



POWER OVER LIFE: A STUDY ABOUT THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND THEIR DILEMMAS FACING SLAVERY IN THE 19th CENTURY IN ‘*KINDRED*’ BY OCTAVIA BUTLER

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RESUMO: O presente trabalho tem como objetivo trazer a discussão o livro “*Kindred-Laços de Sangue*” da autora americana de ficção científica Octavia Butler. Aqui buscamos analisar a obra sobre a perspectiva de como o poder exerce influência sobre a vida da população escrava. Para essa discussão, faremos uma análise dividida em duas partes. Na primeira utilizaremos a teoria de necropolítica de Achille Mbembe para entendermos de que maneira a narrativa demonstra como a morte é utilizada como ferramenta de controle sobre a vida de certos sujeitos. Posteriormente, buscamos analisar a obra sobre a perspectiva feminina, pois dentro do livro é possível reconhecer o racismo, o preconceito e as barbaridades cometidas ao povo negro no período da escravidão, porém saltam aos nossos olhos que a mulher escrava acaba por vivenciar diversos outros sofrimentos como a exploração sexual e a objetificação do seu corpo. Para alcançar esse objetivo vamos utilizar a teoria de Angela Davis em sua obra ‘Mulheres, Raça e Classe’(1983), obra na qual a autora discorre sobre como a mulher escrava sofria outros tipos de violência, além daquelas já impostas sob a população escravizada. Para a realização desta pesquisa optamos por trabalhar com uma pesquisa qualitativa e com uma pesquisa bibliográfica. Ao lermos a obra *Kindred* buscamos identificar em quais pontos os acontecimentos na obra de ficção tem uma relação com a realidade vivida pelos escravos e

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relacioná-las às teorias dos autores escolhidos. A partir deste trabalho procuramos contribuir com os estudos na área da literatura e da necropolítica.

Palavras-chave: Necropolítica; racismo; exploração sexual; mulher.

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to discuss the book "*Kindred*" by the American science fiction author Octavia Butler. Here we aim to analyze the work from the perspective of how power has influence over the life of the enslaved population. For this discussion, we will make an analysis divided into two parts. In the first one we will use Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics to understand how the narrative demonstrates how death is used as a tool to control the lives of certain subjects. Subsequently, we intend to analyze the work from the female perspective, because within the book it is possible to recognize the racism, prejudice, and barbarities committed against the black people during the slavery period, but we can also notice that the enslaved women end up experiencing several other sufferings such as sexual exploitation and the objectification of her body. To achieve this goal we will use the theory of Angela Davis in her work 'Women, Race, and Class' (1983) in which the author discusses how the enslaved women suffered other types of violence, in addition to those already imposed on the enslaved population. To develop this research we chose to work with qualitative research and bibliographical research. When we read *Kindred*, we tried to identify at which points the events in the work of fiction are connected to the reality lived by the slaves and relate them to the theories of the chosen authors. With this work we aim to contribute to studies in the field of literature and necropolitics.

Keywords: Necropolitics; racism; sexual exploitation; woman.

INTRODUCTION

This article firstly resulted from my participation in the CRENAC(Configurações de Resistência em Narrativas Anglófonas Contemporâneas) research project, where I served as a volunteer scholar during 2019 and 2020. Within the project, several works related to the theme of resistance in literature were studied. One of the subjects studied by the project was related to the study of black authors. And one of these authors was Octavia Butler and her book *Kindred*. After reading and reflecting about the book and the story we had a few

realizations about the subjects discussed in the work. Especially about how the black population suffered in their condition as slaves, but also how enslaved women seemed to suffer even more severe oppressions. With the motivation to learn more about the subject, this article came about as a way to research and explore these reflections.

The book *Kindred*, first published in 1979 in the USA, is a science fiction novel by North American author Octavia Butler, who is known as 'the grand dame of science fiction'. The book tells the story of Dana, an African-American woman living in New York City with her husband Kevin. In the story Dana finds herself being transported through time and space to the city of Maryland in the early nineteenth century, a period still marked by the enslavement of black people in the southern states of the USA. She later discovers that, in these travels, her objective is to save the life of a white boy named Rufus, son of a slave master, who later in the narrative is revealed to be an ancestor of hers, along with a little girl named Alice: born black and free, but who ends up being enslaved in the course of the narrative. Each time Dana returns to the past, she finds herself even more involved with these people, and with the origins of her family, which was marked by various types of violence characteristic of slavery.

Butler's work has a direct connection to the history of the United States in regard to racism. During Dana's travels to the 19th century, we can observe the origins of the racism that later took place in the U.S. And we can also observe the consequences of this racism in the lives of black people in 1979, a period still marked by the racial segregation of the previous years.

This theme becomes even more relevant when we look at the present day. Even after more than forty years of the first publication of the book, the injustices committed against black people persist. In May 2020 the death of a black man named George Floyd took place in the United States. The man was killed by suffocation caused by the inhumane action of a white policeman, who immobilized him by placing his knee on top of his neck cutting off his breathing. In an investigation made by The New York Times they had access to videos that show “officers taking a series of actions that violated the policies of the Minneapolis Police Department and turned fatal, leaving Mr. Floyd unable to breathe, even as he and onlookers called out for help”(THE NEW YORK TIMES, 2020). Situations like this are what drive us to study the origins of this racism and seek some way to contribute to the reflection that may result in a significant reduction in racism and any other form of subjugation among the relations of human society.

With this article we realize that all this violence against the black population was actually a form of extermination found by their sovereigns as we are going to analyze according to Mbembe's(2019) and when we look to the suffering of the women it's clear that that in addition to the suffering already inflicted on the black population, they were also subjected to various other types of torture, as we will see according to Davis (1983). To go deeper in the analyses of the works chosen in the first moment of this article we are going to analyze how black people are subjected to necropolitics, a theory proposed by Achille Mbembe and how this is present in the novel. And in a second moment we are going to analyze the work from a perspective of the female representation in the book, according to the theories of Angela Davis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To do the analysis of this article first we needed to verify what had already been written about the chosen book. Between all the works read we can highlight two of them: The first one is 'Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's "*Kindred*"' by Cristine Levecq (2000). In this article the author makes us reflect on how some events in history are interpreted mainly according to texts. Almost as if we only know history from texts by certain people and almost always these people came from a privileged place, and therefore the history of the one who suffered was almost not cataloged as it should have been. Here the book *Kindred* is analyzed from the perspective of how a fiction book works with events that have actually happened in our history. The second one is called 'A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's "*Kindred*" and Phyllis Alesia Perry's "*Stigmata*"' by Lisa Long (2002). Here the author reflects on how slavery has become something very distant for people living in the 21st century because there are no more people who have lived through that kind of slavery and very few have had contact with those people. But the main reflection is about how rape is treated within the two narratives that the author analyzes. As this violence is seen as a right that slave owners had over their slaves simply because they bought them. We also reflect on how this affects the course of the narratives analyzed.

After all the bibliographical research we reflected on everything read that was related to the book and decided to work with two main themes in this article. The first one is how the power is presented in the book and how it affects the story. To do this analysis we based our ideas in one book that was presented to us in the research project CRENAC. The book

‘Necropolitics’ by author Achille Mbembe was first published in 2018. The book brings the idea of how death is used as a tool to decide which people should live and which should die.

The second main theme that we are going to discuss in this article is related to the sufferings experienced by black women. For this part of the article we chose to work with the book ‘Women, Race and Class’ by Angela Davis, first published in 1981. In this book the author studies how gender prejudice, sexism, racism, and social prejudice exert a power over women's lives. Her analysis starts from the period of slavery, especially the one that took place in the United States.

Besides these two main authors, we also consulted other articles related to the book to have a better understanding of the many other issues dealt in the work. In the article "De-Essentializing Interracial Representations: Black and White Border-Crossings in Spike Lee's "Jungle Fever" and Octavia Butler's "*Kindred*" by Paulin (1997) we were able to better understand the interracial relationships between the characters in *Kindred* and how this affects the events of the story. We also used the article "Necropolítica: estratégia de extermínio do corpo negro" by Pessanha and Nascimento(2015) that despite not dealing directly with the analyzed work, brought us valuable reflections on how necropolitics acts on the black population. And finally, we used an interview written with the author of the analyzed work from 1997, so that we could understand her intention and motivation behind certain points treated in the story of the book.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology chosen for this work was a qualitative research and literature review. We searched for works in the literature that have as their main theme the political issues and also those related to the violence suffered by women, mainly during the slavery period. From these works we sought to analyze how Butler's book is able to represent some of the events suffered by the black population during slavery, especially the violence suffered by women, and relate these ideas to the authors chosen to support the ideas present in this work. We also conducted this study using comparative literature as a basis. According to CARVALHAL (2006) the comparative literature "(...) designates a form of literary investigation that confronts two or more literatures".³ Therefore taking the book *Kindred* and relating it to MBEMEB's (2019) political theory and DAVIS '(1983) social theory of slavery and women

³ Our translation. In the original: “ela designa uma forma de investigação literária que confronta duas ou mais literaturas.”CARVALHAL(2006)

and the other articles chosen to integrate this work, we seek to construct a valuable reflection about these themes.

RESULTS

The field of literature by black authors is quite extensive, although it is not valued as it should be. *Kindred's* own writer, Octavia Butler, is a huge name in this area. She wrote a lot of famous works such as *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Dawn* (1987). Besides her, we can mention other authors who bring black protagonism in their books like Chimamanda Adichie, the writer of *Americanah* (2013) and *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). And also the Brazilian writer Maria Firmino Reis, whose book *Ursula* (1887) also has slavery as a theme. Taking into consideration the importance of this often forgotten part of literature, we chose to work with *Kindred*.(2003)

After all the research and analysis made from the chosen authors and the analyzed work, it was noticed that the issue of violence against the black population has very deep roots and that, in a certain way, it started during the slavery period which, unfortunately, has consequences that last until today. The violence was used in real life and also in Butler's work as a way to massacre black people and reduce their lives as something that is only important if it has a monetary value for the rulers, who are the ones who have power over others. Furthermore, we understand that all this violence is even worse for women, who, because they are females, suffer an extra type of violence, a violence that is particularly linked to their sex. But we will discuss these ideas in a more complex way in the second chapter of this article.

DISCUSSION

1 Necropolitics on the lives of the enslaved characters in *Kindred*

In his work entitled "Necropolitics," the philosopher Achille Mbembe, creates this concept based mainly on Michel Foucault's theories on biopower. The necropolitics itself, or politics of death, according to Mbembe (2019) is when the power appropriates death as a management, deciding how subjects should live, how they should die, and who should die: "To kill or to let live thus constitutes sovereignty's limits", going beyond the appropriation of life. (MBEMBE, 2019, p.77).

In his work Mbembe says that:

The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my life potential and security—this is, I maintain, one of the many imaginary dimensions characteristic of sovereignty in both early and late modernity. (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 83)

In this aspect, when we look at Butler's work we understand the 'other' as being the enslaved black people. This other, in a certain way, is seen as a threat to those who hold sovereignty, in this case the white people. Therefore, it is necessary to exterminate them. Sovereignty in Mbembe (2019) is seen as the power to decide who should die and who should live.

Assuming how sovereignty exerts a control over the death of the other, when we look at Butler's book, we notice that sovereignty is very present in the relationship between black and white people and that the white characters have a false understanding that black people are inferior to them and therefore it makes no difference whether they live or die and this, as Mbembe (2019) explains, is the main characteristic of sovereignty.

In this sense, to give an example of what we have just discussed we brought an excerpt from Butler's book. When Rufus reads a book about the history of slavery he says that it is "the greatest abolitionist bullshit" and in response to his disbelieving attitude toward the facts Dana says: “-You’re reading history, Rufe. Turn a few pages and you’ll find a white man named J. D. B. DeBow claiming that slavery is good because, among other things, it gives poor whites someone to look down on. That’s history.” (BUTLER, 2003, p. 141)

The sovereignty theorized by Mbembe (2019) is also present in Butler's work in the character Dana. When she finds herself inexplicably being taken back to the past and as soon as she realizes herself in the context of slavery, she ends up accepting her role as a slave simply because she is black, placing herself in a position of inferiority before Rufus, whom she later discovers to be her ancestor, along with his father Tom Weyling. These two white male characters are the accurate portrait of sovereignty in the slave state of the nineteenth-century that exercises its power over slaves in any way that suits them.

This is the sovereignty present in the social relations of the narrative. These two characters are aware that in several situations they will be placed in privileged positions in relation to the black people. This is what happens at one moment when Rufus is benefited from the justice. When he is beaten by Alice's husband for trying to rape her, and realize that Alice and her enslaved husband have run away, he says: “He’s run away, and Alice is with him, helping him to escape. Or at least, that’s the way the Judge will see it.”(BUTLER, 2003,

p. 124). When Dana asks what will happen to Alice, Rufus suggests that she will be enslaved. Here we notice that the sovereignty exercised by Rufus, who, being a white man, understands that his opinion will be prioritized over the opinions of black people because of his race. Another example of this is Alice, who despite being born in freedom, is easily led to slavery.

We understand then that this part of the narrative is a portrait of the sovereignty of white people over black people. And this inferiorization towards the black people, or even better, this superiority of both the masters and any white person is a clear example that in almost every situation they will be put to advantage. In the end it didn't matter if Alice's husband, Isaac, was defending Alice from rape, Rufus knew that the judge would see things in a different way, in a way that would depreciated the black people. And this behavior is repeated even when the authorities are not involved, as on Rufus' father's farm.

An example of this is that Rufus' father, Tom Weiylin, does not pay any doctor for the injured slaves, injuries that are mostly caused by Tom himself (p. 148), evidencing his total disregard for the slave's life: the let die or live described by Mbembe (2019).

In his work *Necropolitics*(2019), Mbembe uses as the basis of his theory Foucault's studies on biopower. About this he says:

Biopower, in Foucault's work, appears to function by dividing people into those who must live and those who must die. As it proceeds on the basis of a split between the living and the dead, such power defines itself in relation to the biological field—of which it takes control and in which it invests itself. This control presupposes a distribution of human species into groups, a subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establish-ment of a biological caesura between these subgroups. Foucault refers to this using the seemingly familiar term “racism.” That race (or indeed racism) figures so prominently in the calculus of biopower is easy to understand. After all, racial thinking more than class thinking (where class is an operator defining history as an economic struggle between classes) has been the ever-present shadow hovering over Western political thought and practice, especially when the point was to contrive the inhumanity of foreign peoples and the sort of domination to be exercised over them. (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 82)

“Indeed, in Foucault's terms, racism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of bio-power, ‘that old sovereign right to kill.’” (MBEMBE, 2019,p.82). Based on this, we can understand that biopower is built on the relationship of control that the sovereign has over this part of the population: black people, who are seen as a group whose life does not have the same value as the other group in question: white people. In the case of the work analyzed in this paper, this subjugated group is made up of slaves. The biopower ends up choosing those who must die using race as a criterion.

One of the ways of maintaining dominion over the other, in this relationship of control, is the fact that sovereigns use violence as a way to reaffirm their power. In this sense, it is worth mentioning an important point in Mbembe's work, which states that "As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, the slave has a value. The slave's labor is needed and used."(p. 86). In this sense, the black man was used as a product for the growth of capitalism in the colonies. Thus, either these bodies produced wealth for their masters or they ended up being tortured to death. As Pessanha and Nascimento (2015) state in the article "Necropolítica: estratégia de extermínio do corpo negro", biopower controls society, from the moment it is related to the individual, especially the slave, this is modified, the power assumes a disciplinary characteristic, that is, disciplinary power aims to control the individual, to make the slave an obedient, useful, and disciplined being. For these two authors, such power has three components: fear, judgment, and destruction, components that were fundamental to the domination of slaves in the 19th century.

In *Kindred* it is possible to clearly recognize the imposition of suffering on the slave in order to extract the maximum productivity from the work. At one point in the book, Rufus puts Dana to work in the fields, a place she had never worked before and was aware that the work there was much heavier, as she states in the narrative: "and I'm doing better than the field hands" (p.84), by sheer whim of Rufus, in a cruel and uncontrolled way. While working in the fields, Dana is whipped several times by the foreman, to make her work faster and faster. In other words, violence is a way of extracting the maximum from the slave.

The violent tenor of the slave's life is manifested through the overseer's disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner, as well as in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave's body. Violence, here, becomes an element in manners, like whipping, or taking the slave's life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror.(MBEMBE, 2019, p. 86)

Another example of this violence that is present in the book is a scene where Dana says that slaves were forced to watch the whippings of other slaves as a way to keep them warned of what might happen if they did not keep in a submissive behavior demanded by their masters. We can see here the application of the fear component theorized by Pessanha and Nascimento (2015). Also when Dana is beaten by Rufus' mother and thinks: "Only my memory of the whip kept me still." (BUTLER, 2003, p. 94), which demonstrates not only the physical, but also the psychological domination to which the slaves were subjected to. An absolute domination over the slave's life.

In his work *Necropolitics*, Mbembe speaks of slavery as being "one of the first manifestations of biopolitical experimentation." He argues that:

the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether). To be sure, as a political-juridical structure, the plantation is a space where the slave belongs to a master. It is not a community if only because a community, by definition, implies the exercise of the power of speech and thought. (MBEMBE, 2019, pp. 85 e 86)

This triple loss of which Mbembe speaks is portrayed in Butler's work. At the moment that the slaves have the loss of a "home," this loss can refer both to the issue of the slaves being taken away from their homeland as well as the fact that they do not even have a decent home. The character Dana comments on the living conditions of the slaves who work in the fields by saying: "Their pallets are on the ground. Their cabins don't even have floors, and most of them are full of fleas." (p. 84); besides this loss, the work also portrays the loss of the "right to their body" as we have already mentioned about the demand for extreme labor and punishment; and the last loss, the loss of "political status" was already analyzed in the legal issue involving Rufus, in which Alice was easily led into slavery. This demonstrates that slaves have no rights before the law. All this highlights the presence of "absolute domination" in Butler's book.

Therefore, it is possible to notice that besides all the privations that the slaves were subjected to, there is still the present threat of death, the existence of the reality that their life was not worthy of existing. Their value in society was directly related to the production of wealth for the sovereign.

It is also important to mention that all this "terror" directed at black people is a way to concentrate power in the hands of a few privileged groups that perceive themselves as superior. And this power has been modified over the years, industrialized, becoming more "technological", and being applied to other minority groups that were also subjected to necropolitics, for example, according to Mbembe:

World War II shapes up as an extension of methods previously reserved for the "savages" to the "civilized" peoples of Europe. That the technologies which produced Nazism originated in the plantation or in the colony, or that—Foucault's thesis—Nazism and Stalinism actually only amplified a series of already extant mechanisms of Western European social and political formations (subjugation of the body, health regulations, social Darwinism, eugenics, medicolegal theories on heredity, degeneration, and race). (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 87)

What Mbembe (2019) discusses in the excerpt above is aligned with the reflections of the American writer. This is what becomes clear in an interview given to Charles H. Rowell, Octavia Butler says: "We don't really learn from history, because from our generation to the next we tend to reproduce our errors. There are cycles in history" (p. 56).

In this way, Octavia Butler represents in her work these cycles that occur in history. It is possible to see a reflection of this in the narrative at a moment when Dana returns to her home in 1979 and searches for all the information she can about the period of slavery, hoping that this will help her somehow survive that period. She ends up coming across a book about the second World War II:

Then, somehow, I got caught up in one of Kevin's World War II books—a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors. Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred. (BUTLER, 2003, pp. 117-118)

Necropolitics, then, is a phenomenon that tends to repeat itself in history, denying rights to certain peoples and placing them in the condition of beings that must be exterminated, because of a false belief that they represent a threat to society in general. And in making this relationship with World War II, Butler shows us that the power, terror, fear, violence, judgment, have long been in social relations throughout history and have been repeated, we just do not pay attention to it.

2. The power over the enslaved woman's life: an extra touch of terror

Considering what was discussed in the first moment of this work we understand that slavery is a clear example of the practice of necropolitics, proposed by Mbembe (2019), and how this politics of death is shown in the book *Kindred*. However, within Butler's work it is possible to deepen our analysis about the power over life, from the point of view of how sovereignty is presented with more terror when it comes to the representation of female characters in the book. Besides the evils that are peculiar to slavery, women also suffered other types of torture and privations that were exclusive to them.

Based on the studies of the philosopher Angela Davis in her book 'Women, Race, and Class' (1983) we will analyze how the female characters in *Kindred* are subjected to various sufferings inherent to slavery and even more severe due to the fact that they are female.

Dana, the main character, is a black woman who finds herself facing a reality of slavery and when she is transported back in time to the home of her ancestors, her experiences and dilemmas with slavery are very different from a male slave.

In her book, Davis points out that slave women were not seen as inferior or more fragile than men when it came to manual labor. This implies that in relation to work, especially related to the plantations, women did not have their work facilitated because of their sex. The author says that the slavery system had the black man as property and since women were seen, no less than men, as profitable labor units for the owners, they could be genderless and “It would seem, therefore, that the starting point for any exploration of Black women’s lives under slavery would be an appraisal of their role as workers.” (DAVIS, 1983, p. 9)

In the book *Kindred* Dana says that she knew her job was much easier than the work of people who worked in the fields, and when she is forced to work in the plantations, it is evident how much this character is forced to the extreme of her physical strength. Also in this moment, the narrative makes clear that the work is a way to punish the slave, because Dana is sent there for "supposedly" letting Rufus' father die.

Dana is forced to work as hard as she can, and is punished even when she tries her hardest, as is shown in the following excerpt from the narrative:

”Get up!” he said.
I couldn’t. I didn’t think anything could make me get up just then—until I saw Fowler raising his whip again.
Somehow, I got up.(BUTLER, 2003, p.212)

In this scene from the book, it is possible to see how the exploitation of enslaved women was extremely severe. And Dana does not have at any moment her work facilitated because she is a woman, or even because she is new to plantation work. About this aspect, Angela Davis asserts that: “Where work was concerned, strength and productivity under the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. In this sense, the oppression of women was identical to the oppression of men.” (DAVIS, 1983, p. 10)

In the book, after being whipped by one of the foremen, Dana makes the following reflection: “Even Tom Weylin hadn’t hit slave women that way” (BUTLER, 2003, p. 212). From this thought of the character, it is noticeable that in her belief the foreman is acting with an exacerbated violence surpassing even Rufus' father, Tom Weylin. Later in the narrative, her

forced labor continues: “He did that all day. Coming up suddenly, shouting at me, ordering me to go faster no matter how fast I went, cursing me, threatening me.”(BUTLER, 2003, p. 213)

However, looking from the point of view of women, slavery had several nuances that affected them in a deeper and more violent way. One of the points addressed by Davis (1983) is the view of women as a reproducer. The author comments that after the abolition of the international slave trade, slave owners began to rely on natural reproduction as one of the options to increase the number of slaves. According to Davis (1983) after this ban “Black women came to be increasingly appraised for their fertility (or for the lack of it): she who was potentially the mother of ten, twelve, fourteen or more became a coveted treasure indeed.” (DAVIS, 1983, pp. 09-10)

When we analyze Butler's narrative as a whole we recognize this need to increase the number of slaves through reproduction. This appreciation was recognized even by the slaves. In one of the scenes, a slave tells to Dana after the birth of his son: “Cause of Carrie and me, he’s one nigger richer.” (BUTLER, 2003, p. 162) In another scene in the narrative, the character Tom Weylin, Rufus' father, asks Dana how many children she has had, when Dana replies that she hasn't had any he comments: “You must be barren then.” (BUTLER, 2003, p. 91).A few moments later Tom tells Dana that he could buy her from her current master, who was actually her white husband, Kevin, who ended up traveling with her to the past when he grabbed her arm as she was transported back in time, demonstrating that the ease of reproduction of a slave was an important point to consider before buying her.

In another moment of the narrative, when Dana and her husband Kevin return together to the year 1979 and watch TV, Kevin asks Dana to turn off the TV because the prenatal care advertisement reminds him of when he himself witnessed the birth of a slave girl.

“I saw a woman die in childbirth once,” he said.(...)

“No, medical care had nothing to do with the case I saw. This woman’s master strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her—dropped onto the ground.”

(...)

Would Weylin have done such a thing to one of his pregnant slave women, I wondered. Probably not. He had more business sense than that. Dead mother, dead baby—dead loss.(BUTLER, 2003, p. 192).

Dana's reflection shows that when it comes to the slaves, losses and gains were a very important point to be considered, especially when it comes to the slaves' lives. However, it is still perceived in this scene that the slave owner, to whom Kevin was referring to, was not taking into account the losses he would have and cared even less about the life of the woman

and the baby, this being another example of necropolitics, since both the mother and the baby were considered disposable, and therefore the violence happened against them.

On those plantations and farms where pregnant women were dealt with more leniently, it was seldom on humanitarian grounds. It was simply that slaveholders appreciated the value of a slave child born alive in the same way that they appreciated the value of a newborn calf or colt. (DAVIS, 1983, p. 13)

Davis (1983) comments on how women were viewed: “They were “breeders”—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (DAVIS, 1983, p.11). However, although reproduction was highly valued, female slaves did not have any rights over their children, which could be separated and sold according to the slave owner's desire, as Davis asserts:

“Since slave women were classified as “breeders” as opposed to “mothers,” their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows. One year after the importation of Africans was halted, a South Carolina court ruled that female slaves had no legal claims whatever on their children. (DAVIS, 1983, p.11)

Sarah, a character who works in the kitchen of the house, is the representation of this dilemma. She tells Dana that Mr. Weylin had sold his three eldest children simply to have more money to buy expensive objects that his wife wanted. The slave owner's act demonstrates how the slaves were separated without any concern for family ties.

Another character who faces the reality of having her children sold is Alice, Dana's ancestor. When, in one of her trips to the farm, Dana realizes that Alice committed suicide, she later discovers that this act was motivated by the fact that Rufus had made her believe that her children had been sold. In addition, Dana still remembers a woman who was bought by Weylin and she reflects about the exploitative relationship her former owner had with her: “She had a baby nearly every year, that woman. Nine so far, seven surviving. Weylin called her a good breeder, and he never whipped her. He was selling off her children, though, one by one.” (BUTLER, 2003, p.192)

Within Davis' work (1983) one of the most important points that is portrayed in Butler's work is the sexual exploitation of female slaves by masters and other men who were part of the slave system, such as the foremen, for example.

But women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expediency governed the slaveholders' posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as

genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles. (DAVIS, 1983, p.10)

Here it is evident that in addition to forced labor, rape was also part of the the slaves' reality:

Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash. Excessive sex urges, whether they existed among individual white men or not, had nothing to do with this virtual institutionalization of rape. Sexual coercion was, rather, an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave. In other words, the right claimed by slaveowners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over Black people as a whole. The license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery. (DAVIS, 1983, p.182)

Davis (1983) argues that sexual abuse was seen as a right that the white man had over female slaves, not only the slave master, but also other men who participated in slavery in other ways. In Butler's narrative we see this when Dana goes to Maryland together with her white husband Kevin. They do not need to hide their intimate relationship, since others think it is a relationship between a master and his slave. This relationship, in the view of the other people in the house, slave or not, is based on this idea of slaves being subservient to their masters, having an "obligation" to accept their sexual advances.

In an article about interracial relationships in *Kindred*, Diana Paulin (1997) analyzes Dana and Kevin's relationship when they are transported to that time, as follows:

She(Dana) learns to accept the fact that she is still a “nigger” and Kevin is still white. At one point, she feels embarrassed by her apparent willingness to play her subservient role with Kevin because it is a right guaranteed to White men{...}Dana feels that things fall into the master/slave (dominator/dominates) order of things much too conveniently for her and Kevin. The inherent hierarchy of power disrupts her sense of self-empowerment and control. Dana recognizes that although Kevin may have had a difficult time during the five years that he was trapped in the past, “{h}is White skin had saved him from much of the trouble that {she} had faced. (PAULIN, 1997, p. 187)

Power relations are much more imposing on black women. Regardless of the context, be it fictional or real, it is clear that the black female body is the stage on which slave owners lay their lewdness. According to Davis, rape itself was a way for slave masters to reaffirm their power of domination over women.

If Black women had achieved a sense of their own strength and a strong urge to resist, then violent sexual assaults—so the slaveholders might have reasoned—would remind the women of their essential and inalterable femaleness. In

the male supremacist vision of the period, this meant passivity, acquiescence and weakness. (DAVIS, 1983, p.28)

In Rufus and Alice's relationship, after she has been sold into slavery, rape is a constant violence and it is through this violence that Dana's ancestor is born. About the relationship of these two characters Paulin (1997) asserts that:

Rufus's desire for Alice, a black woman, is more about his lack of power and his need to assert his manhood than love. His acceptance and fear of the white-imposed stereotype of black men as untamed animals is evident when he calls Alice's husband a "buck nigger", which also suggests that his desire for Alice may stem from stereotypes about black women. {...} Rufus cannot accept Alice's desire to make her own decisions because this privilege would undermine his power and would challenge his belief that she is powerless and in need of his support and control. (PAULIN, 1997, P. 186)

During the narrative we notice more and more this extreme desire of Rufus to possess Alice. This desire for domination is the result of the false belief that Alice, being a black woman, and therefore inferior, whom he "loved", she was obliged to submit to Rufus' desires, and when Alice refuses to lie with him, Rufus asks Dana to convince her by saying: "You talk to her—talk some sense into her—or you're going to watch while Jake Edwards beats some sense into her!" (BUTLER, 2003, p.164). In this sentence, it is clear that Rufus' believes that, since Alice is now his slave, it is her duty to give in to his advances, otherwise she will be flogged in the same way as a slave would be for refusing to work in the fields, for example.

At the end of the narrative, Rufus implies that he will rape Dana, and she decides to kill him. This act reflects what Davis (1983) theorizes in her book: that rape is intrinsic to slavery. That is, in the narrative, Dana, despite having accepted the condition of being a slave while she was at that time, working and being submissive to the whites, did not accept the possibility of rape as a form of enslavement. After this event Rufus would have total control over her, but Dana refuses to let this happen.

Indeed the book *Kindred* is full of violence and prejudice. The book shows us in a more visceral way how the slavery worked. And even though the slavery is something that we discuss a lot about in the modern day, we are really far away from really knowing what kinds of terror these people suffered. After all the research made in this article we realize that everything that we know about the period of history is extremely small compared with everything that really happened and also how this period shaped the world that we live in today. With Butler's book we can reflect about the history of black people and also be more

conscious about the privileges of certain groups of people and how these privileges sometimes emerged through the suffering of other groups of people.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is common, when picking up a book and reading it and being inserted into such an environment, to feel the same anguish and suffering as the character. In *Kindred* is no different. As we are taken with Dana to the 19th century, we feel the several situations experienced by her, such as torture and pain. *Kindred* is not only a science fiction book that creates a dystopian future far from our reality. *Kindred* is the reality of the history of a people that went through situations that can only be imagined by the reader. The book is a bridge to other reflections, such as those that have been presented in this article: the approach to black women and the different forms of violence to which they have been submitted, whether sexual or psychological, according to Angela Davis' theory of black women and slaves, as well as the the concept of necropolitics by Achille Mbembe.

At the end of the book, when returns home from her last trip to the past, she ends up losing an arm, because while making her journey between the two centuries, Rufus grabs her leaving her arm pinned to the wall, which eventually results in its amputation. This event can be a representation that everything that the black people went through still leave marks on their descendants today, either in the many forms of racism suffered by black people or even by the exacerbated violence directed at people of this race.

The author herself seems to have experienced racism in her social relations throughout her life. As perceived in the title page of one edition of the book *Kindred* from 2017 she says "I started writing about power, because it was something I had very little of"⁴. We know that power is concentrated in the hands of a privileged few and we perceive how Octavia Butler used writing as a form of resistance to overcome the limits placed on her as a black woman, a resistance that should always inspire us to fight against the injustices that surround minority groups.

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⁴ Our translation. In the original: "Comecei a escrever sobre poder porque era algo que eu tinha muito pouco."

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