ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Examining the Past in Black American Fiction: History, Temporality and Politics of the Black Body in Octavia Butler, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

Rosie Higgins

May 2024

"Negro writers must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the whole, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa and of the long, complex (and for the most part unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a whole culture again" (Wright 221)

Black American Fiction places a high emphasis on the historical past as a means of understanding present-day history, but it does so in a variety of ways. This essay will focus on the relationship explored between the past and present in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and Ralph Ellison's short story *Mister Toussan* (1941). I will discuss how Bigger's internalised fear of white society in *Native Son* is linked to the history of slavery and how Butler's exploration of temporal structure and employment of the neo-slave narrative in *Kindred* makes more explicit links between Dana's past and present. Moreover, I will argue that works of black American fiction, such as Ellison's *Mister Toussan*, often explore the devaluation of African American historical culture and illustrate the consequences of ignoring this heritage.

Butler's writing in *Kindred* was likely influenced by two important historical contexts in late 1970s America. *Kindred'*s historical present is set in 1976, the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. This anniversary for Butler may have raised questions about how far society has progressed since slavery, possibly inspiring her use of time travel as a means of explicitly connecting Dana's present and past. At a time when America is nostalgically celebrating its history, Butler looks back on a history of oppression, thereby providing a direct critique of the depiction and celebration of American history. As an example, one can ask how much the violence of the white patrollers in the novel's past differs from the racialized brutality of modern police that has sparked movements such as Black Lives Matter. The 1960s also saw the republishing of what are now considered key slave narratives that had previously been lost or neglected, providing society with access to the buried historical past. For example, it is documented that at least six anthologies of slave narratives were published in 1969 alone (Rushdy), marking the emergence of the genre of the neo-slave narrative, of which *Kindred* is an

early example. The neo-slave narrative is best described using Rushdy's definition of "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" and therefore question the "received and often (mis) appropriated histories of race and slavery" (Rushdy 3, as cited in Gardner 541-542). *Kindred*, therefore, can be seen to take the structure of the historical slave narrative and reconfigure it for the modern age, as we see a reversal of the slave narrative, in which Dana moves from a state of freedom to captivity. By alternating between Dana's nineteenth-century enslavement and her present relationship with Kevin and employing analepsis, jumping between time in the narrative, Butler pushes the boundaries of space and time to reconfigure the stereotypical linear slave narrative and emphasise the interdependency of history and the present.

Butler plays with a variety of genres, especially the gothic. Often, the gothic explores the theme of entrapment and employs the motif of the haunted house, where ghosts and memories of the past are embodied physically or figuratively. These tropes can all be seen in *Kindred*, where Dana is repeatedly transported back to and trapped in the house of the Weylins and reminded of histories of slavery that have been neglected, strengthening her understanding of her own heritage and ancestry. Initially, Dana questions how people 'put up' with slavery in the novel and seems to have little connection with her historical past, stating, "People don't learn everything about the times that came before them...why should they?" (Butler 63). However, due to the brutality of slavery, which is described through Butler's realist descriptions of its practices, Dana learns to adapt to this institutionalised system in order to survive. We see her behaviour and speech assimilate to Sarah's, who originally Dana admits she "looked down on" for being "the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy'" (145), to the extent that Dana is told "you sound just like Sarah" (159). This power shift from Dana looking down on Sarah to being

equal to her illustrates how Dana's full immersion in the historic past has enabled her to better understand how difficult it was to escape slavery and how it has shaped history to this day. *Kindred,* as a novel and work of historical metafiction, is concerned with taking ideas from the past and making sense of them. Butler writes about real-life events, but in a way that focuses on how decisions are made, and how events are recorded and talked about. Additionally, it critiques those who have a lack of understanding about the historical past because they feel it is uncomfortable or does not concern them. Butler's omission of details of what transpired during Kevin's five-year stay in the past illustrates this critique of historical neglect.

When Dana returns to the present via time travel, she retains the scars she has endured in the past which act as physical symbols representing the collective psychological trauma of slavery present today. These scars haunt Dana as she describes them as “thick and ugly” and reminisces how “Kevin had always told me how smooth my skin was'’ (113). Furthermore, the loss of Dana’s arm, which had been grabbed by Rufus, demonstrates a direct connection being drawn between the past and the present, as her body is left physically and metaphorically torn between two worlds. This imagery of scars and dismemberment highlights that one can gloss over and bury historical trauma, but it will always remain there and continue to inform racial politics in the modern world despite the fact that slavery is rendered irrelevant to modern society by many. A continuation of slavery into the present day can also be seen in Dana's description of her work as "a slave market" (52), which again confronts readers with the question of how far we have come since slavery was abolished. Comparing the economic systems of slavery to Dana's treatment in the workplace shows that, although to a lesser extent, black bodies remain commodities in corporate 1970s America, as they were in early 1800s slavery. Consequently, Butler emphasises that understanding the historical past is crucial to understanding the present

through a variety of different techniques, such as using the physical scarring and ill treatment of the black body as a metaphor for the psychological trauma ingrained in African American heritage.

Native Son, too, explores the ways in which the present is informed by the historical past, but draws the connection between the two less explicitly than Butler's *Kindred*. The novel contrasts *Kindred'*s science fiction elements in its stark realism and is almost anti-romanticism in its insistence that one shall not transgress social barriers. This style allows Wright to demonstrate the ongoing struggle African Americans have with accessing white society that was present in slavery. Wright's early experiences of racialisation were shaped by segregation and Jim Crow laws in the Deep South, and it is these experiences that most likely influenced the novel's descriptions of arguably more insidious racism. For instance, the novel begins with descriptions of Bigger's horrible, crowded, rat-infested flat. We have grotesque details of this rat, being told that it "bared long yellow fangs, piping shrilly, belly quivering" (17). This opening is crucial for framing the novel, as we find out at the end of the novel that these dreadful flats are controlled by Mr. Dalton, who charges extortionate rent and yet simultaneously maintains his charitable public image when he states, "Why, only today, I sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boys' Club" (232). We see, therefore, that the philanthropy of Mr. Dalton is paid for by these impoverished people. White supremacist society, however, will continue to hide Mr. Dalton's actions and portray him as a benevolent figure, just like white slave owners rationalised their oppressive actions by saying slaves were provided with a sense of home they wouldn't have otherwise. This normalisation of slavery is discussed in Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts*, where she challenges the ideologies that aimed to normalise slavery on the basis that the relations between slaveholders and enslaved people were some of affection and reciprocity, allowing slave holders

to exert power by creating a sense that enslaved people accepted and participated in their own subjugation (Hartman). In this way, Wright draws connections between the historical past and Bigger's present by pointing out the pattern of white members of society gaining economic status from black oppression. Wright's interest in linking the past with the present can be seen in his essay *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, where he states that "Negro writers must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the *whole*, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa and of the long, complex (and for the most part unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again" (221). Therefore, according to Wright, success in black creative fiction entails awareness, both conscious and subconscious, of both black history and its relation to their progress as a race in present and future societies.

Like *Kindred* and many other works of black American fiction, *Native Son* speaks to a racialised trauma that every individual must carry with them every day. For Bigger, this trauma translates into an internalised fear of white society, which forces him to retaliate with violence when he attempts to access it, leading him to commit monstrous crimes of murder and rape. The *Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature* acknowledges this, describing him as "driven by a fear of whites that was the legacy of slavery," meaning "every act he performs has its roots in dread" (Andrews et al. 34). Furthermore, Baldwin's essay *Everybody's Protest Novel* argues that the tragedy in Bigger's life is that "he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth" (31). We can therefore argue, much like Max does in court, that Bigger's actions are caused by a history of oppressive slavery, which has left him and other African Americans afraid of society and unable

to navigate it. Hence, Wright emphasises how understanding the historical past can provide us with an explanation, although not an excuse, for Bigger's crimes.

Furthermore, Wright's presentation of the black female body in *Native Son* should be examined, as the objectification we already see of black bodies is heightened when gender categories are introduced, and a unique sense of vulnerability is demonstrated when these two marginalised categories are combined. In the court scene over the murder of Mary Dalton, the coroner states, "I deem it imperative that you examine one additional piece of evidence" (260). This "evidence," we soon find out, is the "raped and mutilated body of one Bessie Mears" (260). Rather than being viewed as a brutally murdered and violated human being, Bessie is viewed merely as evidence for the murder of a white girl. As the black female body is exposed and put in a position of extreme vulnerability in the centre of the courtroom, we see Bessie's intersectionality in full force. Intersectionality was a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and has its roots in black feminist criticism, specifically in a legal context. It refers to those experiencing dual forms of discrimination on the basis of gender and race and demonstrates a critique of the "single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law", where race and gender-based discrimination were viewed separately rather than being considered to work in conjunction with one another (Crenshaw 139). Even Bigger himself knows that "though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished," as "he knew that the white people did not really care about Bessie's being killed" (261). The dehumanising treatment of Bessie's body in court and the objectification of her as merely a piece of evidence is fundamentally tied to slavery. The act reminds one of the animalisation of slaves, especially female slaves, whose bodies had no rights since they belonged to their owners, meaning they were exploited physically and sexually. The animalisation of

slaves was so permeative in African American slavery that Thomas Jefferson himself stated that "few minds have yet doubted but that they were as legitimate subjects of property as horses and cattle" (Jefferson, as quoted in Quallen 33). Therefore, the treatment of the black female body in American society, illustrated by Wright through the use of Bessie in *Native Son*, confronts the reader with the question of how much progress has been made in the treatment of the black body from the historical past to the present.

In addition to drawing connections between the historical past and present in terms of the collective trauma of slavery, many black American writers explore the neglect of African American history, and the power exercised when deciding what knowledge becomes history. As Foucault argues in his book *Discipline and Punish*, knowledge is not an objective or neutral category but rather something that is always shaped by power because those with power and authority get to label, categorise, and classify the world's components (Foucault & Sheridan). One such text that explores this concept is Ellison's short story, *Mister Toussan*. *Mister Toussan* offers a direct critique of educational institutions and the power they hold over what is, and what is not, taught, much like *Kindred* challenges the neglect of African American history through the use of Dana's time travel. The boys of this story are only shown an image of Africa that is misrepresentative and plays on racist stereotypes. They are taught that Africans are "bout the most lazy folks in the world" and that "them cannibals would eat the hell outa you" (25). As a result of inadequate historical education, these boys lack an accurate understanding of their cultural heritage and display an internalised racism. This links to the cinema scene in *Native Son,* where Bigger is presented with two different sets of racialised images. One is that of the white world, where "white men and women dressed in black and white clothes" are "laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing," and the other is that of the black world, with "naked black men and

women whirling in wild dances" with “drums beating” (39). As a result of the misrepresentation of African culture and the neglect of its richness, both the boys in *Mister Toussan* and Bigger in *Native Son* develop a double consciousness and internalised racism.

Furthermore, the boys of *Mister Toussan* lack understanding of certain historical events, such as the Haitian revolution leader Toussaint Louverture, who led the first successful slave revolt, establishing Haiti as the first independent black state. This story of Toussaint is the focal point of Ellison’s short story, as illustrated by its title. Toussaint is a figure who did not abide being told where he could and could not go and which spaces he could or could not occupy. This resilience led to the emancipation of numerous lives, characterising Toussaint as a symbol of bravery and freedom. As Wright inexplicitly links his present characters to slavery and Butler uses the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence to question how far society has come, Ellison arguably uses Toussaint's fight for emancipation to question how much freedom African Americans have actually gained since times of slavery. For instance, when the boys are having fun, loudly fantasising about the story of Toussaint, Riley’s mother reprimands them, saying that “white folks says we tear up a neighbourhood when we move in it, and you all out there jus’ provin them out true,” and as a result, orders them to “git on round in the back” (31). We see here that despite the emancipation that Toussaint fought for, white society is still controlling the spaces black bodies can or cannot occupy and under what conditions this must be. In several works of black American fiction, we see older generations as hypervigilant to white surveillance, for example, Bigger’s mother in *Native Son*, most likely since they are more informed about the historical past of slavery. Here, in *Mister Toussan*, Riley’s mother reasserts reality and removes the boys from their fantasy; she takes the boys from the public sphere and confines them to the domestic, something that African Americans have been subject to since slavery.

The boys' excitement grows as they add more details and reenact what they imagine Toussaint might have done in order to fill in the gaps in the story that have been left out. The lines between reality and fantasy in *Mister Toussan* are constantly blurred as the boys have to rely on one another as a source of knowledge, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. This is symbolic of the fact that, as a result of inconsistent and negligent recordings of African American history, we have a much more limited understanding of African American culture than we do of white American culture, aiding the perpetuation of a white supremacist system of values, as to which cultures should be valued. However, we can see the joy of Riley and Buster as they engage with their cultural heritage, as Buster "clapped his hands and kicked his heels against the earth, his black face glowing in a burst of rhythmic joy" and "Riley bent double with laughter' (28). *Mister Toussan* can therefore be seen as a direct critique of educational systems and the past omission of some aspects of history as a means of gaining power and authority. Readers are confronted with the consequences of this through the boys' internalised racism when talking about Africa, showing Ellison's demand for a more accurate representation of African culture in education. Therefore, Ellison emphasises the importance of the historical past and current understanding by demonstrating the consequences of a lack of diversity in education curricula. With Foucault's theories on knowledge and power, we can see how omitting certain aspects of history leaves some groups with power and authority and others without, continuing historical racial hierarchies into the present day.

In conclusion, this essay demonstrates how works of black American fiction highlight the importance of the historical past for understanding their historical present. My emphasis has been on Butler's use of the neo-slave narrative in *Kindred* and her experimentation with the boundaries of time and space; Wright's depiction of the relationship between Bigger's legal case and a

history of oppression in *Native Son*; and Ellison's illustration of the exertion of power through the omission of certain aspects of history in *Mister Toussan*. All of these texts contain complex explorations of the connection between past and present, and suggest that an awareness of this connection is crucial to our present understanding of history, racial politics, and the world as a whole.

Works Cited

Baldwin, J., & Jones, E. P. (2012). Everybody's Protest Novel. In *Notes of a Native Son* (pp. 24–31). Essay, Beacon Press.

Butler, O. E. (1988). *Kindred*. Beacon Press.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989) *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (pp. 139-67). Essay, University of Chicago Legal Forum.

Ellison, R., & Callahan, J. F. (1996). Mister Toussan. In *Flying Home and Other Stories* (pp. 22–32). Essay, Random House.

Foucault, M., & Sheridan, A. (2020). The Carceral. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (pp. 120–133). Essay, Penguin Books.

Gardner, E. (2001). *Ashraf H.A. Rushdy. Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the social - JSTOR*. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286120

Gibson, D. B. (2001). BIGGER THOMAS. In W. L. Andrews, F. S. Foster, & T. Harris (Eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (p. 34). Essay, Oxford University Press.

Hartman, S. (2008). Venus in Two Acts. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, *12*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1

Quallen, M. (2016). *Making Animals, Making Slaves: Animalization and Slavery in the Antebellum United States* (thesis). Georgetown University Press, Washington.

Rushdy, A. H. A. (2005). The Politics of the Neo-Slave Narratives. *Revisiting Slave Narratives I*, 91–102. https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pulm.11365

Wright, R. (2018). Blueprint for Negro Writing. *The Politics of Richard Wright*, 213–223.

https://doi.org/10.5810/kentucky/9780813175164.003.0014

Wright, R., & Rampersad, A. (2005). *Native son: The Restored Text Established by the Library of America*. Harper Perennial.