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Race, Ideology, and *Kindred*

Claire Woodard

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It is strange—perhaps impossible—to envision a world devoid of ideological influence. Ideology is simply everywhere, employed by both institutional structures and individuals in the name of societal order and ideals. Though often promoted as indisputable realities, to suggest that any given ideology is equivalent to truth would be completely misguided. They are paired with such intense enforcement for this reason, unable to exist without interpellated subjects and powerful structures upholding them. The lack of tangible evidence that tends to define an ideology leaves them susceptible to scrutiny, solidifying their equivalency to mere representations of humans' relationship to the actual conditions of life. Considering this notion when situating race as an ideology, it becomes clear how arbitrary many of the narratives dominating policy implementation and conceptualizations of race are.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* exemplifies race not only as an ideological construct, prone to destabilization, but also how the institution of slavery weaponized it in order to concretize white supremacist attitudes and spout its depraved agenda as the way things should be. Specifically, I argue that *Kindred*'s rendering of race directly contextualizes it as an ideology and is consistent with Louis Althusser's

argumentation that ideologies are inadequate in wholly signifying truth. Butler demonstrates this by depicting a complication of the characters' racial perceptions and prejudices, the plain unfoundedness of these classifications, and the severe methods required in preserving slavery's status as a supposed necessity. I will use Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* and Barbara Fields's "Slavery Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," to emphasize my claims, keeping their focal arguments in conversation with the textual evidence. Overall, my paper aims to communicate the urgency of questioning the powerful ideologies that govern us, leading to more inclusive and desirable societal conditions.

Before commencing my discussion on *Kindred*, I will provide a brief summary of Althusser and Fields's main arguments, hopefully elucidating their relevancy and utility when exploring ideological presence in the literature. Althusser's concern primarily lies in the inherent nature of ideologies, describing them as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions," insinuating that a single ideology is incapable of encompassing absolute truth (Althusser 450). This does not negate the immense weight they possess—regardless of being similarly categorized as facades and easily critiqued, they are inescapable, with established authority in our lives before we are even born. Furthermore, they are only able to exist "by the subject and for the subjects," insinuating the crucial role people and systematic enterprises—like ISA's and RSA's—have in ensuring their continued dominance by

means of violent indoctrination (Althusser 455). Matters of race particularly become intriguing, albeit disturbing, when considered ideologically. This is exactly what Fields profoundly does in her essay, expanding upon and putting into practice Althusser's declarations.

Through her identification of race as an ideology, Fields troubles the assumption of race being a result of the observed physical differences of people, framing it instead as having intentionally arisen from a historical context in which the justification and implementation of enslavement was pursued. As she declares, "ideologies are real, but it does not follow that they are scientifically accurate, or that they provide an analysis of social relations that would make sense to anyone who does not take part in those social relations" (Fields 110). Consequently, the narratives and categorizations dominating racial discourse are not rooted in any incontestable facts—racial ideology and its many components are manmade, generated in the name of promoting specific schemas and policies. Butler exhibits how institutional slavery embedded within itself, under the guise of truth, tenets like these to achieve legitimization. However, her novel reflects how shakable these notions are, leading characters to question not only the legitimacy of slavery, but their own perceptions of race as well; her framing of race suggests that it is ideological in nature, supporting both Althusser and Fields's theses, principally through her ability to concurrently accentuate the ideology's immense sway and insecurity.

Kindred is centered around Dana and Rufus's complicated yet undeniable kinship, inciting in Rufus especially reconsiderations of race and what qualifies a person as Black. Equating Blackness with specific traits that transcend a purely a physical basis, he finds these assumptions completely problematized through Dana. She embodies everything he has only ever, up until this moment, associated exclusively with whiteness. Upon first meeting and conversing with her, he is completely taken aback by how blatantly her manner contrasts with the other Black people in his life, all of which are slaves or are essentially treated as such regardless of freed status. He remarks, "You don't talk or dress right or act right. You don't even seem like a runaway," meaning she does not act congruent to the slavery-induced characteristics Black people at this time have been assigned (Butler 25). Of course, this is largely attributed to the time period she is coming from; Black people are no longer enslaved, having greater access to educational opportunities and other necessitous resources that were previously reserved for white people. It is baffling for Rufus to witness—Dana's manifestation is in many ways the antithesis of what racial ideology and slavery have taught him about Blackness and the limitations that have been put on its expression. She represents a United States rid of slavery, where Black people are legally permitted to strive for and outwardly present the same things as whites, and this is entirely inconceivable for him up until now. As their relationship deepens, this confusion only grows stronger, despite her attempts to undo much of the learning racial

ideology has instilled in him. Enslavement and Black identity, for the most part, remains completely equated for him, and because she does not exhibit the traits expected of slaves, her Blackness comes into question at several points in the story.

As mentioned before, Rufus's conceptions of Blackness are only troubled as his kinship with Dana comes to further fruition; strangely, his views towards her grow more dehumanizing as his love for her intensifies. Interestingly enough, it is not the circumstances of their meeting and her ability to travel through time, reaching him only at the direst of times, that is the most inexplicable to him. Even with this in mind, he cannot wrap his head around her behavior as a Black individual, constantly comparing her to white people and questioning her identity. Her manner of speech, intellectuality, and unflinching stances are features of being he has only ever associated with whiteness. In their final confrontation, Rufus shares with her, "Daddy always thought you were dangerous because you knew too many white ways, but you were black," emphasizing the anxiety her existence alone stimulates in white slaveholders and the explicit belief that there are 'white' ways, and there are 'black' ways of being (Butler 262). This statement exemplifies race as an ideology through its implication that supposed differing races have inherently dissimilar attributes, directly actualized via the institution of slavery. Additionally, race is being addressed ideologically here in the way this statement reflects the contestability of white supremacy and race as a whole.

Dana is Black yet capable of matching, perhaps surpassing, the surrounding white people in articulating the qualities that allegedly vindicate their authority. She is downright frightening to people like Rufus's father, for she directly exposes the flaws in the ideologies they adhere to and the institutions they benefit from.

Throughout the story, Tom Weylin is the primary vehicle in which this notion is demonstrated, signaled through his continual wariness towards Dana because of her unapologetic and intimidating level of intelligence. Not only does her intellect make him insecure about his own as a white man—the prospect of a Black woman outsmarting him is likely appalling in his mind—but she poses a threat to his authority on the plantation and the arbitrary rationalizations behind slavery. The education of slaves is what he fears the most, and the punishment for being caught reading without permission incredibly severe, for one of the first things he tells Kevin is a “warning that it was dangerous to keep a slave...educated...as far north as this” (Butler 78). He acknowledges that reading has the potential to lead slaves to question their positioning, thus inspiring yearnings for freedom and ideas of how to obtain it. Furthermore, if his slaves were able to read, write, and acquire reasoning that rejects their inferior status, they would equalize themselves with him in some regard, for his claim as the smartest or most esteemed on the plantation would be diminished. Dana is motivated to educate the slaves, like Nigel and Carrie, with the hopes that they will undo the thinking racial ideology promotes about Blackness, and also to

give them the ability to forge documents that will aid them in efforts towards freedom, boosting their chances in making it out successfully.

Not too long after she arrives, she realizes how daunting, yet undeniably crucial, this undertaking to teach others will be. It is not just urgent for her to teach Rufus to be less like his father in order to make life easier for future slaves but witnessing the inescapable presence of racial ideology and how it has implemented a slave-mindset in their lives ultimately makes Dana feel it is her responsibility to give as many slaves as she can the tools to undo these mentalities. This pivotal decision is marked by an encounter with a group of slave children—firsthand, she is showed how early ideology interpellates subjects through a seemingly harmless game they play together. However, the game is the product of something far more sinister than mindless, innocent play. A young slave boy beckons a young slave girl to a make-believe auction block, calling out, “She worth plenty money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?” (Butler 99). Just as Althusser proclaims about the nature of ideology, this instance highlights how the presence of racial ideology and slavery’s utilization of it is inescapable and solidified before birth, playing a major role in the developmental stages of a person’s life. What Dana finds so disturbing about this display is this very notion; even without much experience as a slave, the children are already wrapped up in the mindset of being one, and as she puts it, preparing themselves for the ostensibly inevitable path they will soon take.

Her presence on the plantation warrants suspicion from people like Weylin, for he is aware she has the power to steer them away from this reality, or at least afford them the utility to decide whether or not their enslavement is representative of the way things should be. The weaknesses in the logic of slavery and racial ideology in general are readily available, especially made known through figures like Dana, who is an obvious example of these inconsistencies. Given this, enforcers of ideological practices, including subjects like Weylin, must resort to violent and aggressive means to ensure the ideology is maintained and believed. If racial ideology as slaveholders know it is certainly equivalent to truth, it would not necessitate such extreme methods of preservation; the ideology would speak for and uphold itself, without a reliance on the subjects.

Public whippings are Tom Weylin's primary method of instilling fear in the slaves, sending an unmistakable message of what happens when someone rebels against the behavior that is expected of them. According to Dana, this is a horribly effective mode for the most part. Although it does not deter her completely from pursuing her anti-slavery and educational endeavors on the plantation, it certainly imparts upon her a significant dread, one that forces her to acknowledge how lightly she must tread unless she hopes to meet the same fate (of course, she eventually does). After watching him make an example of the man, she laments, "It served its purpose...It scared me, made me wonder how long it would be before I made a mistake that would give someone

reason to whip me,” highlighting how actions like this encourage subjects to police their own behavior, aligning it with what is ideologically expected of them (Butler 91). This description of Weylin and the impact it has on the slaves directly relates to Althusser’s proclamation that ideology is by and for the subjects. As a slaveowner, he is a subject of racial ideology, adhering to within a slavery context, and he keeps it alive through whippings and adamantly conserving the disparities between him and the slaves, whiteness and Blackness. Again, these discrepancies are not inherent, nor is there any tangible evidence beyond skin tone to suggest that race and white supremacy are anything but an ideology.

Fields elaborates on this when she states that nothing could “keep race alive if we did not constantly reinvent and re-ritualize it to fit our own terrain,” and this is exactly what happened in the time period *Kindred* takes place in to fulfill legal slavery (Fields 118). The association of inferiority with Blackness, as well as the supposed intrinsic incapacity of Black people to achieve the same potentials and socially desirable qualities as white people, is backed by no real substantiation—only by a manmade ideology that was created in order to validate practices like slavery. This is why Weylin and other subjects in support of slavery must continually act to foster a fearful environment, manipulating their slaves through this until they believe, or at least appear to believe, these notions about themselves and Blackness, thus allowing slavery to continue and ‘order’ be maintained on plantations.

Even with her efforts, Dana cannot prevent Rufus from ideological interpellation, and in the end, proves he is unable to fully shed the prejudices he obtained at a young age. He too is guilty of perpetrating malicious behavior as a means of upholding slavery and spewing racist ideology. Even his familial ties to her, a concept that is far more biologically sound and evident than what governs racial ideology, is not enough to dissuade him from succumbing to what is expected of him as a white slaveowner. Regardless of all she has done for him and her unique circumstances, the pressure and power of ideology are too great, pushing him to treat her as a slave to the point of their relationship being gone beyond repair. The facts of her constantly saving his life are also indisputable and far more believable than the suggestions that she, as Black, requires enslavement and is not worthy of being deemed an acceptable human being, inherently incapable of functioning in society as a white person would—Dana herself exemplifies this clear as day for Rufus. Nonetheless, the power of ideology cannot be understated and often surpasses the influence of other factors, leaving subjects in situations as these. His final wish is for Dana “to stop hating,” him but the behavior he is encouraged to display as a slaveowner and subject of racial ideology are impossible for her to love, even with their shared kinship (Butler 267).

Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* reminds us to continually question racial ideology, highlighting not only the harm that can be caused when it is weaponized, but also the unignorable presence it has in human dealings. Like Althusser, she demonstrates subjects’

complicated relationship to ideology, and the lack of truth these ideologies are capable of presenting. Because ideologies are so insecure, they must be enforced with great intensity and violence. Furthermore, through her ideological portrayals, she highlights Fields's thesis that race is an ideology, constantly being reshaped in the name of certain agendas. She shows us that change is possible, that we can push back against harmful ideologies and reject the institutions that utilize them until they are no longer able to exist.

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