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Dismembering Dana: The Poetics of African American Women’s Wounds in Fiction

Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred* is framed by the image of protagonist Dana Franklin’s left arm, amputated above the elbow; the body of the novel tells the story of her travels back in time to a Maryland slave plantation where her black and white ancestors lived and narrates the events resulting in this grievous injury. But what does Dana’s amputated arm signify? In this essay I initiate a broader conversation about the meaning of wounds in the context of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative. By “wound” I don’t mean any result of violence, all too abundant in African American life and literature. Rather, I focus on iconic wounds that are employed by authors as central symbols of a particular work. Discussing Butler’s narrative of radical dismemberment in dialogue with other literary examples of black women’s wounds, I propose that the black female body in fiction can be read as the refuge of last resort in the defense of black female subjectivity, revealing important tensions between memory and forgetting, and physical and moral peril.

In folktales, wounds and other physical anomalies can suggest strangeness or super-powers that can be used against enemies. Without claiming influence, it seems that Dana’s lost arm echoes the folk legend of Louisiana “escaped slave” Bras-Coupé who inhabited the swamps around New Orleans in the early 19th century and who was said to be near-invincible, despite (or because of) his missing arm which was amputated as punishment after an escape attempt. I will not dwell on Bras-Coupé, not only because his gender leaves him outside this discussion, but also because the myth of his supernatural powers was highly politicized in his own time: white journalists and politicians argued for equipping New Orleans’ police with firearms against the “menace” of this near-invincible black “bogeyman”.[[1]](#footnote-0) We can see in Butler’s novel a possible inversion and reclaiming of this famous legend: While the one-armed Bras-Coupé character is framed as an example of the weird in a rational world, Butler’s protagonist is the normal person in a weird world where time travel to a past slavocracy is possible. The first person point of view of the narrative places the burden on society rather than on Dana, who is only trying to survive. However, Butler’s text also suggests a way to read Dana’s wound, like Bras-Coupé’s, as a symbol of acquired power.

While an extraordinary wound can be evidence of extraordinary powers, the prominent injury or mutilation can also be a kind of authorizing “document” that helps to verify (for white audiences) the author’s experience. William Grimes, author of the first known slave narrative, tells of the extreme tortures to which he was subjected, ending his text with an ironic comment on the founding American documents: “If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy and free America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American Liberty.”[[2]](#footnote-1) America and its vaunted freedom is “bound” is the skin of its enslaved people. The public display in person and in photographs of the wounds of black men and women with the aim of raising abolitionist passions was oddly necessary in an America in which the immorality torture, dehumanization and detention of human beings was not a given. The wound counteracts disbelief.

Countering disbelief as well as forgetting are also important themes in *Kindred.* Early in the novel and before she loses her arm, Dana tells her white husband Kevin about her first experience back into the past, and when he doubts her she says, “The sound of his voice seemed to put distance between me and the memory.”[[3]](#footnote-2) Dana and the reader are given repeated clues that Kevin has difficulty believing her, despite having witnessed her brief disappearance himself. She shrugs it off: “Maybe you’re right...I hope you are. Maybe I’m just like a victim of a robbery or rape or something—a victim who survives, but who doesn’t feel safe any more...I don’t have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don’t feel safe any more.”[[4]](#footnote-3) The theme of unspeakability and the danger of forgetting is explicit. Whether in the present with Kevin or the past with her ancestor (and "master") Rufus, Dana begins to develop an unshakeable memory of her experience of imposed non-personhood under slavery and her subaltern position in the 1976 context; but her consciousness only grows via the hole punctured in her complacency by the wounds she receives under slavery, not from the "micro-aggressions" leveled against her by Kevin. It is all too easy for Dana to return to her 1976 life, and to allow the sound of modern voices to obliterate the lessons of slavery.

Fear of a moral wound, rather than a physical one, is what finally drives Dana to act: she is able to kill Rufus with a knife only when he seems about to rape her, and his dying hand on her arm keeps that part of her in the past, while the rest of her returns to 1976. This decisive act of self-defense frees her from the cycle of return to slavery, but more importantly it frees her from her own destabilizing self-doubt. Since she has killed her own ancestor, however, she also “kills” a part of herself, and in order to leave slavery (Rufus) in the past, she has to sacrifice a part of herself. With the amputation of her left arm, Dana’s new knowledge of her own identity and capacity to act becomes self-contained, and she no longer requires the validation of Kevin who continues to stand between her and her experience of her own history:

Kevin would never know what those moments had been like. I had outlined them for him, and he’d asked few questions. For that I was grateful. Now I said simply, “Self-defense.”

“Yes,” he said.

“But the cost . . . Nigel’s children, Sarah, all the others. . .”

“It’s over,” he said. “There’s nothing you can do to change any of it now.”

“I know.” I drew a deep breath. “I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together—maybe stay with Sarah.”

“You’ve looked,” he said. “And you’ve found no records. You’ll probably never know.”

I touched the scar Tom Weylin’s boot had left on my face, touched my empty left sleeve. “I know,” I repeated…”[[5]](#footnote-4)

Despite Kevin’s reliance on paper documents, Dana insists she *knows*. Her visible wounds mirror her metaphysical ones; she sees her reality as it is, and her injuries have power because they signify a moral truth that has import *for her*, one she still cannot speak to Kevin, but which she understands herself. Dana has earned a whole Self grounded in the lived experience of the fragments of her kin's history. But she has to be literally dismembered in order to re-member herself into a higher consciousness. Her wound gives her authority, insight and an indelible reminder of into her true identity.

While wounds can be proof of self and memory, they can also be public acts of self-determination. Physical and psychic wounds are very prominent in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, in which two women in the Peace family injure themselves for very different reasons. Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother has one leg and "in some mood or fancy, she began some fearful story about it...How the leg got up by itself one day and walked on off. How she hobbled after it but it ran too fast...Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for $10,000—at which Mr. Reed opened his eyes and asked, 'Nigger gal legs goin' for $10,000 a *piece*?' as though he could understand $10,000 a *pair*—but for *one*?"[[6]](#footnote-5) The dismemberment as comic tall-tale is a strategy that Eva uses to guard a personal truth that is too painful to speak about. Slowly, however, we find out that Eva, with three young children and abandoned by her husband, deliberately threw herself under a train to collect insurance money with which she built the family house and saved her family from starvation. Eva’s act is desperate, fierce and calculated to “work” the white system: by sacrificing her leg, rather than her sex as a prostitute, Eva get money, yes, but more importantly she retains her what is valuable to her:, her family and her moral authority. Eva is thus able to reverse the logic of slavery under which a one-legged woman would have no value and her family would be sold away from her. Eva’s amputated leg is a sacrifice, but it is also an icon of defiance against a racist system.

Sula inherits this fierceness from her grandmother. When she and her girlfriend Nel are surrounded by white boys who are threatening to do them harm, young Sula calmly squats on the dirt road:

Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?"[[7]](#footnote-6)

Sula calmly wounds herself as a defense herself against the white boys, and with that, and her direct gaze at her tormentors, she proves her absolute dominion of herself and of whiteness. She weaponizes her ability to endure pain and her willingness to disfigure herself. Her wound is a demonstration of superior moral courage and an act of self-determination.

The body has been the central locus of the traumatic black experience in America for four hundred years. Whiteness objectifies blackness as suspect, lesser, dirty, feared, and the object of curiosity or taboo sexual impulses: Violence, death and dismemberment are encoded into the black American experience. As Teju Cole writes: “The black body comes pre-judged, and as a result it is placed in needless jeopardy. To be black is to...inhabit a psychic unsteadiness in which there is no guarantee of personal safety. You are a black body first, before you are a kid walking down the street or a Harvard professor who has misplaced his keys.”[[8]](#footnote-7) The black female body in particular is the object of the prurient white male gaze which dismembers it either visually or literally, as in the example of the “Hottentot Venus”, Sara Baartman, whose naked body was “studied” by French racial “scientists” and dissected at her death to be displayed as a curiosity at a museum in Paris.[[9]](#footnote-8) Poet Lucille Clifton verbally dismembers Rodney King to show how his constituent parts, neither together nor apart, are seen as valuable or even human by white America: “so / the body / of one black man / is rag and stone / is mud / and blood” and then asks the rhetorical question, “is there no value / in this skin”.[[10]](#footnote-9) Complete or in parts, the post-bellum black body is viewed by white society as a problem rather than a value, and this induces a “psychic unsteadiness” in the African American condition to which black writers work to devise a response.

The disembodied arm and fist logo of Stokely Carmichael’s Black Power movement expressed a principally moral sentiment founded on black racial pride and self-respect to address this “psychic unsteadiness”. For enslaved author Harriet Jacobs, the arm is also a moral instrument. She describes how she felt as a young girl subject to the lascivious attentions of her “master” Dr. Flint, writing: “When he told me I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong.”[[11]](#footnote-10) While Flint’s “will” is the imposition of his sexual desire as well as absolute power over Harriet, her own will is the moral consciousness to defend herself from rape by any means necessary, an interior strength embodied in her own “puny arm”; and while that arm is that of a mere fourteen year old girl, it’s super power arises from her conviction and well-developed sense of self. Jacobs insists throughout her narrative that a well-developed consciousness that is alert to moral self-preservation is foundational to the physical preservation of its owner. Jacob’s story is remarkable for the author’s highly-developed concept of an inviolable identity that remains undefeated by her circumstances, despite the moral wound of her illicit relationship with Mr. Sands. This self-inflicted "wound", though not visceral, is similar to Sula’s self-cutting: giving herself sexually to Mr. Sands is an act of self-determination that protect Jacobs from the greater wound of being raped by Flint.

The fierce self-determination that Eva, Sula and Jacobs demonstrate is not shared by Butler’s Dana at the beginning of the novel: indeed, her “psychic unsteadiness” is materialized in the time-trips that result in her dismemberment. She is passive, morose and complacent in her position as a minimum-wage worker for a “casual labor agency”: “[W]e regulars called it a slave market. Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered.” This breezy, careless definition of slavery betrays Dana’s lack of outrage and her disconnect with the lived history of her “kindred”. In their first conversation, Kevin calls her a “zombie”, and she is curt to him until she “w[akes] up a little then and really look[s] at him” to notice that he is white: then she worries that “[m]aybe he ha[s] some authority.” When they move in together, Dana is servile, doing all the work of settling the couple into their new apartment, while Kevin mopes. The move is on her birthday, which they don’t celebrate because the move, she says, is celebration enough.” This uncelebrated birthday, echoing the unmarked birthdays of the enslaved, is “the day [Rufus] called me to him for the first time. Ten days before Emancipation Day, Dana begins to discover how unemancipated and unconscious she truly is.

To kill Rufus and take charge of her life, Dana must overcome what Jacqueline Brady calls her “docile body”. That is, through negotiating slavery, Dana comes to see what she is capable of and develops a consciousness of her docility to the white male dominated culture in 1976. Brady sees “the body as an emblem of our locatedness in time and space, always indicating the salient ideological tensions belonging to a specific historical moment. In this way, the body resembles Mikhail Bakhtin’s sign, which...is ‘dynamically charged with social meaning and dialogic struggle’ but also laden with ‘intertextual traces of earlier use, earlier struggles.’”[[12]](#footnote-11) Dana’s 1976 body is “laden” with her condition as a black woman writer in 1976, but she is unaware of the meaning of this body. Butler implies a modern dilemma: the knife and the willingness to use it are more accessible to Sula in 1922 than to Dana in 1976: The passage of time since the original “bad thing” of slavery brings with it a dulling complacency and the threat of a disconnect from the self.

Dana learns subjectivity and at last acts decisively, but unlike Sula and Eva her wound is has complex meaning because she acts with regret.. Her decision to kill Rufus, whose life she saves so many times, is a paradox: it represents self-determination and, at the same time, self-destruction for it is her ancestor she kills. This is the complexity that Butler poetically signifies in the dismembering of Dana: the intimate, indivisible cotillion of love and hate that black and white Americans have been dancing for four hundred years. As James Baldwin writes, “any writer...finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other.”[[13]](#footnote-12) The people we hate cannot be divorced from the people we love. We cannot be cut away neatly from the “other”. Dana’s process is an interior one, not a social agenda, and her disarming suggests the need for a personal rather than political resolution to the paradox of the American racial divide. Baldwin writes:

In order to really hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind—and the heart—that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily: the white world is too powerful too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and, above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that. One is absolutely forced to make perpetual qualifications and one’s own reactions are always canceling each other out. Is it this, really, which has driven so many people mad, both white and black. One is always in the position of having to decide between amputation and gangrene . . . The idea of going through life as a cripple is more than one can bear, and equally unbearable is the risk of swelling up slowly, in agony, with poison.[[14]](#footnote-13)

I quote Baldwin at length because it is precisely this yardstick against which all these wounds must be measured--Harriet Jacobs’s moral wound, Eva’s lost leg, Sula’s lost fingertip, Dana’s lost arm--each one suggesting a way of preventing Baldwin’s “gangrene”. For all but Dana, the self-inflicted wound is a means of seeking refuge in the body by deliberately harming it, therefore retaining a measure of sanity in a society that suffers from acute madness. Dana’s setting, the complacent consumer society of 1976 California, requires a more radical consciousness-raising because her subjectivity has been blunted by distance in time from the original “bad thing”. Her lost arm, however, joins her to a fierce tradition of wounded women,, empowers her through the knowledge not only of her own family’s savage past, but also to the complex racial reality to which she pertains. Ironically, Dana’s dismemberment is a reminder to Butler’s protagonist--and to us-- of the indivisibility of black and white in America.

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1. Wagner (122). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Grimes (68). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Butler (16). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Butler (17). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Butler (263-264). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Morrison (30-31). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Morrison (54-55). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Cole. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. “Cuvier dissected her "apron" and in 1817, included Baartman as the only human in his *Notes of the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle and Histoire Naturelle Mamiferes*. Posthumously, Baartman's skeleton, preserved genitals, and brain display at the Musee de l'Homme until 1974.” Tillet, (944). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Harper and Walton (249). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Jacobs (18). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Brady (254). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Baldwin (8). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Baldwin (100). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)