

Intersections and Innovations: Genre and Interracial Desire in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy's *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* defines a neo-slave narrative as a contemporary novel "that assume[s] the form, adopt[s] the conventions, and take[s] on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative"

(3). Although it is conventionally described as a neo-slave narrative, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* presents a challenge to the tradition through form and content. While Rushdy argues that through the very nature of genre "the authors of Neo-slave narratives engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origins in the late sixties and early seventies," his definition does not fully account for a text like *Kindred* that simultaneously represents historical periods past and present (5). And while the novel engages with the debates on racial formation and Black Power articulated by Rushdy, it takes an unpopular position on interracial unions, ultimately undermining black homogeneity through a challenge to the taboo of intermarriage between black women and white men.

These differences allow *Kindred* to occupy a unique place within the canon of neo-slave narratives; it is alike enough to group with other novels that more conventionally fit the confines of the genre, yet dissimilar enough to question these same conventions. In comparison with other neo-slave narratives such as *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*, which both privilege black heterosexual homogeneity as a historical intervention, *Kindred*'s representation of interracial intimacy is anomalous within a genre that seeks to understand such desire as pathological and potentially damaging to the project of recuperating the black family. My presentation will focus on *Kindred*'s position within the neo-slave narrative genre, a position that is negotiated through challenges to narrative form and conventional content.

This paper first analyzes the novel as a neo-slave narrative, investigating its use of slave narrative conventions. While the novel resembles other neo-slave narratives in its recognition of the slave narrative conventions, the novel is distinguished from these works by its use of time travel as the device that links the past with the present, allowing the contemporary world to confront directly the institution of slavery. Butler's treatment of interracial desire also separates her novel from other neo-slave narratives that tend to dismiss cross-racial relationships. The second part of the presentation will address how *Kindred* complicates desire, showing the legacy of interracial rape alongside the potential mutuality that can exist between contemporary blacks and whites. Through the interracial origins of the protagonist's family and the protagonist's interracial marriage, Butler posits that reconciling past racial traumas figures as a critical step in reshaping contemporary race relations between blacks and whites. The novel's implications for interracial intimacy call into question the tragedy that conventionally accompanies interracial love narratives. Consequently, Butler's novel offers two interventions: 1) a revision of the conventional neo-slave narrative (which is itself a revision of slavery), and 2) a rewriting of the interracial love narrative.