

Feminist Murder in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and late 20th Century Speculative Fiction

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Abstract:

Narrative requires conflict. In many genres, a violent confrontation marks the turning point, and conflict is resolved with a triumph of masculinity expressed as military prowess. The Epic established this plot arc for Western narrative and survives as the source genre for many popular modern narrative forms. Force-derived victory remains as a primary denouement in male-authored or masculinist plots. The virtuous masculine protagonist who kills a stigmatized opponent for ethical reasons features prominently in narratives ranging from Marvel comics and films, to space war franchises, to cop shows. This narrative formula holds true for speculative fiction genres: murders that occur in defense of an individual male life or the human species are depicted as justifiable and the killer as an empathetic or identifiable character. However, the two authors I will address are female and feminist. Their speculative fictions share a common plot thread that the violent conflict is not among antagonistic strangers or rival groups but between a woman and her partner or other close community member. The question that I will address today: how do these speculative authors, Octavia Butler and Sherri Tepper develop their narrative arcs, so that their murderous female protagonists might be perceived as heroic in the same way as their male counterparts? And, how does the gender and age of the reader shape reader response?

As a fellow at the Huntington Library archives, I was fortunate to gain access to the unpublished drafts of Octavia Butler's novels. I was so enthusiastic in talking about this experience that a couple of my non-academic friends decided to read *Kindred* (1979). This speculative novel depicts a black woman from 1976 who is pulled back in time on several occasions to an ante bellum plantation. She time travels to save the life of a white slave owner who is her own distant ancestor. Dana seeks to use her time travel sojourns to educate her ancestor Rufus about race relations and bigotry, and becomes wary friends with her forefather. In the final chapter of the novel, she murders him to avoid being raped. One of my friends surprised me by claiming that the ending had ruined the reading experience for him, because he thought Dana was too hasty in killing Rufus. This offhand comment spurred me to think about how Butler's representation of partner murder fits into a topic I had worked on previously: how the feminist science fiction of the late 20th century engaged with the cultural discourses of gender, partner violence and self defense that were in circulation in the 70s and 80s.