



## Scripting the Impossible: Temporal Transgression and the Critique of Reality in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy*

Fatima Ali Al-Khamisi

Fatima Ali Al-Khamisi, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Buraidah, 51452, Saudi Arabia.

Email: f.Alkhamisi@qu.edu.sa, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0000-0003-2824-9441>

Received: 5<sup>th</sup> May 2026

Accepted: 15<sup>th</sup> July 2026

Published: 6<sup>th</sup> September 2026

### ABSTRACT

This article examines temporal transgression in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy* as a narrative strategy through which contemporary American fiction interrogates ethical, social, and political authority. Time travel and temporal violation are approached not as escapist or speculative devices, but as purposeful disruptions of institutionalised scripts that regulate historical memory, causality, and national identity. Drawing on a comparative transmedia methodology, the study integrates close textual and visual analysis with narratological critique to account for the distinct affordances of prose fiction and graphic narrative. It analyses Butler's insistently embodied engagement with historical determinism- where the Black body becomes a site of enforced return and ethical confrontation- alongside Way's representation of bureaucratic temporal governance, in which history is administered, policed, and commodified by technocratic authority. Attention is given to how focalization, pacing, and suspense shape readers' and viewers' ethical positioning, mediating responsibility, complicity, and resistance across temporal boundaries. In both works, the act of crossing forbidden temporal thresholds destabilizes claims to sovereign power and exposes the constructed, contingent nature of historical "reality." By juxtaposing lived, traumatic return with institutionalized temporal management, the article demonstrates that temporal transgression operates simultaneously as a formal narrative strategy and a mode of cultural critique. Ultimately, it argues that such transgressions enable the reclamation of agency, ethical witnessing, and critical engagement with history, positioning time itself as a contested terrain in twenty-first-century American fiction.

**Keywords:** Temporal transgression; Octavia Butler; Transmedia; Reality critique; Comparative study

## INTRODUCTION

Within the changing landscape of American fiction, stories about time travel have undergone a major transformation. What once focused mostly on scientific ideas, adventure, or futuristic technology has become a more complex way to explore moral, political, and knowledge-related issues. Rather than simply escaping reality or playing with "what if" scenarios, time travel in modern American texts serves as a serious tool for examining the historical and institutional factors that shape our lives today. At the heart of this shift is what this study calls Forbidden: boundaries that determine access to time and define what can be known, remembered, or changed in a particular social context. These boundaries are intentional, designed to maintain a sense of linear time while reinforcing the prevailing narratives of national continuity and the myth of historical progress.

This article uses a detailed, comparative approach to explore how Octavia Butler's influential novel *Kindred* (1979) and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy* (2007–2019) use time travel not just as a plot device, but as a sharp critique of American power. Despite their clear differences—*Kindred* being rooted in the harsh realities of the antebellum South, and *The Umbrella Academy* presenting a graphic story influenced by a chaotic, retro-futuristic style—both works treat time as strictly controlled. In both cases, violating the flow of time has serious political and ethical implications. In these stories, the rules of time reflect institutional authority, shaping historical events and limiting the range of possible human experiences. By highlighting the ongoing struggle between institutional control and personal freedom, this study asks whether breaking the rules of time can effectively challenge societal ideas of national identity and the historical amnesia present in much of American cultural memory.

More specifically, the article aims to redefine the Forbidden as a flexible and contested boundary rather than a rigid prohibition. In the stories from Butler and Way, time restrictions act as a paradoxical force; they are enforced by a central authority that is often bureaucratic, yet they can also be destabilised by the protagonist's physical or emotional presence in these forbidden time zones (Suleman et al., 2024). Moving through time does more than shift a character from one point to another; it uncovers the hidden systems that uphold what is considered a "normal" reality. It shows that both history and the future are not neutral aspects of life but are instead constructed by authority. Through a qualitative analysis of the physical, emotional, and bureaucratic costs of these shifts, the study examines how Butler's idea of the body as a living archive connects with Way's portrayal of a sprawling, fate-driven bureaucracy.

Together, these narrative techniques show how power marks human bodies, collective memories, and chains of cause and effect, making our perceived reality both delicate and artificially constructed (Suleman, 2026).

The article combines close readings of texts and visuals with deep narrative and cultural analysis, examining how techniques of disrupting time create strong ideological pressures. It pays close attention to "points of friction," instances where breaking the rules of time leads to physical harm, mental confusion, or swift institutional backlash. The study interprets these outcomes as crucial evidence of the high stakes involved in challenging the governing narratives of reality. By tracing how characters are marked, controlled, or even erased through time travel, the study argues that moving through time in American fiction is never a straightforward or "free" act; it is a politically charged performance that reshapes our understanding of choice, responsibility, and accountability in history.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical intersection of temporal transgression, traumatic memory, and institutional power in contemporary American fiction demands a rigorous, interdisciplinary dialogic framework. Rather than reducing time travel to a mere escapist device or a standard speculative trope, contemporary literary and cultural scholarship increasingly views the manipulation of chronology as a disruptive narrative strategy dismantling dominant ideological scripts.

To map this critical landscape, this literature review evaluates existing scholarship across three foundational domains: The lived somatic and historical disruptions characterising contemporary critiques of neo-slave narratives; The technocratic and bureaucratic policing of causality within postmodern media and graphic narratives; and overarching narratological frameworks that enable textual impossible structures to function as institutional critiques.

Extensive scholarship on Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) positions the novel as a seminal text that interrogates how historical atrocities disrupt the present. Scholars consistently focus on how systemic racial violence is registered not as an abstract historical record, but as an embodied, visceral reality. Parham (2009) argues that the textual traumas in *Kindred* impose an intense ethical burden of "historical witnessing" on the reader. Parham argues that memory and embodiment are permanently intertwined, demonstrating that the human body functions as a living archive that remembers precisely what official national records seek to sanitise or erase.

This focus on the corporeal archive forms the core of contemporary developments in neo-slave narrative and Afrofuturist critiques. Studies by Nougrech (2021) and Barbosa (2025) examine how Butler blends genres to expose the intersectional violence of race and gender, highlighting a "blood debt" (uma dívida de sangue) that underscores the continuous survival and afterlife of slavery's structural hierarchies. Similarly, an anonymous study (2022) addresses history's redemptive authority within the text, framing the temporal rupture as a necessary confrontation that strips away modern historical amnesia by forcing a structural reconciliation with the past.

Furthermore, recent scholarship increasingly frames this temporal bending through the lens of alternative, non-Western temporalities that challenge traditional historiography. Adebisi (2022) challenges dominant Euro-modern linear models of time, arguing that speculative fiction provides a vital legal and cultural tool to unsettle colonial chronologies that underpin modern systemic injustice. This aligns closely with Sealey's (2021) conceptualisation of "mangrove time." Sealey suggests that the temporality of lived Blackness in *Kindred* rejects straight, linear progress; instead, it operates like the tangled, cyclical root systems of a mangrove, where the "then" and the "now" continuously overlap and structurally condition one another.

Consequently, as Kelly (2023), Martín-Zarzuelo (2025), and Bankolia (2026) analyse, Butler's use of Afrofuturist temporal disruptions shatters traditional, anti-racist historical narratives. By utilising what Vint (2007) terms the "anatomy of trauma" alongside Luckhurst's (2008) model of traumatic "afterwardness," these critics demonstrate that *Kindred*'s temporal violations turn the Black body into a site of enforced historical return, proving that the past cannot be neatly cordoned off from the present.

While Butler scholarship explores the visceral, somatic disruptions of historical return, critical engagements with Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy* (2007–2019) shift the focus toward the cold administration, monetisation, and surveillance of causality. In this graphic universe, time travel transitions from an unmapped, organic affliction into a corporate, hyper-rationalised apparatus policed by "The Commission" (Way, 2009; Hoar, 2019).

To understand how this institutional control limits individual agencies, contemporary scholars draw heavily upon post-structuralist critiques of systemic power. The Commission's rigid enforcement of an "approved" timeline operates as a cosmic extension of Foucault's (1977) panopticism and carceral surveillance. By monitoring all eras and eliminating deviations, the bureaucratic state ensures that bodies and histories remain strictly disciplined and useful to the status quo.

This corporate administration of destiny reflects Graeber's (2016) "utopia of rules." Within this systemic framework, regulatory predictability serves to disguise institutional violence and eliminate meaningful political or moral choices. As cultural critics note, this structural determinism becomes even more pronounced when tracing the medium shift from comic panels to television screens, where the narrative friction hinges on the characters' inability to escape an administrative system that treats history as an unalterable corporate text ("Comics vs. television," 2019).

Analyzing this institutional governance requires a methodology specialized in visual storytelling. Groensteen's (2007) foundational work on the system of comics provides the necessary formal vocabulary, demonstrating how panel layouts, page borders, and regular grid structures act as a literal visual architecture that contains time. When Gerard Way and illustrator Gabriel Bá manipulate sequential and temporal structures within the graphic novel layout, they construct a visual grammar of temporal anomalies. When characters break out of panels or disrupt the sequence, they are visually and discursively resisting the spatial and temporal limits imposed by the comic medium itself, mirroring their narrative rebellion against the Commission's bureaucratic constraints.

To bridge the analytical divide between Butler's visceral prose realism and Way's graphic, medium-specific absurdism, this study integrates unnatural narrative theory. As Alber et al. (2010) define it, unnatural narratology focuses on story worlds that explicitly violate the empirical physical, temporal, or logical laws of our world. Alber et al. assert that these physical impossibilities are never arbitrary; instead, they deliberately shatter the reader's expectations to critique, mock, and expose real-world political, social, and ideological structures.

A definitive gap exists within the current literature. While existing studies thoroughly explore somatic trauma in neo-slave narratives (Parham, 2009; Nougrech, 2021) or analyse bureaucratic determinism in pop-culture media (Hoar, 2019), scholarship has treated these two narrative modes as entirely distinct, generic domains. "By utilising unnatural narrative theory, this comparative, transmedia analysis examines *Kindred* and *The Umbrella Academy* as anti-mimetic spaces where power dynamics, historical memory, and moral responsibility converge across different mediums.

This article addresses that gap by demonstrating whether temporal transgression is lived as an inescapable somatic return or managed as a corporate script; it functions as a structurally aligned narrative intervention. By synthesising the "mangrove time" of historical trauma with

the panoptic surveillance of bureaucratic timelines, this study evaluates how these temporal violations alter the reader's pragmatic and ethical engagement. It reveals that both authors weaponise the physically impossible as a linguistic mechanism to strip away the illusion of a natural, stable "reality," exposing instead the violent power mechanisms that police human history and memory.

### **Theoretical Grounding of Temporal Transgression and The Architecture of The Forbidden**

Temporal transgression, as examined in contemporary American fiction, functions as both a narrative strategy and a powerful cultural critique. In the texts examined by the study, "transgression" goes beyond normal movement; it denotes the intentional breaking of established rules of time, linear causality, and chronological continuity, and, most significantly, the control exerted over the past and the future. Such violations do more than enhance a plot; they actively disrupt traditional temporal structures, questioning the Western belief that history and narration follow a single, coherent logic. In this framework, temporal transgression challenges the systems that impose social, historical, and ideological order. By challenging linear progress, these transgressions explore the fragility of what is often seen as stable reality. They show that national identity, historical memory, and the power systems that support them are not natural truths but are constructed and enforced through mastery of time.

The concept of the Forbidden offers a crucial lens for understanding these complex narrative techniques. The Forbidden involves various temporal and ontological restrictions, carefully maintained by legal, political, and cultural norms. These boundaries regulate which events, experiences, and, crucially, which bodies can exist within the "approved" flow of history. When a protagonist crosses these restrictions, they do more than travel; they enact ethical and political resistance that highlights what the state has suppressed, erased, or marginalised.

In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the protagonist's painful, involuntary journeys into the antebellum South exemplify this dynamic. Here, the body becomes the main point of confrontation with historical trauma and institutional violence (Butler, 1979, pp. 97-100 & 126). Marisa Parham (2009) notes that these textual traumas do not just recount history; they urge the reader to engage with the heavy ethical burden of "historical witnessing." Parham emphasises that memory and embodiment are deeply connected in dealing with past injustices, suggesting that the body remembers what the official record seeks to forget (p. 1315). Recent studies have further developed this idea, focusing on the "neo-slave" narrative elements and the Afrofuturist

approach to trauma in Butler's work. These perspectives show that temporal transgression disrupts linear storytelling and functions as a powerful critique of racial hierarchies while recalibrating the reader's moral engagement with history (Nougrech, 2021; Kelly, 2023; Martín-Zarzuelo, 2025; Bankolia, 2026).

A parallel approach to time-based governance appears in Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy*, but it takes the form of a more bureaucratic structure: the Commission. This organisation enforces time rules, manages causality, and ensures predetermined outcomes while harshly punishing any departure from the approved timeline (Way, 2009). Research into the mixed tones and narrative style of both the comic and its adaptations has revealed how these structural frameworks limit individual agency. By placing characters in conflict with a bureaucratic system that defines the terms of temporal possibility, Way's story uncovers the constructed nature of reality. It shows that meaningful emotional experiences cannot be separated from the environment in which time is organized and controlled (Hoar, 2019). In this way, any disruption of the timeline connects to issues of accountability and the potential for ongoing social critique.

This study combines close textual analysis with a detailed critique of narrative and culture. It examines temporal disruption not just as a narrative device, but as a way to interrogate ideology and reveal how reality is both preserved and challenged. It specifically highlights both the physical, psychological, and institutional "expenditures" of these transgressions. By tracing how bodies are marked, disciplined, or erased as a direct result of crossing forbidden temporal boundaries, we can see the intersection of literary form and political power. These narrative techniques show that movement through time in American fiction is never neutral or "empty." Instead, it is a conscious, politically charged, and ethically loaded performance. By highlighting the embodied and institutional consequences of these violations, this study emphasises that transgression is both a literary technique and an important cultural act—one that generates critical, even "impossible," insights into power dynamics, memory, and historical accountability today.

### **Close Reading of *Kindred*: The Body as Archive**

In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler engages with more than the simple translocation of a character through time; instead, she places her protagonist, Dana, as a literal, living archive. In this reading, the body is no longer simply a container for the self but instead becomes the central location through which history, memory, and trauma are lived. Dana's forced temporal

displacements into antebellum Maryland turn her corporeal experience into both a medium and an archive of historical violence (Butler, 1979). Each wound suffered, each moment of disorientation, and each somatic engagement with the material realities of slavery becomes a form of "embodied historiography." This is more than simply telling a story; instead, it reveals the ongoing, resonant impact of systemic oppression, effectively subverting the clean, abstracted notion of slavery common to traditional historiography (Parham, 2009, pp. 1315-31). As Marisa Parham suggests, the textual wounds that Dana suffers are not simply narrative occurrences meant to shock; instead, they become pressing ethical imperatives. They force the reader to engage with the weighty moral and historical implications of witnessing and the hard labour of survival (Nougrech, 2021).

However, Butler's narrative is relentless in its message: temporal transgression is never free; it always has a high corporeal price. Dana's constant crossing of "the Forbidden"—in this instance, the antebellum era—leaves her perilously vulnerable to both immediate physical danger and secondary psychological trauma. In thus deeply interweaving the moral imperatives of memory with the physical repercussions of historical presence, Butler establishes witnessing as a necessarily embodied and politically charged act (Kelly, 2023). This is exactly what Nougrech identifies as the complex neo-slave narrative framework within which *Kindred* operates. Within this framework, the protagonist's body is necessarily double: a locus of vast suffering, but also a keen instrument of critique. It reveals the racialised social stratifications and the deliberate historical effacement of the lives of the enslaved from the general historical record (Martín-Zarzuelo, 2025). Likewise, Kelly points out that Butler's Afrofuturist strategies enable Dana to move through past and present racial conditions consecutively. This displacement undermines determinist historiographies, emphasising instead a sense of agency that exists even in the most oppressive of circumstances (Bankolia, 2026).

Moreover, the temporal transgression in *Kindred* is a powerful tool of narrative resistance. By thrusting Dana through the ages without warning or her consent, Butler disrupts the linear chronology. This creates narrative tension that highlights the ethical implications of action, inaction, and survival. As Martín-Zarzuelo argues, this temporal disruption transforms trauma into both a historical and an ethical event; Dana's physical experiences ground and expose systemic power dynamics that might otherwise have remained purely theoretical (2025). Rather than merely driving the plot forward, these crossings offer a sharp cultural critique, demonstrating that our historical and social realities are entirely conditional, highly regulated, and narrative constructs.

Ultimately, Butler establishes a rigorous framework wherein the body serves as the essential conduit for knowledge, memory, and ethical responsibility. The corporeal danger Dana puts herself under—and the marks she brings back with her—also emphasise the fragility of reality and the high stakes of challenging the authority of time. It becomes clear that the Forbidden is maintained not only by institutional “rules,” but also by the subject's flesh and blood. Through Dana’s pain, the reader is compelled to understand how power marks the body and memory.

### **Close Reading of *The Umbrella Academy*: Bureaucracy, Temporality, and Ethical Stakes**

Whereas Octavia Butler is primarily concerned with the somatic and the corporeal, Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá’s *The Umbrella Academy* moves the play of temporal transgression from the somatic to a far more complex bureaucratic and institutional framework. In Way’s tale, “The Commission” is clearly much more than a mere plot convenience; it is a critical tool intended to manage causality, discipline temporal “deviations,” and prescribe a preordained outcome. It is a system of totalizing power externalised as a literal police force for time itself (Way, 2009). When the Hargreeves siblings break temporal law, they do more than disrupt the chronological narrative; they reveal the shocking vulnerability of institutionalised power.

The series repeatedly emphasises the tension between determinism and agency. For instance, *The Umbrella Academy* episode 'The White Violin' demonstrates the compounding weight of personal choices across generations, illustrating how a single, seemingly minor decision can trigger apocalyptic consequences (Hoar, 2019). This narrative reflects Butler’s *Kindred* in that it illustrates that crossing the boundaries of time is no small thing, but rather a heavy moral and pragmatic burden. Moreover, critical discourse—such as that outlined in the UCLA Reclaim Project guide—indicates that this narrative structure forces the viewer to confront the relationships between memory, power, and action. Ultimately, it reveals a sobering truth: the control of time is, at its root, synonymous with the control of bodies and the circumscription of ethical choice.

As a transmedia narrative, *The Umbrella Academy* extends its temporal complexity across comic book series, graphic novels, and television. Through analysis of *Collected Critical Essays on Litreactor*, the “tonal hybridity” of the series, its blending of the absurd and the tragic, is revealed to be a tool for examining agency and accountability (“Comics vs. Television,” 2019). Comparing the comic book series and the television series makes clear that

the transgression of time is more than a stylistic choice; it is a cultural commentary embedded in the very structure of storytelling.

In this speculative world, the Commission is a paradigm of “bureaucratic time,” a temporal panopticon where observation and surveillance stretch throughout the entire course of history. Through the institutionalisation of time, the Commission exercises a “disciplinary gaze” that seeks to codify the “messy chaos” of human action into a series of controlled “case files” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). This strict framework is analogous to what David Graeber has termed the “utopia of rules” that exists in modern administrative systems—a world in which everything is classified to the point of killing life itself (Graeber, 2016).

However, the comic book medium itself resists this bureaucratic control. Through non-linear narrative and the confluence of past and future on the same page, the comic book lets the reader experience time not as a line but as a spatial network (Groensteen, 2007). This “braiding” of different times within the panels connects our emotional investment to ethical thinking; the reader literally sees the effects of a character’s meddling over time (p. 145). Thus, transgression in Way’s comic is both formal and ideological. It harnesses the comic page’s unique architecture to subvert the Commission’s structures of power.

## METHODOLOGY

This study integrates close textual and visual analysis with socio-cultural critique to examine temporal disruption across different media. It treats temporal transgression not merely as a narrative convention, but as an ideological mechanism that reveals how dominant power structures both maintain and contest reality.

To bridge Octavia Butler’s prose fiction with Gerard Way’s graphic narrative, the methodology relies on a comparative transmedia approach. This framework accounts for the distinct formal affordances of each medium:

It analyses how prose focalization and narrative pacing in *Kindred* map historical trauma directly onto the protagonist’s body, tracing the physical and psychological costs of crossing forbidden temporal boundaries.

Simultaneously, it evaluates visual composition, panel transitions, and graphic architecture in *The Umbrella Academy* to illustrate how the characters’ engagement with administrative systems—such as the Hargreeves siblings’ confrontation with the Commission—functions as a visual and structural resistance that subverts the notion of a fixed future.

By tracking these "points of friction" across both text and image, the methodology uncovers the intersection of literary form, visual culture, and political power, emphasising the deep somatic and institutional toll of violating the Forbidden.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The textual, structural, and visual analyses show that temporal transgression functions as a powerful mechanism for ideological critique in contemporary American fiction. To explore these implications, the comparative discussion is structured around four distinct subsections:

### **Synthesis: Temporal Transgression, Ethical Witnessing and the Critique of Reality**

The analyses of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy* converge around a singular, potent realization: that temporal transgression is far more than a genre trope; it is a mechanism for profound social critique. While their methods differ, both authors use the "broken clock" to expose the "broken reality" of American power. In Butler's work, these temporal breaches are viscerally embodied through Dana. Her body becomes a vessel for the historical trauma of slavery and the grueling weight of ethical witnessing. A prime example occurs when Dana is brutally whipped while attempting to save Rufus from danger; in that moment, she experiences the simultaneous agony of her own corporeal reality and the structural injustice of the nineteenth century. This demonstrates that ethical action within the "Forbidden" past requires literal, physical endurance (Sealey, 2021). Furthermore, her care for Alice following her abuse, or her desperate attempt to save a child from a burning house, proves that witnessing is not a passive act. It entails dual physical and moral responsibility, transforming Dana's body into a site of historical accountability (Adebisi, 2022).

In a parallel move, Way explores temporal violations within a bureaucratically regulated system where the Hargreeves siblings find their agency both constrained and transformative. In the Netflix episode "The White Violin," we see Vanya attempting to avert catastrophe while navigating the Commission's suffocating temporal protocols. Her struggle highlights the severe ethical consequences of acting against a deterministic system (2022). Similarly, Klaus's repeated, often tragic attempts to alter the course of events demonstrate that intervening in the timeline carries emotional and moral costs that are every bit as "heavy" as the physical burdens Dana carries in *Kindred*. Across both texts, the message is clear: crossing temporal boundaries is never a neutral act. It is a disruption that produces ripple effects—ethical, affective, and narrative (Barbosa, 2025).

Recent scholarship further illuminates the high stakes of this "simultaneity" in Butler's work. Sealey (2021) argues that the temporality of "lived Blackness" in *Kindred* shows that the past is never a closed chapter; rather, it is a territory that must be continuously negotiated in the present (Butler, 1979, pp. 52-54). Adebisi (2022) frames this narrative as a site where legal knowledge and temporal imagination intersect, allowing readers to unsettle Euro-modern assumptions about "progress" and rethink the foundations of justice and moral responsibility.

Other studies have emphasized the redemptive potential hidden within this historical awareness. As noted in the *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Dana's repeated return to the plantation—whether to save a young child or tend to the injured—enacts a form of "ethical intervention." Here, the past is not merely remembered; it is actively reclaimed to challenge hegemonic, sanitized narratives of the American South (From the present to the past, 2022; Butler, 1979, pp. 124-127). Barbosa's (2025) analysis further deepens this by underscoring the gendered and racial dimensions of Butler's ethics, showing how the violence of slavery persists across generations, inscribed upon the survivor's body as both a personal and collective mark (Way, 2009).

By integrating these disparate perspectives, it becomes evident that temporal transgression in contemporary American fiction functions as a dual critique. It targets both institutional power structures (symbolized by the Commission) and the embodied legacies of oppression (symbolized by Dana's scars). Vanya's and Klaus's struggles with the Commission's "case files" parallel Dana's moral dilemmas, revealing that the narrative manipulation of time is a vital form of resistance. It lets readers interrogate the social and ideological constructs that define our world.

Ultimately, this synthesis affirms the study's central thesis: the act of "breaking time" and crossing the Forbidden are essential instruments for reconstructing reality. By tracing these persistent ethical and political stakes, Butler and Way show that speculative fiction is uniquely capable of making the contingency of historical authority visible. It provides a roadmap for moral agencies in the twenty-first century, proving that while time may be policed, the human spirit's capacity for witnessing remains untamable.

### **Narrative Techniques: Focalization, Pacing, Architecture of Suspense**

Both Octavia Butler and Gerard Way demonstrate a sophisticated, almost surgical control over narrative temporality. They do not merely "tell" a story across time; they employ focalization, pacing, and suspense to amplify the ethical and social weight of their critiques. In *Kindred*,

Butler's decision to use a tight, first-person focalization is a masterstroke of psychological immersion. By situating the reader directly within Dana's consciousness, Butler allows the past to "intrude" upon the present with violence that makes Dana's ethical dilemmas feel immediate and tangible. The narrative's constant, jarring oscillation between her modern life and the horror of antebellum Maryland creates a sense of somatic urgency. This is not history observed from a distance; it is history lived. As Dana herself observes, "Every time I returned, I felt the whipping anew, as if it were happening to me all over again" (pp. 124-127). Through this technique, Butler compresses trauma and moral decision-making into a rhythmic tension that mirrors the unpredictable "burstiness" of lived experience.

Furthermore, Butler deliberately manipulates chronological continuity to expose the stubborn persistence of social hierarchies. By shifting the temporal frame without warning, she shatters the reader's comfort in linear causality. This unpredictability reflects the sheer contingency of moral action: while Dana's interventions can save individual lives—like Rufus's or the child in the burning house—they cannot, by themselves, dismantle the structural violence of the plantation system. This calculated pacing keeps the reader perpetually off-balance, ensuring that the suspense is not just about "what happens next," but about the profound ethical consequences of Dana's unavoidable transgressions.

In *The Umbrella Academy*, Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá approach these same challenges through the unique "temporal elasticity" of the comic book and televisual medium. Within the transmedia framework of the series, visual composition and panel sequencing allow events to overlap and causality to bend in ways traditional prose cannot. Through nonlinear storytelling and strategic flashbacks, the narrative reveals the Commission's suffocating, deterministic control while simultaneously carving out space for the siblings' agency. This is captured perfectly when Klaus reflects on his refusal to play the role assigned to him by the timeline: "You don't get to tell us how the world ends. We decide that" (Way, 2009, pp. 45-52). Here, the juxtaposition of visual and textual cues heightens the suspense, forcing the reader to weigh the costs of compliance against the dangers of rebellion.

Way's use of intercutting timelines—constantly shift between the "now," the "then," and the "might-be"—functions as a visual echo of Butler's historical oscillations. While Way operates in a more visually dynamic register, both authors exploit temporal dislocation to challenge our normative perceptions of history and authority. The suspense in these works arises from a

fundamental uncertainty: what are the true stakes of intervention? This compels the reader to engage with the narrative as more than mere entertainment; it becomes a reflection on the moral weight of taking action across the barriers of time.

Ultimately, an analysis of focalization, pacing, and suspense reveals that these mechanics are not just "tools" for storytelling; they are the very medium of the critique itself. By combining these techniques, Butler and Way render their political and social inquiries effectively resonant. They allow the reader to experience the "Impossible" not as a fantasy, but as a visceral, moral reality, reinforcing the argument that temporal manipulation is central to the production of critical knowledge and human insight.

### **Social Critique and Cultural Implications**

Temporal transgression in American speculative fiction extends far beyond ethical or political inquiry; it serves as a primary vehicle for social critique, relentlessly interrogating the structures, hierarchies, and norms that govern everyday life. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler's narrative reveals the chilling persistence of systemic oppression across time. For Butler, slavery is not merely a buried historical artefact, but a vital lens through which we are forced to understand the ongoing social, racial, and gendered inequalities that define contemporary society. Dana's repeated, involuntary returns to the antebellum South highlight the inextricable entanglement of personal experience with these broader social structures. Her interventions—whether rescuing a young, enslaved child, assisting Alice, or directly confronting Rufus—demonstrate that social hierarchies are never abstract concepts; they are viscerally embodied and enacted through both overt physical violence and the shifting dynamics of human relationships (Sealey, 2021; Adebisi, 2022). These moments make the social consequences of institutionalized oppression visible, foregrounding urgent questions regarding collective responsibility and societal memory.

Butler's specific focus on the gendered experiences of this oppression further amplifies her social critique. Barbosa (2025) emphasizes that the violence experienced by Dana and other female characters underscores the brutal intersection of race and gender within systems of exploitation, revealing how social norms dictate who is permitted to suffer and who is forced to survive. The novel positions Dana's body as both a site of historical testimony and a tool for social intervention, illustrating how transgressive temporality challenges normative

expectations of behavior, traditional family structures, and the very foundations of societal hierarchy.

In Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy*, social critique emerges through a different but complementary lens: the interplay of familial dysfunction, rigid societal expectations, and the weight of institutional authority. The Hargreeves siblings represent a paradox—they are simultaneously extraordinary in their abilities and hyper-regulated in their lives. The Commission's control over time serves as a direct mirror for modern social systems that enforce conformity, punish any deviation, and marginalize emotional complexity. The characters of Klaus and Vanya, in particular, reveal the devastating consequences of social neglect and emotional repression, illustrating how personal trauma is both socially conditioned and socially consequential. By highlighting this interdependence between individual agency and the social environment, Way offers a critique of the mechanisms—including issues of accountability, privilege, and marginalization—by which society shapes and constrains its subjects (Hoar, 2019).

The transmedia nature of Way's narrative—moving from the static panels of comic books to the dynamic frames of a television adaptation—further deepens this critique. The adaptation foregrounds questions of audience reception, collective memory, and the role of media in shaping perceptions of what is considered normative or deviant behaviour. Analysis of the Netflix series, particularly episodes such as "The White Violin," shows how visual and narrative framing can emphasise social tensions around family and institutional authority (Way, 2009). In dialogue with Butler, these critiques show that temporal transgression functions as a versatile tool for interrogating social norms across multiple registers: the personal, the familial, the institutional, and the cultural.

Recent scholarship continues to reinforce these social dimensions. Sealey's concept of 'mangrove time' demonstrates that Black temporal experience is inextricably linked to social structures and collective memory, framing temporal intervention as a critical tool for exposing and disrupting systemic inequities. Adebisi (2022) similarly frames Butler's work as a crossroads where law, morality, and social accountability intersect, proving that the "social" is inseparable from the ethical and political.

By integrating textual evidence from both Butler and Way, this section demonstrates that crossing temporal boundaries is a socially consequential act. In both narratives, the disruption

of time exposes the inherent fragility of our social systems. Whether it is the institution of slavery, the structure of the family, or the reach of bureaucratic authority, all are interrogated through the narrative manipulation of time. Temporal transgression thus functions as a comprehensive critique, positioning speculative fiction as a vital site for reflection, accountability, and cultural interrogation.

### **Mastery Of Time: Narrative Craft, Transgression, And the Uncovering of The Impossible**

In both *Kindred* and *The Umbrella Academy*, time functions not merely as a chronological framework but as a strategically manipulated narrative instrument, enabling the authors to confront societal taboos, ethical dilemmas, and the seemingly "impossible" without deferring to censorship or institutional authority. Butler and Way demonstrate that time itself can be utilised as a medium of critique, shaping how readers experience the intersections of trauma, agency, and moral complexity. In *Kindred*, Butler skillfully compresses and expands temporal moments to make the past viscerally present, forcing her audience to experience the brutality of slavery in a perceived real-time. Dana's repeated journeys from the contemporary United States to antebellum Maryland do more than disrupt linear chronology; they highlight the agonising continuity of historical trauma and its deep entanglement with personal identity. Dana reflects on the inevitability and weight of these journeys, noting, "I had no choice. The past would not let me go" (Butler, 1979, p. 52).

This reflection captures the paradoxical nature of temporal transgression: although Dana exercises agency in the past, she remains simultaneously constrained by the crushing weight of history. Butler's manipulation of time makes the "impossible"—the ability to survive, act ethically, and intervene in historical atrocities—an urgent, embodied reality rather than an abstract historical concept. Dana's interventions further illustrate how temporal transgression exposes ethical and social taboos. When she seeks to prevent Rufus's violence against Alice, her body becomes the primary site of both moral responsibility and historical witness. As she notes, "Every time I returned, I felt the whipping anew, as if it were happening to me all over again" (pp. 124-127).

This quotation exemplifies Butler's signature technique of "embodied temporality," where the protagonist's physical form bears the literal weight of historical injustice. The narrative ensures that readers cannot remain detached; ethical dilemmas and social taboos—slavery, sexual violence, and racial oppression—are made immediate, unavoidable, and morally complex. In

this way, Butler challenges the boundaries of what fiction can represent while grounding empathy and historical accountability in the corporeal experience of time.

Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá employ a complementary strategy in *The Umbrella Academy*, using time to expose institutional and social structures while interrogating the nature of deterministic authority. While the Commission enforces a strict linearity and causal control, the narrative constantly disrupts this order through the Hargreeves siblings' interventions. In the Netflix episode "The White Violin," Vanya articulates the high stakes of this temporal intervention: "If we do nothing, everything that could happen will—and it won't be right" (Hoar, 2019). Vanya's introspection embodies the ethical weight of temporal transgression, illustrating how narrative time functions as a site for moral deliberation and social critique. By explicitly connecting personal action to global consequences, Way underscores the responsibility inherent in intervening across time. Similarly, Klaus confronts the Commission's control with outright defiance, stating, "You don't get to tell us how the world ends. We decide that" (Way, 2009, pp. 45-52).

This statement serves as a definitive engagement with authority: Way and Bá use temporality to contest predetermined outcomes, allowing characters to explore the limits of freedom and resistance. By foregrounding the tension between institutional control and individual agency, the narrative simultaneously critiques bureaucracy, determinism, and social expectations, all while maintaining a sense of suspense and dramatic complexity. Both Butler and Way demonstrate that temporal transgression allows speculative fiction to navigate controversial themes safely and powerfully. Butler's manipulation of time interrogates slavery, racism, and gendered violence, rendering the "impossible"—ethical intervention in historical atrocities—both imaginable and compelling. Way, through his transmedia approach, employs temporal flexibility to critique family dysfunction and institutional authority, exploring the affective and ethical stakes of choice across centuries.

Moreover, both authors highlight the essential role of narrative craft in rendering the impossible credible. In *Kindred*, Butler's shifts between the present and the past generate a moral urgency that maintains narrative coherence despite the supernatural premise. In *The Umbrella Academy*, Way and Bá's nonlinear sequencing, flashbacks, and intercut timelines underscore how agency and social critique can coexist within fantastical structures, allowing the narrative to explore forbidden knowledge without compromise. Ultimately, time in these narratives is both the medium and the message. Butler and Way skillfully manage temporal structures to uncover the

impossible, challenge deep-seated taboos, and root ethical, social, and political principles in a transgressive framework. The reader witnesses firsthand how crossing the "forbidden" boundaries of time enables both characters and audiences to question authority, confront societal norms, and reconsider the ethical implications of action, indicating transformative speculative narration as a space for critical inquiry.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the established scope, methodology, and theoretical design of this study, several analytical limitations are present:

**Restricted Textual Scope:** This study limits its textual analysis specifically to Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy*. Because the investigation of temporal transgression is confined to these specific works, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader genre of contemporary American fiction.

**Divergent Medium-Specific Analyses:** While the methodology utilizes visual composition and transmedia analysis, this approach is restricted to *The Umbrella Academy*. The analysis of *Kindred* remains focused on literary narrative structure and corporeal representation, meaning visual-spatial analytical tools are not applied uniformly across both primary texts.

**Specific Theoretical Boundaries:** The methodology is strictly bound by close textual analysis, visual composition, and cultural critique. It specifically limits its inquiry to the physical, psychological, and institutional "expenditures" of crossing forbidden boundaries, thereby excluding other potential theoretical, socio-economic, or empirical frameworks.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gerard Way's *The Umbrella Academy* employ temporal transgression as a deliberate discursive and narrative strategy to interrogate historical, social, and ethical realities. Across both texts, time is not a neutral medium but a semiotic site where power, memory, and moral responsibility converge. In Butler, Dana's involuntary journeys into antebellum Maryland render the past tangible (Vint, 2007), embodying both the physical and psychological consequences of historical oppression. Her interventions illuminate the fragility of institutionalized hierarchies, demonstrating that temporal discourse can operate as a form of ethical critique, challenging dominant narratives and recovering silenced histories through a uniquely embodied narrativity.

Similarly, Way and Bá manipulate sequential and temporal structures to foreground institutional determinism, empowering characters to exercise discursive agency within a seemingly preordained system. The Hargreeves siblings' interventions against the Commission reveal the affective stakes of resisting authority. The narrative's nonlinear sequencing and temporal anomalies—specifically the visual grammar of the graphic novel—enable an exploration of social critique while maintaining narrative tension. This exemplifies the authors' skill in using temporality as a linguistic mechanism for uncovering the "impossible."

By juxtaposing Butler and Way, this study demonstrates that temporal transgression functions through specific communicative affordances:

**Ethical:** Characters confront moral responsibility across time, negotiated through focalization, pacing, and temporal disruption that heightens the reader's pragmatic engagement.

**Political:** Temporal violation exposes the constructed nature of power, where Butler's historical determinism and Way's bureaucratic oversight illustrate the semiotic mechanisms through which institutions enforce control.

**Social:** Narratives critique systemic oppression, rendering social hierarchies contestable through a re-scripting of cultural memory.

The comparative analysis further illustrates that mastery of time as a narrative device allows authors to challenge taboos and root principles of justice without compromise. Butler's use of embodied temporality and Way's transmedia storytelling converge in demonstrating that speculative fiction can interrogate political structures that might otherwise remain unquestioned. Ultimately, temporal transgression constitutes a powerful narratological tool, capable of destabilizing linear history and fostering ethical reflection. Through Dana's corporeal navigation and the Hargreeves siblings' defiance, these narratives reveal that breaking the rules of time enables the interrogation of reality itself.

Building on this analysis, several avenues for future research emerge. First, scholars should examine how temporal transgression functions across a broader spectrum of contemporary speculative discourse by authors of color, particularly in narratives that intersect with race, gender, and historical trauma. Such investigations could illuminate how Afrofuturist and Black speculative frameworks uniquely manipulate time to challenge normative historical narratives and foreground ethical responsibility. Comparative studies could specifically explore how transmedial approaches translate these mechanisms from prose into visual and audiovisual

forms, and whether Butler's use of embodied temporality finds linguistic analogues in other emerging media.

Second, there is significant potential for research on the pedagogical applications of temporal transgression. Scholars can examine how *Kindred* and *The Umbrella Academy* serve as communicative tools for historical memory and ethical reasoning in the classroom. The affective experiences generated through Butler's and Way's temporal manipulations provide a unique opportunity for students to engage with history not merely cognitively but viscerally. Future studies can also interrogate the relationship between narrative temporality and institutional authority, specifically investigating how speculative media visualize power structures and social norms through temporal governance.

Also, interdisciplinary research could connect this narratological analysis with fields such as law, philosophy, and political theory. Following the work of scholars like Foluke Adebisi on the legal and moral implications of Black speculative temporality, future inquiry might consider how literary representations of time intersect with real-world debates on historical justice, reparations, and the politics of memory. By pursuing these lines of inquiry, scholars can demonstrate the relevance of temporal transgression not only within literary studies but also as a generative space for rethinking the social, ethical, and political orthodoxies of the twenty-first century.

## REFERENCES

- Adebisi, F. I. (2022). Black/African science fiction and the quest for racial justice through legal knowledge: How can we unsettle Euro-modern time and temporality in our teaching?. *Law, Technology and Humans*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.5204/lthj.2507>
- Alber, J., Iversen, S., Nielsen, H. S., & Richardson, B. (2010). Unnatural narratives, unnatural narratology: Beyond mimetic models. *Narrative*, 18(2), 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.0.0042>
- Barbosa, M. L. (2025). Uma dívida de sangue: Escravidão, violência de gênero e a sobrevivência da escravidão em *Kindred*, de Octavia E. Butler. *Magma*, (22). <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2448-1769.mag.2025.236348>
- Butler, O. E. (1979). *Kindred*. Beacon Press.
- Comics vs. television: The Umbrella Academy. (2019). *LitReactor*. <https://litreactor.com/columns/comics-vs-television-the-umbrella-academy>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- From the present to the past: Redemptive authority of history in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. (2022). *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 10(1), 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.vol10.no1p16-30>
- Graeber, D. (2016). *The utopia of rules: On technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy*. Melville House, 45-50. <https://www.mhpbooks.com/books/the-utopia-of-rules/>
- Groensteen, T. (2007). *The system of comics* (B. Beaty & N. Nguyen, Trans.). University Press of Mississippi. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2tv897>
- Hoar, P. (Director). (2019, February 15). The white violin (Season 1, Episode 10) [TV series episode]. In S. Blackman (Executive Producer), *The Umbrella Academy*. Borderline Entertainment; Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80186863>
- Kelly, C. (2023). *Revisiting history: Anti-racist Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's Kindred* [Master's thesis, Missouri State University]. BearWorks. <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/3881/>
- Martín-Zarzuelo, N. (2025). Revising trauma in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*: An Afrofuturist reading. *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research*, 13(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.8345/jaclr.22980>
- Nougrech, A. (2021). *Neo-slave narrative in Octavia Butler's Kindred through the lenses of race and gender* [Master's thesis].
- Parham, M. (2009). Saying “yes”: Textual traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *Callaloo*, 32(4), 1315–1331. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0564>
- Sealey, K. F. (2021). ‘Then’ and ‘now’ of mangrove time: The temporality of lived blackness in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *Chiasmi International*, (23). <https://doi.org/10.5840/chiasmi20212331>
- Suleman, D. (2026). The Authenticity Gap and the Challenge of Distinguishing AI in Personal and Professional Dialogue. In *Impacts of AI on Human Expression and Relationship Building* (pp. 467-498). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Suleman, D., Iqbal, F., & Bhatti, L. I. (2024). Mediating lack of social interaction and financial stress in domestic violence during Covid-19: post covid-19 policy scenario in Pakistan. *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan*, 14(2), 245-261.
- Vint, S. (2007). “Only by experience”: Embodiment and the limitations of realism in neo-slave narratives. *Science Fiction Studies*, 34(2), 241–261.
- Way, G., & Bá, G. (2007–2019). *The Umbrella Academy* (Vols. 1–3). Dark Horse Comics.
- Way, G., & Bá, G. (2009). *The Umbrella Academy: Dallas*. Dark Horse Books.