



*Old slavery seen through modern eyes: Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa**

by Adriano Elia

ABSTRACT: Time travel has been at times employed by writers and filmmakers alike as a means for addressing sociopolitical discourses. This is the case of the novel *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia E. Butler, and the film *Sankofa* (1993) by Haile Gerima. In both works, the topic of spatio-temporal migration is dealt with in such a way as to make a political statement in order to elicit a response on the part of the reader/viewer. Tightroping between fantasy and slave narrative, Butler and Gerima use time travel as a device investigating the amplified effect of old slavery on contemporary people. This essay approaches the idea of seeing old slavery through modern eyes. Experiencing the senselessness of old slavery from the apparently unreal perspective of a contemporary outsider may inspire the reader/viewer to minimize the typical desensitization with which contemporary slavery – still a very tangible phenomenon – more often than not is met today.

KEY WORDS: *Kindred*; *Sankofa*; Slavery; Afrofuturism; *Critical Race Theory*; Time travel

Far from being a mere self-referential, if spectacular, narrative device, time travel has been at times employed by writers and filmmakers alike as a means for addressing sociopolitical discourses. This is the case of the novel *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia E. Butler, and the film *Sankofa* (1993) by Haile Gerima. In both works, the topic of spatio-temporal migration is dealt with in such a way as to make a political statement in order to elicit a response on the part of the reader/viewer. Tightroping between fantasy and slave



narrative, Butler and Gerima use time travel as a tool to investigate the amplified effect of old slavery on contemporary people.

The medium, evidently, is different, yet *Kindred* is very much a cinematic novel and *Sankofa* is by all means a narrative film. Both works rely on the same device: a spatio-temporal jump to a pre-Civil War plantation made by two young, emancipated black women. As we shall see, living in late twentieth-century makes the trauma of slavery even stronger for Dana and Mona, the protagonists of the novel and the film respectively. The former is a writer living in contemporary Los Angeles, the latter is an African-American model doing a photo shoot at Cape Coast castle, the very place on the West African coast where Africans went through the infamous “Door of no return” directly onto slave ships. In spite of their dissimilar outlook – Dana’s civil rights activism as opposed to Mona’s fashionable shallowness – for both of them experiencing old slavery through the eyes of modern-day women becomes a life-changing event.

What follows is an examination of the idea of seeing old slavery through modern eyes. Experiencing the senselessness of old slavery from the apparently unreal perspective of a contemporary outsider may inspire the reader/viewer to minimize the typical desensitization with which contemporary slavery – as we shall see, a very tangible phenomenon – more often than not is met today.

THE ROLE OF FICTION AND CINEMA

It is now worth raising a couple of questions: what is the role of fiction and cinema in discussing sociopolitical issues? How can they contribute to such discussion? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to deal thoroughly with such crucial matters, we are obviously aware of the fact that fiction is a creation of imagination, hence, by definition, something unreal, a lie. Yet, as we have seen elsewhere (Elia *Formal* 139), fiction can also be a useful resource in approaching sociopolitical issues in at least two different ways.

The first one involves introducing fictional characters and narrating events mainly to make direct political statements and elicit social criticism. Early examples are W.E.B. Du Bois’s novels *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928), narrating the condition of African Americans and revealing the author’s political views, and later James Baldwin’s outspoken first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953). Du Bois deliberately used speculative fiction as a further instrument of interpretation and social analysis: “I have used fiction to interpret those historical facts which otherwise would be not clear”, Du Bois wrote in the “Postscript” to his novel *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957). Therefore, to achieve a realistic representation of African-American life, it is paradoxical that Du Bois used imagination to reinterpret historical situations that had either been distorted or had not been adequately considered by traditional narrations (see: Terry in Zamir 54; Elia *W.E.B.* 177).

A different way of tackling sociopolitical matters is offered by Afrofuturist literature and cinema, based on science fiction and related issues such as time travel,



space age metaphors and so forth.¹ The conflation of past, present and future allows Afrofuturist writers and filmmakers to construct counter-histories and imagine counter-futures reconsidering a series of issues concerning the African-American and the Afro-European diaspora. Both *Kindred* and *Sankofa* belong to this second category.

With regard to the role of cinema, Kracauer has argued that films can be used as historical sources reflecting the mentality of a nation. In the essay *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), he noted that the analysis of films – in his case, those made in the Weimar era foreshadowing the rise of Nazism – makes it possible to comprehend the social and psychological mindset of a nation. Albeit in a different context, *Sankofa* can also be considered as an important historical document describing the odd connection between the lives of slaves in the antebellum South and what their descendants are doing in the contemporary world.

Therefore, a third question arises: what if a contemporary woman were to experience early nineteenth-century racism as an eyewitness? Living old-fashioned slavery from a contemporary standpoint is what actually happens to the protagonists of the novel and the film. In this case, what the media of fiction and of cinema bring about is imagining and, in actual fact, *seeing*, old slavery through modern eyes. *Kindred* and *Sankofa* play as intermediaries between reality and the social sciences, generating counter-histories advancing different and unusual perspectives.

KINDRED: OLD SLAVERY, MODERN EYES

To confirm this point, it is useful to cite a passage from an interview with Butler about the making of *Kindred*. The time travel to antebellum Maryland was meant to be a narrative device obliging Dana to perceive deeply and directly the evils of slavery. As Butler put it, “I was trying to get people to *feel* slavery” (Snider, Butler’s emphasis). In order to do so, time travel is perfectly appropriate for making the contemporary reader feel almost physically the pain of being treated like a slave. The fact that an impossible event such as time travel could happen to anyone heightens the reader’s sense of identification with Dana, who lives this effectively described nightmarish experience. The conflation of past and present provides the novel with a valuable vantage point that considers in diachronic terms one’s relation with old slavery and violence *per se* through a contemporary sociocultural mindset.

As we have seen, it is the story of a young mixed couple, African-American writer Dana and her white partner Kevin, living in contemporary Los Angeles. For seemingly inexplicable reasons, Dana moves in space and time and ends up in a pre-Civil War plantation in Maryland where she meets her ancestors: Rufus, the young son of a slave owner, and Alice, an African-American slave. Dana later understands that she is compelled to go back in time when Rufus is in danger and travels back to Los Angeles when she finds herself in danger. The novel is thus based upon these parallel settings:

¹ In 1993 Mark Dery defined Afrofuturism as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture”. For a discussion of Afrofuturism as an interdisciplinary cultural movement see: Elia *Languages*.



on the one hand Maryland, 1815, where Dana undergoes the dramatic experience of slavery; on the other Los Angeles, 1976, where she tries to lead a normal life with Kevin.

Butler's groundbreaking method tackled slavery and racial politics via unconventional tactics typical of science fiction, in order to discuss and examine the dynamics of antebellum slavery as well as its legacy in contemporary society. More precisely, in the case of *Kindred*, rather than science fiction Butler herself defined the novel as "a kind of grim fantasy", because she did not explain the scientific reasons that made time travel possible: "I don't use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from" (see: Snider; Kenan 496).

One of the most salient features of the novel is certainly its stylistic hybridity. Butler manages to integrate disparate types of narrations such as fantasy novel and slave narrative, a genre based upon a literary transposition of the lives of slaves. The Maryland sections of *Kindred* are by all means influenced by intense autobiographies such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) by Frederick Douglass (to whom many conferences and events are currently being dedicated on the 200th anniversary of his birth), or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, which reported the sexual violence and abuse she had to suffer from her master. For this reason, *Kindred*, in particular the gripping and moving accounts of its Maryland sections, may be considered a seminal example of the so-called neo-slave narrative. Whereas the aim of the above-mentioned slave narratives (mainly autobiographies) was to denounce the horrors of slavery and support abolitionism, neo-slave narratives are contemporary novels inspired by traditional first-hand slave narratives and offering a psychological insight into the experience of slavery such as *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, who aptly described her writing as a "literary archaeology" (Fabi 327-328; Scacchi 308-310).

We have discussed elsewhere (*Elia Languages*) the proto-Afrofuturist features in *Kindred*. What is interesting in this context is the way in which old slavery can be experienced through a contemporary perspective. Seeing old slavery through modern eyes, perceiving it in the first person, yields an even stronger impression of its meaninglessness. The main motif that runs through the novel is indeed the dialogic relationship between violence and slavery. For a twentieth-century emancipated woman like Dana, the whippings inflicted on her become even more absurd. In an interview, Butler pointed out that Dana's amputation of her left arm had been deliberately devised: "I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (Kenan 498). The truthfulness of Dana's experience derives from the fact that she suffers from a corporeal trauma, not just a psychological one. A similar strategy can be detected, for example, in some scenes of the film *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), in which the master smashes a slave's teeth just because he refuses to eat; or the subsequent violent whipping of Nat Turner, the preacher who led a liberation movement in 1831 to free African Americans in Virginia, resulting in a violent retaliation from whites; or, even more so, the lynching of blacks that at that time was still common practice.

These are all examples of violence just for its own sake, that kind of violence Fanon denounced in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) as actually rebounding on the oppressor, thus uncovering his brutality and ethical backwardness. This is a crucial point, the



boomerang effect of violence on the oppressor. *Kindred* sets before our very modern eyes what Jean Paul Sartre, commenting on the French colonialism in Algeria in his 'Preface' to the English edition of *The Wretched of the Earth*, defined as the "strip-tease of our humanism":

the only violence is the settler's; but soon they will make it their own; that is to say, the same violence is thrown back upon us [...] Let us look at ourselves [...] we must face that unexpected revelation, the strip-tease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight [...] an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions (Sartre 15, 21).

SANKOFA: THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

A surprisingly similar narrative strategy can be found in *Sankofa*. Written, produced and directed by Ethiopian-born Haile Gerima, this proto-Afrofuturist film features Mona, a black African-American model who, during a photo shoot at Cape Coast castle, on the Western shores of Africa, suddenly finds herself in the past as a slave named Shola. She is transported back in time on a sugar cane plantation in Louisiana during the slavery era. It is the shamanic beating of the "Divine Drummer" Sankofa that makes this spatio-temporal migration possible. Sankofa claims to be communicating with the spirits of the dead slaves through his drums and invites them to tell their story. At the beginning of the film, Sankofa's drumming is suggestively mixed with a voice-over reciting an intense tale of slavery:

Those stolen Africans step out of the ocean from the wombs of the ships and claim your story [...] You raped, slave bred, castrated, burned, tarred and feathered, roasted, chopped, lobotomized, bound and gagged. You African Spirits! Spirit of the Dead rise up! Lingering Spirit of the Dead rise up and possess your bird of passage.

The identity shift of Gerima's fashionable model Mona into confrontational slave Shola is even more striking than that of Butler's Dana. When she is caught by slave masters, Mona claims she is 'American', thus showing no commitment to her African roots. As a matter of fact, the drummer reproaches her, saying that, by exposing her body on the very place her ancestors had been caught as prisoners and chained, she shows no respect for them. Once back in the early-nineteenth century plantation, Mona/Shola is thus forced to live the life of her enslaved ancestors and to endure her master's brutality. As in *Kindred*, such acts of violence, including rape, are even more aggressive and meaningless to the eyes of somebody like Mona who, despite historically belonging to the African continent, at the beginning did not seem to care about her African ancestry. However, having experienced personally slavery's historical *raison d'être*, later she could not help rebelling against the slave system. The resilience and the courage of slaves are effectively shown in evocative scenes of the film, such as the one when Nunu, one of them, claims that they can only chain her flesh, but not her soul. Nunu is ready to suffer physically, but her soul will always remain untouched by her masters (*Sankofa* 38').



The use of time travel as a narrative device in the film is reinforced by the choice of Sankofa as the title and the actual symbol of the whole story. 'Sankofa' in the Akan dialect means "to go back and get what was taken" and designates the African "bird of passage" looking backward with the egg of the future in its beak. Sankofa is thus a bird whose symbolic meaning involves taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress. The film unveils this meaningful overlapping of past and present to look forward to the future, an essential point that has been often discussed by scholars and writers from a variety of backgrounds.

Edmund Burke, for example, stressed the importance of a "partnership of past and present", which, as Stuart Hall noted, becomes a sort of "imaginary reunification" (Gates 24-25; Hall 70). As regards the importance of a reconsideration of past history, Du Bois once wrote "the past is the present [...] without what was, nothing is" (Du Bois, Du Bois's italics; Porter vii; Elia *W.E.B.* 182). This view is not dissimilar from Walter Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*, which he defined as "the presence of the now". In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, history was not seen as a positivist "homogeneous, empty time", but as "time filled by the presence of the now", a sort of "here-and-now" in which past and present meet (Benjamin 252-253). All these critical insights can be visually rendered in the Sankofa bird, a powerful symbol of Afrofuturism and of hope for a better future.

Indeed, it is significant that Mona/Shola's metamorphosis from compliant to defiant slave is hastened when Shango (a West-Indian rebellious slave) gives her as a present a pendant in the shape of the Sankofa bird that once belonged to his father. As a didascalical story about a contemporary woman reconnecting with her past, the film raises uncomfortable questions about the horrors of slavery. At the end of the film, Mona/Shola is deeply aware of her African origins: the final message is that blacks have to relearn their history and return to their ancestral roots to find their own identity.

A "NEW RECONSTRUCTION": *CRITICAL RACE THEORY* AND CONTEMPORARY SLAVERY

As we have seen, violence and slavery are central issues in the novel as well as in the film. It was crucial for both authors to portray these evils brutally and graphically in order to, in Butler's words, get people to *feel* slavery. Likewise, in the above-mentioned film *The Birth of a Nation*, rather than the passages from the Bible routinely used by slave masters to suggest that slaves should shut up and obey, Nat Turner quotes at length other passages – in particular Samuel 15:3, King James Version – in which a violent reaction to the oppression is made possible: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."

A leading expert on contemporary slavery, Kevin Bales (*Disposable; Modern; Blood*) has often suggested not only that slavery has always existed, but also that, in our difficult age of migration, it is more present than ever. As is known, besides old slavery in classical antiquity and in the Middle Ages, legally distinguishing the free man from the slave, and modern slavery, involving a rhetoric of race, there is contemporary slavery that, as Casadei (7) has noted, may take different shapes – forced and dehumanizing



labour, forced and organized begging, the segregation of women and children, prostitution, forced and early marriages, the exploitation of migrants who are victims of organized crime.

The allegedly reassuring assumption that slavery is a thing of the past is contradicted by innumerable examples of contemporary slavery. It seems to us that, albeit in a totally different sociocultural context, in this day and age something similar to the post-Civil War scenario in the United States is happening on a global scale. As is acknowledged, the outlawing of slavery with the 1865 approval of the three amendments to the American Constitution – the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery; the Fourteenth, granting African-Americans equality before the law; and the Fifteenth, formally conceding the right to vote to the African-American population – did not bring about the social changes that African Americans were expecting, leading to a Reconstruction period that was all but slavery-free.

All things considered, it could be argued then that a sort of “New Reconstruction”, this time a world-wide one, is taking place today, whereas slavery seems to be more present than ever, even when life is in danger. In the first decades of the third millennium, contemporary slavery is no longer an outcome of the what was known as triangular trade, but it is more part of a mono-directional movement towards a supposed promised land – Europe through Italy for Africans. Above and beyond the thousands of people who have drowned in migrant shipwrecks, an emblematic case in point is that of Pateh Sabelly, a 22-year-old Gambian who drowned in the Grand Canal in Venice in 2017. While he apparently made no attempt to reach for the life-rings thrown into the water for him – thus raising speculation that he may have been committing suicide – no one actually jumped in to help him and, most significantly, onlookers laughed and even shouted racial abuse at him while he was drowning. Moreover, besides such ethical aberrations and lack of empathy, it is safe to argue, as Bales (*Blood* 8) has cogently done, that there is a clear connection between contemporary slavery and environmental destruction. These are entwined global phenomena, springing from the same root and provoked by a single twisted mindset. It is no coincidence that the countries where slavery is still common practice are also those where environmental destruction is most likely to happen.

However, such situations may change for the better and several scholars, critics, and also writers and filmmakers, have been doing their part to raise awareness of the issue. For example, Critical Race Theory has proved to be an appropriate tool for investigating the development of modern slavery. According to Critical Race theorists, the notion of equality before the law may be a chimera as legal systems do not seem to be immune from racial discourses. Influenced by critical theories such as Gramsci’s hegemony and Foucault’s subjugated knowledge, critics such as Derrick A. Bell and Cornel West have argued that the false idea of black inferiority has been used to serve the political aims of white supremacy. The law is only apparently neutral and race is a socially constructed concept functioning as a means to preserve the interests of the white establishment. As Bell (22) has suggested, in the struggle for social equality the law is subordinated to “interest group politics” and whites will support advances for blacks only when such support promotes the interests of white society (Lavender 186). It is this aporia, the (in)equality before the law due to race issues, that Critical Race



theorists have addressed in different ways over the past thirty years. For the first time, they stressed in scholarly terms that racism is embedded in the fabric of American society and that the legal system has played a pivotal role in maintaining white supremacy.

According to Delgado and Stefancic (161), another objective pursued by Critical Race theorists is that of “storytelling/counterstorytelling and ‘naming one’s own reality’ – using narrative to illuminate and explore experiences of racial oppression”. This is what Derrick Bell has done in his science fiction short story “The Space Traders” (1992), which raises the question of whether white Americans would exchange blacks with aliens from outer space. Provided they receive an adequate offer, the answer may be affirmative: therefore, as Lavender (187) has argued, not only the justification of racism is self-interest, but also, by eliminating racial tensions in America, this deal would lead to the ‘solution’ to the race problem. Such parables generate a counterfactual history (as in W.E.B. Du Bois’s short story “The Comet”), allowing for reflection on and investigation into the phenomenon of racism, an operation not dissimilar from what Butler and Gerima were aiming at in their works.

Worth mentioning also is the contribution of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose celebrated theory of the “state of exception” seems to be more topical than ever. Grounded on the works of Schmitt, Derrida, Benjamin and Arendt, Agamben’s state of exception, originally meant to be provisional, has become a permanent paradigm of government. This unusual extension of power is still a powerful strategy transforming democracies into totalitarian states encouraging, due to economic reasons, the persistence of phenomena such as contemporary slavery. Therefore, the New Reconstruction becomes part of a permanent state of exception with a multitude of “bodies of exception” and *homines sacri* (to use Agamben’s terminology) such as Pateh Sabelly, who drowned while no one seemed to care about his death.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF SLAVERY

While it is true that today the influence of de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55), the first manifesto of scientific racism, seems to be feeble, slavery is anything but a thing of the past. It persists in the present and almost certainly will be there in the future – a “return to race”, as Etienne Balibar has put it (Balibar in Casadei 94-95). Three key factors, Bales (*Disposable* 232) has suggested, helped create the new slavery: population growth, economic change and corruption. At the moment a true post-slavery scenario seems to be a chimera, but if now there is no post-slavery, what shall be done to aim for it? Desmond Tutu’s comment on one of Bales’s books indicates part of its content as “well-thought-out strategies for what to do to combat this scourge”. Bales (*Modern* 151-153) mentions at least three of these strategies: education, law enforcement and rehabilitation.

Education is indeed the key aspect in which the contribution of literature and cinema (and of an even wider range of arts and letters) may be inscribed. As slavery thrives on ignorance, education is vital because it brings valuable information. Therefore, if we reconsider the questions we raised at the beginning of this essay, we



could argue that the contribution of literature and cinema in tackling sociopolitical issues becomes essential. While it is true that, unlike Critical Race Theory, literature and cinema are not equipped to analyse thoroughly the legal or political aspects of a complex issue such as slavery, they play nonetheless a role of utmost importance in fostering conscious knowledge of one's history. In Gerima's words, "more than the *political*, I think that *cultural* racism is the center of our twenty-first century struggle" (Jackson 36 Gerima's italics). Within this framework, literature and cinema are cultural representations providing an alternative perspective that lies in-between reality and social sciences. In the case of *Kindred* and *Sankofa*, such a perspective is based upon the Afrofuturist conflation of past, present and future, whereby the different time settings evoke the Benjaminian "presence of the now" and produce unconventional counter-histories and memories.

Following the contribution of Balibar and Critical Race theorists, Casadei (12) has observed that, in order to face the persistence of slavery, it is essential to redefine our identity by restoring a factual universality of human rights as well as reconsidering the point of view of the neglected and of the "bodies of exception". Seeing old slavery through modern eyes, experiencing it from the apparently unreal perspective of a contemporary outsider, should make us even more aware of its senselessness. Today our hectic lifestyles have made some of us desensitized to violence and slavery – there is so much of it around that it is as if there was virtually none or, at least, not any particular form of violence or slavery worthy of note more than any other form. Representational objects of analysis such as literature and films thus provide a special opportunity to minimize such desensitization by developing an ear with which we can hear and listen to today's silenced voices and thus encouraging more empathy towards marginalized people.

As an old Native American proverb goes: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children". At the very least, we should not want to leave a polluted planet to our future generations. And, if there really is a connection between contemporary slavery and environmental destruction – as Bales has shown us – is not contemporary slavery part and parcel of this pollution? Do we really want to leave such a legacy to our future generations? The answers to today's questions will be found in tomorrow's history books.

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Adriano Elia is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Rome "Roma Tre". His publications include essays on contemporary British fiction, Afrofuturism, Langston Hughes's poetry, W.E.B. Du Bois's short fiction and poetry and four books – *La Cometa di W.E.B. Du Bois* (2015), *Hanif Kureishi* (2012), *The UK: Learning the Language, Studying the Culture* (co-author, 2005) and *Ut Pictura Poesis: Word-Image Interrelationships and the Word-Painting Technique* (2002).

adriano.elia@uniroma3.it