

Afrofuturism in the sequential adaptation of Kindred (2017)

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ABSTRACT

The sequential adaptation *Kindred* (2017) narrates the experiences of the protagonist, Dana, facing slavery and racism, during her various travels through time in 19th century Maryland, in the United States of America. This comic book is an adaptation of the eponymous Afrofuturistic novel by American writer Octavia E. Butler from 1979, by cartoonists Damian Duffy and John Jennings. Through intersectional representations between gender, power, and race, they more vividly illustrate the violence faced by Dana on an ancient Antebellum plantation. Therefore, the objectives of this research were to identify the main Afrofuturistic elements applied in the adaptation and verify how sequential resources were used both to intensify the reader's experience and to promote a more reliable adaptation (Cartmell, 1999). Through deconstructivist methodology (Derrida, 2010; Evans, 2020), we identify a profound revisionism concerning the relationships between gender, power, and race. Consequently, this revisionism has been proven in a multitude of sequential representations of historical reinterpretations, reconstructions, and reconciliations. These cartoonists do not suggest forgetting the past but understanding it as an hodiernal entity.

Keywords: afrofuturism; comic books; *Kindred* (2017).

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INTRODUCTION

The sequel adaptation *Kindred*, by cartoonists Damian Duffy and John Jennings (2017), is based directly on the Afrofuturistic novel *Kindred*, by American writer Octavia E. Butler (1979). The plot narrates the time travel experiences of the protagonist, Dana, to the slavery period of the early 19th century in Maryland, in the United States of America. This narrative is told by Dana in the first person. During her various travels, she comes across several of her ancestors in slave positions.

The most recurring themes are gender, power, and racism amid Afrofuturistic innovation. Although the narrative of *Kindred* (2017) deals with themes that are so relevant to better understanding our contemporary times, there is still very little academic research on the novel (Astrada, 2017; Donaldson, 2014; Wiggs, 2021) and, much less, on the sequential adaptation in relation to the configuration of these themes through visual means. Afrofuturism presents both content and structural elements about science fiction.

Thusly, this scientific article aimed to investigate the intersectionality between gender, power, and race through the perspective of the Afrofuturistic narrative and sequential resources. Therefore, we decided to suggest an epistemological approach to the main characteristics of Afrofuturism. Subsequently, we propose a sequential analysis of the adaptation of *Kindred* (2017) and then make some final considerations.

AFROFUTURISM: CONCEPTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The philosophical concept "Afrofuturism" relates to a much broader heuristic movement than sequential narratives can encompass in their epistemological composition. The Afrofuturist movement refers to a divergent socio-historical and cultural approach to the ills linked to Afro-descendance that are so publicized and, often, imposed by Eurocentric perspectives on Africanity. From this perspective, Afrofuturist thinkers reimagine Africanity through much more creative, expressive, and fair lenses, that is, they propose a vision of black subjectivity that is much more equalitarian and freer. Among its main characteristics, Afrofuturism presents culturally: alterity, complaint, and revisionism.

In 1994, Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism based on an analysis of the cultural-literary scene in the United States based on interviews that the critic did with three black artists and intellectuals, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose and Samuel R. Delany, in which he questions the absence of African American authors in science fiction. The term seeks to

¹ Translated by: Ana Paula Tribesse Patrício Dargel.

describe artistic creations that, through science fiction, invent other futures for black populations. Although the origin of Afrofuturism lies in the field of literary production, the interview, in which Dery also points to the literary production of writers such as Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, ended up extending the movement also to the field of cinema, photography and visual arts, as well as the musical field (Buroco, 2019, p. 50).

The term Afrofuturism presents various possibilities of black experiences in realities that are often not marked by racism, functioning as a critique of the oppressive reality of Western whiteness. Thus, the concept responds to the perplexity caused by the lack of black science fiction in the United States of America and how it was used against that community. There are several great examples of this type of narrative in our contemporary times, such as *Infinitem: An Afrofuturist Tale* by Tim Fielder (2021), about African kings and their various space battles or *Far Sector* by author N.K. Jemisin (2021), about the first black woman to become a member of the intergalactic Green Lantern Corps. However, the most famous afrofuturistic comic book must be *Black Panther* (2016), about T'Challa, king of Wakanda, which would be a region with advanced technologies and completely hidden from the rest of planet Earth, but strategically located on the African continent.

Cultural alterity encompasses two types of approaches: essentialist and non-essentialist. According to Hofstede (2007), the essentialist approach understands culture through smaller ontological units, with each unit being separate from the rest. Therefore, each culture has its own characteristics and, therefore, it can be studied and investigated separately. The members of this culture identify themselves through these elementary characteristics that are perpetuated from generation to generation, continuously. Furthermore, these cultures are independent and do not have inter- and/or transdisciplinary relationships with other cultures. Afrofuturism tries to deconstruct this cultural hierarchical structure and promote new reflections (Derrida, 2010). In this way, an Afrofuturism text can present both a work of appropriation and nihilization.

In turn, the non-essentialist approach to culture has increasingly challenged the essentialist approach. For Hofstede (2007), treating culture as a type of entity separate from others is to understand the extremely restrictive and outdated concept of culture. Therefore, non-essentialists understand culture as a fragmented and changeable process, which can take on a plethora of facets given the different possible interactions of one culture with another, or others. In other words, non-essentialists see culture through its eternal semantic becoming, constantly depending on each interactional context in the face of posited otherness.

Under this spectrum, the conceptualization of the term “otherness” becomes clearer and more substantial. According to Said (2010), otherness encompasses the different possible descriptions of a person or people considered “culturally different”. In this way, understanding identity, from a post-colonial perspective, reveals power hierarchies and processes of identity construction, often imposed by oppressive discourses. As a result, otherness can present several characteristics. Among them, we highlight empathy, subjectivation and recognition.

Empathy is the human ability to identify with another subject. When a cartoonist puts himself in another's shoes, he can bring up several relevant discussions against homophobia, sexism, and racism. In this empathetic process, different subjects can be born. In line with this, the opportunity for multiple subjectivities, that is, the different subjects who can exercise their particularities freely. Such freedom offers us new reflections on existing discourses and even new discussions about the conceptualization of culture itself. By recognizing the existence of multiple subjects, the existence of distinct cultures is recognized. Such recognition also allows for the practice of mutual respect and provides us with new creative spaces.

Therefore, cultural reclamation refers to the recovery, celebration and then preservation of cultures largely marginalized by oppressive discourses such as, for example, colonialist discourse

and positivist discourse. According to Brayboy (2006), cultural recovery is an extremely valuable process for marginalized and peripheral communities. In this way, by recovering their oppressed culture, these communities gradually increase their levels of self-esteem, sense of cultural identity and their resilience perspectives. One of the ways to effectively recover an oppressed culture is through the reuse of a dialect, a language or even slang.

Subsequently, cultural grievance should not be a segregating process. For Young (2007), the celebration of a culture, often oppressed or prohibited, results in a deeper reflection on the identity issues of those who claim it. It is a process of assimilation, that is, instead of the subject separating his claimed cultural heritage from conventional culture, he embraces different worlds. As a result, we are presented with new forms of culture and/or, at least, hybrid cultures, that is, identity destabilizations (Evans, 2020). In this sense, Afrofuturism proposes a more accentuated reflection on the identity concepts proposed by Positivism. In other words, an Afrofuturist text must question the status quo of identities considered stagnant and immutable. Blackness does not only encompass slavery, but it is a source of possibilities and new narratives to be told.

In this scope, cultural hybridization is intrinsically associated with the ontological composition in cultural complaint. According to Simmel (2010), cultural hybridization semantically reveals the most diverse networks of relationships and the most diverse interstices of human experiences, which provoke new artistic performances and new productions of meaning. Still according to Simmel (2010), there are no pure, that is, original, processes of meaning. Every culture is an amalgam of a series of semantic exchanges that occur from time to time. From this perspective, cultural complaints raise the subject's self-esteem, as it grants them the ability to recreate their own culture. Furthermore, it also gives you the chance to give new meaning to your sense of identity. In this case, the subject can embrace both the past and the present, but, above all, propose a new identity future.

In this identity future, the subject can practice the resilience of their new culture. According to Folke (2010), cultural resilience can be understood as the capacity of a system to absorb influences external to this system. In other words, it would be the ability that each subject has of not being influenced by external pressures. In contrast, Thomas (2017) believes that such a conceptualization of resilience is quite outdated. Currently, resilience would be less a return to the past and more a step towards the future. In this sense, it must be better understood through possible forms of adaptation and transformation, thus returning to the concept of cultural hybridization (Simmel, 2010).

Accordingly, the cultural complaint for Thomas (2017) would be the ability that each subject would have to survive adversity, deal with changes and, mainly, develop from these adversities and changes imposed by life. Disturbances must be understood as synonymous with adversity and change. From this perspective, Thomas (2017) also argues that one of the most recurrent characteristics of cultural complaints is the multiplicity of voices, that is, the diversity of discourses. In a multicultural world, individuals would have the right to express themselves creatively as they please. Such freedom would provide us with new forms of artistic creation, thus benefiting more multifaceted and deeper dialogues.

Revisionism can be understood as a historiographic process of reinterpretation of a given socio-historical-cultural situation. Therefore, according to Goddard (2018), we must determine what type of revisionism we are dealing with. In our specific case, it is historical revisionism. It has been a fundamental analysis tool for Post-Modern Studies, as it allows researchers to revisit certain historical passages to identify oppressive discourses such as, for example, LGBTQIAPN+phobic, misogynistic, and even racist discourses. For this to be substantiated, it is necessary for these revisionist researchers to present arguments and facts that corroborate their oppressive anti-speech.

From this perspective, historical revisionism encompasses three main characteristics: reinterpretation, reconstruction, and reconciliation.

Historical reinterpretation is a way of heuristically revisiting a given event in the past with the aim of identifying facts. According to Tucker (2008), facts can be unknown, revisited, or veiled. Unknown facts can be classified as events that have not been identified by past researchers. The revisited facts refer to events considered immutable, but which, in fact, present much more complex facets around the constructed discourse. In turn, veiled facts are those that were intentionally hidden by oppressive discourses coming from the dominant elite.

Subsequently, historical reconstruction is related to an etiological reapproach of newly discovered facts. According to Summers (2015), the process of historical reconstruction is fundamental to eliminate stereotypes, injustices, and prejudices. From this perspective, historical reconstruction can bring several benefits to groups that are constantly harmed by oppressive discourses, as it is directly linked to human rights movements. Reconstruction proposes a new narrative that, on the one hand, does not hide the ills of humanity and, on the other hand, signals a richer and more reliable/ “transpositional” history (Cartmell, 1999).

Finally, historical reconciliation can be understood simultaneously as a goal to be achieved and a process by which that goal can be achieved. Therefore, according to Bloomfield (2003), reconciliation can occur in different types of contexts and its main goals are directly based on the search, that is, the search for healing, justice, forgiveness, and truth. Furthermore, reconciliation is a humanistic opportunity to redesign history for what it really was and not for what oppressive discourses have imposed on us. It's a big challenge, but it's a challenge worth facing. Still according to Bloomfield (2003), if historical reconciliation is achieved, there would be a great chance that past violence would not be repeated. Reinterpretation, reconstruction, and reconciliation must be conceptualized through Foucauldian discourses (2014). In other words, they are anonymous and collective constructions based on socio-historical-cultural statements.

Furthermore, Afrofuturism also encompasses narrative elements coming directly from science fiction, such as time travel, parallel universes and the Freudian *unheimlich* (unfamiliar, in Portuguese). According to Stephen Hawking (2015), time travel can be understood as a revisit to a pre-existing event. Although Hawking (2015) believes in this type of travel, he states that we still need to discover new laws of physics to corroborate this belief. In turn, according to Max Tegmark (2014), parallel universes would be worlds that coexist side by side or on different extraphysical planes. Finally, according to Sigmund Freud (2020), *unheimlich* refers to the feeling of strangeness linked to a known event, that is, it is the frightening present in the familiar.

AFROFUTURISM IN THE COMIC ADAPTATION OF THE NOVEL *KINDRED* (2017)

The science fiction novel *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler (1979), tells a complex narrative about slavery in the United States of America. The author intersperses two great American historical moments. The protagonist Dana lives in California in 1976 but is constantly transported to the year 1800 in Maryland, where the slave trade was still a reality based, in most cases, on state laws. The character Dana is not only the protagonist, but she is also the narrator of her own diegetic experiences. In this context, she can be classified as an autodiegetic narrator.

In turn, the sequential adaptation of the novel *Kindred*, made by artists Damian Duffy and John Jennings (2017), has been considered one of the most “transpositional” adaptations (Cartmell, 1999), that is, versions very close to the literary sources with few adapting interferences, from a science fiction novel. They manage, through the elements of sequential art, to illustrate Butler's

(1979) powerful diegetic diatribe about how the actions of the past have serious, often horrific, repercussions in our present. Duffy and Jennings' kinetic lines expose visceral themes, as they reveal a plethora of connections between the history of black Americans and their oppressive pasts in the Antebellum Southern period, the period before the Civil War in the United States (1860-1865), a conflict marked by opposition between the South, which was slaveholder, and the North, which was abolitionist.

The connection between Dana and Rufus is extremely complex. Every time Dana returns to the past, she does so because he needs her help. For example, at the age of five, he almost drowns. Then he sets the curtains in his own room on fire. At the age of twenty, he gets into a terrible physical fight. Although Dana routinely tries to help him, he begins to hate her various attempts. The passage in which Dana saves Rufus from drowning (Figure 01) can be understood as a form of historical reinterpretation (Tucker, 2008), as it subverts the oppressive discourse that establishes the slave as a being without humanistic compassion.

Figure 1 - Rufus' Drowning



Source: Kindred (Duffy; Jennings, 2017, p. 13).

In this passage, the protagonist Dana pulls Rufus out of the river, already unconscious. She then carefully drags him to the riverbank and tries to resuscitate him. In the meantime, Tom Weylin, Rufus' progenitor, arrives at the scene and promptly threatens Dana with a gun. As a result, she panics, feeling dizzy, Dana returns to her 1976 apartment. Amid parallel universes, there are several silences. According to Foucault (2004), we find the three foundations of oppressive racist discourse here: the taboo of the object, what one does not have the right to talk about, the ritual of circumstance, that one cannot talk about everything in any circumstance and the right privileged, that anyone cannot talk about anything. Nevertheless, Dana breaks these silences by saving a white slave boy from drowning, by confronting her armed father and by relating her experiences to her husband.

Slavery is a central theme in Kindred (2017). As a form of historical reconstruction (Summers, 2015), cartoonists Duffy and Jennings manage to reveal the great influence that a slave society still has on its citizens, even after decades of freedom. In figure 02, they use kinetic graffiti lines to demonstrate the weight that slavery has on people. Each frame shows a facet of racist violence. In one of her first temporal trips to the past, Dana is already confronted with the problems of slavery.

When trying to say goodbye to her friend, Dana finds herself silenced once again, both by slave traders and by the slaves themselves. Such unfamiliarity (Freud, 2020) is an extremely

frightening event. By illustrating in bold colors that black people do not have the right to speak, Duffy and Jennings (2017) break with the eidetic discourse that slaves were treated well. The images clearly expose the silencing surrounding the dehumanizing process resulting from slavery. The dark tones of the cartoonists' brushes ensure even more seriousness for the paintings.

The protagonist Dana is not only silenced, but she is also terrified by the whole human trafficking scene (Figure 02). According to Foucault (2004), a form of discursive exclusion occurs through a false dialectic perspective. When white supremacists (Windisch et al., 2018) claim that there was no slavery or that many slaves were treated well, they attempt to prove that both realities were true. However, a real historical reconstruction (Summers, 2015) can be used as a counterargument to expose such philosophical fallacies. Such a counterargument can be substantiated in different ways. One of them is the sequential narrative that can effectively reach a large child and youth audience. It is important that Butlerian readers can feel unfamiliar with the various slave practices.

Figure 2 - Racist violences



Source: Kindred (Duffy; Jennings, 2017, p. 195).

The corrupting influence of power is probably one of the most conspicuous themes in the sequel adaptation *Kindred* (2017). With its main personification, there is Rufus. The intersectionality of his heterosexual cisgender and his dominant race already gives him great authoritarian status in relation to the other deuteragonist characters. Although he shows moments of compassion and empathy with the slaves Alice and Nigel, upon becoming their main owner, Rufus comes to believe in his eugenic superiority over the others. Therefore, he still constantly tries to control them, several times in vain.

As far as he is concerned, corrupting speech is a byproduct of the misuse of power. According to Foucault (2004), this type of discourse presents a game of meanings that must be discontinued. Otherwise, they will result in a series of venal decisions. These decisions often come from unfounded fear. In the specific case of Rufus, he has power, but is outnumbered by his slaves. Such a numerical disadvantage causes him extreme apprehension and furious attacks. If his wishes are not fulfilled, he tends to violently punish anyone who defies him. Such violence can be seen in Figure 03 below.

When Dana tries to explain to Rufus that her intentions were positive, that is, that she was just going to teach the other slaves to read, he tells her to go inside the house. Cartoonists Duffy and Jennings (2017) well adapt the content elements of Butlerian science fiction into the sequential narrative. They maintain Dana's contemporary attire in an act of insubordination. The common presence of this clothing during the slave era corroborates the existence of parallel universes. In characterizing the features, they apply more concentrated kinetic lines to the slaves' faces to signify more tired and battered appearances. In comparison, Dana's features are more rested and softer. However, throughout the narration, his appearance also becomes more tired and ill-treated.

Additionally, Rufus's moral absolutism is constantly questioned. When he slaps Dana in the face, her face is expelled to the opposite side. The configuration of the emanata illustrating such a slap does, in fact, expel force, especially through the golden kinetic lines, but the reactionary movement of Dana's face effusively breaks with the oppressive speech. Readers of the sequential adaptation of *Kindred* (2017) can effectively verify the disruption of the slave's passive discourse towards their owners in Figure 03.

The subversive discontinuity of the oppressive slave discourse was already found in Butler's original text in 1979. By turning her face to the opposite side, the protagonist Dana refuses to accept the violence inflicted by Rufus. It is a type of historical reinterpretation (Tucker, 2008). By revisiting this type of oppressive discourse, the author reveals much more complex facets of slavery practices. Slaves did not simply have passive attitudes. Their attitudes were much more active within the possibilities presented. If Dana returned the slap, she would be killed. However, when Duffy and Jennings (2017) draw her face going in the opposite direction of the slap, they show Dana's strength in the face of extreme violence. It is a refusal of Rufus's corrupting influence.

Figure 03 - Rufus's violent escalation



Source: Kindred (Duffy; Jennings, 2017, p. 208).

The whipping process served as a painful means of dominating white people over black people, especially in the southern states of the United States of America. In this way, it functioned as a painful and permanent reminder to slaves of their supposed racial inferiority. Such inferiority was constructed, firstly, through the oppressive slave discourse. Foucault (2004, p. 45) asks that “[...] proposing an ideal truth as a law of discourse and an immanent rationality as the principle of its development”, only imprisons people in a false discourse without a theoretical-practical basis. In other words, oppressive speeches are fallacies, insofar as they would be abhorrent statements that simulate a certain truthfulness. On the one hand, white supremacists (Windisch *et al.*, 2018) argue that slavery would be an aporia, as there would be no labor alternative at the time. On the other hand, cisgender white men were paid a fee for their work at the same time. This means that slavery was a discourse created mainly to unscrupulously exploit others in their otherness.

Secondly, the oppressive slave discourse adopted cultural artifacts such as gags and chains to cause intermittent fear and inflict intense pain. However, these fears and pains must be limiting so as not to cause the death of slaves, given that they were still considered commodities in the eyes of their owners. According to Mcneese (2008), most of the assertion of white American authority was

in inflicting such excruciating pain with various methods of torture that the agonizing message should be able to reverberate throughout the black community, not just the slaves.

Therefore, the whip cultural artifact represents both physical and psychological terror. In relation to the sequential adaptation *Kindred* (2017), the whip is only used by white cisgender characters. In turn, they always use it as a form of abuse and never for self-defense. Although the protagonist Dana comes from the future, she is not spared, as her otherness is still understood as inferior. Thus, she is also whipped several times. Such narrative passages can be considered as representations of historical reconciliation. According to Bloomfield (2003), reconciliation presents goals, and these goals are directly linked to a process of seeking healing, justice, forgiveness, and truth. When faced with the violence of the whip, Dana finds herself in crisis and must try to reconcile all her experiences.

Whippings are constant forms of physical and psychological violence. When Dana encounters the first whippings, she realizes how problematic the history of American slavery is. Your first reaction is to run away. When trying to escape, she is caught and receives a series of whips, as can be seen in Figure 04 below. At this moment, cartoonists Duffy and Jennings (2017) disrupt white supremacist discourse (Windisch *et al.*, 2018) about slaves. According to Mcneese (2008), one of the greatest Confederate heroes, General Robert E. Lee, stated that slaves did not run away, as they did not have the cognitive capacity to do so. When Butler (1979) narrates Dana's escape attempt and, consequently, her failure to complete this feat, the author does not argue that black people had no cognitive capacity, but that the entire slave system was built to inhibit and punish any attempt to break this system.

Figure 04 - Dana's whipping



Source: *Kindred* ((Duffy; Jennings, 2017, p. 228).

The oppressive slave discourse in *Kindred* (2017) encompasses a plethora of descriptive signs. According to Foucault (2004), the appropriate subversion of oppressive discourse must permeate critical descriptions and genealogical descriptions. Thus, an appropriate historical reconstruction (Summers, 2015) must use the revealed facts to complement the liberating discourse. When Butler (1979) narrates the whipping *ipsis litteris*, she is merely ordering the authentic facts

about slavery. By not excluding Dana's suicidal desire, she further reveals her human side, distancing her from the animalistic speech proposed by General Lee.

Therefore, Butler (1979) undermines white supremacist discourse and searches for a truth. This truth can result in a healing process. It is worth clarifying here that healing is not synonymous with forgetting. When the protagonist Dana recognizes several wounds and problems caused by slavery, she begins to accept that history is a present discourse, not a past one. From this moment on, she starts trying to reconcile herself with her own history. The process of reinterpretation, reconstruction and historical reconciliation is extremely painful, as can be seen in the following tables:

Figure 05 - The process of healing, justice, forgiveness, and truth



Source: Kindred (Duffy; Jennings, 2017, p. 231).

Afrofuturism is present throughout the narrative of the sequential adaptation of Kindred (2017) in an eristic way. Author Butler (1979) uses elements of science fiction (time travel, parallel and unheimlich universes) to provide more intense experiences for her protagonist Dana. With each return to her own universe, she tries to understand her experiences. To achieve such understanding, she must reinterpret the facts experienced, many of which are ineffable. This reinterpretation results in a reconstruction of the discourse about her slave past, as Dana realizes that history is a present and not a past discursive construction. Consequently, historical reinterpretation and reconstruction become a series of attempts to reconcile, mainly, with violent experiences. Historical reconciliation is not an erasure of slavery atrocities, but a recognition of these atrocities. Recognizing past mistakes is to prevent them from being repeated.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The adaptation of the science fiction novel Kindred by author Octavia E. Butler (1979), by cartoonists Damian Duffy and John Jennings (2017), deals with the intersectionality between gender, power, and race. The protagonist, Dana, tells us about her most varied experiences as a

black woman during the 19th century slavery period in the United States of America. With an analytical-contemporary look at her slave ancestors, a look embodied by several trips through time, she manages to examine more deeply the oppressed role of this woman in the face of a system that is mostly oppressive, as well as exclusively male and white.

Through a first-person narrative, the protagonist Dana manages to carry out an etiological review of her own ancestry and the ancestries of her blood relatives. As a result, it enters crisis and promotes a series of reinterpretations, reconstructions, and historical reconciliations. Among these series of examinations, perhaps the most striking is reconciliation. However, it is worth highlighting that reconciling with the past does not mean forgetting it but perceiving it as eternally present.

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