

**Transcending Text: Iconic Solidarity and Emotional Resonance in the Graphic Version
of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred***

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Abstract

The present research paper explores the unique narrative qualities of the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler, arguing that it surpasses its textual counterpart in both iconic solidarity and emotional resonance. Utilizing the concept of iconic solidarity, the paper examines how the graphic novel's visual elements create a cohesive narrative unit, allowing for a more intuitive and sensory reading experience. This is further enhanced by the emotional resonance generated through the visual representation of characters, settings, and events, which serves to engage the reader on a deeper emotional level. The paper also delves into the role of the gutter and closure in the graphic novel, arguing that these elements facilitate a form of reader engagement that is unique to the medium. Through a comparative analysis, this study aims to demonstrate that the graphic novel version of *Kindred* offers a richer, more immersive narrative experience, making it a compelling alternative to the original text.

Keywords: *Gutter, Emotional Resonance, Closure, Iconic Solidarity*

Introduction

The adaptation of classic and contemporary novels into graphic novels has become an increasingly popular trend in the literary world. This transformation from text-based narratives to visual storytelling offers a new dimension of engagement, opening up complex works to broader audiences, including those who might find traditional novels intimidating or inaccessible. However, the process of adapting a novel into a graphic narrative is fraught with challenges and controversies. Comic adaptations of novels play a significant role in modern

storytelling, offering a unique visual dimension to the original narrative while maintaining the core literary elements. These adaptations bridge the gap between traditional literature and visual media, making complex stories more accessible to diverse audiences. Comics employ multimodal storytelling, combining text and imagery, which can enhance readers' engagement and comprehension of intricate plots and characters (Baetens, 2020). Furthermore, the shift from novel to comic format provides opportunities for creative reinterpretations, where the visual representation adds layers of meaning, making abstract concepts more tangible (Thomas, 2011). This process can also democratize literature, allowing readers who might not engage with lengthy novels to experience classic or complex narratives through a visually compelling medium (Pizzino, 2015).

Fidelity to the original text in comic or graphic novel adaptations can be a contentious issue, with creators often facing the challenge of balancing faithfulness to the source material with the unique demands of the visual medium. In some cases, adaptations strive to maintain high fidelity to the original, preserving plot, themes, and even dialogue, while enhancing the narrative with visual elements unique to comics. For instance, Tardi's adaptations of Jean-Patrick Manchette's works exemplify a commitment to the fidelity paradigm, where efforts are made to remain true to the source while leveraging the distinct features of the comic medium, such as page layout and visual storytelling techniques (Mutta & Hynynen, 2019). However, fidelity is not always about exact replication but also about capturing the essence or "spirit" of the original work, as seen in various graphic novel adaptations that adapt novels into visual forms, aiming to retain the thematic and emotional depth of the source material (Baetens, 2020).

One of the primary issues is the question of fidelity to the original text. It is often questioned that how much of the original narrative, with its intricate details and nuanced character development, can be retained in a medium that relies heavily on visual elements. Critics often argue that the simplification required for visual representation can dilute the complexity of the original work. On the other hand, proponents of graphic adaptations contend that the visual elements can add layers of meaning and emotional depth that are not easily achievable through text alone.

Another concern is the interpretation of the original work. The act of adapting a novel into a graphic form involves not just translation but also interpretation, as the visual elements add a new layer of meaning. This raises questions about authorial intent and the "purity" of the

original narrative, as the graphic adaptation inevitably reflects the perspective of its illustrator and adaptor as much as its original author.

Despite these challenges, the graphic novel medium has unique strengths, including the ability to convey complex emotional states and themes through visual elements. In this paper, I argue that the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler serves as a better medium than the original text form. This is primarily due to two unique qualities inherent to graphic narratives: iconic solidarity and emotional resonance. These elements contribute to a richer, more immersive narrative experience, making the graphic novel a compelling alternative to the original text.. This paper aims to explore these unique qualities through a case study.

Iconic Solidarity

Iconic Solidarity is a concept that refers to the arrangement of panels on a comic or graphic novel page as a cohesive unit of meaning. The term was coined by theoretician Thierry Groensteen and is used to describe how individual panels in a graphic narrative gain coherence and significance by being placed in relation to each other on the same page or spread. Unlike traditional textual narratives, where meaning is constructed linearly through sentences and paragraphs, graphic narratives build meaning through the spatial arrangement of panels.

In comics, meaning is generated through a combination of verbal and non-verbal elements that interact to create a cohesive narrative experience. Visual elements such as imagery, color, and spatial organization work in tandem with textual components like dialogue, narration boxes, and sound effects to guide the reader's interpretation. According to Carrier (2000), comics are a hybrid art form that combines words and images in a way that neither can fully stand alone. The visual format enables the comic to convey meaning quickly and intuitively, often using panel transitions and the arrangement of images to indicate the passage of time or changes in perspective, which words alone would struggle to achieve (Carrier, 2000). Moreover, as Chute (2008) highlights, the juxtaposition of images and text in comics often creates a nonsynchronous relationship, meaning that readers must engage with both the visual and verbal aspects simultaneously to fully grasp the story (Chute, 2008). The interplay between these elements ensures that comics offer a unique multimodal narrative experience where the meaning is not derived from a single mode of communication but through their combined use.

In a graphic narrative, each panel is like a piece of a puzzle that gains its full meaning in relation to the other panels. This creates a form of "solidarity" among the panels, making them part of a larger, interconnected whole. The reader perceives this whole both intuitively and sensorially as they navigate the page, making connections between panels, often subconsciously.

In the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred*, the event where Dana saves Rufus from drowning is condensed into a single page, specifically on page 12. This is a prime example of the concept of Iconic Solidarity at work. Each panel on this page serves as a discrete unit of meaning, but when viewed together, they create a cohesive narrative moment. The panels are not just sequential; they are interdependent, each contributing to the overall meaning of the page. The first panel sets the stage by showing Dana witnessing Rufus drowning. The next panel transitions to her entering the water, and the subsequent panels depict her saving Rufus and being scolded by his mother. These panels are linked by a single, unifying theme: Dana's act of saving Rufus. The spatial arrangement of these panels on a single page allows the reader to grasp the entire event in one visual sweep, creating a sense of immediacy and emotional intensity.



Figure 1. The protagonist saving Rufus. From *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 12.

This condensation of a significant event into one page also demonstrates the graphic novel's unique ability to convey complex actions and emotions quickly and viscerally, offering a different kind of narrative depth. The reader is not just told but shown the urgency of the moment, the danger Rufus is in, and Dana's quick thinking and bravery. The visual representation adds an emotional resonance that complements the textual narrative, making the event more impactful. In contrast, the original text version spreads the event across multiple pages (15-20), requiring the reader to construct the scene more gradually and linearly. While this allows for detailed description and internal monologue, it lacks the visual immediacy and interconnectedness of the graphic novel's single-page depiction.



Figure 2. The protagonist saving Rufus by giving him breath. From Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 7

In the exploration of iconic solidarity within the graphic novel adaptation of "Kindred," it is essential to delve into specific instances that exemplify this concept. Page number 7 of the graphic novel provides a compelling illustration of iconic solidarity, contributing to the overall narrative richness and emotional depth of the adaptation. On this particular page, the sequential

arrangement of panels plays a crucial role in conveying a powerful message. In the first panel, the artist skillfully portrays a child lying unconscious, vulnerable and in need of assistance. Subsequent panels depict Edana, the protagonist, taking immediate action to save the child, Kevin, by blowing breath into him. While these individual panels may not seem significant when viewed in isolation, it is the relationship between them that gives rise to iconic solidarity.

At first glance, one might interpret these panels merely as Edana saving a child's life, which, on its own, is a commendable act. However, when these panels are considered together, a deeper and more profound meaning emerges. The juxtaposition of a black woman rescuing a white boy creates a poignant visual representation of racial dynamics and interdependence. This depiction encapsulates the central themes of Octavia E. Butler's original work, where Dana, a black woman from the 1970s, finds herself repeatedly transported back in time to the antebellum South and must navigate the complexities of race and power.

The unity and coherence achieved through the arrangement of these panels on the same page evoke a sense of immediacy and emotional resonance. Readers are not merely witnessing an act of heroism; they are confronted with the complexities of race relations in American history. The iconic solidarity on this page reinforces the idea that the narrative extends beyond the actions of individual characters, symbolizing a broader commentary on societal issues. In this context, the use of iconic solidarity on page 7 not only serves as a storytelling device but also aligns with the authors' aim to provide a nuanced and thought-provoking adaptation of Butler's work. It allows readers to engage with the narrative on a visual and emotional level, effectively enhancing their understanding of the intricate themes explored in the original text.



Figure 3. Edana's ancestors are enslaved by white masters. From *Kindred: A Graphic Novel* Adaptation by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 40

Page 40 of the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* effectively demonstrates the concept of iconic solidarity through its skillful arrangement of panels. In this sequence, the visual storytelling technique employed by the artists contributes significantly to the reader's understanding of the narrative, and it underscores the power of the graphic medium in conveying complex themes and emotions.

At first glance, the individual panels on this page may appear disjointed and unrelated. However, it is precisely the juxtaposition and alignment of these panels on the same page that imbues them with iconic solidarity. In the first panel, we see Edana positioned behind a tree, her presence hidden from view, which sets the stage for her role as an observer in this pivotal moment. Her wide eyes, as depicted in the second panel, convey shock and surprise, but the true impact of these expressions is revealed when considered in the context of the adjacent panels.

It is in the third panel, where a group of white individuals are seen bringing black individuals out, that the true power of iconic solidarity becomes apparent. When these panels are viewed collectively, they form a cohesive narrative unit. Edana's concealed presence, her

wide-eyed astonishment, and the emergence of white individuals bringing black individuals forward culminate in a poignant and coherent storyline. It becomes evident that Edana is witnessing a distressing scene from the past, where her ancestors are subjected to the cruelty of white oppressors.

This spatial arrangement of panels transcends the limitations of individual images to create a meaningful whole, allowing readers to intuitively grasp the emotional impact of the moment. It enables the graphic novel to convey the complex historical and emotional dimensions of the narrative in a single, visually cohesive unit, a feat that text alone may struggle to achieve. The use of iconic solidarity here underscores the graphic novel's unique ability to provide readers with an immediate and sensory reading experience that engages them on both intellectual and emotional levels.



Figure 4. Edana is transported to the past while eating. From Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 40

Page 23 of the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's "Kindred" stands as a prime example of how visual storytelling can masterfully evoke emotional resonance in the reader. In this particular sequence, the narrative unfolds with a series of panels that intricately detail the harrowing incident of Edana saving Rufus from a fire accident. Through the visual medium, the graphic novel encapsulates the characters' emotions and the tension of the moment, thus enriching the reader's emotional experience.

The first panel on this page introduces Edana, whose startled expression reveals her immediate reaction to Rufus's reckless act of setting fire to the curtain. This moment of shock

is conveyed with striking immediacy, allowing the reader to empathize with Edana's fear and concern.

Moving forward, the fourth panel captures Rufus's facial expressions, featuring wide eyes and an open mouth that unequivocally signify his realization of the grave mistake he has made. The visual depiction of Rufus's fear adds depth to his character and accentuates the gravity of the situation. This emotional layer adds complexity to the narrative, allowing readers to engage with Rufus's emotional turmoil and his awareness of the danger he has created.

Panel three is particularly noteworthy as it depicts the fire dangerously close to Rufus's face. The visual representation of this perilous proximity further heightens the tension and underscores the gravity of the situation. The reader can almost feel the heat and the imminent threat, which intensifies the emotional resonance of the scene.

The last two panels on this page reveal Edana's anxiety and her intense focus on extinguishing the fire. Her actions and facial expressions communicate the urgency of the moment, with every line and shading contributing to the portrayal of her determination to save Rufus. In the final panel, Edana's facial expression conveys the tension that resides in her heart as she grapples with the life-threatening situation.

Thus, page 23 of the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* epitomizes the graphic medium's capacity to elicit emotional resonance in readers. Through skillful visualization, this page immerses readers in an emotionally charged scene, replete with fear, realization, danger, and determination. The juxtaposition of characters' expressions, the perilous proximity of the fire, and the portrayal of Edana's actions all combine to create a profoundly emotional experience.

The graphic novel's ability to convey these emotions visually and spatially enhances the reader's connection with the characters and the narrative. In this regard, the graphic novel adaptation of "Kindred" excels in providing a visceral and emotionally rich narrative experience, transcending the constraints of textual storytelling and reinforcing the argument that it offers a more immersive and emotionally resonant alternative to the original text.



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Figure 5. Rufus sets fire to the curtain. From Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 40

The gutter, the empty space between panels, and the concept of closure, which entails mentally connecting these panels to create narrative continuity, are indispensable elements in graphic novels that actively involve readers in the storytelling process. The gutter provides temporal and spatial separation, allowing readers to navigate the sequence of events, while closure requires readers to bridge the gaps between panels, fostering engagement and interaction with the narrative. This engagement influences narrative pacing, facilitates visual storytelling, and invites readers to uncover symbolism and subtext, deepening their

understanding of the story and enriching their reading experience, making the gutter and closure pivotal tools for conveying complex themes and emotions in the graphic novel medium.



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Figure 6. Edana is beaten by the white master. From *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 40

Page 97 of the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* vividly exemplifies the concept of closure, underscoring how the arrangement of panels within the same page creates a seamless narrative flow and enhances the reader's understanding of a critical moment in the story. The utilization of iconic solidarity in this sequence, combined with the nuances of closure between panels, allows for a sophisticated storytelling experience that transcends the limitations of text alone. The first panel, depicting a white hand holding a black hand, serves as a cryptic yet evocative prelude to the ensuing events. The closure between the second and third panels implies that Edana has been subjected to a severe beating by the white master for her act of reading. While the graphic novel does not explicitly depict Rufus, the white master, physically assaulting Edana, the reader can discern this through closure. The visual connection between the act of holding hands, the dropped book, Edana on the floor, and Rufus standing in the house creates a narrative coherence that allows readers to infer the traumatic event. This understanding is made possible solely through the meticulous arrangement of panels on a single page, showcasing the power of iconic solidarity in enhancing reader engagement and comprehension in the graphic novel medium.



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Figure 7. Edana's husband saves her. From *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* by O. E. Butler, J. Duffy, and J. Jennings, 2017, Abrams ComicArts, p. 40

Page number 66 of the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* presents a compelling example of how the concept of iconic solidarity can be employed within the framework of the gutter to convey distinct timelines and enhance narrative comprehension. While the images are arranged on the same page, the gutter serves as a visual boundary that effectively separates the narrative into different temporal dimensions. The strategic use of color further distinguishes these timelines, with the future depicted in red shades and the past adorned with colorful hues. This deliberate color-coding not only provides a visual distinction but also contributes to the reader's understanding of the temporal context. As the reader's gaze moves across the page, the gutter serves as both a division and a bridge, allowing for seamless transitions between timelines. In this manner, iconic solidarity within the gutter aids in creating a cohesive and immersive reading experience, where the simultaneous presence of multiple timelines becomes an integral aspect of storytelling, reinforcing the graphic novel's unique capacity to convey complex temporal narratives through both spatial and color-based arrangements.

Coda

In conclusion, the graphic format proves itself as a superior medium for the adaptation of the novel *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler. Through its skillful utilization of techniques such as emotional resonance and iconic solidarity, the graphic novel engages readers on multiple levels. It harnesses the power of visual storytelling to evoke complex emotions, providing a deeper and more immediate connection to the characters and their experiences. Moreover, the strategic deployment of iconic solidarity, whether in the arrangement of panels on the same page or the use of the gutter to delineate timelines, enriches the narrative, facilitating a cohesive and immersive reading experience. In this manner, the graphic novel transcends the confines of traditional text-based storytelling, offering readers a richer and more interactive engagement with the story, making it a compelling and valuable alternative to the original text.

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