Pauline Hopkins- *Of One Blood*
- 1920-W.E.B. Dubois- "*The Comet*"
- 1954-Amos Tutuola- *My life in the Bush of Ghosts*
- 1962-Samuel R. Delany- *The Jewels of Aptor*
- 1969- Sam Greenlee- *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*
- 1970-Lorraine Hansberry- *Les Blancs*
- 1972- Ishmael Reed-*Mumbo Jumbo*
- 1975- Samuel R. Delany- *Dhalgren*
- 1977- Toni Morrison- *Song of Solomon*
- 1979- Octavia Butler- *Kindred*
- 1981- Charles Saunders-*Imaro*
- 1984- Octavia Butler- *Bloodchild*
- 1986- Virginia Hamilton- *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*
- 1988- Gloria Naylor- *Mama Day*
- 1990- Charles R. Johnson- *Middle Passage*

Enthralled by Shawl's list of amazing writers and scholars, I began to seek other connections to science fiction within other realms of Black culture. Being that music always tells

²³ Shawl, Nisi. "A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction". The Nisi Shawl Homepage, February, 2016. <http://www.nisishawl.com/CCHBSF.html>

a story musicians were a natural connection. The 1950's and 1960's were a time when Black artist began to create their own sounds and choose their own creative paths.

In tomorrow's world, men will not need artificial instruments such as jets and space ships. In the world of tomorrow, the new man will 'think' the place he wants to go; then his mind will take him there. -- Sun Ra, 1956²⁴

The term and the artistry of Afrofuturism which has been birthed from the works of Octavia Butler, other writers and musical artists as early as the 1850's. Octavia Butler along with musicians Sun Ra and George Clinton are some of the pioneers of Afrofuturism. Sun Ra was born on May 22, 1914, and left the planet Earth on May 30, 1993, at the age of 79. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama as Herman Poole Blount. He became involved in the Chicago jazz scene during the 1940s. He soon abandoned his birth name, taking the name Sun Ra (after Ra, the Egyptian God of the Sun) and developing a complex persona and mythology that would make him a pioneer of Afrofuturism. Sun Ra claimed he was an alien from Saturn on a mission to preach peace. Throughout his life he consistently denied any ties to his prior identity. His widely eclectic and avant-garde music would eventually touch on virtually the entire history of jazz, ranging from swing music and bebop to free jazz and fusion, and his compositions ranged from keyboard solos to big bands of over 30 musicians. From the mid-1950s until his death, Sun Ra led the musical collective, The Arkestra (which featured artists such as Marshall Allen, John Gilmore and June Tyson throughout its various iterations). Its performances often included dancers and musicians dressed in elaborate, futuristic costumes

²⁴ Yanow, Scott. "Sun-Ra"-Artist Biography.AllMusic.com, <http://www.allmusic.com/faq/topic>

inspired by ancient Egyptian attire and the Space Age.²⁵ Here is a quote from the introduction to Sun Ra's 1973 film "*Space is the Place*." ²⁶

"The music is different here; the vibrations are different not like the planet Rave, planet Rave has sounds of guns, anger, frustration there was no one to talk to on planet Rave, to understand the setup colony for Black people here to see what they can do with a planet all their own... they could drink in the beauty of this planet it would affect their vibrations for the better course..."²⁷

For Sun Ra his connection to the stars and to space was expressed through his music. The act of denouncing of his former self and embracing his new identity as Sun Ra is intrinsically Afrofuturism.

The legendary George Clinton, founder of Parliament and Funkadelic, revolutionized R&B during the 1970s, twisting soul music into funk adding influences from several late-'60s acid heroes: Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, and Sly Stone. The Parliament/ Funkadelic machine ruled Black music during the 1970's, capturing over 40 R&B hit singles (including three number ones) and recording three platinum albums. (While Funkadelic pursued band-format psychedelic rock, Parliament engaged in a funk free-for-all, blending influences from the godfathers (James Brown and Sly Stone) with space age platforms boots and translucent futuristic costumes and themes inspired by '60s acid culture and science fiction.²⁸ Clinton's infamous *Mothership* album further drew connections between Clinton and the bands psychedelic music and hallucinogenic trips with actual space and time travel.

In researching George Clinton, I recently encountered a YouTube channel: *DUST*²⁹.

²⁵ Benjamin. Lucas. "Sun-Ra: An Angel from Saturn".StrangSoundsfromBeyond, <http://strangesoundsfrombeyond.com/magazineitem/an-angel-from-saturn>

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ "Sun-Ra: Space is the Place". *YouTube*, uploaded 11, June 2007.<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djBKQNVj5Cc>

²⁸ Clinton, George. "Family Care", George Clinton Parliament Funkadelic.com, <https://georgeclinton.com/family/>

²⁹ DUST has 81,966 subscribers as of December 11th of this 1027. *DUST* claims to be the first multi-platform

This channel defines Sun -Ra, George Clinton, and Jimi Hendrix as the founding fathers of Afrofuturism. This channel also included a short film by director, Donovan Vim Crony, titled DEPARTURE. The caption for the film reads *DEPARTURE* -Sci-Fi/Afrofuturist/Noir Short Film. Afrofuturism has become somewhat of a tag or a code for Black readers and writers to tune in to creative storylines, art and music. This ten -minute film portrays, an alien couple named Addem (Hari Williams - "Resident Evil 7", "Runner, Runner") and Efa (Natascha Hopkins - "Straight Outta Compton," "Street Fighter Resurrection"). They live on earth as human beings in order to determine if it has proper living conditions for their alien race. They are suddenly called back to their mothership and must face a disgruntled Special Agent (Paul Statman - "CSI," "Supernatural") and growing uncontrollable human urges to stay on Earth before it is too late to return. Crony published this film on YouTube in September of 2017.

"Departure" further iterates the reach back into to the past by incorporating historical context by including images of Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin and showing the male character Addem, holding the George Clinton's *Parliament Mothership* album. The film quickly moves forward to the voice of a new soul singer, Cameo Adele, as the alien couple transitions to meet their "Mothership." Crony brings the film into the present moment by showing the young black couple escaping being pulled over and brutalized. Here are Crony's thoughts on the film:

"DEPARTURE" is a noir jazz sci-fi short film based around the ideas of galactic beings who have transcended the physical body but are brought back in order to do research that may help them take on new forms and discover a new home. I've been developing a kind of "jazz sci-fi" aesthetic for many years through my work in filmmaking. I tend to lean heavy on rock and roll sounds and hyper-visual aesthetics, but I always come back to a very fluid narrative. I love the

destination to binge watch sci-fi.

balance between calm and chaotic when it comes to cinema. I think about rhythm in a film just like I think about rhythm in jazz and rock and roll. "

These connections between the music of artist like Clinton and Sun Ra and Octavia Butler became clear in a work like Donovan Crony's *DEPARTURE* . They are all seeking to rediscover a reimagine themselves in a world that does not fully see them for who they are. Butler's inclusion as a founder of Afrofuturism is important because her novels share the same concepts of redefining the Black image. Butler's work and Afrofuturism imagine a world where Black people and their culture are celebrated. In a sense, Afrofuturism is a resurgence of the themes in Butler's work.

Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, George Clinton and new filmmakers like Donovan Vim Crony illustrate how important it is for people of color to create a timeline in the future where Black bodies are an integral part. Seeing beyond the present moment comes naturally in the realm of science fiction. It enables a recreation of the identity of the Black body. Afrofuturism has emerged as a sub-genre of science fiction very specific to social change and reconnecting to old values in the Black community. Comic illustrator, concept designer, cartoonist artist and animator Tim Fielder, was asked to define Afrofuturism, he had this to say,

"Afrofuturism is a mode of operation where you take any action whether it be storytelling, art, photography, architecture and of course writing; and you infuse these actions with Afrocentricity. However, you must design and arch the work in a way that reverts or reflects on our collective past. While being an Afrofuturist, you are living in

your present narrative but looking towards your future, coupled with the knowledge of your past. "³⁰

In 1994, Mark Dery wrote an article called: *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose*. This article spawned the term "Afrofuturism."

Mark Dery: Have you ever felt, as one of the few Blacks writing science fiction, the pressure to write science fiction deeply inscribed with the politics of Black Nationalism?

Samuel Delany: The answer there depends on what your question means.

If you mean: do I feel that, deep within my work, I 've situated material that encourages the reader's engagement with some of the political questions that the disenfranchised people in the county , victimized by oppression and an oppressive discourse based on the evil and valorized notion of nationhood and it's hideous white—no other color—underbelly, imperialist, must face but cannot overcome without internalizing some of the powerful concepts and relationships inescapably entailed in the notion of "nation" itself? Well, if that is what you mean, my answer is Damned right I have!

Samuel R. Delany, Jr., also known as "Chip," is an award-winning African American writer, editor, professor, and literary critic. He is one of the first major African American science fiction writers as well as one of the most influential writers of this genre in the United States. He transformed the field in the 1960s and 1970s with daring and visionary novels. He has published over 40 works. African and African American writers like Delany were and still

³⁰ "Comic Tin Fielder's 'Black Metropolis' Looks at Afrofuturism...". *YouTube*, uploaded by BRIC TV, 14 April,2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cr2cwEl2aOA>

are writing out of a need to be recognized as valued as skilled writers within and outside of their community and the science fiction genre. Dery's need in this article is to define and question why so few Black writers chose the genre science fiction in 1994. Dery was engaging with one of most celebrated science fiction writers, of all time but his definition was lacking something, it did not seem invested in the outcome of "imagined possible futures."³¹ The question is no longer: "do multiple futures exist," the current question is; are these multiple futures being crafted and designed by Black authors and writers. Butler's writing spans a large part of the science fiction timeline being discussed. Her writing career spans from 1971- 2005. Butler's concepts and characters around being 'ready to travel to the stars' is a constant in several of her novels. One of the basic elements of Afrofuturism is Black people seeing themselves a working as a sustainable part of the near and distant future. Afrofuturism's origin is rooted in the work of artist spanning from the 1850s to the present. So, while this term is somewhat new and created by someone outside of the culture. The artistry and culture of Black people in America define the Afrofuturism.

Science fiction is a realm of distant worlds and imagine futures. In science fiction the imagination can be brought to life. I believe Afrofuturism has been birthed out of the need for science fiction to transform and fit its current audience. In recent popular culture, the fantastic and magical have taken center stage. A comic book has been brought to life. On February 16, 2017, director and writer Ryan Coogler wrote himself into American popular culture, with the Marvel Studios release of *The Black Panther*³². Coogler's version of *The Black Panther* comes

³¹ Dery, Mark (10/01/1993). "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose". *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (0038-2876), 92 (4), p. 735.

³² Black Panther is a fictional superhero appearing in American comic books published by Marvel Comics.

58 years after the original comic. Fortunately for young Black women in 2018, the images of the Black female body that Coogler chooses to supersede the original images tremendously. In the original comic, Nakia and the Doro Milajae were not fully drawn and in black and white. Nakia is a love interest to Prince T'Challa both in the original comic and in Coogler's film. However, the original character, Nakia is introduced as inconsolable about her break-up with T'Challa. She becomes unstable and vengeful. In several original storylines, she plots with T'Challa's enemies and becomes the love interest of Eric Killmonger arguably T'Challa's greatest foe. Coogler transforms Nakia into a driven undercover agent, who shows definite love interest in T'Challa but decisively remains focused on her love for her country and the betterment of her people. The Dora Milajae carry the same physical features and demeanor of strength in both the original comic and film. With a shaved head and red and gold battle gear, Coogler makes Okoye the lead and voice of the other warriors. Okoye performs as a central component to the movement of the kingdom of Wakanda. She is shown an equal to her male counterparts in battle and in the King's council.

The addition of Princess Shuri to the Black Panther family provides a paradigm shift for young black women. Princess Shuri was created in 2005 by Reginald Hudlin, former president of Black Entertainment Television from 2005-2008. Hudlin created her as a part of his comic book and BET television series, *The Black Panther* (2005-2010)³³. In Hudlin's series, Queen Shuri is *The Black Panther*. She leads her people out of turbulence from invaders trying to steal their natural resource, Vibranium.³⁴ In every performance, Princess Shuri is a creator and

³³ Hudlin was the former president of Black Entertainment Television from 2005-2008. He created Shuri as a part of his comic book and BET television series, *The Black Panther* (2005-2010).

³⁴ Vibranium- **Vibranium** ([/ˈvaɪˈbreɪniəm/](#)) is a fictional metal appearing in [American comic books](#) published by [Marvel Comics](#).

designer of the future. She uses nanite technology to build The Black Panther's arsenal of weapons, gear, and gadgets much like James Bond's Q³⁵. She creates and sustains technology that allows advancements beyond what the modern world has seen and been able to develop.

Letitia Wright has starred in several roles as an actress in love with the realms of technology and the future. Less than two months after the release of *Black Panther*, Wright appeared in the Netflix Original Anthology Series, "Black Mirror"³⁶. Both these roles link her to the power and strength to stand in and the resistant to violence against the black body and solidifies her role as part of the future by her characters wielding future technology. Wright performs as a protector of the Black body in this mini-series.

"Black Museum" is the sixth and final episode of the fourth season of anthology series, *Black Mirror*. The episode is presented as a series of three stories told by Rolo Haynes (Douglas Hodge), proprietor of the remote "Black Museum" to his solitary visitor Nish (Letitia Wright), all involving various exhibits related to cutting edge technological connections and transfers with the human brain that Rolo had developed in his scientific career. As Haynes and Nish move on to the main attraction of the museum: a dismal hologram projection of Clayton Leigh (Babs Olusanmoku), a convicted murderer appears within a jail cell. While Leigh was on death row, Haynes coaxed him to sign over the rights to his post-death consciousness in exchange for money to help support his family, despite the objections of his wife, who feared for his safety. After his execution, Clayton found himself reborn as a hologram inside Haynes' museum. Haynes sets Clayton Leigh up in an execution display, in which visitors could pull a lever to

³⁵James Bond' Q- Q is James Bond's technological genius that builds all of his weaponry.

³⁶ This show has been fashioned as a modern-day *Twilight Zone*, each episode containing three vignettes. However, the majority of these involve a mixture of hazardous, horrific and often gory cautionary tales surrounding the usage of technology.

make Clayton experience the agony of the electric chair and feel like they were electrocuting him all over again. They could then leave with a key chain souvenir containing a preserved, and fully independent, copy of Clayton eternally in agony. Each electrocution is set to last 10 seconds, as 15 seconds or more would disrupt the hologram and erase it.³⁷

Nish reveals herself to be Leigh Clayton's daughter: she sabotaged the museum's AC so that Haynes would become thirsty and accept her poisoned water. She asserts that her father was innocent, but the state never overturned the conviction. The exhibit attracted wealthy sadists and racists to torture Clayton to the limit of his virtual consciousness, turning him into an empty shell. Haynes passes out, and Nish transfers his consciousness in Clayton (her father's) place. She pushes the electric chair simulation to its maximum, allowing Haynes to experience the full force of the torture and finally putting Clayton's consciousness to rest. Taking along with her the stuffed monkey and a "souvenir" of Haynes in eternal agony (thereby preserving a copy of his consciousness), and before returning to the car, Nish removes the device disabling the AC, which causes a short. Nish converses with her mother, who is revealed to share her consciousness with Nish. Nish drives away, her mother shedding joyful tears as the museum was engulfed in flames.³⁸

In this technological mind game, Nish(Letitia Wright) "takes back" what is left of her father's body, and his image from the museum. She releases his hologram so that he will not have the continued agony and repeated pain through electrocution. In both of these roles' actress

³⁷ This show has been fashioned as a modern-day *Twilight Zone*, each episode containing three vignettes. However, the majority of these involve a mixture of hazardous, horrific and often gory cautionary tales surrounding the usage of technology.

³⁸ Hernandez, Molly, "Shuri". Marvel Cinematic Universe, February 2017. <https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Shuri>

Letitia Wright is composed, tech-savvy, and confident.

As I watched these Black women dominate the movie screen and now some time later dominate in popular culture, their significance is poignant. The identity of the Black female body is shifting. I became ecstatic for my daughters because they would not have to search for reflections of themselves that represent power. The strength and distance from social notions and stereotypes are demonstrated in Reginald Hudlin's and Ryan Coogler's and *The Black Panther*. They were experiencing images of Black women struggling, fighting and surviving in a very different way than I did. The images of Shuri, fighting alongside her brothers and the other warriors, dismantle the image of a young defenseless Black female. Nakia speaking foreign languages and not eagerly accepting T'Challa marriage proposal opens up the idea that marriage is a choice, not a necessity or last alternative for Black women. The warrior, Okoye, introduced levitation and uses it to guide a Wakandan ship. The power that she wields to defeat men with her golden staff embodies her strength and total physical control. Her discomfort and disgust with wearing a blond wig and European attire exhibits her embrace for her own cultural traditions and her natural beauty. Her stance against her lover and his pet beast on the battlefield exhibits her loyalty to her country and gives her a superhuman mystique.

Ryan Coogler's Black Panther personifies the new image of the Black female body. These new images are being created out of a need to erase and dismiss century-long stereotypes and notions about Black women that were created and based on violence and image of beauty that does not include Black skin. The women of Wakanda are projecting an image of a new-found power connected to the future and technology. Coogler's *Black Panther* causes a cultural shift in the national identity of Black women. Wakanda is a fantasy world. And while liberties may have been taken to culminate an experience for the film, the important take away is not

authenticity but representation. Black women are represented in their full array of perspectives, personalities and different bodies.

Chapter 3 – The Novels and the Protagonists

Octavia Butler's novels act as a paradigm shift from the characterization of Black women as defenseless and silent. She provides a different scope for Black women to see themselves through by centering their experience. In Butler's novels, the protagonist's interaction with others, their unwillingness or willingness to change; proves Butler's writings parallel with elements of science fiction. Butler's use of alien life forms, genetic alterations, mutations, an actual race by humans to space to exist on the planet Mars in *Xenogenesis* Series.³⁹ These elements solidify Butler's work in the genre of science fiction. Butler only centers Black women who are focused on self-analysis, working through problems, journaling, gathering herbs, healing, morphing, traveling through time and fixated on bettering themselves. Each is forging for survival and adaptation to new people, new surrounding and often a new world. This is where Butler shifts the genre. Butler uses the Black female body as the mechanism to shift the thinking and associations with a sexualized or victimized identity. This writing is critical because it is the introduction of Black bodies into science fiction literature which has a predominately White body of work . In the early part of Butler's career, she wrote about race relations. As a Black woman, writing from her perspective and it being very different from the dominate perspective on race and gender, Butler carved her own direction with her novels and short stories. Her model was the opposition. Butler created characters that would exhibit Black bodies in complete opposition to what they were currently being. Critics and fellow writers were only able to see Butler's work through the eyes of race because they weren't really willing to

³⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Lilith's Brood*. New York :Aspect/Warner Books, 2000. Print.

deal with or examine race or gender. By centering the “othered” and outcast characteristics and beings like alien and other non-human beings, Butler exposes all human beings to be questioned on their behavior towards one another.

During her keynote address at "A New Frontier: Blacks in Science Fiction,"⁴⁰, Octavia Butler listed the three categories of science fiction as "what if, if only, and if this goes on." She posed that these categories necessitate that science fiction is not only about the problems of the world, but also about solving the problems of the world. “Black women's need to speculate on "what if, if only, and if this goes on" as well as to offer up these speculations in prose and poetry is one guiding aspect of this special issue. How these speculations highlight the hope for the future and the magic of the past is another guiding aspect of this special issue”.⁴¹ This chapter will discuss the science fiction element of time travel and its popularity in American culture. This chapter will explore time travel as a vehicle of escape and mobility for the Black female body in Butler’s *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*. This chapter will also examine each protagonist’s body, and its varying physical changes.

Time travel is a well-known trope in science fiction. For generations, American audiences have witnessed the white male heterosexual hero on his journey to “go back” and “change the past.” In “ The Popularity of Time Travel in Contemporary Media”, Aybige Yilmaz examines the growing presence of time travel narratives in popular culture; through a close look

⁴⁰ a conference held at Howard University in March of 2003

⁴¹ Pough, Gwendolyn D., and Yolanda Hood. "SPECULATIVE BLACK WOMEN: MAGIC, FANTASY, AND THE SUPERNATURAL." *Femspec*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2005. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/200079924?accountid=10598>.

at a drama/ comedy series, "Being Erica".⁴² Yilmaz makes this important observation about time travel and popular culture: "Time travelers seem to embody fantasy of knowing about all the life and identity choices one can make, exhausting all the possible life options. They are not always lucky enough to fulfill this fantasy, however. Time-travel narratives seem underlined by anxiety about limits of choice, which is often represented through the classic conflict between destiny/fate versus free will." Butler creates narratives where time travel has the ability to release the protagonist from natural aging and physical changes. Dana, the protagonist in the novel *Kindred*⁴³ physically changed forever by losing of her arm where as Anyanwu, the main protagonist in *Wild Seed*⁴⁴ shifts her physical form to look like other humans and animals.

As a lover of science fiction, I am always in a search for writing within this genre that may mirror my own life in some way. This search led to a very interesting movie, that inspired me to do more research and delve into time travel as a young reader. In 1984, director and actor John Sayles, debuted the movie *Brother from Another Planet*. At the time, this movie was called a black comedy, however if it had been filmed in the last ten years it would be place in the categories of Black Speculative Fiction or Afrofuturism. In appearance the protagonist is a black man, but when the camera pans to his feet the viewer is surprised by his three toes. "Brother's toes signify his alien identity. They also signify a tremendous difference between him and Black people he meets on his journey. When the community sees his feet, they bring him in, give him

⁴² Yilmaz, Aybige. "The Popularity of Time Travel in Contemporary Media: Being Erica and Time Travel as Individualized Consumer Choice." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2013, pp. 387-408.

⁴³ Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

⁴⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Wild Seed*. New York: Warner Books, 1999. Print.

shoes, a job and a place to sleep. “The Brother”, a terrified space pilot (Joe Morton) is forced to ditch his rickety-looking UFO in the Hudson River. Dawn breaks over the twin towers of the World Trade Center as “The Brother” begins to explore his new surroundings on the streets of Harlem. He is surrounded by people who look like him but could scarcely be more different, even ordinary sights and sounds are fascinating and at times, terrifying. The Brother finds a haven in the friendly neighborhood bar run by Odell (Steve James), where the regulars are puzzled by ‘The Brother’s’ mute, inquisitive presence. The fastidious Walter (Bill Cobbs) worries about germs and dirt and mourns the passing of Harlem's glory days. Hard-drinking Smokey (Leonard Jackson) conducts a few experiments with a shot of whiskey and a handy paper bag, determining that while The Brother is not "deaf," he is unable to speak. And Fly (Daryl Edwards), a video-game fanatic, discovers one of The Brother's special talents: he can fix any machine with a touch of his hand. This indie comedy from IFC Films features cameo appearances by John Sayles and David Strathairn as mysterious visitors from “Somewhere Else”. Armed with a set of mug shots and an ESL textbook, these ungainly men claim to be hunting an "illegal alien."⁴⁵

My search for science fiction including people of color did not end here. In my high school years, we read Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Besides its evident lack of relevance to a high school sophomore in 1990, it did spark my interest about the past. But a slave narrative was not how I wanted to choose to travel back in time. It was not until much later in life, that I read the novel *Kindred*. I realized that time travel could be connected to a traumatic moment in history and not perpetuate the images and ideals of that past traumatic moment.

Dana is an illegal alien in *Kindred*. She is dropped into the 1820’s much like “The Brother’ is dropped in the Hudson River. She is a stranger to everyone. Her speech is so different from her

⁴⁵ “The Brother From Another Planet”. Imdb.com, 1984,Imdb.comthehttps://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087004/plotsummary#summaries.

enslaved ancestors that she may as well be speaking another language. She uses her voice and speaks her mind quite a great deal. When Dana first arrives on the plantation, she is wearing pants and her hair is uncovered. This difference is bothersome to everyone who encounters her. In her present time of 1976, her body and mind cannot fully escape the mental chains of slavery. In 1976, Dana and Kevin had just moved to L.A. to a newly purchased house in Altadena. They have barely begun to unpack when Dana's body shifts into the past. In that sense, the novel has Dana torn both spatially and temporarily between two worlds, and homes. Dana's physical and emotional transformation is marked by the loss of her arm and the memory of a "re-written" past. The experience of violence and the memory of two different timelines leaves Dana with a complete understanding of her ancestors and history, but with a body that is incomplete.

By contrast, *Wild Seed's* Anyanwu's transformation is a bit different. The action of shapeshifting is originated in Native American and indigenous cultures. Shape shifting is a metamorphosis (change in the physical form or shape) of a person or animal. Shape shifting involves physical changes such as alterations of age, gender, race, or general appearance or changes between human form and that of an animal (half man/half animal), plant, or inanimate object. Some people believe that you can achieve shape shifting through deep meditation. The ability to shape shift can be very useful when you are doing shamanic journeying or astral traveling. It is said that during certain ritual dances an individual may meld with an animal spirit. Although they outwardly do not become the animal, their body may contort or move in the fashion that the animal is most comfortable. The human's sense of smell or sight may be meta-heightened; there could be increased dexterity in the limbs, or a feeling of savage power that the animal may represent. Vocalizations that represent the animal may also be heard.

Anyanwu's body dismantles the definition of time. Her hundreds of years on earth have given her wisdom on surviving the world and other humans. By making Anyanwu's body immortal, Butler presents the Black female body as supernatural. Her willingness to follow "worldly" constraints and identities, only comes into play when she wants to hide her supernatural ability and physical strength. Anyanwu is an archive of the Black body. Her body holds multiple forms, memories and identities in order to protect herself.

In "Defining *Kindred*: Octavia Butler's Postcolonial Perspective" Thelma Shinn explains *Wild Seed's* protagonist: "Anyanwu, not the male principle Doro, is the source of logic, reason, the analytic workings of mind in *Wild Seed*. She has achieved her shape-shifting knowledge by careful, systematic inner quest, where she has studied herself down to the atoms... She can "clone an animal or fish only after she had eaten some of it and studies with her genetic makeup. Anyanwu is both the scientist and the laboratory".⁴⁶

Each protagonist's willing or unwillingness to change proves that Butler's writing can be aligned with significant elements of the science fiction genre. Dana and Anyanwu's self-analysis gave them the ability to work through problems, journaling, gathering herbs, healing, morphing, and traveling through time. Shows, each analysis is forging the survival and adaptation of new people, new surrounding and often the new world.

Butler uses the female body as the mechanism to shift the thinking and associations of Black women. These writings offer a significant swing in the thinking and associations with the Black women and their bodies. Butler's work is a crucial to the introduction of Black bodies into

⁴⁶ Thelma, S. R. (2006). Defining kindred: Octavia butler's postcolonial perspective. *Obsidian III*, 6/7(2), 118-134,264-265. Retrieved from <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/206795019?accountid=10598>

science fiction literature. With the introduction of a non-white body into the predominantly white body of work of science fiction, Butler's writing is placed into the category of race by default. Another populate science-fiction trope used brilliantly by Octavia Butler is time travel. The concept of time travel provides a way of reconstructing our current ideas about the past. Time travel allows an extension of sight and possibilities beyond our current understanding, place in history and our obstacles. Butler uses time travel as a literary device to analyze American history and the inhumane treatment of Black women.

I see literary devices as translators, a method of interpretation that could not be reached otherwise. Dana's first-time travel trip is in 1819, when she returns having spent almost two weeks in the past, her husband Kevin reports she has been gone less than 5 minutes. Dana appears in the past at intervals in Rufus's life(her White ancestor) when he is on the verge of causing harm to himself or someone else. What is Butler saying about the responsibility of the Black female body to its ancestors? In *Kindred*, Dana is responsible for protecting, what is causing harm to her and other enslaved Black on the plantation. Dana's position leaves her with very few allies in the 1820's. Dana's ancestor Alice shares her physical feature and can see similarities, however she and most of the other enslaved on the Weylin Plantation do not trust Dana. To them she is unusual and "tries to act like a man" because she wears pants and "tries to talk White". Unlike her trained and enslaved ancestors Dana looks white people directly in the eye. These critical details get Dana mistaken for a slave, whipped and almost raped. Rufus eventually realizes he can never fully "possess" Alice, (Dana's ancestor) so he tries to possess Dana. As an adult, a drunkard, and a slave master like his father before him, Rufus attempts to enslave Dana and begs her to stay with him. Even though he knows and believes that she is from

the future. Butler places Dana in her ancestor circumstances, this stages for the reader, Dana and Alice's shared experience.

In each of Butler novels she positions the Black female body in circumstances which can only be overcome through a change and reformation of the body. In *Kindred*, the reader experiences Dana's body as a time travel device; this element is unique and stylistic to Butler. In most time travel tropes, there is always an outward physical object that the protagonist must operate and hold onto to return to their "proper" timeline. The device's capability determines the time traveler's movements; without their time travel device, they are "stuck" in their "new timeline." Dana's body is her device for time travel. Butler create an immensely complicated but malfunctioning time machine. Fear, pain, and the threat of death invoke Dana's body to time travel. Dana's body removes itself from harm's way by shifting to a different timeline. In this very poignant *Poets and Writer's* interview with Joan Fry⁴⁷, Butler opens up about *Kindred* and some of her inspirations for writing:

Fry: Why did you start writing science fiction?

Butler: Because of a movie I saw when I was twelve called *Devil Girl from Mars*. I thought, "I can do a better story than that." Of course, what I wrote was awful, but I didn't know it. I was having a good time. By the time I was thirteen I was bothering editors with my stuff. One thing that contributed to my fascination with the universe in general was the time I spent on my grandmother's chicken ranch between Victorville and Barstow (in California's sparsely settled high desert) and

⁴⁷ Butler, Octavia E, and Conseula Francis. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*. , 2010. Print.

being able to look up and see the stars and realizing there are parts of the world that human beings don't dominate.

Fry: The book of yours most people seem to read first is *Kindred*. Why is that?

Butler: It's accessible to people who normally don't read science fiction.

Parable of the Sower is another one. *Kindred* is a story of a black woman who unwillingly travel back in time to the Antebellum South and has to fight like hell to survive slavery. She's a struggling writer, and before her trips begin, she and her husband were both holding jobs, that I had actually held—food processing, clerical, warehouse, factory, cleaning, you name it.

Fry: How long did that period of your life last?

Butler: Ten years, Form 1968 through 1978. After *Patternmaster* came out 1976, I started working more sporadically, at temporary jobs. I didn't get an awful lot of money for that novel; I've gotten more money for the best short stories—but also, things cost a lot less then. The last job I held was in a hospital laundry. In August. Bad. And this was after I had written and sold three novels. When I got the money from the third, I was able to quit and go off to Maryland to research *Kindred*.

Fry: After *Kindred* you wrote *Wild Seed*. That's a book a year for five consecutive years.

How did you manage to be so prolific?

Butler: I was like a lot of writers. I had all these ideas stored up. I had been trying to write for years. Once I was able to actually finish a novel, the flood gates opened and I was able to finish the others, too.

Fry: You wrote the Patternist novel first, but you wrote out of sequence—some are prequels to others, and so on. If someone wanted to read them chronologically, what's the order?

Butler: I wrote them completely out of order, yes. Chronologically, *Wild Seed* would be the first then, *Mind of my Mind*, *Clay's Ark*, *Survivor*, and *Patternmaster*.

Fry: *Mind of my Mind* is a very violent book—beatings, incest, murder. What exactly are you referring to?

Butler: The fact that you have Doro, who has kidnapped a bunch of people and bred them and used them, and after a while, when they're strong enough, they do nasty things to him. But they also do nasty things to everybody else, because they've learned that's how you behave if you want to survive.

Butler states that after writing *Kindred* she wrote *Wild Seed*. *Kindred* is a stand-alone novel, and *Wild Seed* is the first novel in Butler's *Patternists Series*, however these novels are connected. These novels include Black women who take on a personal journey and physical treks that convert their bodies into different forms from the novel's beginning. *Wild Seed* is the first novel in Butler's *Patternists Series*. The protagonist, Anyanwu does not shift herself through time like Dana does in *Kindred*. Anyanwu is immortal. She moves through time and masters it by controlling frequency in which she ages. With the ability to change form or shapeshift, Anyanwu can appear as chooses. Doro her partner, shares immortality, and has the ability to inhabit the bodies of humans. Butler uses the extension of the life expectancy of the black body to signify its strength and importance in history. As Anyanwu's body supersedes the bound of time, it also supersedes ideas of the Black body as invisible and short-lived. Together Anyanwu and Doro travel in the 17th century through Africa to the Americas. The protagonist, Anyanwu does not

shift herself as Dana does to master time. She masters and defies time by being immortal. Her body ages and returns to its youth on her command. Butler examines slavery by allowing the spirit of the Doro to take the body of a white slaveholder. When Anyanwu shifts from a Black female to a Black male, it gives the female body equality to the male body.

The acts of enslavement carried out in this country are evidence of a foundation and baseline for racism. The concept of racism is the unfair treatment of an individual based on the color of their skin, ethnicity and or physicality. The definition of racism has become difficult, as individuals with varying personal experiences try to define racism; the term becomes multi-faceted and specific. Black bodies exist more freely in this alternative reality Butler actualizes where the Black female body is whole and complete without the present day constrictions of racism. Octavia Butler begins *Wild Seed*, in 17th century Africa during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. During this period, the identity of the Black female was exploited, objectified and oversexed. The female slave was used for sexual pleasure, breeding, and child rearing. Anyanwu is independent. Anyanwu bares her history to the reader, by revealing her age and growth into womanhood as a timeline of 350 years. However, she is not specific about her actual age. Butler creates a character who experienced and survived slavery, and the American immigrant experience. As Anyanwu becomes Doro's mate and leaves the lands of African and her forest behind her. When Anyanwu is brought to Doro's Virginia settlement her body is asked to adapt:

Anyanwu watched carefully as the white women placed first a clean cloth, then dishes and utensil on the long narrow table. At which the household was to eat. Anyanwu was glad that some of the food and the white people's way of eating were similar to her own. She could sit down and have meal without seeming utterly ignorant. She could not have

cooked the meal, but that would come too in time, she would learn....New words, new ways, new clothing...She was glad of the cumbersome clothing, though finally. It made her look more like the other women, black and white, whom she had seen in the village, and that was important, she had lived in enough different towns through her various marriages to know the necessity of learning to behave as others did. What was common in one place could be ridiculous in another and abomination in a third, ignorance could be costly.⁴⁸

Wild Seed's other protagonist Doro aims to control and to possess Anyanwu. He is an immortal male spirit who can inhabit the human body. He has been masquerading in human form for centuries. Humans are for his pleasure and breeding. As Anyanwu's chosen mate, his intentions are to use her for breeding and his pleasure. He can never fully control her or her body from changing form. Anyanwu escapes Doro's domination and control by physically changing into a Dolphin and dismisses his violent sexual interest by turning into a man. The battle between them is a part of their spiritual connection, and sexual tension. This connection creates a pattern, hence *The Patternist Series*⁴⁹. This series includes four other novels three of which include Anyanwu, Doro and their children. Butler creates a timeline, and a legacy around the complicated relationship of Anyanwu and Doro. Among the abilities mentioned earlier, Anyanwu also can transform herself into a man and while in a male form she can impregnate another female and reproduce a female child. In this quote, she explains her ability to Doro.

⁴⁸ Thelma, Shinn R. "Defining *Kindred*: Octavia Butler's Postcolonial Perspective. *Obsidian III*, vol. 6/7, no. 2, 2006, pp. 118-134,264-265. *ProQuest*, <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/docview/206795019?accountid=10598>.

⁴⁹ From 1977 until 1984, Butler published four more **Patternist** novels: *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980) and *Clay's Ark* (1984).

“The python shape brought luck. We needed rain then to save the yam crop, and while I was a python, the rain came. The people decided magic was good and it took them a long time to want to kill me again.” Anyanwu was becoming a small, well-muscled man as she spoke. Now Doro did try to strip her cloth and moved cautiously so that she would understand. He felt her strength for a moment when she caught his hand and, with no special effort, almost broke it. Then, as he controlled his surprise, and prevented himself from reacting to the pain, she untied her cloth herself and took it off. For several seconds, he was more impressed with the casual grip than with her body, but he could not help noticing that she had become thoroughly male.

“Could you father a child?” he asked.

“In time. Not now.”

“Have you?”

“Yes. However, only girl children.”

He shook his head, laughing. This woman was far beyond anything he had imagined. “I am surprised your people have let you live,” he said.

“Do you think I would let them kill me?” she asked.

He laughed again. “What will you do then Anyanwu? Stay here with them convincing each new generation that you are the best let alone-- or will you come with me?”⁵⁰

Butler brilliantly depicts a narrative where the Black woman is whole and complete without the need of a man for survival, strength, or even childbirth. These characteristics make Anyanwu

⁵⁰ Butler, Octavia E. *Wild Seed*. New York: Warner Books, 1999. Print.

more desirable and more unique to Doro. He asks Anyanwu to leave her home and children and travel to the Americas with him. These question and decision are crucial. Butler exemplifies an African man and woman making a conscious choice to go to America as opposed to being forced there by captivity and enslavement. Butler introduces the reader to Anyanwu when she has mastered her powers and her sense of self. She has inherited her strength and powers from her mother. The following passage illustrates the pre-existence of the supernatural elements within a Black culture and more specifically the Black female body.

Anyanwu could think of several unusual things about her mother. The woman had stature and influence despite the gossip about her. Was her husband a member of a highly respected clan? Well known for its magical abilities, but in this household, it was Anyanwu's mother who made magic. She had highly accurate prophetic dreams. She made medicine to cure diseases and to protect the people from the evil, the clan of her mothers' husband, had members who could change their shapes, take animal forms at will. Was her mother in whom she had found strangeness, closeness, empathy that went beyond what could be expected between a mother and daughter. She and her mother had shared a unity of spirit that did involve some exchange of thoughts and feelings, though they were careful not to flaunt this before others.⁵¹

The cosmically magical connection between Doro and Anyanwu is clear. When Anyanwu meets Doro, she is living alone with very little and is very content. Doro is drawn to her. He like all the other men in her in life wants to possess her. However, Doro can offer Anyanwu something that none of her other husbands could not: lifelong companionship. Immortality blends their lives.

⁵¹ Butler, Octavia E. *Wild Seed*. New York: Warner Books, 1999. Print.

Butler rewrites history when Doro demands that a White slave owner release and give him a newly branded young man who is Anyanwu's kin. The dynamics of this scene as Butler describes Doro and Anyanwu both disguised as Black men and freeing a fellow Black man from chains diminishes the very idea of enslavement of the Black body in this text.

The trajectory of Octavia Butler's science fiction speaks to this shift in the workings of race. Much of her previous work, including *The Patternist Series* which deals explicitly with race, biogenetics, and power within the context of interspecies relationships. These works are generally situated within the context of the 1960s and 1970s (White) feminist science fiction, including the likes of Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin, and Joanna Russ, whose books tackled patriarchy but did less to address correlating gender structures and racial constructs of power and imbalance.

According to Frederic Jameson: 'genres are essentially literary institutions or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of particular cultural artifacts' (Political Unconscious, 106) ...Butler strategically deploys traditional generic tropes and narrative devised of science fiction and adheres to (or breaks) the "social contract" between her and her audience.⁵²

In the case of *Wild Seed*, Butler makes a "social contract" with her readers to remain outside of what society deems as normal. I believe she makes a "social contract" with women of color to continue to create female characters who have unlimited power as well. Butler also further diminishes past notions of female power as less than and not equal to male power by giving Anyanwu the power to heal. The following excerpt describes Anyanwu healing with Doro with ease.

⁵² Serenity Joo, Hee-Jung. (2011). Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler's Parables Series. *Extrapolation*. 52. 279-299. 10.3828/extr.2011.52.3.2.

“The infected hand had begun to swell by the time she notices it, and it was beginning to make him sick. Doro was already deciding how he would get a new body without endangering her. Then, to his surprise, she offered to help him heal. “You let yourself suffer needlessly. “He looked at her doubtingly. “ ‘Can you get the herbs you need out here?’ She met his eyes.

"Sometimes the herbs were for my people—like the gods in my compound. If you let me, I can help you without them. ‘All right.’ He gave her his swollen, inflamed hand. "There will be the pain," she warned... She bit his hand. He bore it, holding himself rigid against his life-threatening reaction to sudden pain. This was the second time she had been nearer to death than she could imagine. She spat three times, each time returning to his hand. Her saliva burned like fire. Almost at once, the swelling and sickness went away, and the wound began to heal."⁵³

Butler argues for female power by creating characters who can switch genders and chose female. The power to understand both perspectives of gender is vital to balance in Butler’s novels. When Anyanwu is a man, she has only changed her physical being. She is still feeling and seeing life as a woman. Butler has placed the hero in two realities at the same time. By showcasing a male body, she is protected from physical attacks and physical threats; however, she still sees the world as a woman, she still feels things as a woman would. Anyanwu feels a strong need to shelter her loved ones from Doro’s killings. In partnering with Doro, Anyanwu temporarily loses physical power over her body. Why does a woman as powerful as Anyanwu decide to leave her home and travel across the country with a strange man? Butler gives Anyanwu a choice, Doro shows affection

⁵³ Butler, Octavia E. *Wild Seed*. New York: Warner Books, 1999. Print.

towards her, but she also sees his unwillingness to stop breeding not just her relatives but anyone he sees with special abilities. Anyanwu recognized Doro's need to control her. However, Doro could offer her something no other man could: a life-long partnership and a future she could not predict. As I stated earlier, I found nothing about Butler's intimate partners or otherwise.

However, her writing makes it apparent that her protagonists struggle for a balance between intimate relationships and serving the community. Butler's novels draw from each protagonist's past.

The Kiswahili term for learning from your past is Sankofa. The word Sankofa is also derived from the Ghanaian Akan language; it means "to go back, look for, and gain wisdom, power, and hope from your past."⁵⁴ In 1993, Haile Gerima created the film *Sankofa*. This film bends concepts of time and space in order to take the protagonist, Mona, and the audience through, the African Holocaust. Although the majority of this film takes place in the past, Gerima fervently believes that the importance of the film *Sankofa* can provide direction for both the present and the future.⁵⁵

The narrative of Dana in *Kindred* and of Mona in *Sankofa* are parallel. Their Black female bodies are exposed to the same violent and subjective treatment as their ancestors. The stark difference is their modes of travel to the past. Dana's travel is brought on by an overcoming feeling of physical sickness, weakness, nausea, pain, and fear of death. Mona takes a physical walk into the Elmina Castle Cave, in Ghana, West Africa. The cave goes dark, there is a loud

⁵⁴ "A Chat with Haile Gerima". *Melanet*. 4 April 1996. On line posting. 21 April 2002. <http://www.melanet.com/Sankofa/sanchat.html>

⁵⁵ Haile Gerima lecture given at Mount Holyoke College. Mtholyoke.edu. 21 April 2002. <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/offices/comm/csj/950405SE/toc.html>

distant door slam, and when the light returns, she is face to face with her ancestors in chains. The film reflects the novel *Kindred* by taking Mona's body back to the Antebellum South as Butler does with her protagonist, Dana.

Kara Keeling, in *The Witches Flight*⁵⁶, had this to say about the impact of Sankofa. "Even though *Sankofa* was released in the United States in 1993, it is crucial to place the film within the historical context in its inception and to understand it is a product of several interrelated historical narratives. These include the transformations that the American film industry has undergone since around 1960; the influence that the film generation subsequently exerted in Hollywood and the auteurist inflections of the influence; the systematic exclusion of black filmmakers from Hollywood during the same period, coupled with Gerima and his colleagues collective refusal to train for inclusion in Hollywood; and the cultural and political philosophers and practices circulating in Black America and throughout the black diaspora at that time contextualizing in this way, *Sankofa* provided an opportunity to examine the possible for the production of a black cultural nationalist subject presented in a female body."⁵⁷ Both Dana and Mona are on a journey to reclaim a part of themselves that Butler and Gerima feel are lost to them. This becomes evident in the necessity of their journey. In *Sankofa*, Mona's travel ends for her when she decided to "rise up" and fight back against her master and rapist. For Dana on her last trip to the past, she fights Rufus who refuses to let her leave, with him holding onto her left arm, she is transported back without her arm.

⁵⁶Mayne, Holly. *Kara Keeling, The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. vol. 3, Indiana University Press, 2011.

⁵⁷ Mayne, Holly. *Kara Keeling, The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. vol. 3, Indiana University Press, 2011.

Kindred's protagonist, Dana lives and travels between worlds. Dana's body is interlocked with the pain of her ancestors. When she feels physical pain, she is transported. The attempted rape of a patroller on a dark road sends her reeling back to 1979, where she claws at her White husband mistaking him for her attacker. This is not an accident on Butler's part. This example ties the pain of slavery and the Antebellum South (being raped by a white man) with the reality of her 1976 existence(being married to a white man).

In November of 1990, Butler conducted a phone interview with *Calloo* writer, Randall Kenan. She had this to say about slave narratives, patrollers and Dana's interracial marriage and creating a narrative with historical context:

BUTLER: Yes, yes. Very much so. It was not fun. It is not pleasure reading. As a matter of fact, one of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative. I think I had gotten to one by a man who was explaining how he had been sold to a doctor who used him for medical experiments. I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it. I think that is what most fiction writers do. They almost have to.

KENAN: But at the same time, I think you address the problem of accuracy and distance with amazing intelligence and depth. For example, the scene where Dana in *Kindred* witnesses the patrollers catching the runaway, you address this issue straight on; how she was unprepared to bear witness to such horror. So, at the same time, you are making the reader aware of how brutal it all is, was, and double, how much we are separated from that past reality and how

television and movies have prejudiced us or in some cases blinded us to that fact.

BUTLER: The strange thing is with television and movies, I mean, they have made violence so cartoonishly acceptable ... I was talking to a friend of mine the other day about the fact that some kids around the L.A. area, on Halloween, kids around fourteen and fifteen, found a younger child with Halloween candy and they shot him and took it away from him Now when I was a kid, I knew bullies who beat up little kids and took away their candy, but it would not have occurred to them to go out with a knife or gun to do that, you know. This is a totally different subject, but it is one that interests me right now. Just what in the world is to be done, to bring back a sense of proportion of respect for life?

KENAN: But another thing that makes *Kindred* so painful and artful is the way that you translate the moral complexity and the choices that have to be made between Dana and her white husband and not only in the past but in the present.

BUTLER: I gave her that husband to complicate her life.

KENAN: And even though the roles in many ways are more affixed by society in the past, she has to make similar choices in the present; so, it is almost as though time were an illusion.

BUTLER: Well, as I said, I was really dealing with some 1960's feelings when I wrote this book. So, I am not surprised that it strikes you that way, as a matter of fact, I am glad. I meant it to be complicated.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Butler, Octavia E, and Conseula Francis. *Conversations with Octavia Butler.* , 2010. Print.

Butler mentions the interracial relationship of her protagonist as a "complication to her life." The complication lies in Dana reconciling her choice to still be in partnership with Kevin, after experiencing the trauma of attempted rape by the White patroller and her white ancestor Rufus. Butler not only complicates Dana's life, but she complicates the reader's perspective on interracial marriage and each period's different perspective. Butler inserts knowledge to guide her readers through the dynamics of Dana and Kevin's relationship in both time periods. We are given a taste of the relationship that Dana and Kevin had before becoming married as co-workers. Butler also interjects a coworker's obscene and racist comments about the couple being interracial. He refers to their intimacy as "vanilla-chocolate porn", another coworker refers to them as "the oddest couple she'd ever seen".⁵⁹

Butler deliberately loads the everyday conversations with racially charged statements. Expectedly, Rufus is befuddled by Dana not wanting to be called "nigger." Butler eludes to the white domination over the Black female body by exhibiting Rufus's frustration when Dana wants to be called Black. He is outraged when Kevin suggests that he is married to Dana. Butler demonstrates the negation of the Black body as equal to Kevin's White body by transporting their relationship from equal in marriage in their home to master and servant on a plantation. The identification of the Black body as not fully human and positioned as problematic becomes clear in Rufus's disapproving looks and words towards Kevin and Dana's closeness and marriage. Butler is imposing vital questions about how Black bodies are existing in a dystopian and utopian society. In this excerpt we see an example of how the Dana's Black body and Kevin's White body operate differently in the past:

⁵⁹ Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

"Time passed. Kevin and I become more a part of the household, familiar, Accepted, and accepting. That disturbed me too when I thought about it. How easily we seemed to acclimate. Not that I wanted us to have trouble, but it seemed as though we should have had a harder time adjusting to their particular segment of history—adjusting to our places in the household of a slave. For me, the work could be hard but was usually more boring than physically wearing. Also, Kevin complained of boredom and having to sociable with a steady stream of ignorant, pretentious guest who visited the Weylin house. However, for drop-ins from another century, I thought we had a remarkably easy time, and I was perverse enough to be bothered by the ease."

"This could be a great time to live in." Kevin said once, "I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the century, see how much of the Old West mythology is true."

"West!" I said bitterly. "That is where they are doing it to the Indians instead of Blacks!"⁶⁰

This conversation between Dana and her 1976 husband and 1819 master is perplexing. Butler reveals that although Dana loves her husband, she can no longer ignore how their history is intertwined. Also, with Kevin "playing" her master and "fitting in so well." Dana's fear of just becoming a slave and not a wife are justifiable and clear from her worry in the statement. Butler leads us to accept that Dana has no permanent placement in the novel. Her body is stretched across time, and she belongs momentarily to both periods. However, this does not lend to Dana

⁶⁰ Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print.

having more freedom of movement. Her time travel traps her in her home in 1976, with the fear that she will be transported into the past while driving or in a public place. In the Antebellum South, Dana was trapped by the historically violent circumstances and eventually Rufus and his unhealthy obsession with her. The dystopian 1819 and the "better" utopian 1976 offer numerous rewrites on the historical narratives around slavery and oppression. It lends to the question what does a perfect moment in time look like for the Black body? For Dana, it included freedom of expression; in 1976 Dana has enough freedom to marry interracially. After being in 1819, and after losing her arm, can Dana create a just world with Kevin? Can Dana see him as her husband and not her enslaver? By jumping through time Dana has altered her present moment.

Doro alters his history by jumping bodies and in and out of human skins. He makes demands on Anyanwu, his children and all villagers under his control. His demands are unreasonable and self-serving. Anyanwu holds the Black female body in high esteem. After transforming into a man for some time in order to free one of her enslaved kin, she labels shifting into a man as painful. After the traumatic incidents of witnessing Doro's cycling through bodies in order to reach the Americas, Anyanwu calls changing into male form "an abomination" she swears of the transformation for years. She only goes against this when the life of children is threatened by Doro. With the threat of death to her children looming over her head, Anyanwu transforms into male form and attempts to follow Doro's orders. She is clear and concise about the male form being taking a toll on her physical being.

Chapter 4- Conclusion- Octavia Butler as a Thread

“I realize that I have been writing about people for years and I’ve never seen any of them. I have the kind of imagination that hears. I think of it like a Radio Imagination. I like radio a lot and try to imagine what characters might look like because when I began writing at age twelve, I couldn’t. What I had to do was go back and sort of paint the characters in. What would I like them to look like?⁶¹
-Octavia E. Butler

In this quote Butler clearly states a part of her creative process: she creates her characters as parts that she “paints in” to the scene. Butler’s last novel was written in 2005, *Fledgling*. *Fledgling* is an exploration of power and voice. Butler sets up a world in *Fledgling* that centers around a vampire inhabiting a newly forming Black body. Shori, the protagonist awakens unaware of her identity. Like Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*, Shori’s body is not what it appears to be. Shori appears to be a girl who is ten-year-old but she like Anyanwu doesn’t age in a regular manner. Shori is a 53-year-old member of the Ina species. The Ina are nocturnal, long-lived, and sustain themselves by drinking the blood of other species. Therefore, their relationships are symbiotic, with the Ina’s venom providing significant boost to their humans’ immune systems and extending their lives up to 200 years.⁶² In *Wild Seed*, Butler gave her protagonist Anyanwu immortality. However, she was only able to pass this ability on to one of

⁶¹ Butler, Octavia, et al. “‘Radio Imagination’: Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment.” *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2001, pp. 45–76. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3185496.

⁶² Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. New York : Warner Books, 2007. Print.

her 50 children. But in *Fledgling*, Butler creates a body that is not only immortal and self-healing but has the ability to extend the life of any human that it chooses to share blood with. This is an interesting choice on Butler's part, she creates the protagonist, Shori's body as small, frail, and "the look of a 10-year-old girl."⁶³ But this body is in a position of power and control over all the other bodies in her community, essentially her world. Shori has been created to give the Ina people a new way of living that diminishes the old ways of their alien life. Like Doro in *Wild Seed*, Shori's mission is to breed her species with the human race. Shori's hybrid or alien DNA is proven to enhance human DNA, and to her own alien species Shori is an anomaly. She begins her mission trying to convince humans and her own species that her new path of breeding the two species is the best way for both to continue to exist on earth. What creates a distinctive alert for most women about this book is the age and demeanor of the main protagonist. Shori is mentally a fully developed woman. She speaks with power and authority. But her physical appearance and demeanor are such in the human world, that convincing adult men and women to stay with her, follow her and build a community is far-fetched. Once again Butler has created a body that is abnormal, but is more capable of connection, and change than fully formed adult humans. This body can create a bond between humans and its own species. The Ina people see themselves as superior to humans and see Shori as dealing with a lower level species.⁶⁴

Butler creates another society based in hierarchical systems. Shori, like Doro has her own agenda, it doesn't include killing human bodies. However, it does include biting them, sucking their blood, and ultimately changing their physical appearance and DNA. In Butler's novels, the body doesn't begin with strength it begins alone, in darkness, and often times weak. It is only when

⁶³ Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. New York : Warner Books, 2007. Print.

⁶⁴ Butler, Octavia E. *Fledgling*. New York : Warner Books, 2007. Print.

the protagonist begins to gather a community, share her goals with that community and outline a passage for her upward movement that the body strengthens. Butler makes this statement about genetics and what she calls “body knowledge”: “What is Genetics?—body knowledge— that is what is important. What’s made of biology is that the people who are in power are going to figure out why this a good reason for them to stay in power...Because the body is all we really know that we have. We can say that there’re always other things that are wonderful. Some are. But all we really know is that we have flesh.”⁶⁵

Butler’s unique strategy of creating self-awareness and leadership in the protagonist, leads to a development of a community. The protagonist, Anyanwu demonstrates Butler’s focus on the “body knowledge”. She has created a character in Anyanwu who knows the intricacies of her body so well she can manipulate them on a cellular level. *Wild Seed* indicates the importance that Butler places on redefining the Black body on the own terms of the Black woman. Anyanwu’s body appears in many forms within two novels in the *Patternist Series*. Both of these novels showcases Anyanwu’s main two supernatural abilities, most importantly she is a shape shifter. Shapeshifting is a popular and the ancient trope in the speculative fiction genres. It has a history of going back to epic poems such as the Iliad and can be found in the stories of many cultures. In science fiction each ability has a scientific explanation. For example, a gradual and spectacular change in cellular alteration for Anyanwu by transforming herself from a Black woman to a female dolphin exemplifies a jump that goes beyond race and gender and maintains a feminine theme. In mythology, folklore and speculative fiction, Shapeshifting is the ability of a being or creature to transform its physical form or shape. This is usually achieved

⁶⁵ Butler, Octavia, et al. “‘Radio Imagination’: Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment.” *MELUS*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2001, pp. 45–76. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3185496.

through an inherent ability of a mythological creature, diving intervention or the use of magic. The idea of shapeshifting is present in the oldest forms of totems and shamanism as well as the oldest extant literature and epic poems, including works such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Iliad where the shapeshifting is usually induced by the act of a deity. The idea persisted through the Middle Ages, where the agency causing shapeshifting is usually a sorcerer or witch, and into the modern period. It remains a common trope in modern fantasy, children literature and works of popular culture⁶⁶. The most common form of shapeshifting myths is that of Therianthropy,⁶⁷ Anyanwu's dolphin transformation and her yearning to stay a dolphin to remain "free" of Doro speaks to the depths of the character that Butler has created.

Her most forthcoming ability is Anyanwu's immortality; it is always present in the novel. Within the first chapter Anyanwu reveals that she is over 350 years old and her regret over out losing her husbands and children to old age. From the introduction to Anyanwu, the reader knows that her body exists outside of society's constructs of Black female identity and the body Butler creates a body that is beyond human capability. From ingesting poison, to manipulating her body into the shape and size, transforming her outward appearance to a white man and wearing his privilege for a time. Butler creates a death free couple in Anyanwu and Doro. They can live their Black lives without the fear of harm, oppression or death. Butler explores the notion of Black women as supernatural and beyond the reach of oppressive societal roles. By creating Black bodies that supersede death, illness and pain, Butler is reshaping and rebuilding a better image of Black

⁶⁶ Linn, Denise. "How to Shape Shift _ A Native American Technique of Transformation". Healyourlife.com <https://www.healyourlife.com/how-to-shapeshift-a-native-american-technique-for-transformation>

⁶⁷ Therianthropy is the transformation of a human being into an animal(i.e. werewolves or vampires) or conversely, of an animal into human form.

characters. Butler gives her protagonists a choice in body and location. Doro can wear the skin of anyone that he chooses. Anyanwu can take any form she chooses. Doro choose his outward identity out of need and greed. Butler creates a dominate, driven, sexually charged enslaver in Doro. He announces himself and rightfully belonging to a black male body, but not committing to any one body for a long period of time. Anyanwu changes forms but her body home is as a Black female. She states it was her first form, this gives Blackness power and supernatural agility. She abhors being a man, and yearns to take her original form as soon as possible. In *Fledging* the protagonist, Shori chooses Black skin because pragmatically as a vampire she and her people having dark skin would give them the ability to function during the sunlight hours.

Anyanwu is constructed as an African women enslaved and brought to America as an immigrant. It is important to look at the way Butler aligns Anyanwu's experience with Black American women. In *Wild Seed*. Anyanwu establish herself as protector and mother. In *Mind of my Mind*, the second book in the series Anyanwu is still a protector but she is faced with going up against labels and discrimination within Doro's fashioned Patternist community. There is division between the telepathic sub-community and the non-telepathic. Butler designs this society to examine community and inclusion in America. First this community is all outlawed for difference and then within the unique community of supernatural abilities they are not able to fully accept each other. The reader journeys with Anyanwu and Dana as they develop a stronger mental capacity through their experiences of trauma and loss. Butler's female protagonists mirror the lives, issues and concerns of real Black women like the women Hartman and Spillers make record of. Butler's look at Black female sexuality is unique because it allows readers to examine past notions and stereotypes, but at the same time sees new identity in her chosen protagonist and their struggle to become self-aware. In the fictional settings of *Wild Seed*, and the historical glimpses

of the real-life plantations in *Kindred*, Butler is able to make reference to the real atrocities against Black women during slavery. The creation of Anyanwu and Dana creates a shift in the nature of power within the sexuality of the Black women. By western standards the Black female body is constricted to victim or vixen⁶⁸. Butler creates a new identity for Black women by giving them the ability to travel through time. This project demonstrates Octavia Butler's use of time travel as a literary device to represent the historical trauma and violence Black women in America. Butler's influence on American popular culture is evident in new age movies and tv shows like the Black Panther, which exhibit images of Black women that perpetuate the strength and supernatural ability that Octavia Butler's protagonists do. There is no accurate telling of science fiction, speculative fiction, or Afrofuturism without Octavia Butler. The depth of her knowledge of American history coupled with her ability to insert historical context and figures, give her novels the hint of historical education that youth need to research their own history. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* are perfect examples of text to discuss race and gender with younger generations. These texts invite conversations about power placement and displacement, gender and violence in American history. Octavia Butler makes the Black body the center of each of her novels. Butler forces the reader to take an internal look at its protagonist and with that character experience their pain, and decisions good or bad. The immortality of Anyanwu speaks for itself. The life of the Black female matters to Octavia Butler, this is evident by her making a Black female body last forever.

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