



Rousseau's The Social Contract: And The First And Second Discourses

*A Case Study of The Role of Neo-Slave Narratives in Shaping
Understandings of This Peculiar Institution*



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ABSTRACT

In his book *The Social Contract: And the First and Second Discourses*, Jean Jacques Rousseau stated that “men are born free, yet everywhere are in chains” (Chapter 1, para 1). Although I use this quote in the context of slavery (physical, mental, or social), Rousseau uses these words to argue for the rights of men to govern themselves. He suggests that if men are denied the ability to manage themselves free from bureaucratic interference then, they are essentially slaves. But how does Rousseau’s philosophy of slavery apply to neo-slave narratives as complex analysis and interpretations the lived experiences and social realities of enslaved populations in contemporary texts? I use this “big question” as a springboard into an investigation of the ways in which one African-American, author explores slavery in a present day context. Sherryl Vint defines neo-slave narratives as “an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth century slave narrative

tradition” (241). I examine one novel as a case study of neo-slave narratives in which I extend Rousseau’s philosophy of slavery as a social contract between human beings and the larger society employing the following questions: What are the effects of slavery on the descendants of slaves? In what ways are individual’s chained to one’s ancestors? Using Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* I scrutinize the ways in which each use their works to open discursive spaces as sites of resistance challenging larger societal discourses associated with slavery as well as the lived experiences and social realities of enslaved populations and their descendants. Although the protagonist in the novel is “technically” free, she is metaphorically “chained” to their enslaved and free ancestors, I use this ideas to analyze the ways in which Rousseau’s ideology of social contract is used in a neo-slave narrative by the protagonist to negotiate their past, present, and future as discourses situated in larger societal expectations.

KEYWORDS

Rousseau, Neo-Slave Narratives, Society, Slavery, Ideology

RESEARCH PAPER

Rousseau's *The Social Contract: And the First and Second Discourses* (1762): A Case Study of the Role of Neo-Slave Narratives in Shaping Understandings of This Peculiar Institution

Jean Jacques Rousseau's social contract is not a philosophy in the traditional meaning of the word often used to describe thoughts expounded in texts by Socrates, Plato, and Confucius, instead social contract is a sociopolitical theory exploring and describing the necessary components for the creation of civil societies. Using Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, this essay examines the effect slavery on the descendants of slaves and the ways in which they are chained to their ancestors. By exploring the dialogical relationships and social interactions between Dana, the novel's protagonist and other characters, each enters into unspoken agreements with others in their environment, while exploring their historical pasts and negotiating their present understandings of slavery. Incorporating their present day context, the protagonist begins to construct her future not only in her slave community, but also in the larger society. Throughout her journey into the historical past the Dana learns to use her social position and proximal location to enter into multiple unwritten social contracts in an effort to ensure her survival.

To fully examine the role of Rousseau's social contract, in the context of neo-slave narratives, the following guiding questions are utilized: How does Rousseau's philosophy of slavery apply to Butler's *Kindred*? What is the effect of slavery on the lived experiences of Dana? In what ways is she chained to their ancestors?

Rousseau, the Social Contract, and Neo-Slave Narratives

In the context of Rousseau's work, slavery is used as a metaphor for the perceived state of chaos plaguing mankind in which the will of the individual infringes upon that of the community. According to Rousseau,

The right of slavery is null and void, not only because it is illegitimate, but also because it is absurd and meaningless. These words *slavery* and *right*, are contradictory and mutually exclusive. Whether spoken by a man to a man, or by a man to a nation, such speeches will always be equally aberrant. (Rousseau161-162)

As a result, slavery in any form (physical, mental, social, or political) is viewed by Rousseau as immoral because it denies the individual free will and abolishes "the protection afforded by the social contract" (Baker284). From this perspective slavery is not just physical, but also mental, social, or political condition in which notions of freedom and history are asserted, restrained, and negotiated based on what is in the best interest of the group. By suggesting

that individuals are interconnected through social interactions and discourses, Rousseau maintains that everyone is responsible for the promotion and maintenance of the health, safety, and well-being of the individual, their families, and their communities. To extend Rousseau's notion of social contract to the practice of chattel slavery, with broader implications for the ability of each protagonist in the selected works to overcome the constraints imposed upon them by their communities and the larger society. In his text, Rousseau's proposes the use of social contracts as a way to encourage individual and communal relationships and responsibilities in which "each man's power and freedom are his main means of self-preservation" (Rousseau153), in the context of their community and the larger society.

Emerging from this fray, *Kindred* enters these conversations by offering alternative explanations for taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the lived experiences and social realities of Dana's ancestors through the use of her accounts as vehicles for rewriting of her generational histories as situated knowledge. In this essay, situated knowledge is defined as "the knowledge embedded in a physical site or location" (Sole/Edmondson 23) in which groups construct their narratives of lived experiences and social realities through the establishment and maintenance of dialogical relationships. This enables a social contract to exist as an abstract concept situating dialogical relationships and interactions among Butler's characters, in the context of the attainment of freedom, equality, and other normative practices as determined by group consensus.

Three Sides....Two Lives....One Story

Slavery is a physical, mental, political, or social condition affecting the descendants of oppressed groups and connects these individuals to their ancestors through a history of marginalization at the intersections of race, gender, and class. From this perspective, "slavery is a physical condition – it affects the body on a base level; therefore it changes, subtly or corporeally, one's body (as well as one's perception of his or her own body)" (Steinberg478). These unwritten understandings propel Dana's unconscious desire to know their African history as well as her Black American history of enslavement. Throughout the novel, Dana learns to embrace Africa as their "motherland" while using her newly acquired lived experiences to recontextualize her social realities as a descendant of slaves. Paul Gilroy contends that black people are connected to Africa as well as their ancestors by history. By acknowledging and accepting legacy of African enslavement, Dana is linked to her ancestors based on the commonalities among the lived experiences and social realities she shares with her ancestors on her journeys into the past.

Using a present day lens Dana is able to interpret older conversations associated with enslavement as a physical, social, political, and mental condition “transcending the cultural limitations projected onto [the] body” (Vint242) by signification and marginalization. From this perspective, history is a social contract and a site of resistance in *Kindred* in which the temporal web of subjugation constructs discourses of humanity for Dana, and many of the other characters in these texts. Frantz Fanon maintains that the past is revered because it is not truly known and that it is the responsibility of each succeeding generation to redefine what it means to be Black and free in the context of their communities and the larger society. The use of time travel (physical and spiritual) enables Dana to return to the past and experience Black enslavement as well as negotiate dominant discourses of “otherness” by opening discursive spaces of agency and creating locations for unspoken discourses to emerge. As a texts, *Kindred* concentrates on narratives that “[utilize] slave characters and the conditions of slavery as focal points” (Keizer1) in which counter-discourses are used to understand, interpret, and explain past lived experiences and social realities. This enables Dana to negotiate “between the abstract and the real” (Keizer3) across historical and geographical locations which is present in the description of *Kindred*.

Kindred

Edana “Dana” Franklin, is the protagonist in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*. She was born in 1950. Dana is a black writer who lives in California, in 1976, with her white husband Kevin. On her twentieth-six birthday, Dana time travels to nineteenth century Maryland where she encounters Rufus Weylin and saves his life. This marks the first of her six journeys into the past. The state of Maryland is significant to Dana’s storyline because it is the ancestral home of her ancestors. Rufus Weylin, is white plantation owner and Alice Greenwood, a free Black women who later becomes his slave, are Dana’s great-grandparents “several times over” (Govan88). Initially, Dana is summoned to nineteenth century Maryland by Rufus, when he is in danger, she is “mysteriously pulled through space and time to antebellum Maryland, Dana comes face to face with her slave heritage on the Weylin plantation and discovers that she must arrange the rape of a free black woman by the slave-owner Rufus Weylin in order to ensure her own birth” (Yaszek 1058). From that moment, until Rufus dies, Dana realizes that her mission is to save Rufus’s life and ensure the survival of her family lineage.

The novel begins at the end of Dana’s journey where she describe being stuck in the wall. Butler writes:

Something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it –painlessly at first—melting into it, meshing

with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving. (261)

This description is a metaphor for the unwritten social contracts in which African-American are situated in discourses of African and American enslavement, with Dana as an illustration of the horrors of being physically, socially, politically, and mentally located in the “in-between spaces” (Bhabha 4) of her historical past and its legacy in her present day context. While in nineteenth century Maryland, Dana loses her twentieth century freedoms as she becomes part of the Weylin “chattel slave system” (Govan 86). She is physically and mentally enslaved. Although she is liberated when she returns to twentieth century California, she still carries the marks (welts, missing teeth, bruises) and memories of her life on Weylin’s plantation.

By entering into multiple unspoken social contracts in order to save her familial line, “she [Dana] learns that, to live in the past of her kin, she must find reservoirs of strength” (Govan. 86), while living in nineteenth century Maryland, Dana assumes the role of slave, but in the twentieth century she is a free Black woman living with her white husband, Kevin; thus, “establishing a dialogic relationship between the past and the present” (Mitchell 54). For that reason, Dana, “must establish her own power base or personal territorial boundaries if she is not to be destroyed” (Govan86) as she creates relationships and engages in social interactions with Rufus, Alice, and many of the other enslaved characters in the novel.

Prior to his death, Rufus, reveals to Dana that he is able to see her in her modern time of 1976, before he “calls” her back to nineteenth century Maryland to save his life. It seems as if Dana is propelled to the past at the same moment that Rufus is moving toward the future of her ancestral line. On her final trip to Weylin plantation, Dana discovers that Alice has committed suicide and Rufus is the cause. This leads Dana to conclude that she must end Rufus’s life. During the struggle, Rufus grabs Dana’s arm which causes her to it to become encased in the wall. She loses a piece of herself in the past as she carries the scars that remain into her present. The novel ends with the story of Dana’s and Kevin’s physical journey to Maryland in search of Weylin plantation. They find nothing, but an over grown field. As they search county records Dana and Kevin discover documentation that the plantation’s inhabitants were displaced on the night Dana returned to the twentieth century. Following her departure, slaves burned down the home to cover up Rufus’s murder, after which some escaped, while others were captured and sold to neighboring plantations. But, what are the effects of slavery on the descendants of slaves in the context of *Kindred*.

Mirroring: Yours, Ours, and Mine

In any form slavery is a bodily experience in which power is deployed through social contracts. Carrying the invisible and sometimes physical striations as discourses of the body, the descendants of slaves exist as displaced, disembodied, silenced, and marginalized groups with a history of oppression, devaluation, and subjugation at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Rousseau's social contracts situates the effects of slavery on the descendants of slaves as presented in *Kindred* as unwritten communications built on social interactions, geography, commonalities in lived experiences, as well as a shared history. Reconciling that "the impact of slavery [was] not just on isolated individuals but on entire families and networks of kin" (Yaszek1075), in which systematic break-down of family units through premature deaths, abandonment, and "being sold away" (Govan 90) were used as to maintain the status quo. Dana faced dilemmas that forced her to reassess her situation while in her respective antebellum locality and choose the best course of action to ensure her survival.

Being physically transported through time and space, Dana experiences the loss of her personal freedoms and control over her present while living in her nineteenth century Maryland slave community. Dana has to learn to negotiate several social contracts simultaneously in order to restore her humanity in her past and present social relationships such as her marriage to Kevin, friendships with Alice and Rufus, as well many of the other house slaves. But, to survive her past, Dana needs to piece together the missing parts of her ancestral history using her memory of her family tree, handwritten in the family Bible which states:

Grandmother Hagar. Hagar Weylin, born 1831. Hers was the first name listed. And she had given her parents' name as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something Weylin. (Butler28)

In addition Dana recalls that:

Hagar Weylin Blake died in 1880, long before the time of any member of my family that I had known. No doubt most information about her life died with her. At least it had died before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left. (Butler28)

For Dana history serves as a series of interconnected paradigms in which the past is used to inform the present and history is an inescapable fact that is "written on the body" (Hammad 64) used to fill in gaps in the historical records. Dana is connected to her ancestor's by birth and other kinship bonds continue to influence her present day lived experiences and social realities.

Bonded Together: Love and Belonging

Connected by bloodlines and memories to the characters Dana encountered in Maryland helps her to developed narratives that serves as their testimony of lived experiences regarding their history of enslavement. Using social contracts as situated knowledge, Dana embraces and comes to terms with their historical pasts of enslavement through the realization that each is a representation of their ancestors' struggles. While Dana is physically transported to nineteenth Maryland, she becomes of a visible and active member of Weylin plantation's slave community. As a slave, Dana witnesses the interracial relationship between Rufus and Alice which mirrors her marriage to Kevin. Even though she realizes that enslaved women were often coerced to make such concessions, she made the conscious choice to enter into hers. Each of her interactions with Rufus from the first to the last, influences Dana to rewrite her family history as she comes to terms with Black enslavement. To fully comprehend her role in the creation of her family line, Dana "successfully pieces together an alternative family history based on her newfound understanding of historical representation itself as a kind of mutable structure informed by multiple sources" (Yaszek1064) through social contracts. With regards to the neo-slave narratives presented in this essay, how did Dana use Rousseau's concept of social contract to negotiate their enslavement and understand their historical pasts?

Social Contracts, Plurality, and Unwritten Discourses

In order for social contracts, to be successful it has to be negotiable and polygamous; thus, enabling individuals to enter multiple agreements across groups simultaneously. This gives the individual voice and agency in larger societal discourses in which freedom and responsibility are transversed in ways that work in the best interest of the group, in exchange the group serves as the moral and political compass for individual members. Contemplating the notion of freedom Rousseau's idea of social contract in this essay examines the effects of slavery on the descendants of slaves and explores the idea of being chained to one's ancestors using Butler's novel *Kindred*. Social contracts serve as essential components for understanding the historical past in the present day context in which lived experiences are negotiated through social interactions and dialogical exchanges.

For instance, Dana befriends Rufus Weylin and Alice Greenwood for the purposes of ensuring their procreation. Having partial knowledge of her family history, Dana realizes that in order to ensure her lineage's survival, she must convince Alice to become Rufus's property, concubine, and mother of his children. These unwritten social contracts are

evidenced in Dana's internal dialogue regarding her relationship with Rufus and Alice in which she articulates:

We could hurt each other too badly, kill each other too quickly in hatred. He was like a younger brother to me. Alice was like a sister. It was so hard to watch him hurting her – to know that he had to go on hurting her if my family was to exist at all. (Butler180)

Understanding that she had initially been pulled back through time and space to save Rufus and facilitate his liaisons with Alice, Dana reconciles the fact that she has to permit this alternative version of history to play out if she is to return to 1976. This experience provides Dana with first-hand knowledge of the atrocities Alice endures in order to create Dana's family line. As a result, Dana reaches her own conclusions as she enters into an unspoken arrangement allow him Rufus to exert his control over Alice. Dana employ Rousseau's notion of social contract to recontextualize past and present discourses as future narratives to break away from larger societal expectations while connecting with their ancestors.

Summary

Rousseau's idea of social contract is typically not what one might consider a philosophy of slavery. The use of social contracts from the standpoint of Rousseau serves as a way to create civilized societies by enabling members of a given community to hold each of its members accountable for their behaviors. From this perspective, social contracts are mental, social, and political approaches to self-governing which systematically enables participants to implement agreements that are in the best interest of the group.

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