

Uncanny Race and Octavia Butler

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Beyond Sigmund Freud's phallogentric definition of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) as the fear of castration, repetition, or the fear of that which is no longer secret or hidden (and is consequently dangerous), there is another theory posited by Tania Modleski which expands this Freudian interpretation to include a third source of operation, found in the fear of a lack of separation between mother and child. I believe that this enlarged and unique concept of the feminine uncanny is a frequently overlooked literary tool utilized by a diverse group of female writers, as its subversive nature allows for a broad interrogation of social mores. The feminine uncanny explores themes of claustrophobia and isolation, the ordinariness of evil, the frustration of being unheard, and the pure terror that occurs when places of expected safety are transformed into places of danger.

Octavia Butler explores these uncanny themes through science fiction and fantasy by tackling the unruly subjects of race, class, and gender. In her fiction, race and trauma are the ultimate uncanny operative; the underlying fear that guides the actions of individuals and societies, unconsciously or willfully. Butler uses extraordinary situations and events to present race as a fundamentally normal part of human experience, but one which has been used to re-categorize other people as *unheimlich*. Butler was, in many ways, uncanny in and of herself. As a black, female writer of science-fiction, she frequently found herself positioned as the Other in workshops, classes, and conventions. Her experience of radical alterity in her daily life situates her uniquely in this examination of the uncanny as a literary method of telling uncomfortable truths. While Butler is chiefly associated with cautionary science-fiction—her *Parable* and *Patternmaster* series function in this manner—two of her works particularly

place her in the feminine uncanny: *Kindred* and *Xenogenesis*. These stories both share an adamant refusal to submit to binary categorization; they center around female protagonists who are placed in uncomfortable, dire situations, and choose to survive at almost any cost, and they both use race and the Other as a way to subvert the reader's expectations. In reading Butler's works, initial expectations on the part of the reader are frequently questioned and often reversed. For Butler, "difference...becomes a catalyst through which power structures can be revised and new ethics imagined." (Evans 238) Difference, particularly that of race, is the unique expression of the feminine uncanny which Butler utilizes throughout her oeuvre.

This catalyst is found in Butler's "grim fantasy" novel *Kindred* (*Conversations* 40) chiefly through the difference of its protagonist: a black woman named Dana, who lives in California in 1976, and is involuntarily pulled back in time to repeatedly save her white, slave-owning ancestor, Rufus Weylin, who lives in Maryland in 1815. Unlike many novels involving time travel, *Kindred* has no scientist fiddling with a machine, nor does it involve choice on the part of any character involved. The first time it occurs, Dana is abruptly yanked back in time without preparation or warning, and the first sight she sees is a child drowning. She saves his life, and is thanked for her pains by the child's father pointing a shotgun at her head. Dana, sick with fear and panic, then finds herself back in her own living room as suddenly as she left it. The mechanics of this time travel are left intentionally vague, and the only explanation Butler gives is that its operation is driven by fear, specifically an intense fear of death. Rufus' fear calls Dana to him, and her own fear sends her back home. Their interdependence prevents either of them from doing harm to the other, although Rufus becomes progressively less careful of Dana's well-being as he ages and becomes a product of his environment, in spite of his exposure to the inexplicable forces that bring the humanizing efforts of Dana into his life. These

forces push Dana and Rufus further into an uncanny, liminal state—she is out of his time, out of her own, and represents a future dissolution of order that Rufus cannot and will not understand.

Every time Dana is wrenched back to save Rufus, she ends up being stuck in the past for longer periods. Her first trip is a matter of minutes; her second, hours; her third days; while time in 1976 hardly progresses at all. This warping of time has a jarring, frightening effect on Dana, shifting her from the *heimlich* of her present so much so that at one point, she even thinks of the Weylin plantation with relief as “home”. (190) The Weylin plantation is simultaneously her home as the origin of her family, and its *unheimlich* doppelgänger, as that familial/familiar origin is rooted in trauma. The uncanny effect of Dana’s travels are amplified when she realizes that Rufus is the father of her ancestor Hagar; this radically alters her understanding of home and her own kin, taking the comfort of what she believed to be truth and showing it to be not just false, but grotesque: The only way Dana can be born is through the rape of her black great-great-grandmother.

In this way, Dana’s very existence is a product of the uncanny revealing what was hidden—while her family Bible listed Rufus Weylin as her great-great grandfather, his race and status as a slave-owner were not revealed to Dana. When Dana pieces together who Rufus is, she experiences the trapdoor drop of her familiar and known world being exposed as untrustworthy, even down to her kindness in saving Rufus’ life, as his continued existence now makes Dana an accessory to the rape which will eventually produce her. In spite of this moral conundrum, Dana chooses survival, fighting through the nauseating reality of slavery in order to ensure her own life.

Butler uses Dana’s experience of slavery as a way to push past the convenient “happy darkies” concept found in novels like *Gone with the Wind*, and in watered-down explanations of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Since Dana

is experiencing these horrors for the first time, and in a first-person narrative, it breaks down the reader's resistance to reductive and distanced approaches to history. Butler's unblinking account of the daily cruelties inherent to slavery pushes the reader into an uncanny experience, as she exposes events, beliefs, and behaviors often glossed over or hidden by the filter of time. Even the compassion that a reader may feel for Dana is made unnerving, since it forces a kind of tacit complicity with her decision to survive above all else, in all its implications.

Dana has another reason to survive the past so she can return to her present. She is married to a white man named Kevin who becomes a constant reminder of the divide between the two worlds she bridges. While Kevin and Dana receive occasional lewd remarks from a drunk co-worker about their relationship, their union is reasonably safe and respected in 1976 Los Angeles. The California Supreme Court ruled bans against interracial marriage as unconstitutional in 1948, almost 20 years prior to the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*. However, their marriage is still greeted with skepticism and disgust from both of their families. Kevin asks Dana to "go to Vegas and pretend we haven't got relatives" (112), a statement that later drips with irony and doubled meaning, as Dana's time travels mean she can pretend no such thing without risking her very existence.

Through Kevin, *Kindred* explores the shifts and uncertainties of white subjectivity in his fundamental beliefs, and by extension, that of many of Butler's readers—first through his sister and her racist rejection of his marriage. Dana warns him that his sister may react poorly to their biracial marriage, while Kevin assumes the best of her, but is proven wrong. He is fundamentally incorrect about his sister's character, and her ability to resist the passive acceptance of bigotry that surrounds her. Her rejection sets the stage for his own journey back to Maryland—Kevin grabs Dana and is pulled back in time with her, and finds

himself forced into complicity with the institution of slavery in order to protect his wife. Kevin's experience becomes increasingly uncanny via the extraordinary cognitive dissonance he undergoes when he poses as Dana's owner. He must pretend to be a part of systemic racism and bigoted behavior, even to the extent of lying to Rufus' father about his intent to sell Dana. It is only after Dana is pulled back to 1976 without him, stranding Kevin in the past for five years, that he learns to use his privilege as an educated white man to stand against the system that paradoxically produced his wife. In this way, Kevin is also able to experience the uncanny matrilineality that so violently interrupts Dana's life.

Butler continues to use themes of unnatural or violent separation from the maternal figure to replace the first expected experience of the *Heimlich*—that of mothering—with trauma and fear. This action of the uncanny in her writing wields violent separation as a superior form of castration, originating as it does in a place common to all of us: the womb. The uncanniness of violent separation from one's mother is readily apparent in *Kindred*, as slavery strips both mothers and their children of their very personhood; the domestic ordinariness of their humanity and familial relations are betrayed by a system that perverts this fundamental domesticity into products to be bought, sold, and used. One of the first slaves that Dana interacts with is a cook, Sarah, who has borne four children, and had all but one sold away from her. The one child she is allowed to keep is mute, and is therefore seen as worthless chattel, but this child is also used as leverage—the ever-present threat of her sale is used to keep Sarah submissive. Dana experiences the horror of seeing children on the plantation acting out their mother's worst fears as a game, not yet realizing the import or significance of what they do. She is simultaneously drawn towards and repulsed by "...the small slave children who chased each other and shouted and didn't understand yet that they were slaves." (77)

The play-acting that the enslaved children engage in may be viewed as a form of doubling, a theme *Kindred* shares with many stories involving the uncanny. Doubling is frequently used as an uncomfortable expression of desire, in this novel, it chiefly occurs between Dana and her ancestor, Alice, a look-alike such that they are often mistaken as sisters. Alice is Dana's uncanny confrontation with the past; with the life that she, too, could have lived. Alice enters the narrative as a free black, a term revealed as meaningless by the end of the novel, as Alice's personhood is brutally stripped away, first with the selling of her father, then her husband, followed by her own person through a forced relationship with Rufus, and finally, through her children. This last removal is Rufus' crude attempt to manipulate Alice—he lies about selling the children he has had with her in order to make Alice “behave,” to force her into further dependency on him. In the structure of the narrative, Dana's will to survive makes her uncannily complicit in every step of this particular story. Each time Dana saves Rufus, his relationship with Alice deteriorates further, leading inexorably towards the rape that will allow Dana to exist, but only at the cost of Alice's life: She hangs herself after Rufus tells her he sold their children. Alice's suicide is a clear example of the feminine uncanny working through separation and doubling—a mother is separated by violence from her children, while simultaneously separating herself violently from them.

This “glimpse behind the scenes of the most fundamental psychical process” (Kokoli 33) seen here through motherhood and autonomy, not only causes anxiety, but horror, which is manifested in the novel's penultimate scene, where Rufus attempts to rape Dana because she is Alice's double and mirror. She kills him in self-defense, and is thrust back into her own time, but her left arm is embedded into a wall in the very place where Rufus was grabbing it. This amputation can be seen to operate as Lacan suggests in his “Seminar on Anxiety”, where “one loses oneself a little” as “part of the function of the

labyrinth that must be brought to life.” (41) Amputation is also a frequent theme in the uncanny, typically operating as a grotesque displacement of the natural with either emptiness or falsehood. Dana’s severed arm and the resetting of her worldview are the sacrifices required to ensure her ultimate desire for survival. The amputation acts as a metaphor for the many losses she experiences, and it speaks to how a portion of her is literally left behind because of her time travelling and the ugly truths it reveals about her own history. Dana’s amputation was an intentional decision on Butler’s part, a violent mark that demonstrates both the surreal horrors of slavery, and the disembodying sacrifice required of many to survive that institution (Kenan 30).

Dana’s decision to take control of her own ancestry allows her to simultaneously subvert and reclaim her autonomy; she achieves and has separation from her mother(s) thrust upon her by demanding her own right to exist—a right her ancestors were not allowed to assert. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Dana is not the slave in Butler’s narrative: Rufus—though white, male, and privileged—is.

In Butler’s works, slavery is the culmination of domestic horror. Its perversities and capriciousness reveal the not-so-hidden desire to dominate; its strict adherence to codified behavior demonstrates the frailty of the culture, economy, and individuals who came to rely on it. *Kindred* operates in the uncanny by making kinship and home places of dissonance, and through the institution of slavery itself which demands bodies that can never belong to themselves.

In Butler’s *Xenogenesis* series, she creates an intersection of past horrors with present, consistent human behavior thereby expanding the concept of uncanny kinship and the destruction of bodily autonomy to a universal scale. In this series, when Butler argues for accepting the uncanny—the difference, the Other—it is almost always in the service of survival and the hope of future

autonomy. In Butler's view, to embrace the uncanny is to survive it. She uses a "female Adam" (Payne 21) in this series, an African-American woman named Lilith (an apt reference to the ancient Hebraic legend of Adam's first, rebellious wife), to create a new race of alien-human hybrids after the Earth is decimated by a nuclear holocaust. Over the span of two centuries, Lilith undergoes a series of wakings, gradually learning more about her rescuer/captors, as they slowly reveal themselves to her. Each of these wakings is a kind of re-birth, returning Lilith again and again to a state of infantile helplessness until she is deemed "ready" to meet those responsible for her captivity: A race of aliens called the Oankali, hideous in form to human eyes, who rescued the few remaining humans they could find on post-apocalyptic Earth, and placed most of them into comatose states on their spaceship, ostensibly for their safety. The motives of the Oankali are not entirely benevolent, however, as the prime directive of their species is constant adaptation: They must constantly seek new races with whom they can "trade" genetic diversity in order to survive, but their trade rarely takes the willingness of another species into account.

The uncanny finds one operation here by removing choice or the illusion of it from the protagonist. By using literal aliens in her *Xenogenesis* novels, Butler is able to alienate certain readers from prevailing patterns of thought regarding people of color, women, and the hierarchical reflex that interferes with our relative intelligence as a species. While Lilith realizes that the Oankali do not necessarily have evil designs on the few surviving humans, she is still not given any choice in becoming their chosen brood mare for an Oankali/human hybrid. It is disturbing to see this laid out so plainly as a reader, and Butler is clearly returning to her earlier theme in *Kindred*—the practice of forced breeding that white slave owners used to both control and humble slaves.

This forced breeding, which the Oankali insist on calling "trade," is one of the chief complications in determining whether or not the humans of Earth have

been rescued or captured by these aliens. While the Oankali are able to increase Lilith's lifespan and remove her genetic propensities towards cancer, they also deprive her and every other surviving human of the ability to reproduce without an Oankali intercessor. Reproduction now requires the intimate involvement of the Oankali's third sex, the Ooloi, who literally lays between heterosexual human pairs during intercourse, separating them not only during the sex act, but permanently, marking each with a pheromone that these human pairs find deeply repugnant. There is no regard for consent; humans must accept this queer mating, or they will die as a species. As a whole, *Xenogenesis* uses this dissonance to ask its readers a key ethical question: Is it right for one species/race/group to control another, even if that control provides desirable, but previously unattainable benefits like increased health, strength, and longevity?

Critic Thomas Foster argues that the Oankali should not be interpreted as "alien invaders," since they desire mutual trade instead of "passive acceptance of their own norms." ("We Get to Live and so do They" 143) I fundamentally disagree with this interpretation, as Butler makes humanity's helplessness in the face of this assimilation abundantly apparent in each novel in this series, and Butler's own notes and development of the series denies any notion of the Oankali being a purely altruistic species. Rather, Butler uses these beings and our concepts of a benevolent and powerful species to interrogate *all* notions of hierarchical behavior. Butler confronts the frustrating hold that hierarchical thinking has on us by looking at how "racial tension as a theoretical phenomenon persists not only as the...xenophobic response to the Oankali or to other humans; it also informs the construction of the subject position from which Butler writes, and enables an assertion and celebration of intra- and extra-textual cultural diversity that the novel and its author endorse." (Tucker 171)

She uses the revulsion of the truly alien Other to shed light on the inherent ludicrousness of fearing difference among human races; she uses the xenophilia of the Oankali to properly frame their opportunistic nature, exposing their exoticized Othering for the patronizing, hierarchical behavior that it truly is. Gerry Canavan effectively argues that “the surface humanitarianism of the Oankali belies the threat of (xeno)genocidal violence on which their interactions with human beings are predicated; if this is supposed to be a cosmopolitan utopia, it comes only at the barrel of a gun.” (107) The Oankali may not be hierarchical among themselves, but this is not a grace they extend to other species.

At no time in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy are humans respected as equals of the Oankali. They are harvested for their traits, even as they benefit from their interactions and relationships with their captor/rescuers. The subaltern does speak throughout Butler's writing, and what they ask for is autonomy and survival, for good or for ill. Butler intentionally frames alien behavior against human behavior, and demonstrates that there is little inherent difference between both species' intelligence and hierarchical behavior. The Oankali are not evil, but their first and greatest good is always their own need for new genetic material, no matter the cost to the species of whom they demand it.

One of the supreme costs to humanity is that of Earth itself: The Oankali have made it habitable again, but only on their terms and with their help, forcing Lilith into an alliance with her rescuer/captors. She is told that her job is to wake groups of humans, teach them primitive survival skills, and most importantly, she is to teach them to accept interbreeding with the Oankali. Humans who reject this breeding will continue in the sterilized state that the Oankali have subjected all surviving humans to. The uncanny is literalized here—existence itself is now *unheimlich* to humanity.

Lilith's cry against forced breeding rings throughout these books, and echoes back to *Kindred* as well. If both Lilith and Dana eventually accept their

captors' terms, it is because survival is their ultimate imperative—not a benighted sense of honor, nor a passive victimhood—but survival by almost any means. Butler's uncanny reveals a hidden truth of being a marginalized person: acceptance of the unacceptable is frequently the only way in which such a person or a group may survive, and by extension, prevent their children from having to make the same horrifying choice.

Butler never offers her readers easy answers or solutions, leaving the ambiguity of moral choice and human existence unvarnished and decidedly unpalatable. This ambiguity can also be said to be a fundamental trait shared throughout the genre of the feminine uncanny, and (perhaps) the feminine experience as a whole. What Butler understood is that survival is alienating, that to choose it is to deny oneself the relative ease of martyrdom, or the sublimation of desire found in adhering to social mores. The radical alien adaptation of the Oankali is mirrored in the equally radical will to survive seen in Lilith—human, black, and Other even among her own species.

Butler's work may be categorized as science-fiction, but her writing also gathers together principles of the uncanny and actualizes these through stories that are uncomfortable, deeply disturbing, and give voice to the will of women when confronted with doubling, desire, anxiety, and the Ur-uncanny of separation from one's mother. Butler's stories can be viewed as fictional manifestos that demand survival, respect, and voice for women, particularly women of color, who have been denied the ability to be the hero or protagonist of their own story. Her unblinking examination of the feminine uncanny as it intersects with race doubles the impact of this genre, reminding her readers that women's stories and experiences are valid, universal, compelling, and necessary for understanding the human experience.

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