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Adapting Kindred

by Ben Girving

Kindred by Octavia E. Butler is an afro-futurist historical fiction book. The main character, Dana, is a black woman living in Los Angeles in 1976. Over the course of a few months in 1976, Dana is miraculously transported back in time to Maryland multiple times over the course of nearly 20 years in the 19th century. The book details her experiences as a black woman in the Antebellum South and her desperate mission to save her own existence. Dana's mission is dependent on the son of a slave owner in Maryland named Rufus Weylin. Throughout the book, Dana is summoned to the past when Rufus' life is in danger. She is only returned to her time when her life is put in danger. During her multiple trips to the past, she gets to know Rufus. Being complicit in the enslavement of human beings, Rufus's personality is fraught with flaws and evils. Though Dana comes to disdain Rufus, she must protect him from peril because she discovers he is her ancestor, and her birth is reliant on his survival.

This story is one of the most well-known of the afro-futurist genre. Afro-futurism is a brand of art combining African American cultural themes with the science fiction genre, a genre dominated by white authors for its entire existence. A core element of afro-futurism is the examination of African American persecution through the lens of fantasy and futurism and the contemplation of the African diaspora in the context of science fiction. The aesthetic also focuses on the reclamation of traditional African culture through art. The style of afro-futurism traverses many art forms, from literature to music to visual art. The proliferation of works like Butler's represents a massive shift in popular culture to highlight black voices.

Published for the first time in 1979, *Kindred* came onto a literary stage not very accustomed to the afro-futurist genre. A mere 15 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the subject matter of the book and the vividness with which Butler described it was revolutionary. Conservative reactions to books like Butler's were extremely hostile. Despite this environment, the book would gradually gain popularity in the genre of afro-futurism, and beyond. By the 1990s, *Kindred* was a mainstay of the growing afro-futurist movement, receiving Rochester's Book of the Year award in 2003.

In 2022, "Kindred" was taken from the page to the screen, in a science fiction show on FX and Hulu of the same name. This rendition was met with a mixed response, but mostly one of criticism for its unfaithfulness to the book. Accurately converting a literary narrative into a show is a difficult task. The main reason for this is that books like *Kindred* tend to have a slow pace and are very detailed. A balance must be struck between making the most

accessible and entertaining story possible for the given medium versus continuity between the book and the film. Because it is impossible to film and produce every scene in a book, reductions must be made. It is the responsibility of the writer of the show to decide which elements should be removed, and which must be preserved. If I were tasked with such a responsibility, I would retain two primary features of Butler's book.

The first is the nature of the transition from present to past and vice versa. Butler shows this the first time Dana is taken to the past in the chapter, "The River."

"I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, 'What happened?'

I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. 'Something is wrong with me,' I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

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!" (13)

Butler takes a vague and abrupt approach, not thoroughly describing the mechanism of how Dana is transported back in time. When reading this excerpt, Butler's method brings to my mind a more fairy tale kind of time travel, rather than the more common science fiction variety. I believe that a film adaptation of *Kindred* should take a similar approach. Showing a vague portrayal of time travel not only mitigates the risk of it being perceived as cheesy, but also leaves more creative interpretation to the viewer.

When depicting this scene in my hypothetical live-action production, I would begin in an identical way. Dana and Rufus unpack their belongings as in the book. Suddenly, arresting their labor, Dana stumbles and must catch herself. "What's the matter," Kevin asks. Dana looks up, light in the head, "I don't know. I-" She crumples to the floor. The room blurs, her vision watery. A lonely ring fills her ears, accompanied only by a low constant whoosh, almost like the inside of a seashell. Her vision fades to black. The rocks are cold. She opens her eyes to a pale blue sky. A ring of trees fills the perimeter of her skyward gaze. An aroma of decomposing duff fills her nose. She rolls over onto her side, attempting to gain her bearings. Only then does she notice the sound of a rushing river, accompanied by the violent thrashing sound of a child. A red-haired child.

The second narrative aspect that I think must be translated into the show is Dana and Rufus' dynamic. Despite Rufus' negative qualities, he and Dana have an amicable relationship. On account of her being from the future, Rufus has a reverential perspective of Dana, and relies on her for counsel. "But I would help him (Rufus) as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come." (68)

In this passage, Dana realizes the fortuity of her position. This influence she holds over Rufus, and her desire to utilize it are integral to the story and must be portrayed as such in a live action adaptation. Dana, due to her connection to Rufus beginning when he was a child, is also a kind of mother figure to Rufus. Margaret Weylin, Rufus' mother is an evil, even deranged woman. As Rufus ages, Dana provides comfort to him in the absence of a warm maternal figure. Despite whatever warm feelings shared between the two, Dana and Rufus' relationship is also one of reluctant dependence. In the following passage, Rufus has been severely beaten and immobilized, and Dana is the only person around for miles. She is his only hope. "Dana? Come back here! Dana! I could hear his increasing desperation. He was hurt and alone except for me. He couldn't even get up, and I seemed to be abandoning him. I wanted him to experience a little of that fear." (122)

Dana does not love Rufus in any conventional way, but is forced to see what little goodness he may possess so as to quell her morally inspired hesitations. She knows that she must protect and aid him for the sake of her own conception. In turn, Rufus is dependent on Dana, not only in this passage, but throughout the whole book. Rufus knows on a less than conscious level

that Dana's purpose in his time is to protect him from harm. This being the case, he fears alienating or endangering her. Though this dynamic between Rufus and Dana is a complex one, it is imperative that the writers of a film adaptation of *Kindred* take all measures at their disposal to convey it.

The intricacies of the book *Kindred* make it arduous to bring to the screen. However, with tedious consideration, an accurate, entertaining story can be obtained. The transitions between times in the book are a delicate element. If portrayed correctly, they can act as seamless journeys between worlds. If communicated poorly, they have the potential to appear out of place and spoil the story in its entirety. The second narrative segment that is integral to an appropriate translation is Rufus and Dana's relationship. Dana's goal to make it home alive is acutely related to her protection of Rufus, however reluctant.

A testament to the normalization of afro-futurism is the production of *Kindred* as a television show in 2022. Large television networks like FX would not fund a project like *Kindred* if they did not think it had a sufficient viewer base. Beginning as a daring book that broke boundaries for its depiction of racial violence, *Kindred* and other afro-futurist stories have risen to the view of popular culture. However, the popularization of this book came with

some answer to these horrible charges that are made against you. If you tell me that they are absolutely untrue from beginning to end, I shall believe you” (198-199). Dorian responds by instead finally showing Basil the portrait he had painted so many years ago, now warped by many years of Dorian corrupting his soul. Basil recognizes his work and is forced to come to terms with the fact that not only are the rumors he has heard of Dorian true, but Dorian has done much worse.

Dorian, Sibyl, and Basil are all inevitably disappointed by the people they had worshiped, but for very different reasons, and the consequences of that disappointment are felt very differently. One form of love that Fromm writes about is what he refers to as a psychic symbiotic union, something he labels as “immature”. He describes it as one person idolizing the other one, and wanting to become a part of their life to escape aloneness, while the other person seeks to escape aloneness by controlling and incorporating the former into their own life. They are dependent on each other, and play opposite roles, one being passive and the other active. Fromm clarifies that, “This is a considerable difference in a realistic sense; in a deeper emotional sense, the difference is not so great as that which they both have in common: fusion without integrity” (20). Sibyl, Dorian, and Basil are involved in dynamics that bear a resemblance to this model, but their deviations from it are also notable.

Sibyl and Dorian both idolize each other. The way Sibyl does so is more in line with what Fromm describes. Fromm points to the passive party as someone who “... escapes from the unbearable feeling of isolation and separateness by making himself part and parcel of another person who directs him, guides him, protects him; who is his life and oxygen, as it were.” (19) This statement describes fairly well how Sibyl seems to feel about Dorian. She doesn't understand why he loves her, as she sees herself as less than him, but she knows he makes her happy. Dorian, on the other hand, idolizes Sibyl, but is not at all dependent on her. He does say she is everything to him, but this view is because of her art, not what she means to him as a person he has entered into a relationship with. Still, they both admire each other to an unhealthy degree, and so they are both disappointed by the reality of the other. Dorian is furious, but after seeing the resulting change in the portrait, determines to apologize to Sibyl. Later that day, however, he finds out that Sibyl Vane has killed herself. With the help of Harry, he is able to move on remarkably quickly, and is back to almost his usual self when Basil visits the next day. Sibyl was unable to move on, as she was so completely dependent on Dorian, but Dorian, realizing that he never truly loved her in the first place, did not have the same problem.

Basil is, very similarly to Sibyl, consumed by Dorian's existence. Dorian adored Sibyl for her art, but not for herself, while Basil's worship for Dorian as a person is what leads to his artistic admiration. Dorian, as Basil acknowledges, does not have such strong and lasting feelings for Basil. Despite his disinterest in the pedestal Basil has put him on, however, Dorian is aware of Basil's complicated feelings. As Basil reluctantly explains, “Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that

unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an exquisite dream. I worshiped you, I grew jealous of everyone to whom you spoke. I wanted to have you all to myself. I was only happy when I was with you. When you were away from me you were still present in my art” (149). Basil’s feelings fit very well into the passive side of the symbiotic union. The difference is that Dorian is not taking an active role in the relationship, at least not to a degree that matches Basil’s obsession. When Basil finds out the truth about Dorian, he is heartbroken, and desperately tries to convince Dorian to pray and atone for what he has done, because he believes that Dorian can’t be too far gone. For Dorian, the destruction of his relationship with Basil is not so earth shattering.

He does not depend on Basil the way Basil depends on him, so what this interaction brings out in him is just irrational hatred towards the creator of that cursed portrait. Impulsively, he kills Basil, and although he manages to cover it up and act normal for a while, he is haunted by that act for the rest of his life.

Erich Fromm writes a lot about different kinds of unhealthy and false love, which can arise for many different reasons. There are many such forms of love that can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, one of which is most clearly on display in the story of a man who appears perfect. Dorian is beautiful, pure, and innocent. He ruins many of the people he is closest with, but is still worshiped by the people who love him. Basil and Sibyl, although they are very different people who meet and interact with Dorian in very different circumstances, both fit the example of what Fromm describes as submission. Dorian, despite enjoying control and thinking highly of himself, does not fit the actively dominating role that Fromm outlines, as he doesn’t care enough about most people besides himself. Dorian’s role means that these relationships, while they follow a similar path, are nonetheless decidedly different from each other. Dorian, Basil, and Sibyl, as well as other characters in the book, relate to many of Fromm’s points in *Art of Loving* in an interesting way, showing especially in the case of idolatry how different relationships can be, even when they fall into the same patterns.