
For Dana and Her Ancestors: A Poetic Emergence from Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

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Abstract

In this collection of poems, I narratively engage each chapter in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* to examine disability and Black life anew. My engagement with the tale of longing, time-travel, and slavery that Butler weaves together in the novel is moved by an interpretive, or a phenomenological, disability studies approach, where "the experience of disability, our own or that of others, becomes the scene where we can frame how we experience embodied existence and, thus, disability becomes a place where culture can be examined anew, again and again" (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012/2017, p. 77). Interpretive disability studies surfaces necessary questions around how we make sense of boundaries that distance 'normal' from 'non-normal.' Haitian author, Edwidge Danticat's (2018) desire to make sense of separation is what brought her, in part, "...to the internal geography of words and how they can bridge sentences" (para. 10). Following in Danticat's footsteps, while remaining indebted to the wisdom of Black women storytellers' writ large, I hope to understand the separations among the characters of *Kindred*, namely among Kevin, Rufus, Alice, Alice's mother, Hagar, Dana and her ancestors, and Tom Weylin, and, in so doing, emerge, through poetry, from a geography of words charted by Butler and again encountered. The below poetic emergence reveals all boundaries as bridged, showing how disability can become a place where culture can be examined anew. For Dana and her ancestors, perhaps we might wonder about what it means to be in kindred with notions of normal and non-normal, and to live in kindred with one another.

Keywords

interpretive disability studies, phenomenological disability studies, Black studies, creative resistance, poetry

I. The River

along the
edge of wood
along wide
blue life

a child thrashed in its centre

the river was harsh
and hungry
the wood was wise
but withdrawn

called into the past
into the edge
time-travel tremors

our Black heroine

breathes him
back into a world
where he will
later greet Alice
a similar exchange
by taking her
not to save her
but to enslave her
to wrap themselves
together
in his wretched way
as carnivores know
only meat
as Man slices into
steak while cattle
eat only to die
for now
the river and wood
dance on

II. The Fire

“whips
are used to
kill our souls”
the beautiful, Black
goddess mother queen

told her doe-eyed
daughter of the green

after
it found little Hagar

common-sense warned,
run back
ancestor-sense whispered,
jump
rope

decision disguised
as choice

smiling
she skipped whip
happily in silence

III. *The Fall*

lying with him
is being embraced
by a warm blanket
after wading through
wet weather
drenched by the downpour
of this damning day-job

where is
the sun
haunt me
with heat
while pens
help me
imagine
worlds without work

lying with him
is fine too
together in loneliness
I'll be your zombie
anytime, K

IV. The Fight

Tom Weylin
frowned down
at a mat of red hair
evidence of tears
filed away
in the rim
of his son's collar

insensible Rufus

hurt them until
they get it
else I'll play you like a drum
beat you until you get it
rhythmic violence
your teacher

fly boomerang
fly

V. The Storm

in dreary
darkness
a so-called
master
fell into a genre
of human
impatient from
waiting
for ages

time witnessed
him bind
his kindness
strike slave
until her child
was revealed
from hiding
in mum's
warmth
in mum's
self
in territory mum
could never travel

a version of Kevin
was with mum too
moving through uncharted territory,
mapping sorrow,
trauma,
and dreams of Dana

“five years”
cannot capture
how death, birth
and their middle
are released in minute
moments

“five years”
assumes nothing
and everything

feel time, don't tell it

VI. *The Rope*

I am
exploring
what I might be
or who I might be
or what I am not
which is dead
like Rufus
the red-haired boy
he once was
the red-haired brute
he always will be
even this is unclear

science
and regimes of truth
might claim
that my existence is
fact

it is fact,
the claims begin,
that I am
a broken arm
once part of a whole
now living in a hole

in Dana's wall

it is fact,
 the claims continue,
 that I am human
 as Dana is
 and I am hers,
 an extension of a
 dislodged
 disappearing
 disability
 into white
 plaster

but I have
 my facts,
 a regime of
 topsy-turvy truth
 my science of contradiction
 holding answers too

follow me	
as I contradict	
this self	
that I do not	know
which I must	know
in order to claim	self - science

I am an arm, yes
 just as much
 as I am the wall
 in which I am
 implanted
 I am Dana's, yes
 but held in the past,
 by Rufus too,
 both Dana's
 and not,
 lingering in
 the liminal,
 laden in
 a lack,
 lagging last
 in Octavia's
 long, looping
 line of lies

meet me
in this mess
I have not arrived
at myself yet,
Rufus
can sleep
Dana
can rest

they will not know me
have me
get to me
any sooner than I will

certainly uncertain
regimes of
tumbling turvy
topsy truths

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Author Biography

Elaine Cagulada is a teacher, poet, and PhD Candidate in the Department of Social Justice Education at OISE, University of Toronto. She is interested in the single stories of deafness, disability, race, and policing produced and reproduced by the ruling relations, with her focus primarily being on police institutions. Through poetry and counterstory, Elaine develops a narrative approach to making disability matter differently, engaging carceral practices as sites of dependence and resistance. Influenced by teachings abound in disability studies and Black Studies, she wonders what different stories of deafness, disability, and race, what radical possibilities for Being, might be let loose with and through interpretation.