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Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard

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Patrycja Kurjatto-Renard

« They were all gone. The person I had been was gone. I couldn’t bring anyone back, not even myself. I could only learn what I could about the Ina, about my families. I would restore what could be restored »

[Fledgling, 316].

1 This sentence, taken from the last page of Butler’s last novel, sums up the protagonist’s situation as she realizes that she will never remember her childhood or all the dead members of her families and that the only thing she can do is to try and re-learn as much as possible about them. As the only surviving child of a family that has already been decimated during the Second World War, she feels the duty to recover as much of the memory as she can.

2 The sentence triggered our interest insofar as in our opinion, it also explains to what extent Butler’s representation of amnesia is a commentary upon African-American cultural and historical situation. Butler has been said to depict ordinary women in extraordinary situations. Butler’s output can be classified as didactic fantasy, the literature of revision, which « ‘tries to force the readers to accept the proffered interpretation of reality and to revise their worlds to fit this interpretation’ » [Katherine Hume’s definition quoted in Jablon 156]. Butler’s fiction is not escapist: it does not aim at providing an entertaining illusion which would help to deny the existence of unpleasant or dangerous trends in human society. Reading her novels is not a means to forget reality, but rather a way to think about some of its aspects. Her fiction also highlights the relationship between personal and communal development and progress as it promotes peaceful coexistence and social justice: « One lesson she teaches is that there is a continuum from personal to political, from religious to social and communal » [Jablon 157]. Personal and community growth and spiritual development can be achieved through investigating the past, an activity which is « an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future » [Morrison 181].
While amnesia is a condition affecting humans all over the world, certain groups perceive forgetting in a particular way, due to their painful past which, it is felt, should never be forgotten. This is relevant for the minority groups whose traumatic past has been misrepresented or obliterated in the dominant historical discourse. Drawing attention to the gaps in historical narratives and to the silences in official histories is a strategy enabling minority writers to rediscover alternative histories. African-American culture is a good example of this trend. In her essay « Behind the Making of the Black Book », Toni Morrison presents remembering the past as a source of pride and as a tool to reach self-esteem. She writes

I remember ... when the complete failure in the neighborhood was not the drunk who sat in the alley, but the pimp who sat on the bannister. [because although] both ... lacked dignity, [the pimp] had forgotten his history [34].

Morrison’s own novels, as well as numerous African-American writers’ narratives, deal with the recovery of the past, the influence the past has on the present, and the burden and the threat an unknown or insufficiently remembered past represents. In African-American culture, certain stories have to be passed on « as insider knowledge to protect [their] power and vitality as a form of resistance to oppression » [King and Ferguson XIV]. In the situation where it is so vital to « fashion a culturally grounded identity » [King and Ferguson 23] based on a shared remembered past, forgetting deprives a person of tools to build a strong personality.

Butler’s representation of amnesia is not restricted to the cultural domain but shows the extent of her interest in biology and neurology. In her texts, she depicts various kinds of amnesia, recognized by medicine and psychology. In this way, her work points to the trend in modern culture which tends to eliminate the distinction between mind and body and to bridge the gap between science and humanities.

While the issue of amnesia is most visible in Fledgling (2005) whose protagonist suffers from total amnesia due to massive brain damage, it is also present in Butler’s older texts, Kindred (1979) and Dawn (first published in 1987), whose characters suffer from dissociative / psychogenic amnesia, « a disorder characterized by abnormal memory functioning in the absence of structural brain damage » resulting « from the effects of severe stress or psychological trauma on the brain », also known as repressed memory syndrome². To reinforce the theme, two of these novels, Fledgling and Dawn, juxtapose the amnesiac protagonist and a species of intelligent beings who have excellent eidetic memories so that the protagonists’ plight appears to be an even more striking anomaly. In spite of the differences in the plot of the three novels, they address in various ways the issue of the relationship between amnesia, recovering one’s memory of past violence, and forgiveness³.

In the first part of this essay, we will look at the types of amnesia and of amnesiac subjects shown in the three above-mentioned novels. We will discuss the origins of amnesia as well as its occasional benefits. We will see what various amnesiac subjects have forgotten and how they retrieve the lost knowledge, provided it happens at all. We will also discuss the link between memory and the body. Various literary genres suitable for overcoming losses of memory will be evoked. In the second part, we will focus on what is retrieved, with a particular focus on the cultural knowledge, represented by mythological and literary tropes, cultural symbols, and collective memory, all of which are elements helping construct an ethnic identity and sense of belonging. The process of retrieving what has been forgotten is made possible in those
texts thanks to the skills of the central figure of the Black woman suffering from amnesia and fighting against it. We intend to show that all female protagonists of those novels must acknowledge the ethical dimension of transmitting the memory of the past and resolve the tension between amnesia, amnesty and forgiveness.

As Ricœur says, amnesty can be called forced forgetfulness:

Les abus de mémoire placés sous le signe de la mémoire obligée, commandée, ont-ils leur parallèle et leur complément dans des abus d'oubli? Oui, sous des formes institutionnelles d'oubli dont la frontière avec l'amnésie est aisé à franchir: il s'agit principalement de l'amnistie et de façon plus marginale du droit de grâce, appelé aussi de grâce amnistiante [585].

The proximity between the words “amnesty” and “amnesia” is more than phonetic or semantic. In fact, according to him, amnesty signals a denial of memory, a refusal to remember, which aims at interrupting violence that has been disrupting a community, but which cannot be equated with a real forgiveness. Ricœur gives an example dating back to 403 B.C., extracted from a decree in which it is forbidden to remind the citizens about what happened: « Les formules négatives sont frappantes: ne pas rappeler » [586]. Amnesty is a kind of social therapy used in emergency situations [Ricœur 585-589]. Forgiveness, on the other hand, requires remembering with a peaceful heart, having completed the process of grieving, and takes time and effort.

Sources and types of amnesia

Our analysis of the novels will begin with the individual cases of amnesiac subjects. We chose to do so in order to follow the path Butler follows in her narratives: each of the three novels opens with isolating the protagonist from her regular surroundings. This state of isolation is always traumatic for the protagonists. One of the characteristics of Butler’s work is depicting bodies in extreme physical pain, which arouses the reader’s empathy. In Butler's novels, physical suffering and psychological trauma often result in amnesia.

Butler’s interest in the physicality of trauma points to the generic relationship her texts entertain with autobiography. Indeed, not only is Kindred a neo-slave narrative, but Dawn and Fledgling seem to be affiliated with autopathographies: tales dealing with the influence of physical or psychological disorders on author’s life, a genre which is « revealing about how closely aligned our bodies are with identity » [Durán 52] and with the new autobiographical pact, « where the “real” extratextual referent of the autobiographical text is no longer the coming-of-age of a healthy subject » [Durán 52], which accepts telling the story of bodily degradation and weakness. Incidentally, Kindred, too, shows the process of progressive loss of Dana’s health even as she acquires an ever better understanding of her family’s past.

The forgotten elements in Butler’s novels include the character’s identity in Fledgling, the reasons for being in a certain place or situation (Fledgling and Dawn), one’s homeplace4 (Fledgling and to some degree Kindred), and details about one’s family (Fledgling, Kindred and Dawn). In Kindred, the erasure of the memory about the family members and the past living places results from a willful amnesia, as the protagonist’s family clearly has decided to forget a part of its past. At the same time, the female protagonists of those three novels have not only to struggle against their amnesia but also to protect themselves and their loved ones from violence, which requires using the
retrieved memories. The novels thus move from the individual to the communal dimension. In the lines that follow, we will discuss the three protagonists’ individual situation of amnesia.

13 *Fledgling* opens with a nameless first person narrator waking up alone and badly hurt in a place she cannot recognize:

I awoke to darkness.

I was hungry—starving! --and I was in pain. There was nothing in my world but hunger and pain, no other people, no other time, no other feelings.

I was lying on something hard and uneven, and it hurt me. One side of me was hot, burning. [*Fledgling*, 7]

14 The narrator has no idea who she is, either in terms of gender or personal identity, and her past has been totally wiped out. However, she heals on her own and eventually leaves the place, which turns out to be a cave in a forest. The first chapters of the novel deal with Shori discovering she is able to walk and run and kill an animal with her bare hands and teeth. When she finds the place where she used to live, which is close by, the sight of the burnt ruin does not trigger her memory, and it is only later that she figures out the importance of the place. One day, she leaves the forest and meets a man who addresses her. Thanks to him, she discovers she can speak English. She recognizes everyday objects such as a car, a fridge or a computer when she sees them, but she does not recognize her face in the mirror: she feels as if she were meeting a complete stranger for the first time. By and by, she discovers a few facts about herself which enable her to meet her father and brothers, but the memory of them as individuals does not return with the encounter. Eventually she meets other relatives and friends from the past, but on the whole, while by the end of the narrative she has retained both languages she used to speak before she was hurt, as well as the knowledge of certain physical activities and the ethical values she was taught as a child, she never in the course of the novel remembers the family she has lost or recovers any actual memories from the first fifty-three years of her life. Her past, forever lost, is a kind of pre-birth knowledge, which according to Plato is forgotten upon birth at the moment when the soul is imprisoned in the tomb of the body. Indeed, in *Phaedo*, Plato speaks of soul before birth witnessing and observing various things in the realm of the ideal and accumulating knowledge, which then is forgotten as soon as the soul is embodied because pleasure and pain have such a strong impact on the soul that all memory of previously gained knowledge is lost. For Plato, birth is a form of trauma, and we might say that the above-mentioned memory loss is a form of traumatic stress disorder. Memory has a cognitive dimension. To a certain extent, Shori’s leaving the cave is like being born again. However, for her, the knowledge she eventually retrieves stems from the body and not from the realm of the ideal, because she remembers mostly objects she manipulates and physical or mental embodied skills but never affective memories.

15 In *Fledgling*, retrieving memory happens thanks to seeing the objects or being confronted with either speech or writing, but the thing retrieved is devoid of all emotion, which is probably why Shori does not remember any family members even when she talks to them. For instance, when she meets her father for the first time after the accident, she asks him who he is and upon hearing his name, thinks « I didn’t know him. And yet he might be telling the truth » [*Fledgling*, 68].

16 Last but not least, Shori’s amnesia entertains a troubled relationship with her dark body: she is the first Black member of her species whose DNA is a combination of Black human and Ina characteristics. The Ina responsible for her family’s death and her own
predicament call her, as she is told, « “Dirty little nigger bitch” » and « “Goddamn mongrel cub” » [179]. She discovers it while she is questioning Victor, one of the men who have been used as tools to kill her family. Victor also tells her that the crimes were motivated not only by her dark skin, as she assumes at first, but also, and more importantly, by her mixed blood: « “Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina. That’s not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn’t let you and you ... your kind ... your family ... breed” » [179]. We can say that by eliminating the family line which tried to combine the DNA of both species, the murderers wanted to erase the memory of the possibility of creolization, but Shori’s skills as a female Ina, endowed with powerful persuasion skills, helped her overcome that scheme.

While the Ina are depicted as the dominant species in terms of physical strength and long-lasting memory, arguably the fact that humans are presented in the novel as more resilient psychologically may provide balance to Ina’s genetic superiority. At the same time, human characteristics also made it possible for Shori to survive the attack and increased her resilience. Thus, Blackness is presented as a source of power at the same time as it is a source of persecution from racist others.

In contrast, *Dawn* features mostly psychogenic amnesia which is also situation-specific: some characters have been made to forget certain isolated events because remembering them would have led to madness and perhaps death. For instance, Lilith has been made to forget her own rescue by aliens after the Earth had been all but destroyed. As a result, when she finds herself on board the space ship, she does not know who her captors are. Importantly, her amnesia has been deliberately inflicted on her by the alien tentacle-covered race called Oankali. This kind of amnesia, destined to protect someone from too painful or difficult memories, and deliberately caused, is also present in *Fledgling*, where both Shori and other characters use it in order to protect themselves. For example, a few men who were kidnapped by the Ina and made as tools attacking Shori are questioned by her and then made to forget their interaction with the Ina, so that they cannot seek them out or tell others about them: « I told them to forget those things completely and to remember only the truck-driving job » [*Fledgling*, 197]. In conclusion, in the depicted worlds a species that is superior biologically and endowed with capacities humans do not have inflicts amnesia on a less developed species to protect its own interest or to preserve the less developed species’ well-being.

Besides, *Dawn* develops the idea of memory of the body, which consists in the unconscious reproduction of certain processes. For instance, like numerous members of her family, Lilith tends to grow cancer. An ooloi makes her body forget this family heritage, making her body amnesiac. It would seem then that the memory of the body is shown here as detrimental to personal growth and life. More generally, it is as if Lilith was endowed with innate knowledge of suffering, which her body would in due term learn to recover: in this way, the text plays with the idea of anamnesis, of retrieving the innate knowledge. Here, ancestral heritage is a lethal illness, which can only be eliminated thanks to the intervention of aliens. For Butler, a body forgetting an injury is a sign of biological superiority: *Fledgling* features Shori and other Ina who can heal deep wounds in a few days and even grow back lost limbs. Shori’s body forgets its trauma in a way that would be impossible for a human subject. On the contrary, scars and marks on a previously wounded body, which constitute its memorial traces of past trauma, do not seem to be valuable in the construction of the subject’s identity, but rather constitute a source of anguish or a nuisance. When after a period of
unconsciousness Lilith notices a scar on her belly without being able to remember how it was made, she begins to wonder who has harmed her:

Opening and closing her jacket, her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen. She had acquired it somehow between her second and third Awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost and gained, and why? And what else might be done? She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge

As a matter of fact, the scar turns out to be the result of a beneficial operation, as she is told later: she developed cancer and has been healed. Better still, her body’s tendency to grow cancers has been annihilated. Nevertheless, Lilith’s lack of agency is naturally a source of anguish to her, and makes her think of herself as a slave, which functions as a moment of anamnesis. However, for Dana in *Kindred*, the wounds and the missing arm are « the bodily mark[s] that silently “tell[...]]” a story of past damage » [Brogan 81] of past suffering which she remembers but which is difficult to articulate because the tale of its origins would be unbelievable: as Dana says to her husband on the last page of *Kindred*, « “If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn’t think we were so sane” » [264]. In the above cases, amnesia functions as a barrier against madness, illness, or death.

And yet, in spite of the occasional protective value of amnesia, memory is presented as valuable on both psychological and biological level in Butler’s novels. Indeed, *Dawn* stresses the importance of keeping and preserving memory for future generations: for example, Lilith perceives Hilary Ballard, a poet and an actress who has memorized numerous literary texts, as a valuable asset to the community she is creating, because what this woman remembers will be helpful to build human identities in the future: « She had something that would help future human children remember who they were » [*Dawn*, 122—123]. Oankali preserve human memories, which can become the means of choosing suitable individuals who will form harmonious groups.

Unfortunately, the plot shows that this assumption is false, since the groups consisting of carefully selected people are disrupted by these people’s prejudice and violence. Human body has a memory too and can be made to “remember” what its animal ancestors could do, which enhances the individual’s strength and resilience: indeed, this is what the Oankali have done to humans, as explained in the following passage: « “For the strength, I gave her more efficient use of what she already has. She should have been stronger. Her ancestors were stronger—her nonhuman ancestors in particular” » [*Dawn* 155—156]. Finally, eidetic memory is a valuable survival aid as it helps Lilith find her way in the forest. At the same time, she avoids discussing it since it is a gift from the Oankali: « She had never told them why she had an eidetic memory. Every Oankali change she had told them about had diminished her credibility with them » [218]. Consequently, such memory is an ambiguous element, and this ambivalence provides the material for the discussion on the definition and nature of humanity. Good memory is valued by the protagonists and defines one as a worthy member of the community of intelligent beings. However, non-humans possess it to a higher degree than humans, and the novel describes a process of uneasy realization that aliens may be more human than human beings. *Fledgling* makes even more use of the importance of memory as an element that is essential in determining an individual’s acceptance into the community of intelligent beings: the Ina’s superior memory makes some of them look upon Shori’s amnesia as a sign of her inferiority, a
stain of human condition, and a proof that she is unfit to be considered one of them. Indeed, during the trial aiming at punishing the murderers of Shori’s family, she finds herself questioned by adult Ina. Some of them claim not to believe her testimony on the grounds that she is “seriously impaired” and that her “mind has been all but destroyed [so that], even if she were healthy, [she] is barely Ina at all” [Fledgling, 300, 301]. Consequently, they treat her as if she were a lesser being. Because of that, she is asked to undergo an examination by a human doctor of neurology. By this time, Shori knows enough to understand that “it was intended to be offensive, another effort […] to treat me as a human rather than Ina” [281, see also the next pages].

22 Kindred focuses on recovering from cultural amnesia and that is why it assumes the trappings of a neo-slave narrative with a feminist and fantastic twist, which has also been called an « inverse slave narrative » [Steinberg 467]. A slave narrative is based on a slave’s lived experience and reconstructs certain traumatic events stressing the fact that all truth would be either unbelievable or too hard to hear and comprehend. This kind of text « can be interpreted as a power struggle, an attempt … to wrest control of [the protagonist’s] body and her psyche » [Steinberg 469]. Neo-slave narratives introduce various innovations to the traditional form (see such examples as The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), The Chaneysville Incident (1986), Beloved (1987), and Middle Passage (1990) [Foster 145], one of which is introducing supernatural elements and another recovering the memory of one’s family past, fighting against repressed memory syndrome. Indeed, « critics often perceive these works as “novels of memory”, since much of the action they dramatize takes place in an era before their authors were born » [Foster 146; Rushdy 136].

23 The protagonist of Kindred, Dana, has been shaped by untold narratives of trauma, in addition to those she has consciously heard. Marianne Hirsch defines the « postmemorial condition » as a state of an individual who has had “one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by [one’s] ancestors10”. While Dana knows the names of her ancestors, she does not know what traumatic events led to their births, and the narrative deals with her retrieving that knowledge. She accomplishes the deed by travelling into the past, an act that certainly exceeds comprehension, just like the untold events from the past do, and consequently her story defies narrative reconstruction too. Dana in Kindred has a « supernatural status, as a time-traveling present-past subject » which « fractures rational time-space progression by allowing her to be experientially tied to urban California in 1976 and a Maryland slave plantation roughly 200 years earlier » [McKittrick 1].

24 In contrast to Dawn and Fledgling, no character of Kindred suffers from a condition that they identify as amnesia, but gradually it becomes clear that the protagonist’s family past contains many secrets which have influenced her growth and the novel shows her coming to terms with this heritage. Indeed, this novel deals with the weight of the repressed and forgotten trauma resulting from slavery in American collective memory. In order to dramatize this condition, Butler uses the elements of a ghost story and a cultural ghost story in an innovative way. To some extent, the family in Kindred is a model of false consciousness, an institution that fails its individual members, and a source of dangerously concealed secrets [Briggs 127]. The title itself hints at such a reading. Moreover, revealing the secret concerning her family past results in severe bodily damage for the protagonist. Besides, ghost stories are characterized by « the sudden interruption by supernatural events [which force] us to reconsider the nature
A sudden trip into the past makes Dana realize that the past and the present are not distinct. At the same time, “in her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors” [Crossley XI].

Recovering cultural knowledge, building ethnic and post-ethnic community

In various ways, the three novels comment on recovering the lost past, focusing on revealing the family secrets, retrieving cultural knowledge, and on acknowledging the ethical dimension of transmitting the memory of the past. In the three texts, the character responsible for this task is Black and female, which in itself points to the role of Black women in “constructing for us homeplaces [sic] that are the site of resistance” [hooks 45]. It would seem that certain elements and tropes in these novels refer to elements of Black American cultural and communal memory and create the dimension of fighting against a national amnesia concerning slavery. This turn toward southern folk culture [through the use of “vernacular imagery unique to the Afro-American imagination”] works … to guarantee the writer’s ability to identify, address, and speak for a wider black community [Dubey 104].

The cultural elements that will be discussed are the river, ogbanje-abiku, the ship and the threatened home. In Butler’s three narratives, constructing ethnic identity by retrieving cultural knowledge is a starting point for overcoming ethnicity and building a harmonious community of individuals belonging to different ethnic communities. This requires forgiving past interracial violence and embracing difference. As we will see, although most of the cultural elements discussed below stem from African-American heritage, others point to European tradition.

In her influential book Cultural Haunting, Kathleen Brogan identifies African-American ghost stories as the product of three different traditions: classical Gothic literary tradition, African folklore and beliefs, and a new « understanding of how the past is translated and how ethnicity is constructed » [Brogan 4]. This type of narrative combines the presence of an internally haunted self, which was already present in 19th century mainstream texts, and the communal nature of ghosts. Kindred is set in the 1970s, after the Civil Rights Movement, in the days and years following the day after Dana moves in with Kevin, her white husband 11. While Dana openly stresses the lack of racial prejudice against her, it is obvious she is hiding the truth from herself: in fact, Dana and Kevin are rejected by both their families, and constitute the aim of obscene jokes at their workplace before they even start a relationship. It has been observed that the silence the couple exhibits around ‘race’ when they are in their own time mirrors the silence around this subject that was characteristic of the entire nation following the Civil Rights and Black Power movements [Foster 144].

If the compulsive returns to the antebellum plantation where her family originates from begin on the day after she has moved into her new house with Kevin, it is likely that they reflect either Dana’s feeling of guilt over this development or her determination to get to the root of the threats her marriage is fraught with. Whether or not she can have a future with Kevin depends on her recovering the lost family history, which is made difficult on account of her family hiding a part of it from her. Consequently, in order to overcome this difficulty, the narrative resorts to time travel,
whose mechanism is never explained but seems to result from Dana’s white ancestor’s
capacity to summon her whenever he is in danger so that she may save his life. This
turn to the supernatural in the process of recovering history emphasizes the
difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past, as well as the degree to which
any such historical reconstruction is essentially an imaginative act [Brogan 6].

29 In fact, Kindred could be called a reverse ghost story: a living woman is “called” back to
the past and has to live among the people whom she knows to be dead but who appear
to be as alive as she is, and who have the power to harm her. Moreover, Dana serves as
a helpful spirit whenever the ancestor who calls her is in danger, and is identified by
the people from the past as something more than human. In this way, she may be said
to haunt her own ancestor12. The uneasy friendship between Alice and Rufus, the
betrayal of that friendship through Alice’s rape, her forced relationship with Rufus, her
suicide, all those traumatic memories end up by creating « a parallel reality » [Brogan
73].

30 In the end, « ghost-gossip can [...] be more real, more vivid, than the shadow-play that
passes for “real life” » [Punter 77]. That is why Dana’s body is forever altered by her
trips into the past, and she acquires very real new wounds before the previous ones
have had the time to heal. The last trip to antebellum Maryland results in Dana’s losing
an arm because when she comes back to her own time, her arm forms one with the wall
of her house: she is « literally sacrificing her flesh as a cost for the experience and the
memory » [Due 276]. Just before traveling back in time, she kills Rufus whose corpse
falls on her arm:

   His body went limp and leaden across me. I pushed him away somehow —
everything but his arm still on my arm. Then I convulsed with terrible, wrenching
sickness.

   Something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm,
squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it — painlessly, at first — melting into it,
meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something.
   Something cold and nonliving [Kindred, 260-261].

31 In this way, the oppressive presence of a slave-holding male ancestor turns into a
dangerous presence of an inanimate object which is supposed to guarantee Dana’s
safety: where, after all, can we be safe but at home? Of course, “home” is a contested
term throughout the novel13, since Dana is repeatedly told that the plantation where
she is often whipped and threatened is her home. If Dana’s arm becomes a part of her
house, it may make us question whether in fact she will now be able to make use of her
history because « Possession – the dangerous incorporation of the dead – signals a
failure of memory to organize history, to render it usable » [Brogan 9].

32 On the other hand, it is sometimes necessary to endure suffering in order to achieve a
better understanding of one’s predicament. In Dana’s case, it is the sensory and
emotional experience not simply of life on a slave plantation, but of life on the
plantation her ancestors lived on that enables her to get on with her life.

   The site of memory is also the sight of memory—imagination requires a return to
and engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were and are
denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship [McKittrick 33].

33 In short, « reconstruction requires “seeing” and “sighting” that which is both
expunged and “rightfully” erasable. What you cannot see, you cannot remember » [33].
According to the internal logic of the novel, this is why Dana has to come back to the
Maryland plantation before she can live her life with Kevin: she has to fight against her own amnesia about the past that the interracial couple like theirs cannot ignore.

34 The first of the tropes we will discuss is the river. In African, Greek and other countries’ mythologies, the river constitutes the border between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Water is also endowed with the capacity to remember. In her influential essay, The site of memory, Morrison wrote: « All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was » [77]. In Kindred, appropriately, the first time Dana sees Rufus is when he is drowning in the river:

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of the woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming ... Drowning! [Kindred, 13].

35 At this point in the narrative, they both cross the symbolic border between life and death. An already-dead ancestor, a white child, is rescued from dying by a not-yet-born Black female descendant who could not be born if Rufus died at this moment. At the same time, the river Dana dives into to save his life is also the Lethe, the Greek underworld river whose water helps the souls of recently deceased to forget their past suffering and in which a soul about to be reborn must bathe so as to forget her previous existence. Dana must cross it back to recover her memory of past family trauma: « C'est à contre-courant du fleuve Léthée que l'anamnèse fait son œuvre » [Ricœur 33]. In this way, the river functions in the same way as the cave and the cell in the Oankali ship: it is a symbol of rebirth. We can see it as amniotic liquid while the cave and the cell stand for the womb. This symbolism of the river may be connected to amniotic rivers in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and A Mercy.

36 Butler’s use of the river as a site of recovering memory bridges the gap between classical Greek, traditional African and contemporary African-American representations of the spiritual reality. In African mythology, rivers are places related to the underworld, too. In her essay on African contribution to beliefs of Afro-Americans, Margaret Washington mentions that in BaKongo religion, « deceased ancestors became white creatures called bakulu, who lived [...] under riverbeds and lakes » [Washington 176]. Rufus, a white body emerging from the waves of the nameless river, is Dana’s long dead ancestor who claims his right to her aid by recognizing the unity of all humans, alive, dead, or not born yet, a concept typical of African Weltanschaung [Washington 156]. Furthermore, according to afrofuturist production inspired by legends about Drexciya, water is regarded « as a site of memory where disappeared and suppressed things resurface, wash up, or return to us as detritus » (Shields, accessed 20 Sept 2015). According to the mythology developed by Drexciya, a Detroit-reared music duo active in the 1990s, « the Drexciyans are an underwater nation, the descendants of the African women thrown overboard in the transatlantic slave trade » [Womack 70]. That a white child of slave owners should risk death by drowning is oddly appropriate.

37 Incidentally, Rufus and Dana share certain characteristics with ogbanje-abiku, Nigerian / West African spirit children who embody the ideas of cyclical rebirth and « immanent suffering » [Okonkwo 651—652]. Rufus is a child who often risks death, who in fact would not survive without the help of a woman from a different time and place. Like West-African ogbanje-abiku, Rufus has the capacity to communicate with the world of the spirits, he dies young, his implied deaths and rebirths are frequent, and he
is a mixture of good and evil in a troubling way. Like ogbanje-akiku, he is a « diabolic and yet functionally constructive force » [653] who does not care about the distinction between past, present and future. As for Dana, she shares Rufus’s disregard for the clear separation between the past and the present, keeps traveling between worlds, and her implied deaths are numerous. Critics have identified Dana as ogbanje-abiku: « Octavia Butler refers to her central characters in Wild Seed as ogbanje, and her peripatetic Dana in Kindred is similar » [Ogunyemi 670]. Apart from introducing a West African element into the novel, the concept of ogbanje-abiku with its disregard for death can be used « as a springboard for examining issues of memory [... and] migrations » [663]. The « forced, migratory patterns » [666] that Dana is subject to by Rufus’s appeals evoke the imposed restlessness of Black people and comment on Dana’s lack of rootedness in her surroundings. Ogunyemi notes that « abiku doubles as a signifier for social and spiritual unease » [664].

Water occupies a very important place in spiritual ceremonies, both in African and African-American traditions [Holloway 207]. In particular, Holloway says « the reason why the majority of African Americans are Baptists is because of the importance of the association of water with African ritual » [207], in which immersion of human body in water played a very important role. « In Marshall, Naylor, and Morrison ... the mediate nature of ghosts (always associated with water imagery) cannot be separated from the disaster of the Middle Passage » [Brogan 16]. In light of those elements, it can be said that the presence of a loaded element from African-American folk culture in Kindred, the river, makes it possible for Butler to combine “countermemory” and “counterfuture”, which at the time she wrote that novel were regarded as strictly opposed and mutually exclusive. According to Kodwo Eshun, because the practice of countermemory [sic] defined itself as an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten, the manufacture of the conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures [sic] was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty [287].

Furthermore, it can be argued that Dana’s (but also Lilith’s and Shori’s) ordeal is a reflection or a reminder of a phase of spiritual striving in initiation ceremonies [Washington 164-165]. Indeed, before being granted admission to church membership, the person needed to live out a period of “seeking”, when he or she prayed and meditated in the wilderness, common locations for that being « graveyards, cotton or cornfields, and marshes » [165]. The seekers encountered terrible sights, and met « a vision of white man who warns and talks with the seeker and eventually leads the seeker to the river » [165]. Washington shows how these cultural practices reflect older, African practices of initiation into secret societies. The water burial signaled « a journey into the world of the ancestors [...] and subsequent return, represented an end of individualistic tendencies inimical to group interests » [165]. Dana’s meeting Rufus, her white ancestor, and saving him from a death by drowning begins the process of her initiation. Her trips into the past enable her to recover her family’s painful past, but also her community’s secrets, and her initiation hopefully prepares her to live her adult life and her marital relationship well but also makes her recognize the limits and dangers of her union with a white man. Like Dana, Lilith and Shori must be isolated in order to grow and come of age, they must die symbolically in order to be reborn as stronger and more resilient selves. Some elements of the water burial ritual and other initiation practices can be found in their predicaments. For example, Lilith has to cross
a river in order to found her first community while Shori is washed by rain when she leaves the forest in which she woke up.

The river is a symbolic element common to classical European and African mythologies, which likewise points to African-American ritual practices and cultural knowledge. On the other hand, the ship and the threatened home are more specifically related to African-American collective past since they evoke the reality of the middle passage, slavery and segregation.

In the introduction to her book *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick defines « the ship as a location of black subjectivity and human terror, black resistance, and in some cases, black possession » [XI]. In *Dawn*, the ship is just that – a location of human terror, which is disguised and hidden within individual cells. From the beginning of the novel the reader is made aware of the fact that human beings are kept separate from one another and from the Oankali and that each individual occupies a locked room that he or she cannot leave, and that does not even appear to have doors. The parallel of the slave ship is subverted to a large extent by the fact that in the novel, the humans are saved from certain death by the Oankali, so the alternative to being on board the ship is death from cold, radiation and hunger on the war-devastated earth. Besides, contrary to slaves during the Middle Passage, humans do not suffer from hunger and are not kept in an overcrowded hold of the ship. Nevertheless, humans on board still mainly read the vessel in terms of a slave ship, feel they have been enslaved and forced to accept the way of life of the enemy. What is more, they are clearly regarded by the Oankali as interesting sexual partners and are sought in order to procreate new hybrid species of intelligent beings, which can evoke forced sexual relationships between enslaved women and their white jailors, an interpretation that is alluded to in the novel. Consequently, many of them resort to extreme violence to protect themselves from this plight. McKittrick notes speaking about *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), that for Equiano, « the slave ship is not simply a container hiding his displacement. It is a location through which he articulates hardship and human cruelty, in part mapping and giving new meaning to the vessel itself » [XII]. In *Dawn*, Butler makes the ship an ambivalent symbol, as it is clearly a location of human suffering, but on the other hand this suffering is partly self-inflicted: it results from the inability and unwillingness of humans to embrace the salvation which they did not choose. What’s more, humans in the depicted world find themselves in need of being rescued due to the fact that they had indulged in a military conflict that destroyed the ecological balance on Earth.

This leads us to discuss the memory of a threatened home, since Lilith’s earthly home is irretrievably lost. Such memory of menaced or destroyed hearth is often present in Black writing and points to the trauma of historically unsafe housing under slavery during the era of segregation. Before coming back to the discussion of Butler’s novels, we will evoke the role of Black women in the protection of Black domestic spaces.

The essay entitled *Homeplace: a site of resistance* by bell hooks opens with an evocation of visits to the author’s grandparents’ house which was situated in the white neighborhood. Those occasions were characterized for hooks with the overwhelming feeling of loneliness, danger and terror while the family walked through this neighborhood, and the contrast between those negative feelings and the welcoming atmosphere at the grandmother’s house [41]. The essay depicts homecoming to a black enclave, surrounded and threatened by white population. For younger bell hooks, her
grandparents’ house was a safe space, a haven, which belonged to women and which made it possible for all family members to feel human, to resist, and to restore the dignity that they were refused in the outside world [42].

Such tension between safety and threat, loneliness among strangers and community support is reproduced in both *Kindred* and *Dawn*, although Butler rejects the idea of home as safe haven. Not only do Rufus and his father tell Dana that she will always find a home at the Weylin plantation, but Dana catches herself thinking of the plantation as “home” even though she knows she is in danger during her stays. *Kindred* constructs a tension between Dana’s new home in twentieth century California and the Weylin plantation. It is evident that neither is a safe place for her: she can be taken away from her California house and she can be hurt or possibly killed at the plantation. Neither location is truly hers: the Weylin plantation because it does not belong to her, and the California house because she has not had the time to make it her own. The Weylin plantation seems to offer a false sense of security, as a place that is more and more familiar to Dana, as if familiarity could protect one from danger. This experience makes it clear to Dana that she has totally forgotten how insecure some of her female ancestors must have felt in their homes.

*Dawn*’s protagonist Lilith who the reader first meets when she is locked up in her separate cell, is later given the possibility to influence the ship and to make it build cubicles, an ability that other humans do not possess. Importantly, although this appears as a sign of her agency, it is in reality a competence that the Oankali bestow on her. Consequently, the other humans resent her for using this aptitude. Like in *Kindred*, also in *Dawn* the cubicle which Dana inhabits and the one she modifies are not locations where she can decide to be by herself: she may, or may not, be constantly watched, and the Oankali can always arrive and enter at will. On the other hand, on numerous occasions such interventions are shown to be beneficial as they help avoid bloodshed among humans.

In short, unlike the home evoked by bell hooks, Dana’s and Lilith’s “homes” are not private intimate spaces and can be invaded by others without the protagonists’ will. Besides, these “homes” could not possibly be created without the assistance of those who are presented as oppressors in those texts. And yet, the women characters in Butler’s texts do enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in negotiating their homes. In both novels, women protagonists are endowed with powers and capacities that are not shared by other characters. For instance, Dana and Lilith have more knowledge, Lilith is in a better physical condition, Dana possesses the ability to always be in the right place at the right time. These female protagonists remember, in their bodies, in their unsafe homes, what it was like to be an African-American woman in the USA before their time. These powers are not enough to make them truly safe in what they sometimes call a space of their own, which once again reproduces the limitations of African-American women’s capacity to resist oppression.

*Fledgling* features an immature female character trying to provide a safe homeplace for the family she is beginning to shape and her consistent efforts make up the latter part of the novel until she manages to reach her goal, though not before one of her new family members is killed. Contrary to the protagonists discussed above, she is not an adult in the narrative present, and the first “home” the reader is shown is a cave where amnesiac Shori awakens in. This uncomfortable space provides her with sufficient security and makes it possible for her to regain her strength. The home where she was
born, situated close to the cave, was destroyed a short time before and its charred remains do not stir real memories in Shori, although she does recognize the function of the objects she finds in the ruins and recovers in them an ornament she used to wear. Throughout the novel, Shori occupies a number of “homes”, but none of them are hers in the sense that she is always a guest, and she contributes to the making of those houses to an even lesser degree than Dana and Lilith do. She is also often forced to leave them at one point due to threats own and her friends’ lovers’ symbionts’ security. At the same time, while she does not contribute to the material makeup of these domestic spaces, she has one essential quality, namely, her strength, resilience and determination to protect her own.

Interestingly, the representation of Dana’s, Lilith’s and Shori’s homes, or domestic spaces, testify to the porosity of the boundary between the private and the public space for women of color, whose lives « are more often interrupted by the state than those of white middle-class women: welfare legislation, sterilization programmes and policing all intervene to deny them the right to a private life » [Rose 126]. Dana’s existence is lastingly modified by frequent appeals to her presence from a white ancestor, and when she is in Maryland, her life is policed by the inhabitants of the Weylin household. On board the Oankali vessel, Lilith is kept in a locked cell (which is supposedly done for her own good), once she is placed in the company of a child whose language she cannot speak, and later on, she is made pregnant without her knowledge or consent. As for Shori, she becomes the target of hate crimes which deprives her of her entire extended family (which includes over a hundred members), she is also tracked down by her persecutors wherever she goes. In all cases, a Black middle-class female whose existence used to be safe must confront the dangers which have been routinely faced by generations of low-class blacks. This occurs by taking the protagonist away from her family home (note that in Dawn and in Fledgling, the return to the home is impossible as the latter has been destroyed) and reactivating her memory of various dangers of daily life (displacement, finding oneself on board the slave ship or on a plantation). Strikingly, in the most recent novel the protagonist who suffers this predicament is a first-generation black, since the color of her skin results from a medical experiment aiming at raising her resilience in daylight. In short, these novels expose the falseness of « assumptions about the home as a site of security by revealing who is and is not protected there » [Leveen 562]. The fact that Dana explicitly states she can never tell her story to anyone hints at the difficulty in changing this state of things. The unsafe houses in the three novels reveal the makeshift character of the freedom obtained by Black people in the USA, through projecting the forgotten insecurity of housing into the future as well as into the present. None of these women characters is allowed to choose where to live, they are denied the « freedom to move where and when [they] please », which is one of the fundamental « rights and privileges in a democracy » [Avilez 135]. In this way, Butler’s novels inscribe themselves into the tradition of segregation narratives.

Conclusion

As Tananarive Due said, Butler’s « work is a prism through which she examines ills in American society » [264]. Over the years, Butler’s fiction has been creating futuristic counternarratives which combine « technology and memory » [David 698]. One of the
ills that Butler criticizes is the ease with which humans forget the suffering they inflicted and the unwillingness to recognize the guilt that should result from causing fellow beings pain. Over the years, Butler repeatedly came back to depicting physical violence, but also amnesia and abrupt return of the repressed memories. Peaceful coexistence and social justice are not possible if the past wrongs are forgotten by those who committed them. However, those who have suffered from the crime must also remember it and recognize its weight on their current existence. Memory is usually empowering, but sometimes, amnesia may serve the purpose of protecting the well-being of the suffering. *Fledgling* depicts fighting against amnesia as the protagonist’s moral duty as well as a necessary survival tool, while at the same time showing that the full recovery of past traumatic experience would be detrimental to Shori’s mental health.

The imagery used in Butler’s afrofuturistic narratives, through its rootedness in the local and the personal Afro-American experience, enables her to connect science-fiction and countermemory. Her books feature such experiences and images as the river, the ship, the threatened home, but also homelessness, alienation, vulnerability and dislocation that characterized “the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” [Eshun 287], while at the same time pointing to the possible ambiguity of those same images. The Oankali bring a new life to mankind. Losing one’s arm is a price to pay for a harmonious marriage. In this way, Butler shows her suspicion of such categories as “myth and aspects of history”, characteristic of countermemory14.

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NOTES

1. See for example: *Slavery and the Promise of Humanism in Octavia E. Butler’s Science Fiction* by Catherine S. Ramírez (constantvzw.org/verlag/.../Catherine_S_Ramirez.doc); Octavia Butler Samuel Delany (http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/science_fiction/transcripts/butler_delany_index.html), both accessed 25th September 2015.


3. Two of those novels have been translated into French and published under the titles *Novice* (*Fledgling*) and *Liens de Sang* (*Kindred*).

4. We have adopted the spelling of the word “homeplace” used by bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*.

5. In fact, it is later in the narrative that the narrator discovers she is a human-looking female member of a species called Ina, that shares certain characteristics with vampires. For the sake of clarity, I am using the personal pronoun *she* throughout the text.

6. For example, early in the novel, she explains to the man whom she has met on the road and who has taken her into his house what she needs in order to heal: « “fresh meat for healing injuries and illnesses, for sustaining growth spurts, and for carrying a child” » [Fledgling, 25].

7. For a discussion of anamnesis and of body as the prison of the soul, see Ricoeur, 32-34.

8. Antonio Damasio points out that “feeling your emotional states, which is to say being conscious of emotions, offers you flexibility of response based on the particular history of your interactions with the environment” [133].

9. Only a secondary character in this novel can be an example of amnesia resulting from physical trauma: Lilith’s husband forgets his family after a car accident in which their son lost his life.


11. In twentieth century California, only about two weeks pass, but in the interstices of this period, Dana spends many months in the antebellum Maryland, and her husband Kevin stays there for five years.
ABSTRACTS

En
Three novels by Octavia Butler, the first famous African-American speculative fiction writer, feature characters who suffer from memory loss. All three novels begin with the isolated and forgetful individual who, in the course of the narrative, recovers some memory of the past and uses it to build or reconstruct family ties. The article analyzes the way those amnesiac subjects are represented and the types of amnesia they suffer from. It also looks at some elements of what is retrieved in order to trace back the roots of certain recurrent motifs. Finally, it questions the figure of the Black woman fighting to recover her memory and use it as basis to construct a community.

Trois romans écrits par Octavia Butler, la première auteure afro-américaine célèbre, présentent de personnages qui souffrent de pertes de mémoire. Ces trois romans s'ouvrent sur l'image d'un individu isolé et oublieux, qui par la suite et tout au long de la narration recouvre une partie de sa mémoire du passé et l'utilise afin de construire ou reconstruire les liens familiaux. Notre article analyse la manière dont ces sujets oubliés sont représentés et les types d'amnésie dont ils souffrent. Nous essayons aussi de montrer certains éléments que ces personnages arrivent à récupérer afin de retracer les origines de certains motifs récurrents. Finalement, nous interrogeons le personnage de la femme Noire qui s'efforce de retrouver sa mémoire et de l'utiliser pour bâtir une communauté.

INDEX

Mots-clés: amnésie, littérature afro-américaine (XXe et XXIe siècles), mémoire, roman fantastique
Keywords: African-American literature (20th and 21st centuries), amnesia, memory, speculative fiction

AUTHOR

PATRYCJA KURJATTO-RENARD
Université du Littoral Côte d’Opale