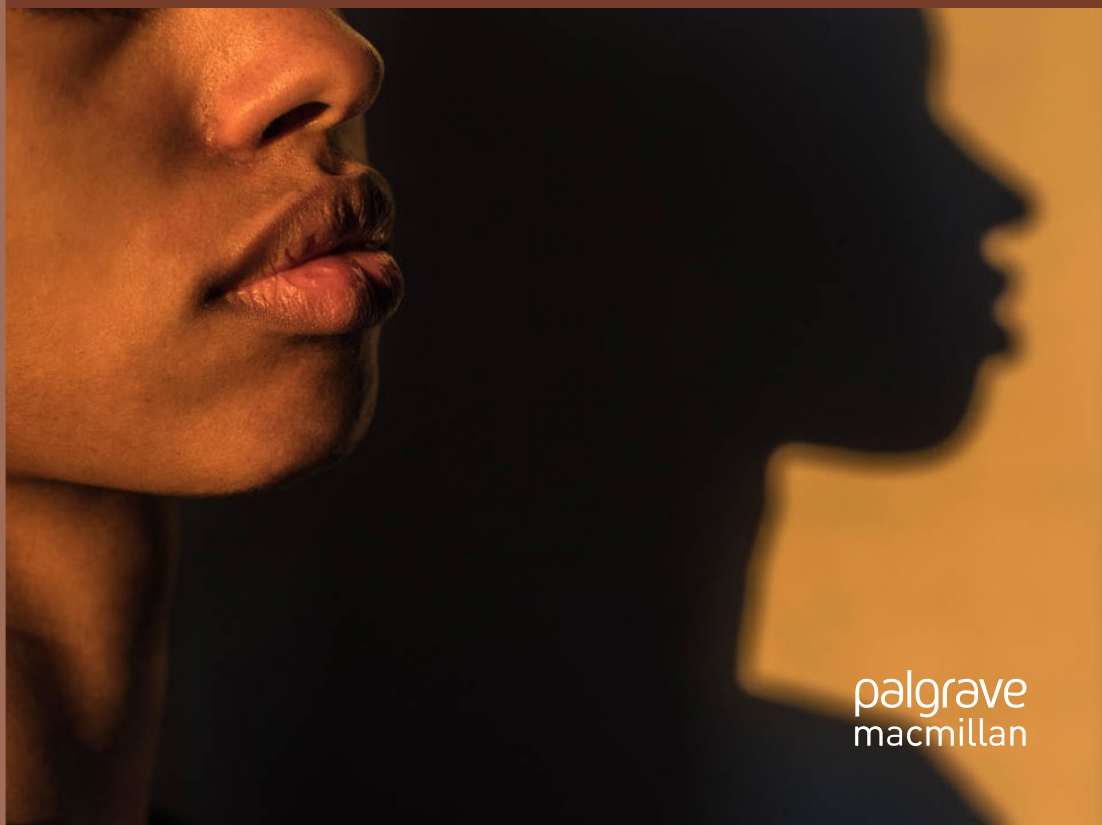
Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

Edited by Martin Japtok · Jerry Rafiki Jenkins



palgrave
macmillan

Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

Martin Japtok • Jerry Rafiki Jenkins
Editors

Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Martin Japtok
Palomar College
San Marcos, CA, USA

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins
Palomar College
San Marcos, CA, USA

ISBN 978-3-030-46624-4 ISBN 978-3-030-46625-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1

Cover illustration: David Prado Perucha / Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

Notes on Contributors

Joshua Yu Burnett His articles have appeared in *African American Review, Research in African Literatures, Mosaic*, and *Gender Forum* and in essay collections. He teaches at Tallahassee Community College and is a writing specialist at Florida State University.

Stefanie K. Dunning is an associate professor at Miami University. Her articles have appeared in *African American Review*, *MELUS*, *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* and in other journals and essay collections, and she is the author of *Queer in Black and White: Interraciality, Same Sex Desire, and African American Culture* (2009) and the forthcoming *Black To Nature: Pastoral Return in African American Literature*.

Allison E. Francis is Professor of English at Chaminade University of Honolulu. Her articles have appeared in the *Journal of Haitian Studies, Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* and in a number of collections, and she is co-editor of *South Seas Encounters: Nineteenth-Century Oceania, Britain, and America* (2018). She is revising a book titled *Navigating Gender and Ethnic Borders in Panama, Jamaica and England with Mary Seacole*.

Regina Hamilton received her PhD from Rutgers University and is now an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. Her research interests are twentieth- and twenty-first-century African American Literature, Caribbean Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Black Feminist Theory, and Women's and Gender Studies.

Heather Duerre Humann teaches at Florida Gulf Coast University. Her articles have appeared in *African American Review*, *South Atlantic Review*, *Studies in the Novel*, *Obsidian* and other journals, and she is the author of *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study* (2014), *Gender Bending Detective Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works* (2017), *Another Me: The Doppelgänger in 21st Century Fiction*, *Television and Film* (2018), and *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction, Film, and Television* (forthcoming from McFarland in late 2019).

Martin Japtok is Professor of English at Palomar College. His articles have appeared in *African American Review, MELUS*, *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*, *The Journal of Caribbean Literature* and in other journals and several essay collections. He is author of *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism, and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (2005), editor of *Postcolonial Perspectives on Women Writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S.* (2003), and co-editor, with Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, of *Black Authenticity/"Real" Blackness: Essays on the Meaning of Blackness in Literature and Culture* (2011).

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins is Professor of English at Palomar College. His articles have appeared in *African American Review*, *Journal of Children's Literature*, and *Screening Noir,* and he is the author of *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction* (2019) and co-editor, with Martin Japtok, of *Authentic Blackness/"Real" Blackness: Essays on the Meaning of Blackness in Literature and Culture* (2011).

Beth A. McCoy is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of English at SUNY Geneseo. Her articles have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Genders*, *PMLA*, and *African American Review*, among other journals, and in a number of essay collections, and she is working on a monograph, with Jasmine Y. Montgomery, entitled "*The Sad Aperture of the Dead": The Book as The Door of No Return*.

Micah Moreno received her MA from Florida Atlantic University. Her thesis is titled "Survival by Any Means: Race and Gender, Passing and Performance in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents."* She is teaching at Plantation High School in Plantation, FL.

Karina A. Vado is pursuing her PhD in English from the University of Florida. Her research focuses on African American and Latinx literature and culture, science fiction, critical race science and technology studies,

and black and Latinx feminism. The title of her dissertation is "Mapping Bloodlines, Engineering Utopia: Genetic Fictions and Mixed-Race Futurities in the Americas, 1863–2017."

tobias c. van Veen is a visiting scholar at ReImagining Value Action Lab, Lakehead University. He has been guest editor of a special issue of *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* and of two special issues of *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, and his articles have appeared in *Liquid Blackness*, *Dancecult*, *TOPIA*, *Women and Language* and other journals as well as in essay collections and a variety of critical arts and culture publications.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins

The novels and short stories by Octavia Estelle Butler (1947–2006), who was inducted in the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2010, continue to speak to the times we live in, maybe even more so today than at the time of their publication. Given their thematic concerns (e.g., climate change/global warming, slavery, religion, colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, survivalism, otherness, exploitation, consent, negotiation, the workings of power and the tools of the powerless, the impact of hard and bio-technologies, and the meaning of being human), Butler's novels and short stories are useful for understanding current local, national, and global problems as well as for thinking about solutions to them. Through a maze of present and future problems as she diagnosed and predicted them, Butler always speculated that there would be a path forward, even if that path was full of hard compromises.

"Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism," says Walidah Imarisha (2015, 3), "we are engaging in speculative fiction." In a number of ways, that

M. Japtok (✉) • J. R. Jenkins
Palomar College, San Marcos, CA, USA
e-mail: mjaptok@palomar.edu; jjenkins@palomar.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_1

definition of speculative fiction—the overall term now often used to include "science fiction and horror, fantasy" (Stanley 2019, 9), fiction invoking the supernatural, and alternate visions of the past and present—captures the works of Octavia Butler. In addition to winning several literary awards for her fiction—including the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and Solstice awards as well as the Langston Hughes Medal and the PEN Lifetime Achievement Award—Butler is the first science fiction writer to receive a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. At the time of her unfortunate death, Butler was "the only prominent, popular, female African American and decidedly feminist voice in an historically white male domain called science fiction and fantasy or SF/F" (Smith 2007, 385). Instead of focusing on issues of war, conquest, and empire, issues that defined much of SF/F before the 1960s, Butler's fiction, like that of Samuel Delany, can be read as "experiments in social justice" that "complicate" the simplistic view of "the alien as Other" (Smith 2007, 387). However, as she has stated in a 1998 interview, Butler's fictions are not utopian: "personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely" (McCaffery and McMenamin 2010, 26). Indeed, Butler's work does not offer us worlds absent of war, violence, empire, or forms of domination; instead, her work searches for possibilities to first survive and then transform worlds filled with such social evils. Citing Butler's "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," Sandra Y. Govan reminds us that "Octavia staunchly maintained that 'the one thing that [she] and [her] main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up on hope'" (McIntyre et al. 2010, 434). Thus, Butler offered us often hard-nosed and unsentimental fictional analyses of our world with the hope of making it and ourselves better.

To make ourselves and our worlds better, Butler believed that we had to address the "human contradiction," the notion that we have two characteristics that work against each other—intelligence and hierarchical behavior. In *Dawn* (1987), the first novel of Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the human contradiction is referred to as a "terrestrial characteristic" and "genetic problem" (39). The problem with the human contradiction, as Butler saw it, is that it could lead to human extinction: "Unfortunately, the hierarchical behavior is the older behavior, which is true; you can find it in algae, for goodness sakes. So sometimes the one in charge shouldn't be. That's why I begin [*Xenogenesis*] with the idea that we've one-upped ourselves to death in a nuclear war" (Mehaffy and Keating 2010, 105).

For Butler, the link between the human contradiction and human extinction are those moments when our hierarchical tendencies "focus and drive our intelligence" (Fry 2010, 128). An example of those moments is our inability or unwillingness to distinguish what Butler calls "real biological determinism," actual biological facts, from "body knowledge," what is made of biological facts (Mehaffy and Keating 2010, 108). In other words, implicit in the notion of the human contradiction is that "the gap between real biological determinism and body knowledge is largely due to our propensity to privilege our hierarchical tendencies … over our intelligence" (Jenkins 2019, 119). As Butler points out in her fictions, our tendency to confuse biology with body knowledge has resulted in classifications of humans that have been used to justify racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, slavery, and other forms of discrimination, domination, exclusion, and exploitation. Thus, although the human contradiction will always be with us, Butler's novels and short stories contend that one of the ways that it may be controlled or attenuated is to de-hierarchize human difference and different ways of being human. Put another way, since human difference is one of the issues that links questions of social justice and otherness to the human contradiction, Butler believed that keeping the human contradiction in check required rethinking the connections we have constructed between human differences—biological facts—and our social hierarchies—the ways in which we have interpreted those biological facts.

In her explorations of social justice, otherness, and hope, Butler wrote about people who tended to be absent from science fiction. According to Gerry Canavan (2016, 3), "Butler's creative and critical work demonstrates that science fiction was never really a straight, white, male genre, despite its pretensions to the contrary; blackness, womanhood, poverty, disability, and queerness were always there, under the surface, the genre's hidden truth." Her engagement with and focus on science fiction's hidden truth were partly due to what she believed was the "duty" of all writers. As she stated in a 1980 interview, authors should "write about human differences, all human differences and help make them acceptable. I think s.f. writers can do this if they want to. In my opinion, they are a lot more likely to have a social conscience than other kinds of writers" (Harrison 2010, 6). In this light, Butler's engagement with science fiction's hidden truth was also an attempt to do what many science fiction writers can but choose not to do—to write about humanity as it is. For Butler, writers cannot claim to be writing about humanity if they only write about one people or one way to be human. Butler reiterated this point 20 years later in her

description of what she focuses on in her fiction: "I write about people and the different ways of being human. And you really can't do that unless you write about a lot of different kinds of people" (Butler 2000). As she saw it, problems concerning social justice, otherness, and hope all derived from our inability to accept human differences, an inability that continues to shape the social evils we witness, experience, or produce in everyday life.

Octavia Butler is also rightly regarded as a founding figure in the movement now often referred to as Afrofuturism. While there is a host of definitions of the term, Mark Dery, who coined the term in 1994, argued that "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (180). It is important to note, as Alondra Nelson (2002, 14n23) does, that "the currents that comprise [Afrofuturism] existed long before" Dery came up with his catch-all term for African American science fiction, fantasy, horror, futurism, cyberculture, and the like (for more on the pre-history of Afrofuturism, see, for example, Lavender 2019; Youngquist 2016). In addition, Nelson herself, as editor of the 2002 Afrofuturism issue of *Social Text*, Sheree R. Thomas, as editor of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), and many others contributed to defining the movement. Whereas Dery's (1994) definition of Afrofuturism focuses on the role that technology plays, has played, and/or will play in African American lives, recent notions of the term focus on how black people might shape humanity in a prosthetically enhanced future. As Susana Morris (2010, 153) notes in her analysis of Butler's *Fledgling*, "not only does Afrofuturism posit that blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse, but in 'recovering the histories of counter-futures,' Afrofuturism insists that blacks fundamentally *are* the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society." Thus, at its most basic level, Afrofuturism imagines that there is a future that has black people in it, as so much of science fiction prior to the 1970s did not (Ursula Le Guin being the notable exception among white authors; however, as Gregory Jerome Hampton [2010, xxi] has noted, while Le Guin is one of Butler's "feminist predecessors," her seminal work *Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, does not explore "how other identities complicate problems of the body in addition to gender"). Stated more explicitly, Afrofuturism, while not leaving the past

behind and often critically engaging it, seeks a way forward, in multiple media and artistic expressions, that frees black people from confining stereotypical definitions of the past and delves imaginatively into a liberated future. These concerns are older than Afrofuturism, of course. Louis Chude-Sokei's (2016) book *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* reminds us of Afrofuturism's rootedness in "the long-standing commitment in black thinking to remapping the past with an injunction to not just imagine futures but make sure those futures not be colonized by the geographic or ideological limitations of the present" (14–15).

Butler is a pivotal ancestral figure for Afrofuturism not only as a literary pioneer but also as role model and thinker who sought to free herself from "the ideological limitations of the present" and thought in nuanced and complex ways about blackness, ways still being explored by a growing number of critics today. As Kilgore and Samantrai (2010, 355–356) put it, Butler's works are not "condition-of-the-people stories" that "faithfully and joyfully" represent "familiar black communities as a condition of the future"; instead, "the communities she creates are always hybrid, composed of individuals and families who share oddities across the range of more conventional phenotypic differences: African, European, Asian." Butler's refusal to see any community as monolithic or bound to definitions of the past, whether self-engendered or imposed, was both a reflection of an ever-more globalized present and an insistence on the necessity of cooperation, however tangled such cooperation might be. We are all still exploring the layers and nuances of Butler's fiction and are in some sense in the early phases of plumbing the suggestive depth of her texts.

Following the lead of Francis (2010), Hampton (2010), Holden and Shawl (2013), Canavan (2016), Pierce and Mondal (2017), and Stanley (2019), which are invaluable to developing an understanding of Butler's fiction, legacies, and humanity, the critical chapters in *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, all published here for the first time, seek to make important contributions to Butlerian scholarship. Like Holden and Shawl's (2013) *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*, and like Pierce and Mondal's (2017) *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, *Human Contradictions* "demonstrate[s] both the wide range of Butler's appeal and its influence in multiple worlds" (Holden and Shawl 2013, 3). Unlike *Strange Matings* and *Luminescent Threads*, *Human Contradictions* is exclusively comprised of academic investigations into Butler's literary

works. Unlike Tarshia L. Stanley's (2019) *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler*, which provides invaluable contextualization and suggestions for classroom uses for Butler's novels and short stories, our volume present essay-length deep readings of individual texts to continue the critical conversation about Butler's texts in higher education and help ensure that her essays, short stories, and novels are viewed as required reading in America's high schools, colleges, and universities. Even though, as Shannon Gibney (2011, 101) notes, the literary genres that Butler's work "builds on, undercuts, and surpasses […] are mainstream Black literature, mainstream science fiction, and feminist science fiction," Butler's texts need not be limited to literature courses; they can also be used to help teach courses in philosophy, biology, sociology, anthropology, psychology, cultural studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, religious studies, American studies, and U.S. history. Our collection thus covers a wide range of concerns and approaches and engages with the fullness of Butler's work: her series (*Seed to Harvest*, *Xenogenesis*, *Parables*), her stand-alone novels (*Kindred* and *Fledgling*), and her short stories.

In "Contextualizing Escape in the Neo-slave Narratives of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*," Allison E. Francis focuses on the processes of escape and on its psychological ramifications as both novels depict them. Francis argues that physical escape is merely one dimension of liberation, and not the one Butler and Williams primarily center in their narratives. Francis specifically hones in on "the politics of interracial relationships, the psychology of violence, and nontraditional modalities of escape" to explore how "Octavia Butler in *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* complicate what is meant by 'escape' for Black female slaves." Both authors are not bound by audience expectations or the limits of rhetoric available to writers of slave narratives, and for them it is also the consequences of slavery that move into the foreground; thus, "escape does not represent finality in *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose*; escape appears to be where survival truly begins."

Regina Hamilton also addresses the issue of black female survival in her chapter "The Somatopic Black Female Body within Archipelagic Space and Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*," but creates a new theoretical framework to enable an analysis of the complexities of Butler's novel and focus on the centrality of the black female body in it. She merges Bakthin's notion of the chronotope, the fusion of "spatial and temporal indicators into one … concrete whole," Ramona Fernandez's idea of the somatope, which gives a bodily dimension to the chronotope, and Elaine Stratford

et al.'s concept of the archipelago, which is to account for the complex relationships between geographic locations, in order to do justice to the manifold consequences that flow from "thinking about Anyanwu's body as the site from which all of the relations of [*Wild Seed*] flow." The novel's plot involves multiple geographic locations, multiple historical eras, multiple cultures, with Anyanwu being the only physical constant in all, but Hamilton also utilizes the novel to hope to create a theoretical apparatus that keeps on view that in "African American and Black Atlantic literatures, the body, space, and time cannot be separated, and the idea of a black somatic body creates a terminology that represents this inseparability while also disallowing the elision of the individual components." *Wild Seed* is the text that both inspires and tests this theory.

Martin Japtok asks, in his chapter "What Is 'Love'?—Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild,'" whether something like love can exist when power relations are unequal, a question *Wild Seed* and much of Butler's fiction poses. In attempting to find out what love means in "Bloodchild," this chapter puts the short story in conversation with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, all of which explore that question as well, and with a variety of definitions of love. "Bloodchild," this chapter argues, "allows one to ask what 'love' is, what its functions are, and observe the extent to which love may help explain relationships within specific historical contexts, especially to the individuals involved in those relationships." Love, both in the short story and in Butler's work in general, is a functional term and plays an ambiguous role, providing some leverage where there might otherwise be none but also potentially obfuscating power differentials. Yet the story also suggests there might be no alternative to it. As Moreno's chapter, Japtok highlights Butler's pragmatism in response to complicated lifeworlds.

Beth A. McCoy's "'Accept the Risk': Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' and Institutional Power" explores Butler's short story's value as a pedagogical tool for exploring unequal power dynamics in everyday life, in this case at the very institution students are enrolled. Institutional power to some extent parallels the power Butler's Tlic are exerting in that there may not be much room for negotiation: one accepts the power difference and conditions, or one does not get to attend (or stay on the planet, in the short story's case). McCoy argues that a study of "Bloodchild" prods "students to think carefully and critically about the terms with which they enter academic institutions even as the story underscores how important it is that

they make principled demands of the institutionally powerful who set those terms, even—and perhaps *especially*—when those institutions purport to be protective and liberatory." Like Burnett's chapter on *Dawn*, McCoy also interrogates the complicated nature of consent.

"Beyond Science Fiction: Genre in *Kindred* and Butler's Short Stories" by Heather Duerre Humann does not focus primarily on plot analysis but puts genre questions into the foreground, arguing that Octavia Butler is an innovator on that plane as well. As Humann argues, "Butler's science fiction differs from traditional science fiction in three key ways: the narrative perspectives she employs, her sustained focus on race and 'otherness,' and the manner in which she borrows from and blends tropes and conventions common to other literary genres." Humann looks at *Kindred*, but the majority of her discussion emphasizes how ground-breaking and genre-bending Butler's short stories are.

Joshua Yu Burnett's chapter "Troubling Issues of Consent in *Dawn*" reads Butler's novel against contemporary discussions about consent, employing a similar lens as Beth A. McCoy but using college consent guidelines as his starting point. The "tangled web of consent and desire Butler weaves in *Dawn*" allows for a discussion of the boundaries between coercion, voluntary assent, manipulation, and exploitation. Butler does not draw clear boundaries, and readers of the novel are left with the uncomfortable task on figuring out themselves where those might be, and, as this chapter shows, are confronted with the fact that the "Oankali disinterest in … securing affirmative consent causes great emotional distress for their supposed human 'partners,' dis-ease in readers, and a lingering sense of uncanny horror towards the Oankali in the novel's human characters' even ones who are otherwise sympathetic to the Oankali and critical of humanity's deeply flawed nature."

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins's "Transhumanism, Posthumanism, and the Human in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" focuses on how Butler's trilogy makes an argument for transhumanism, the idea that humans can change and improve themselves, and against posthumanism, the notion that if humans change themselves, they will constitute a new species. The latter notion often takes as its point of departure that a particular kind of human—the Western white subject—is somehow the acme of human evolution, an argument often implicit in bioconservatism and "end of history" discussions. Butler shows, however, that it is just that very racial-historical construct, the most extreme embodiment of what Butler has called the "human contradiction"—hierarchical thinking and intelligence—that has

led humanity to the brink of self-extinction. In Butler's trilogy, that debate plays out in the relationship between the Oankali, humans they have genetically altered, Oankali-human "constructs," and groups of resisters who initially refuse Oankali genetic modifications. Jenkins proposes that *Xenogenesis* makes a case for multiple ways of being human so that the trilogy "is not only about the birth of a new species, but also about the birth of new ways of being human," ideas that reverberate, if in different ways, in *Wild Seed* and "Bloodchild" as well.

"'But All We Really Know That We Have Is the Flesh': Body-Knowledge, Mulatto Genomics, and Reproductive Futurities in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" by Karina A. Vado delves into the complexities of genetic manipulation, a key concern in Butler's trilogy. This chapter approaches this topic differently than Rafiki Jenkins does in that it focuses on the topic of "mixing" as a window into Butler's thinking on the emerging dominance of genomics, and Karina A. Vado points out that DNA would become "the reigning metaphor of the twenty-first century." Engaging the intellectual history of eugenics, the author examines "how both the (resister) Humans and the Oankali in the series invariably adhere to ideas of biological essentialism that stifle, to varying degrees, the building or 'engineering,' if you will, of actual emancipatory futures for mixed-race/hybrid and/or non-normative subjects. More specifically, I trace and uncover the competing discourses of white and black eugenics that are weaved through the Humans' obsession with 'human purity' (paralleling white eugenics' preoccupation with maintaining untainted bloodlines), and the Oankali's morally ambivalent genetic engineering/species interbreeding project (paralleling early twentieth-century 'New Negro' eugenicists notions of racial progress vis-à-vis the *amalgamation* of the black and white races)." The questions of what function being "mixed-race" plays, for whom, and to what purpose turn out to be charged, even if the "mixing" is enacted for seemingly benevolent purposes.

In "'Learn or Die': Survivalism and Anarchy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," Stefanie K. Dunning reads Butler's novel as inviting thought about how to create a more sustainable "society based on anarchic principles of flexibility, anti-fragility, and change." Though survival is a key theme in almost all of Butler's fiction, Dunning shows how central it is in *Parable of the Sower*, which shows the tragedy of one form of society collapsing but not without asking whether a better society can be built from the ruins. Dunning reads the novel in the larger context of African American survival in the New World, and references Harriet Tubman and

maroon communities as historical antecedents. Dunning thus sees possibilities in the collapse *Sower* depicts: "The anarchy implied by Lauren's community represents the end of black social death, a radical break in the nation which upends its historical logic." *Sower*, and its sequel *Talents*, thus invites comparison to *Xenogenesis* in that these novels explore whether the necessary renewal of society can only follow the end of its current, destructive form.

In "Survival by Any Means: Race and Gender, Passing and Performance in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," Micah Moreno makes a case that Butler's novels illustrate race and gender as primarily performative categories than as expressions of immutable identity. Indeed, the novels show that they need to be in the interest of survival, which is necessarily intertwined with visions of the societal renewal Lauren Olamina strives for. Moreno thus focuses more on the pragmatic aspects of survival than Francis, who saw Dana's survival and escape in *Kindred* as stage one, followed by the psychological consequences of harrowing experiences which also require a kind of survival, and less on the potential of an anarchic, sustainable future than Dunning, though the fluidity of performativity Moreno emphasizes has anarchic potential. Moreno's main concern is that in the *Parable* novels, gender or racial performance are seen not so much as foundational to identity and psychology but measured by whether they contribute to survival. Lauren, the founding mother of the Earthseed religion, "is a trickster and an enigma, drawing on her ancestral history as well as her understanding of the performative nature of gender to become a survivor by any means necessary," so that gender and racial roles are "adopted, discarded, and shaped pragmatically in the interest of survival."

tobias c. van Veen, in his chapter "Of Blood and Blackness in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling:* On Post-Racial Utopias in Posthumanist Discourse," examines the only other stand-alone novel in Butler's oeuvre outside of *Kindred*, and her last published novel. As he argues, *Fledgling* continues Butler's "exploration of female black protagonists who are not quite human, providing a speculative model for the study of the social and biological constructs of race, including the very 'race' of the human species, inviting comparisons to Jenkins's and Vado's essays. *Fledgling* is particularly crucial to understanding the relationship between discourses of Afrofuturism—that (re)imagine blackness in the future/past by way of science fiction—and posthumanism, the latter of which critically re-evaluates Western ideas of the human while proposing models for post-human

entanglements with the animal, machine, earth and alien." Van Veen's chapter thus shares Jenkin's chapter's concern with definitions of the human, connecting such concerns with the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism in which such questions are central.

We hope that the chapters in *Human Contradictions* inspire others to read and study Butler's work because one collection of chapters cannot capture the intelligence, depth, significance, and impact of Butler's work. If anything, her work appears to grow more relevant to the world we live each passing decade, and as this collection illustrates, new concerns and new ways of reading will be brought to her work. She continues to inspire, causes one to question one's premises, baffles, and invites reflection.

Acknowledgments We wish to thank Allison E. Francis for suggesting to us, after a Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association Octavia Butler panel, that we edited a collection just like this one.

References

Butler, Octavia E. 2000. Interview with Charlie Rose. *The Charlie Rose Show*, aired June 1. https://charlierose.com/videos/28978

———. 2007. *Dawn; Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central.

Canavan, Gerry. 2016. *Octavia E. Butler*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Chude-Sokei, Louis. 2016. *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Dery, Mark, ed. 1994. Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, 179–222. Durham: Duke University Press.

Francis, Consuela, ed. 2010. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Fry, Joan. 2010. Congratulations! You've Just Won $295,000: An Interview with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 123–133. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Gibney, Shannon. 2011. Science Fiction, Feminism and Blackness: The Multifaceted Import of Octavia Butler's Work. In *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, ed. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, 100–110. New York: Peter Lang.

Hampton, Gregory J. 2010. *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*. New York: Lexington Books.

Harrison, Rosalie G. 2010. Sci-Fi Visions: An Interview with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 3–9. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Holden, Rebecca, and Nisi Shawl, eds. 2013. *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*. Seattle: Aqueduct Press.

Imarisha, Walidah. 2015. Introduction. In *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown, 3–5. Chico: AK Press.

Jenkins, Jerry Rafiki. 2019. *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Kilgore, De Witt Douglas, and Ranu Samantrai. 2010. A Memorial to Octavia E. Butler. *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (3): 353–361. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746438

Lavender, Isiah, III. 2019. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

McCaffery, Larry, and Jim McMenamin. 2010. An Interview with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Conseula Francis, 10–26. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

McIntyre, Vonda N., Sandra Y. Govan, Jeffrey Allen Tucker, Veronica Hollinger, Sweta Narayan, Marleen S. Barr, and Joan Gordon. 2010. Reflections on Octavia E. Butler. *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (3): 433–442. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746443

Mehaffy, Marilyn, and AnaLouise Keating. 2010. "Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 98–122. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Morris, Susana M. 2010. Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40 (3/4): 146–166. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23333483

Nelson, Alondra. 2002. Introduction: Future Texts. *Social Text* 20 (2): 1–15.

Pierce, Alexandra, and Mimi Mondal. 2017. *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*. Yokine: Twelfth Planet Press.

Smith, Stephanie. 2007. Octavia Butler: A Retrospective. *Feminist Studies* 33 (2): 385–393.

Stanley, Tarshia L., ed. 2019. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler*. New York: Modern Language Association.

Thomas, Sheree. 2000. *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. New York: Warner Books.

Youngquist, Paul. 2016. *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

CHAPTER 2

Contextualizing Escape in the Neo-slave Narratives of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*

Allison E. Francis

In historical, fugitive slave narratives like the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (1847), successful escapes from slavery represent a slave's physical emancipation. However, in neo-slave narratives like Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), escape is less about the geographical journey to freedom and more about the emotional and psychological liberation and revelations of the female protagonists, Dana and Dessa, respectively. In these neo-slave narratives, a slave's feelings and reactions to liberation become more important than the mechanics of the escape itself. Therefore, these protagonists are able to reinvigorate the enslaved female's vocabulary by using sentiments to express both judgment and emotions, which signals the necessity of exposing a slave's reactions to enslavement that was expurgated from early slave narratives like that of Charles Ball. In fact, Ball's editor Isaac Fisher believed that if he did not suppress the subjectivity and opinions

A. E. Francis (✉)
Chaminade University of Honolulu, Honolulu, HI, USA
e-mail: afrancis@chaminade.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_2

Ball expressed about slavery, Ball's narrative would "[contaminate] facts rendering them less fit for the reader's 'eye' than for his 'imagination'" (Andrews 1986, 63). So, facts and observations of this "peculiar institution" and life in the South then, not sensibility and sentimentality, would garner the attention and support of early Northern readers.

Instead of relying on facts and observations, Butler and Williams politicize sentimental discourse, like Harriet A. Jacobs and Mary Prince did in their narratives, to explore the transgressions of racial and sexual violence visited upon black female slaves in the American slave cycle. Unlike early fugitive slave narratives, however, Butler and Williams are able to provide readers with insight not readily available in nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts precisely because their characters employ sentiments as both the language of feeling and the language of judgment—without censure.[1]

Nevertheless, both fictional characters, Dana and Dessa, are isolated despite the various communities they encounter. Dana, as a time traveler from the twentieth century, becomes inexplicably propelled to her ancestors' enslaved past, but she travels too far back in rural Maryland of the 1800s to await emancipation, so her survival and that of her distasteful, white ancestor Rufus Weylin, become paramount until she returns again and again to her present day—Los Angeles in 1976. Dessa, on the other hand, is a young, pregnant, renegade slave who recently escaped from a coffle and seeks refuge with other fugitive slaves on the incomplete plantation of Mistress Ruth Elizabeth or "Rufel," in the antebellum South. Dessa eventually realizes that while she and her mistress share the vulnerabilities of being unprotected and female, class and race divides cannot be broached by gender alone. Therefore, escape for both Dana and Dessa is not only desirable, but they must believe in its inevitability.

Since Butler's and Williams's narratives are fictional accounts of slavery reflecting history and tradition, the slave escape can be explored (and perhaps exploited) in ways it cannot in fugitive slave narratives whose authors were still in hiding. To this end, Butler and Williams poke, prod, and push through the understandable limitations of traditional slave narratives written by fugitive slave women like Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs. Consequently, through the politics of interracial relationships, the psychology of violence, and nontraditional modalities of escape, Octavia Butler in *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* complicate what is meant by "escape" for black female slaves.

Before we might contemplate the discursive, literary techniques by which Williams and Butler render their twentieth-century narratives, we need to understand the term "neo-slave narrative". James Olney in "'I Was Born': Slave Narrative, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature" argues that the act of transforming memory into the slave narrative form involves "the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, [so] events are lifted out of time to be resuscitated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance" (Olney 1984, 47). This definition posits an intriguing argument between the historical slave narrative and neo-narrative because as Olney suggests, memory shapes the past events in slave narratives, but the memory is tempered by the present state of the author—specifically, the fugitive slave during the writing process.

Unlike Bell and Olney, Guy Mark Foster argues, as Paul Gilroy does, that neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* are not merely re-imagining slavery by rescuing or reshaping memory; these narratives offer a means of negotiating the historical import of an enslaved past through the lens of modernity:

> For if it is true that a focus on slavery is the reason that so many contemporary critics and readers of African American literary texts celebrate Butler's novel, then I would say that slavery itself is overdetermined within the tradition, since *Kindred* is not so much *about* slavery as it is about how black Americans learn to renegotiate the history of slavery within their present-day circumstances. (Foster 2007, 147)

While I believe Foster's argument is a valid caution against the reductive approach of most literary critics to neo-slave narratives, in my reading, Butler and Williams construct idealized memories based on their readings of previous slave narratives, and in turn, each author's protagonist, Dana and Dessa, enacts these speculative memories based on the author's ability to shape the future progression, the "patterned significance" if you will, of the specific protagonist.

So, these twentieth-century novels rely on speculative memories despite the narrative truths used to render them, which is why they become what Bernard Bell (1989, 289) coined "neo-slave narratives" in 1987: "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom." Ashraf

Rushdy (1999, 3) extended this definition to mean "contemporary novels that adopt the form, assume the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." Through the application of this definition, Rushdy is able

> to explore in some detail the social logic of the literary form of the Neo-slave narrative: its origins in the social, intellectual and racial formations of the sixties, its cultural politics as these texts intervene in debates over the significance of race, and its literary politics as these texts make statements on engagements between texts, and between mainstream and minority traditions. (3)

Rushdy's argument centers on the four representative neo-narratives he examines—Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, and Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Rushdy believes these novels respond to cultural and sociopolitical debates from the 1960s, which are then transformed to represent literary trends in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, when this modern rendering of the slave narrative genre is conflated with speculative fiction by an author, Nadine Flagel (2012, 218) believes "the neo-slave narrative is liberated from the rigid forms of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with speculative fiction." Moreover, Flagel notes how both genres have suffered similar literary stigmas: "Arguably the most popular vehicle for imagining alterity in the nineteenth century was the slave narrative; in the twentieth, speculative fiction. Yet both have been dismissed at times for being formulaic, repetitive, and non-literary" (217). My interest, however, relies on the revelations this neo-narrative genre presents for Butler's and Williams's female protagonists, who enact non-traditional and perhaps more disruptive modes of escape from bondage even though they physically remain enslaved, while their psyches and personal truths do not. This disruption is most transgressive through Butler's and Williams's construction of interracial relationships.

Interracial Relationships

Although Harriet Jacobs, in her seminal 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* reveals the possibility of love, or at least mutual desire between a slave girl and a white man, neo-slave narratives have the advantage of exploring such antebellum taboos more explicitly. For

example, both Butler and Williams depict interracial relationships that are based on either love or mutual attraction. In *Kindred*, Dana is a 26-year-old black woman married to Kevin, a pale-eyed, white man who is nearly 10 years her senior (Butler 2004, 57). Their relationship is not without difficulties since the plot is set in mid-1970s California when love between blacks and whites, while legal, was still considered unethical, immoral, or an abomination by some members of both ethnic groups.

In fact, Butler (2004) describes the negative reception both Dana and Kevin experience when they inform their relatives of their impending marriage. Kevin's incomprehension of such prejudice leads him to question Dana about her uncle's feelings of rejection. Dana responds, "I'm marrying you … He wants me to marry someone like him—someone who looks like him. A black man" (11). This post-Civil Rights response to Dana's engagement to a white man underlines the legacy of fear and loathing associated with nonconsensual, interracial relationships in antebellum America. Foster (2007, 154) notes, "*Kindred* graphically demonstrates that much of the anonymity that whites enjoy is effectively problematized when someone white becomes linked with a person of color in ways that are socially proscribed, such as in the case of marriage or any other intimate partnership." Hannah Rehak (2015, 5) reminds us that Kevin's relationship with Dana becomes more fraught in the novel when he time travels with her because "the similarities between Kevin and the Weylin genealogy is there to begin with in the pale eyes and cold stares, but the influence of the antebellum South on Kevin is undeniable and he is not just a reflection, but also a product of the past." Rehak argues that "though Kevin may fight his racial prejudice and male superiority complex, he expects Dana to give much of herself to him and gets bothered when she practices her agency" (4). These moments of "unlearned oppressive tendencies" (4), as Rehak terms them, could be the far-reaching consequences of American slavery on white descendants of slave-owners but also point to the "entanglement of past and present" that characterizes most of Butler's novel.[2] Therefore, interplays like this one between Dana and Kevin offer poignant yet disturbing reminders that the fear of replaying the victimology narrative of black women's racial oppression in mid-1970s America parallels true accounts of rape, molestation, and sexual assault of enslaved women by slave-owners and overseers, which Dana will witness when she time travels backwards.

In Williams's novel *Dessa Rose*, the white Mistress Rufel begins an affair with one of the "darkies" named Nathan who escaped the coffle with

Dessa, and like Dessa, he lived freely on Rufel's plantation (Williams 1998, 155). Rather than mimic the disturbing trysts between slaves and their owners subtly veiled in some slave narratives like Jacobs's, Williams slowly develops the attraction between Rufel and Nathan, staging an elaborate courtship between the dark-skinned man and this abandoned white woman. By acknowledging the possibility of desire between black men and white women in the antebellum period, Williams complicates established myths of racial desire perpetuated in past and current accounts of slavery in America. Foster (2007, 148) notes this problematic schema wherein

> "race" is a privileged term in the construction of black *and* white identity formations, often subordinating gender, class, and sexuality, for instance, as well as, correspondingly, that blackness and whiteness are historically stable, rather than historically *changing*, concepts. With the latter, many Americans assume that interracial sexual liaisons of the past and those of the present, despite being implicated within radically contrasting historical and socioeconomic conditions, are conceptually indistinguishable from one another.

Foster reminds us that even though theoretically we can imagine the fluidity of racial constructs, prevalent nineteenth-century racial myths about black men's bestial designs on the virtue of white women continue to inform how we interpret historical and fictional accounts of interracial relationships. In contrast, I believe that through this courtship Williams breaks down these negative myths about race and sex by offering a liminal space where black men and white women might freely choose each other as romantic and sexual partners.

But this courtship does not merely rectify racist sexual fantasies of violence and assault; it provides Rufel with knowledge of the fugitive slaves living on her plantation and establishes in her a certain but limited affinity to their plight through her own growing desire for Nathan (Williams 1998, 147). This humanizing gesture through sexual desire is crucial to restore Rufel's agency and motive for remaining on a plantation she barely controls since Dessa previously denounces Rufel's affectionate memories of her "mammy" Dorcas as false and foolish. Although Rufel's claims of familial intimacy with her mammy allowed her to validate an uneasy alliance with the runaway slaves on her plantation, Angelo Rich Robinson (2011, 57) argues that despite Rufel's fabrication of "a romanticized role to remove the ugliness of slavery, her history did not benefit or restore

Dorcas' identity or that of the many other mammies living in slavery." Notwithstanding this powerful debunking of the slave-owner's fantasy of the subservient mammy stereotype, in this shifting terrain of narrative space, Williams also allows white desire for blackness to kindle an intimacy that leads to the humanization of the Sutton Glen slaves. It is this illicit relationship with Nathan and her growing usefulness to the fugitives that will redeem Rufel.[3] Moreover, Rufel develops a perception of these fugitive slaves as lost souls who share her refuge. In short, through loving Nathan she sees him and other blacks through the lens of humanity, not merely chattel slavery (Williams 1998, 133–134).

In both *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose* then, we can read alternate representations of interracial relationships in the antebellum South, wherein the progeny of miscegenation were not merely the result of rape or unwilling parents. Thus, the neo-slave narrative offers another context by which a contemporary author might signify love between whites and blacks that is not configured merely on violence and lust. Yet, neither Butler nor Williams can conceive Disney-esque resolutions for all their interracial pairings. Therefore, Dana's white ancestor Rufus is unable to project the loving model Dana and Kevin's relationship might suggest, so Rufus continues his "destructive love" for Dana's great-great-great grandmother Alice, a slave, which leads to her ultimate, self-destructive escape—suicide (Butler 2004, 147). "Destructive," Dana reminds us because "[t]here was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (124). Nor can Rufel and Nathan in Williams's *Dessa Rose* maintain a love union in nineteenth-century America where currencies like ethnicity, class, capital, and social norms are strictly defined, yet rarely traded. Thus does one interracial pairing in *Kindred* end in violence, while the other pairing in *Dessa Rose* does not endure the passage of time, geography, or antebellum society. Such failed interracial relationships also point to twentieth-century anxieties of race and sex, which become more disruptive when violence seeps into both Butler's and Williams's narratives.

Violence

While both Butler and Williams can and do conceive multivalent outcomes for interracial relationships in their neo-slave narratives, chattel slavery is still slavery whether contextualized in the nineteenth or twentieth century. As Mary A. Seliger (2012, 317) reminds us in her investigation of the "master narrative" in *Dessa Rose*,

> While social, economic, and political dissension in antebellum America divided the nation into two conflicting geographic entities. North and South, lack of mobility and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and class not only create bonds of dependency, but are an impediment to embodiment and the development of selfhood.

Not surprisingly, the exploration of violence in these novels is worth noting because not only is violence marked painfully on slave bodies, but readers gain insight into the psychological ramifications of the body in pain. I would argue that neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* are able to express what Elaine Scarry (1985, 3) termed the "inexpressibility of physical pain."[4] For instance, Dana's first experience with antebellum violence is as an observer of the enslaved father of Alice, who is whipped by night patrollers for visiting his freeborn wife and child. Dana tells us, "I … lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves … My face was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping" (Butler 2004, 36). Here, Dana finds the reality of violence unequal to her experience of twentieth-century cinematic representations—a terrifying marker by which some twenty-first-century readers elide violence in America.

This is a powerful moment of foreshadowing because not only will she witness more plantation violence masked as discipline, Dana will also be the recipient of similar subjugation by both white men's fists and whips (Butler 2004, 42, 107). However, she gives voice to both her physical and psychic pain, especially when she is whipped for the first time:

> It came [the whip]—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin … I screamed, convulsed. Weylin struck again and again, until I couldn't have gotten up at gunpoint. I kept trying to crawl away from the blows, but I didn't have the strength or the coordination to get far. I may have been still screaming or just whimpering, I couldn't tell. All I was really aware of was the pain. I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing me as he beat me … I vomited. And I vomited again because I couldn't move my face away. (107)

As Kara Keeling noted during her plenary address at the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association conference in 2015, Dana realizes her existence is predicated on the violence of her ancestors, specifically the

Weylin men—Rufus and his father, Tom. This is why Butler ensures that we hear Dana's screams, feel the heat of whipped flesh, and taste her vomit and dirt in visceral detail. Although traditional slave narratives like that of Mary Prince do not avoid violence, the sensibilities of their primarily female Northern readership required a certain tacit understanding that graphic renderings should not exceed the physical in a slave narrative; however, no such censure of emotionality need exist for writers of a neo-slave narrative.

Such inexpressible fear and potential violence also are what trigger Dana's flight back to 1970s Los Angeles. For example, her first, direct experience with the whip is soul-sucking, graphic, and harrowing, especially since her husband is unable to touch her in time so that he too can cross back over to the promised land of twentieth-century traffic, pollution, and smog. The separation between Dana and her husband Kevin will last five years and their reunion will be uneasy, as much as it is desired. Is it any wonder then that it is among slaves that Dana discovers what she herself experiences: how families are fractured by a slave-owner's decision to sell a brother, sister, daughter, father, or mother on a whim, or for financial reasons, or because a slave appeared to look insolent in the presence of a white person?

According to Flagel (2012, 219), "Dana repeatedly experiences typical symptoms, such as nausea at terror of the void and a sense of chaos, emptiness, isolation, infinitude, separation, and absence. In other words, the disorienting nausea and fears of her travels owe as much to speculative fiction as they do to slave narratives." Flagel also points out that "Dana often carries neither healed wounds nor memories of wounds but open wounds into the present … Butler's time travel means that the wounds of slavery literally and figuratively have not healed over by 1976" (Butler 2004, 232). This is a harrowing reminder that there is neither a simple resolution to Dana and Kevin's antebellum experiences in *Kindred*, nor to the disruptive legacy of American slavery in our collective consciousness.

Later in Butler's novel, Alice's own pain and disassociation will mirror her descendant Dana when Rufus recovers Alice beaten, broken, and psychologically damaged after her unsuccessful attempt to escape with her husband Isaac, who upon capture has his ears sliced off and is sold down the River (Butler 2004, 170). Both Dana's whipping and Alice's failed escape depict cruelty and violence coupled with familial separation—common tropes in slave histories. However, the emotionality of such fracturing between families is seldom so disturbingly detailed since facts, not

sentiments, were the primary intention of fugitive slave narratives and nineteenth-century historians.

Similarly, the violence in Williams's novel is not relegated to just depicting the foul stench and body-numbing size of the sweatbox Dessa is sealed in, or increasingly graphic whippings, or even to Dessa's mutilated loins with "scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would never grow there again" (Williams 1998, 154). In addition to these horrors, readers witness the inverse effect of violence on its perpetrators like when the white investigative reporter Adam Nehemiah experiences self-loathing and some small measure of guilt when he attempts to dominate Dessa by hitting her in the face and condemning her to a saltwater diet because of her noncompliance (Williams 1998, 30). Even in *Kindred*, Rufus temporarily exhibits remorse and guilt when he strikes and later rapes Alice. Again, these textual moments in both neo-slave narratives provide readers with insight not readily available in nineteenth-century accounts because modern audiences witness what contemporary psychologists term "controlling and abusive tactics" of abuse which adversely affects the perpetrator as well as the victim. The interface of violence and cruelty with love and desire will add yet another measure of complexity to how and when these enslaved characters will formulate their escapes.

Escape and Refuge

To be clear, it is the constant attempts at escaping bondage, not the final escape itself that appears to matter in these two neo-slave narratives. Unlike Frederick Douglass, whose first narrative focuses on his heroic flight to freedom, the enslaved women who Butler and Williams imagine are configured more like Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent because Dana and Dessa construct slow-to-realize escape plans or escape routes, which necessitate that they build networks of co-conspirators, both black and white. For example, Dana, with Kevin's help, builds a survival kit—a denim bag filled with scratch pads, pens, maps of Maryland, books on slavery, and a knife—which she ties to her body. By wearing this kit when she is in 1970s Los Angeles, Dana is assured that she has a few modern tools to provide her with a sense of agency and support since she cannot affect an actual escape each time she is involuntarily ripped through the fabric of time. Dana also initiates friendships with the plantation slaves and erects a temporary but failed truce with Rufus because of their strange time and space co-dependency and blood-ties.

In Williams's novel, Dessa subscribes to an elaborate confidence game with Mistress Rufel and the other fugitive slaves, wherein Rufel will continually resell her "slaves" who then escape and meet her outside the towns they visit so that they may eventually divide up the funds and seek their individual freedoms (Williams 1984, 151). But the networks in each narrative are more fluid than reliable, and freedom is a long time in coming, which means both Dana and Dessa, ultimately, must rely on their own ingenuity to maintain their self-preservation. Consequently, they seek refuge first, not freedom.

Dana at first unsuccessfully searches for refuge outside the plantation like freedmen's cabins or other villages, but ultimately, she defines refuge as the room her husband has been granted by Rufus's father when Kevin is inadvertently transported back in time with her (Butler 2004, 811). Later, Dana will rely on Rufus's room to be her refuge from the vagrancies of her own mind as she contemplates whether or not passivity in her enslaved condition is submissive acceptance, or a form of mental escape (Butler 2004, 145–146). However, Dana quickly recognizes that even her husband's protection is fleeting since their twentieth-century interracial marriage is not sanctioned in the antebellum South, and Kevin will not always hitch a ride with his time-travelling wife. Since Dana time travels primarily alone, survival is more crucial than escape, which is why she relies on the "talk-story" slaves share in the cookhouse to offer her tips and clues: "I [Dana] liked to listen to them talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive" (Butler 2004, 94). Unfortunately, blood ties among slaves or even family members are not resilient enough to resist the virus that is slavery.

Survival while enslaved is treacherous business, and in Dana's transient state, a brutal reminder that her survival is configured on Rufus—a changeable, aggressive, white ancestor. This is why in each interaction with Rufus (and at times, with Dana's own husband), Dana insists on her free will and self-determination. Thus she struggles continuously to maintain her agency in the face of the hegemonic structure of the Weylin Plantation. Consequently, survival is arguably more tenuous for Dana than for Dessa because of the added element of time travel in *Kindred*. In fact, Flagel (2012, 219) argues that "[t]he arbitrary nature of time travel and Dana's constant dread of it stimulate the reader's appreciation of the arbitrary and quickly changing logic of slavery and of the slaves' complex psychological responses to situations of bounded choice." As Flagel notes, Dana's sense

of what choices she has will change with each crossing, and her modern definitions of how slaves survive bondage no longer remain static nor monolithic.

In Dana's reality, time travel is messy and sometimes violent, incurring her bouts of nausea and vomiting, disorientation and abandonment, as if she were enacting the Middle Passage again and again, each time she plummets to Maryland in the 1800s, an analogy Robert Crossley (2004, 268) asserts "recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her [Dana's] ancestors." Clearly, there is nothing clean nor painless about that this literary device of vertigo-inducing time travel in Butler's novel: Dana's limbs are broken, timelines are sped up to elapsed months or years and then slowed down to mere minutes or days, her emotions are frazzled, and the after-effects of Dana's time spent in Maryland off and on from 1815 to 1820 often have dire repercussions on her real life in 1976 which the reader experiences. In fact, after Dana's final crossover, she loses an arm and has to assure friends and police in the twentieth century that her husband is not abusing her. Crossley (2004, 267) reminds us that Butler herself remained silent on why and how Dana's arm is severed, merely remarking that she couldn't allow her protagonist to return completely whole because, of course, no one who experienced slavery is ever whole again. Thus will modalities of survival and escape for Dana exist merely as temporary shelters because of the unpredictable quality of her time-spinning.

For Dessa, her initial refuge is her mind and memories when the white author Nehemiah first discovers her pregnant on the floor of Sheriff Hughes's root cellar, awaiting her fate after initiating a semi-successful revolt while shackled in a slave coffle (Williams 1998, 17–18). Dessa, barely 18, but still enraged and grieved over the murder of her beloved Kaine by their master, incites the other slaves in her chain line to overpower the slave trader Wilson and his guards in an effort to free "the rest of the slaves on Wilson's coffle … the toll in life and property had been horrifying. Five white men had been killed. Wilson himself had lost an arm. Thirty-one slaves had been killed or executed; nineteen branded or flogged: some thirty-eight thousand dollars in property destroyed or damaged" (21–22). Nehemiah intends to turn her tale into profit once he publishes it because he recognizes this staggering figure of dead men, both white and black, as well as the fact that all the slaves escaped bondage, however temporarily, makes Dessa both an object of curiosity and fear.

However, his dreams are not realized when the Sheriff's slaves, and outlying survivors of the slave revolt, help Dessa escape the cellar, and she finds her way to her next refuge—Sutton Glen, overseen by Rufel, herself a new mother, anxiously awaiting the return of her wayward, gambling husband who never makes a narrative appearance. This scene solidifies what Dessa's initial incarceration fomented; namely, that refuge may be a state of being because when she walks on her own two feet once more, Dessa in that moment is free: "she knew, without needing to think about it, that she'd never be less free than she was now, striding sometimes stumbling toward a place she'd never seen and didn't know word one about" (Williams 1998, 87). Seliger (2012, 318) also comments on how Dessa affects a temporary escape from her enslavement when she "revisits her past as she listens to the 'dawn noise' from the liminal space that separates her from the community." Not surprisingly, in both narratives, neither Dana nor Dessa experience what Frederick Douglass meant by freedom from enslavement; nevertheless, these characters enact modalities of escape that incrementally point to self-liberation through self-reflexivity.

Escape in both novels is less about the crucial geographical journey to freedom requisite in traditional fugitive slave narratives, and more about the psychological and temporary refuges these female slave characters create. This in turn suggests that how these female protagonists feel about and react to freedom becomes more important than the mechanics of the escape itself. Although both Dana and Dessa rely on sometimes unlikely collaborators of black slaves, white masters, and white mistresses to affect their escape, both protagonists recognize that despite the unique communities of support they encounter or create to advance their primary objective—liberation—Dana and Dessa ultimately rely on their own will and ingenuity to create free spaces within the corruption of their enslavement. Consequently, each of their journeys away from bondage represents a solitary crossing onto the uncertain terrain of deliverance, where tolerance and acceptance is not a guarantee. My argument counters Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu's (1999, 9) more traditional theory that female slaves evoke a "family-identity freedom" and present themselves as "whole women," because in my reading, these black women are anything but whole—they are scarred physically, mentally, or emotionally by the end of each novel.

As neo-slave narrative writers, Octavia Butler and Sherley Anne Williams are able to create intriguing but unsettling accounts of how a slave achieves her freedom, contextualizing and complicating the process of escape through a discursive approach to sexual relations, violence, and

self-reflexivity. In order to examine interracial relationships, violence, and modalities of escape that do not rely on an actual flight to freedom, Butler and Williams rely primarily on the self-reflexivity or singular will of their protagonists for survival. Their process of escape, whether configured as mental retreats, physical refuges, or temporary alliances with willing and unwilling communities, presents logistical issues and levels of connectivity to the evolution of each protagonist, whether that evolution is configured as time travel or subterfuge. Consequently, escape does not represent finality in *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose*; escape appears to be where survival truly begins.

Notes

1. This definition of sentiments is explored by John Mullan (1988) in his dated but intriguing study, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*. By identifying the dual purpose of sentiment and sentimental works, Mullan effectively shows how philosophers like David Hume link rational and emotional states.
2. Rehak attributes this reading of Kevin's "unlearned oppressive tendencies" to Joy DeGruy's (2005) work on long-term effects of slavery on the American psyche: *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*.
3. In her book *Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing: From Faulkner to Morrison*, Kelly Lynch Reames (2007, 119) believes that by becoming useful and capable, Rufel is compelled to right action in a manner that would be less effective if she was governed solely by sympathy.
4. Although dated, Scarry's ground-breaking work continues to inform discussions on human vulnerability as configured on the body.

References

Andrews, William L. 1986. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. 1999. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Bell, Bernard. 1989. *Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Butler, Octavia. 2004. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Crossley, Robert. 2004. Reader's Guide and Critical Essay. In *Kindred*, ed. Octavia Butler, 265–284. Boston: Beacon Press.

Flagel, Nadine. 2012. "It's Almost Like Being There": Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *Canadian Review of American Studies/Canadienne d'études américaines* 42 (2): 216–246.

Foster, Guy Mark. 2007. "Do I Look Like Someone You Can Go Home to from Where You May Be Going?": Remapping Interracial Anxieties in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. *African American Review* 41 (1): 143–164.

Keeling, Kara. 2015. Wild Seeds: On Speculations and Black Futures. Plenary address, PAMLA, Portland, OR, November 7.

Mullan, John. 1988. *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Olney, James. 1984. "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature. *Callaloo* 20 (Winter): 46–73.

Reames, Kelly Lynch. 2007. *Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing: From Faulkner to Morrison*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rehak, Hannah. 2015. Butler's *Kindred*: Non-linear Genealogies and Transformative Possibility of Breaking Genre Conventions. *Tapestries: Interwoven Voices of Local and Global Identities* 4 (1): 1–8.

Robinson, Angelo Rich. 2011. "Mammy Ain't Nobody Name": The Subject of Mammy Revisited in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. *Southern Quarterly* 49 (1): 50–68.

Rushdy, Ashraf. 1999. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Seliger, Mary. 2012. Dessa's Blues: Reimagining the Master's Narrative in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*. *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 36 (4): 314–324.

Williams, Sherley Anne. 1998. *Dessa Rose*. London: Virago Press.

CHAPTER 3

The Somatopic Black Female Body within Archipelagic Space and Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*

Regina Hamilton

Somatopes and Archipelagoes

In *Wild Seed* (1980), the last-published book in her *Patternist* Series, Octavia Butler explores the origins of a race of human telepaths that eventually take over the Earth. In *Wild Seed*, Butler creates a complex universe, tracing the history of these powerful beings through multiple time periods and across continents. The plot of the novel primarily focuses on the relationship between two powerful beings, Doro and Anyanwu, who meet for the first time when Doro is drawn to Anyanwu (and her power) in her African village in the year 1690. Both Doro and Anyanwu have superhuman abilities that allow them enormous control over their bodies. Doro's power lies in his ability to move from one body to another as a form of feeding or survival. Doro's son Isaac—who eventually becomes Anyanwu's husband—tries to explain to Anyanwu that "Doro wears flesh, but he isn't flesh himself—nor spirit … [and] when he needs a new body,

R. Hamilton (✉)
University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA
e-mail: regina.hamilton@uky.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_3

he takes one whether he wants to or not" (Butler 1980, 119–120). In other words, Doro forces himself into a body while literally engulfing the essence of whoever was there before him. Anyanwu's power is more internal and therefore less explicitly violent. Anyanwu "could look inside herself and control or alter what she saw there" (53). For Anyanwu, "molding her malleable body into another shape" is exceedingly easy (20). And for those forms she does not know intimately, principally animal bodies, ingesting the flesh of those animals "told her all she needed to know about the creature's physical structure," enough "to take its shape and live as it did" (76). The story of Doro and Anyanwu is centered around three specific moments during the lives of these characters in the years 1690, 1741, and 1840. Throughout *Wild Seed*, there is a rather jarring juxtaposition between the superhuman nature of Doro and Anyanwu's abilities and the subhuman treatment of blacks during the transatlantic slave trade. Though neither of these characters is ensnared by the institution of chattel slavery themselves, Anyanwu is enslaved by Doro for much of the story, and the communities they help to create are adjacent to and affected by the discourses and institutions connected to African enslavement.

The nature of Doro's and Anyanwu's power bring a corporeal dimension to this text that is often filtered through Anyanwu's body, and often expressed through both her productive and reproductive labor. Anyanwu's power—and her responsibility to Doro—lies in her ability to reproduce healthy offspring containing the telepathic capabilities Doro wants in the new race he is trying to create. Also, Anyanwu is often compelled to use her body to produce medicines for many of the diseases or conditions suffered by her fellow colonists. However, the love and responsibility she feels for her children make her vulnerable to Doro's power, and he exploits this as a weakness. Thus, the simultaneous power and powerlessness of Anyanwu, in particular, is grounded in her control over her bodily machinations, and the various relations between her body and other people and places.

The sheer physicality of the characters in *Wild Seed* is a popular topic among scholars trying to analyze the various connections between the body, race, gender, sexuality, and the speculative within Butler's text. Maria Aline Ferreira takes a comprehensive view of the body's role in Butler's fiction. Ferreira (2010, 408) argues that in *Wild Seed*, in particular, there is "a concern for a greater awareness of bodily capacities, for looking inside one's body with a view to understanding its inner

functioning, and how to profit from that knowledge in order to influence it to heal itself and heal others." Gregory Jerome Hampton and Wanda M. Brooks attach their bodily analysis to the fluidity, and perhaps even the fallacy of identity. Hampton and Brooks (2003, 73) argue that "Octavia Butler's fiction presents methods of imagining the body that allow us to question how and why we must be categorized as male, female, black, white, or 'other.'" They describe these terms as "arbitrary markers" used to belie the "construction of 'otherness'" (73). Ruth Salvaggio (1984, 81) narrows her discussion of the body in *Wild Seed* to "the physical characteristics of Anyanwu" as one of the many strong feminist protagonists in Butler's fiction. Salvaggio argues that Anyanwu "is flexible and dextrous … She uses prowess rather than direct, confrontational power. She heals rather than kills … [and] despite her imprisonment by a patriarchal tyrant … [Anyanwu] learns to use her abilities to survive" (81).

Madhu Dubey (2008), in her essay "Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction," also discusses the particularities of Anyanwu's shapeshifting and healing abilities. Anyanwu can only fully morph into other kinds of beings after ingesting a part of their flesh, and Dubey argues this allows Anyanwu to create a literal body of knowledge within her own body that is in keeping with an "alternative feminist epistemology grounded in empathy and embodiment" (36). Dubey is also interested in the freedom and power Anyanwu finds through changing her body into animal forms, particularly the fact that "Anyanwu's knowledge … heals the dichotomy between mind and body, taking the body as an active agent rather than an inert and alienated object of knowledge" (37). Dubey argues that Butler's *Wild Seed* "elaborates the embodied and relational model of knowing nature that is privileged in much of women's speculative fiction and feminist theory" through Anyanwu's ability to change her body into an animal form (37).

Like Dubey, I am also interested in relationality and embodiment as it pertains to Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*, and I want to consider how Anyanwu does more than *just* embody temporality and spatiality. In other words, Anyanwu is more than just a blank object on which time and space work. Within the confines of her body, she is a powerful actor that works as much on time and space as they both work on her. In the same way that time and space cannot be separated from each other when we meet Anyanwu in any of the three periods of the text, neither can these time-spaces be separated from her. Time and space only make sense in relation to other times and spaces, and in this text, Anyanwu is the only character

that moves through each time-space within the same body—no matter how much she changes that body along the way. Without her, the time-spaces of the text could not exist because it is Anyanwu's body that anchors each time-space to a future and a past that produces differing, but related, meanings. Anyanwu's bodily experiences are the foundation of the narrative, and the fact that she is a black woman intensifies both the physical and discursive nature of her connections to each of the time-spaces she encounters in the text.

One term that is useful for trying to get at the relationships between the black female body, time, and space is the somatope. The term was coined by Ramona Fernandez (2014), and Fernandez's somatope, which centers the body, is an update of Bakhtin's (2010) chronotope, which focused primarily on the inseparability of time and space. Bakhtin argues that "[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully throughout, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to movements of time, plot and history" (23). As Maria Holmgren Troy (2016, 20) argues, "[i]ntimately linked to history, the chronotope expresses a world-view, and 'determines to a significant degree the image of man [or woman] in literature as well' … characters constitute and are molded by the chronotope in having particular ideologically charged views of, and relations to, time and space." In Troy's parsing of the chronotope, it is clear that even in Bakhtin's original definition, there is some space for thinking about chronotopes made of flesh.

This fleshed-out chronotope leads to a kind of embodiment that is central to the Black Atlantic and African American bodies of literature, a physical being that goes beyond Paul Gilroy's slave ship or Pullman car chronotopes. Fernandez's idea of the somatope is one step closer to articulating the embodiments of the raced and gendered bodies in time and space that also lie at the center of African American and Black Atlantic literary and theoretical work. Fernandez (2014, 1124) argues,

> While Bakhtin describes the chronotope as the fulcrum of time/space and declares the human form to be intrinsically chronotopic, it is our thesis that representations of the body are increasingly central to contemporary narrative … The somatope encodes a host of meanings penetrating and surrounding the image of the body. The somatope and its feverish references bind all the seemingly unrelated phenomena within the text together … In somatopic narratives, the body is the site that makes meaning and directs the

> plot … And bodies in somatopic texts are almost always morphing or under contention.

It is clear from this definition that *Wild Seed* is indeed a somatopic narrative. Anyanwu's body, specifically, is the site to which everything else in this text is tethered, the locus through which everything is filtered, and much of the meaning of this text is produced through her body.

Yet, there is space here for the term somatope to do more than originally intended. In Fernandez's construction of the term somatope, the body literally replaces time without any real consideration for the way different bodies have different relationships to time; a body is inserted, and time is basically abandoned. However, black bodies are always already mired in time. Race has a historicity to it, and connecting the idea of the somatope to the black body, particularly the black female body, does not elide time but instead brings time back into the formulation of the somatope as a body-time-space. Most importantly for my argument, the idea of the somatopic black body creates a terminology that represents the inseparability of the black body, space, and time. Bakhtin originally tried to think of a way to articulate the inability of time and space to be separated, and in African American and Black Atlantic literatures, the black body is one of the most powerful forces holding both time and space in constant tension while operating as a dialogical site that produces meaning. Somatopes have the same dialogical nature as chronotopes, and therefore, the black body as a somatope will have various kinds of relationships with many of the spaces, discourses, and time periods it comes in contact with.

Here, I think an archipelagic model of space and time is useful because there are levels of relationality and connectivity that this model could help us think through. How do we analyze this assemblage of the black body, time, and space, though they can never really be separated, and seemingly can only make any real meaning together? One way is to rethink the kinds of connections that exist between these three components—time, space, and the black body—instead of just the fact that they are connected. To do this, a more relational and dialogic model, which I describe here as archipelagic, becomes a necessity. An archipelagic model allows for a critical analysis that can think through various kinds of relations without subsuming any one item or individual into a larger whole. When one uses this model, bodies and islands can retain their individuality while still sustaining different kinds of relationships to larger communities.

One of the aims of archipelagic studies, according to Stratford et al. (2011, 114), is to generate and establish "scholarship that deploys the island as 'a model, rather than simply a site' of investigation." This scholarship makes room for the application of island or archipelagic models to other kinds of "sites," such as the somatopic black body. Stratford argues for a kind of archipelagic spatiality that is associated with the particular topographical form of the archipelago, and it is my contention that the "experience of disjuncture, connection and entanglement" that exists "between and among islands" of archipelagoes can also be separated from that particular physical geographic form and applied elsewhere, helping to explain the relationships between certain kinds of bodies, communities, and geographies in literature (114). To bridge the gap between Anyanwu's somatopic black body and archipelagic spatiality, we can start by thinking about Anyanwu's body as the site from which all of the relations of this text flow, and the model of an island is perfect for trying to think through the various kinds of relations her body might have. Thinking of Anyanwu as an archipelagic island is also useful because this idea takes for granted the materiality that is so important to analyzing her body as somatopic. In addition, an archipelagic model is generative because Anyanwu is not just one body. She is an archipelago of bodies, and each one is intimately connected to the specific time and space in which both we and Doro find her.

Another aim of using an archipelagic spatiality to engage the black somatopic body in *Wild Seed* is to follow Dubey's (2008, 37) lead by making sure that the black somatopic body is "an active agent rather than an inert and alienated object of knowledge." An archipelagic model is not meant to separate the body from consciousness, history, or subjectivity. Instead, the use of this model is meant to allow a broader view of the black body, through which it becomes easier to see the relationships between the body and history and subjectivity, all of which are enmeshed in time and space. Katherine McKittrick (2006) sets a precedent for this kind of analysis in her work. McKittrick connects geographical sites with all the things that make people human, and she uses places and spaces to get at what makes a black character's humanity relatable, significant, and compelling in literature. In her work, black subjects and the spaces they occupy are so closely related as to be almost inseparable, and the same is true for my conception of the black somatopic body. McKittrick argues that "the relationship between black populations and geography allows an engagement with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced,

rendered ungeographic" (x). Through the use of the speculative and the contemporary use of a black somatopic body, African American and Black Atlantic authors try to present "alternative patterns that work alongside and across traditional geographies" (McKittrick 2006, xix). An archipelagic model advances McKittrick's idea of the connection between black people and geography by amalgamating those two elements into one cohesive whole.

Butler's use of the speculative in *Wild Seed*, and the use of the speculative more widely in African American and Black Atlantic literatures, often offers a critique of linearity. Thinking through *Wild Seed* using an archipelagic model works toward the same goal of expanding our understanding beyond linear and binary relationships. Often, neo-slave narratives such as *Wild Seed* attempt to portray the challenges of racism as they move through time in unexpected ways. These texts then have to be open to different knowledges and different negotiations of power, space, and time to get at the political implications of a raced spatiotemporality. An archipelagic model is uniquely suited to aid in this effort because within this model connectivity can flow from multiple sites in many different directions. Thinking about the structure of *Wild Seed* and the particular time-spaces that are inseparable from our understanding of Anyanwu's body, the political implications of these spaces become even more relevant and even more palpable when connected to various temporalities. Therefore, in terms of Anyanwu specifically, conceptualizing her body as a site does not rob her of her subjectivity as she comes to know herself and the world around her through these specific moments in time. The conscious decisions she makes still have the influence of her power behind them. The point is to make her more visible while trying to access and analyze the connections between her body, time, and space, and how these connections affect our understanding of her subjectivity.

Anyanwu's Island: Making Meaning Through Time and Space

My conception of a model of archipelagic space and time continues to center (even as it shifts) the "three relatively durable topological and binary relations: land and water, island and continent/mainland, and island and island" which "invoke ideas of difference, mutual relation, and equivalence" (Stratford et al. 2011, 115). According to Stratford et al.,

this first binary relation of "the boundary marked by land and water identifies a fundamental disjuncture in spatiality; the island split between two basic forces" (115). By centering Anyanwu and thinking of her as an island and as the site through which meaning is made in *Wild Seed*, this first binary conceptualized as the relationship between an island and water is analogous to Anyanwu's relationship to Doro. From the moment they meet in 1690, his power surrounds her in all directions, and the fluidity of his being, exemplified by the different bodies he temporarily calls his own, create a kind of tension between these characters due to the fundamental differences between them. At one point, right after Anyanwu has arrived at Doro's North American colony, Wheatley, Butler (1980, 97) writes, "[Anyanwu] did not need to be reminded of how dangerous and demanding Doro could be. Reminders awakened her fear of him. Reminders made her want to forget the welfare of her children whose freedom she had bought with her servitude." From the moment they meet, there is a constant underlying threat that Doro will submerge her body within his own substance. Yet, Anyanwu persists, and uses her resources, her body, and her knowledge, to help people and to prolong life and health.

Doro, on the other hand, is as timeless as the sea and treats everyone and everything as temporary, if not disposable. Throughout the novel, Doro struggles to understand that Anyanwu's physical, bodily attachment to a particular time and space moves in more than one direction. Anyanwu's somatopic black body does not only drag the history of race and racism with it, but it is always projecting itself into the future, as well. There is a kind of permanence to her body that rivals the timelessness of his formlessness, and really unfortunately for both of them, it takes Doro 150 years to come to this conclusion. Doro believes that being beyond or even outside of time is the only kind of temporality that could match the power of his own. Time has no meaning for Doro, and he takes that as a strength. However, time and space keep Anyanwu connected to the world around her and, together with her body, produce meaning from the connections. Anyanwu is bound to time and to space, but she is not hampered by them, and the power and longevity of her body belong to her in a way Doro's power and his bodies never fully belong to him.

The fundamental difference between Doro and Anyanwu is that Anyanwu is a material being with a form that she can never leave behind. She can never leave the site of her body, even as she changes it, and that gives her a kind of ownership and power that Doro overlooks due to his own power to change his form at will. From the moment Anyanwu meets

Doro, the differences between them are constantly defined and then redefined through Anyanwu's body. At first, she has to constantly morph her body to demonstrate her powers for Doro and others. Then, she is required to consistently bear children, while being the caretaker for those individuals going through transition—which is a period of physical and emotional collapse during which telepathic individuals acquire their powers. All of these representations of Anyanwu's disparate powers shift their relationship and verify for Doro that Anyanwu is different from anyone he has ever met. More than once, these differences save her life (and the lives of her children), but the unique nature of her power gives him pause and often makes him consider killing her if he cannot break her. Doro is threatened because it is Anyanwu who makes his dream of a new kind of human being a reality. It is not his power, literally or figuratively, that creates a people—or at least something more than a smattering of colonies containing people with superhuman talents—it is hers. Doro does not have a body-time-space that connects him to people or histories, and though this lack might occasionally bother him, it also makes him blind to the fact that he would never be able to have complete control over Anyanwu. Doro is a nomad, a being without a home, and Anyanwu is self-contained. Her descendants are her own, unlike his who are a random assortment of people made from the dead husks of his victims. Her body is her home, and regardless of his omnipresence, he can never fully control her body or its machinations in the way that she does. Here, the ideas of insularity and isolation are particularly relevant as "the creation of distinctive 'inside' and 'outside' spaces implied in the boundedness of the islands highlights two ideas of them: as complete in and of themselves; and as isolated from others and insular unto themselves" (Stratford et al. 2011, 115). Anyanwu is insular; she is complete within herself. And similar to the way that water separates islands from everything else, it is Doro, and his relationship to Anyanwu, that isolates her in very real ways from all of the other people and spaces she comes in contact with.

In terms of the second relation between the island and the mainland or continent, Stratford et al. (2011, 116) argue that "the binary between continent and island is 'structured by hierarchies of value, as much as size: presence/absence, sufficiency/insufficiency, positivity/negativity, completeness/lack'" and that "such a mix of categorical and relative evaluations positions islands as both microcosms of continents/mainlands as well as quintessentially different or particularized others." Thus, if Anyanwu is an island, the various cultures, discourses, and social mores

she is forced to accommodate could be conceptualized as "the mainland." Anyanwu, though she exists as her own space, has discourses continually foisted onto her from without, and as hierarchies of value are attached to these discourses, they become attached to her, as well. *Wild Seed* takes place during historical time periods that laid the foundations for blackness being associated with particular kinds of lack and insufficiency. And though misogyny is much older, in this period misogyny and anti-blackness become imbricated in ways that definitely affect Anyanwu's connections to the world around her. Therefore, regardless of the power and strength of her body, not to mention the exceptional control she has over it, her body is often misread due to the discourses of inadequacy attached to her because of racism and misogyny. In the communities created by Doro, and in the larger American and Black Atlantic regions, Anyanwu is often misread as being too confident, uncivilized, or too secure in her own power under the ever-looming and ever-shifting shadows of xenophobia and sexism. These linkages between the black somatopic female body and discourse are important because discourses are often thought of as nebulous concepts with no real material effects or consequences. However, there is an undeniable physicality to discourse, particularly those concerning race, gender, and sexuality. In *Wild Seed*, it is Anyanwu's body, in this somatopic body-time-space assemblage, with which particular discourses of time and space are entangled.

Stratford et al. (2011, 118) argue that "[i]slands were understood as distinct 'closed' worlds, ideal locations for the extraordinary and the bizarre, but *at the same time* they were also perceived as parts of a complex reality of interaction" (italics original). For Anyanwu, much of this "complex reality of interactions" includes a deluge of cultural standards, which are always focused on a cultural policing of the body. Over the centuries, Anyanwu's interactions with various cultures are conveyed through the particular modifications she makes to her body. Anyanwu makes her hearing and sight particularly keen. Butler (1980, 10) writes, "She had increased their sensitivity deliberately after the first time men came stalking her, their machetes ready, their intentions clear." On another occasion, she has to soothe her body and make it accustomed to "the abomination" of ingesting cow's milk, which she ingests for the first time during her first meal in Wheatley (108). Anyanwu also artificially ages her body, so as to not bring attention to herself, as her husbands age. Occasionally, her changes go even further, like when she has to become male or white for her own personal safety or the safety of those around her. As she and Doro

begin traveling from her village to the coast, "she wears the guise of a young man, and had twisted her cloth around her and between her legs in the way of a man" hoping to pass unmolested through unfamiliar places (27). In the last section of the text, she discusses taking her "Warrick shape," which is that of a white man, to appease her neighbors and give her freedom of movement (200). All of these various changes demonstrate that the form, shape, color, and even the coverings of Anyanwu's body have meaning, and these meanings change depending on the time-space with which her particular body aligns. Moreover, it is through Anyanwu's interactions with other people, places, and discourses that she realizes the vulnerability with which her natural form as a young black woman is read throughout the timeline of the novel.

Though set up to be fairly isolated and self-contained, Doro's colonies become places where multiple cultures, languages, and religions collide, and as a site in the middle of these encounters, Anyanwu's body can never really escape the movements of ideas and information from other places. Even something as innocuous as clothes has the ability to change the way Anyanwu's body-time-space is read. Toward the end of the first section of *Wild Seed*, Isaac fumbles through a problematic, though honest, definition of civilization as Anyanwu is being fitted for Dutch clothing that would make her body more acceptable to others in Doro's colony. He says, "Before, you were Anyanwu … mother of I-don't-know-how-many children, priestess to your people, respected and valued woman of your town. But to the people here, you would be a savage, almost an animal if they saw you wearing only your cloth. Civilization is the way one's own people live. Savagery is the way foreigners live" (Butler 1980, 96). Thus, Anyanwu's body has to change, or at least conform to particular ways of being, in order to be at all intelligible to others in particular time-spaces. As a black woman, as a woman from Africa, and even as a woman with great power, discourses are always adjacent to, if not acting directly upon, the site of her body. Discourses and cultural norms from outside of Doro's colonies flow perpetually toward the island that is Anyanwu, and she is powerless to stop the flow, and often has no choice but to adapt for her own survival or freedom of movement.

Ultimately, the central aim of an archipelagic model is to give more credence to the third binary relation, "which foregrounds interactions between and among islands themselves" (Stratford et al. 2011, 116). This third relation is the primary relation in *Wild Seed*. The text is broken into three parts, and each section takes place in a particular time-space that is

made discernible through understanding the experiences of Anyanwu's black female body in that time-space. Due to the structure of the text, Anyanwu's body-space-time in each of the three sections is different from, yet adjacent to, her body-space-time in the other sections. In other words, the site of her body changes along with the time-space, and the differences and similarities between the meanings produced through her somatopic body at each of the different sites is crucial for understanding the text itself, the physicality of time-spaces for black women, and the tenacity of certain discourses. In this way, the setting of this text, as related to Anyanwu, is a kind of archipelago. Anyanwu also functions as an island within the text, and the relationships between her body and the various other bodies she comes in contact with through sexual and familial relationships in *Wild Seed* form another archipelago. These two archipelagoes are intimately connected to each other because each section of the text revolves around Anyanwu's bodily connections with new people in a new space and a different time period. Yet, regardless of the place or the time or the modifications Anyanwu makes to her body, Doro's presence and the threat of his power flows through most (if not all) of the relationships and the intimacies Anyanwu shares with others.

In the first section of *Wild Seed*, it is through Anyanwu's somatopic black body that we engage the chronotope of the middle passage. However, in this text, Anyanwu does not experience the middle passage through death and torture, but through play, exploration, and cooperation. Within the novel's archipelagic structure, it is important to address the pressure of racist and misogynist discourses on this narrative from without, and how Butler places these sorts of contemporaneous discourses in conversation with the rather alternative lives and experiences of her characters throughout this text. The colonial era middle passage is a space-time that ties the histories and the bodies of the Black Atlantic together while also being the place where the African diaspora was created. By recreating this time and space in *Wild Seed*, Butler confronts the chronotope of the colonial era middle passage through Anyanwu's body and her experiences in this time-space. Through Anyanwu's somatopic body, Butler warps the common reading of the black body in the space of the middle passage as not only traumatized, but as unable to be understood as anything other than unspeakably traumatized. In contrast, while Butler (1980, 66) mentions the violence, depravity, and death that takes place on slave ships crossing the middle passage, it is only in passing, through a very short conversation between Doro and Anyanwu. Instead, in terms of

Anyanwu's actual bodily experiences within the time and space of the middle passage, Butler deviates from the established—and one might say canonical—narrative and relates a black woman frolicking in the ocean with dolphins and her white male friend (80). Thus, in *Wild Seed*, the colonial time-space of the middle passage, as it relates to black bodies, comes to have more than just anguish, suffering, and fear associated with it. Moreover, on the *Silver Star*, which amounts to being Doro's slave ship, and in the Atlantic Ocean itself, there is joy, wonder, and excitement, even as currents of danger and loss flow right below the surface. Through Anyanwu's bodily experience of the middle passage, Butler presents a story that is related, but adjacent to the kinds of trauma usually associated with the chronotope of the middle passage. As such, Butler situates *Wild Seed* to do a kind of discursive work that is reparative through her insistence on telling a story that, like an island-filled archipelago, is intertwined with, but in some ways separated from, the trauma caused by the transatlantic slave trade.

Though Anyanwu is placed in the same time and space as other enslaved women of this period, the more positive experiences of her body in this first section inspire her to have hope for her future with Doro, even if that hope is both misguided and short-lived. Throughout this first section of the text, Anyanwu's entire worldview begins to shift, and she comes to understand just how dangerous her situation is. It is the year 1690, and there are two imminent threats to Anyanwu: one is the slave trade encroaching on her people, and the other is Doro. Though Anyanwu is only aware of the danger of enslavement after she and Doro begin to travel toward the coast, several of her kinsmen have already been captured by the time she and Doro make it to Doro's slave trader, Daly. In terms of the setting, Anyanwu's body speaks volumes as her existence is juxtaposed with the time and space of African enslavement. All of the spaces Anyanwu encounters in this first section of the text—the West African coast, the middle passage, and colonial era northeast America—are inseparable from the fact that Anyanwu is a black woman living in 1690. In all of these spaces there is a perpetual threat to her person due to people making meaning from her blackness. In this first section of the text, Anyanwu is a black woman encountering the European enslavement of Africans for the first time, and regardless of her power, and even of Doro's power, it is very clear that "among African and European slavers, no one is safe" (Butler 1980, 40). In this section, Anyanwu shifts between being a "small, muscular [black] man" and what she refers to as her "true shape" of a young

black woman (39, 53). Thus, in this first section, it is clear that Anyanwu is aware how dangerous it is to be female, but she has not yet internalized how dangerous it is to black in these colonial transatlantic spaces. The physical threat to her person is simultaneously heightened and put into relief by Doro's power. Though Anyanwu is confronted by the violence of enslavement, Doro seemingly saves her from that fate, but only by tying her to another form of enslavement that is eventually as physically and generationally violent as the chattel slavery he saves her from. In fact, the idea that Doro has a kind of power that exceeds the power of transatlantic slavery is both jarring and terrifying.

Throughout the first section Anyanwu slowly comes to understand who and what Doro is, and how all of this affects the kind of relationship they can have with each other. After they first meet, and as they build their relationship, Anyanwu understands Doro to be just another of the many husbands she has had in the last 350 years, as just another island in the large archipelago of islands that already radiate out from her, but she soon comes to learn that is not the case. Though there is an air of peril lurking just underneath the surface of their relationship, Anyanwu believes that the parameters of a romantic and sexual relationship with Doro will keep her safe, and in some ways moderate his behavior. Thus, throughout the first section of *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu tries to relate to Doro as if he is another island like herself, another strange site whose physical presence, though a bit different, is similar enough to hers that they might be able to make a true connection with one another. However, due to the fact that Doro is not an island, there is a fundamental difference between them, and this kind of relationship never quite fits.

From the beginning, Doro knows Anyanwu's idea of who he is and what their relationship will be to each other is incorrect, but he continues to let her understand them to be married because "women … accepted him best as lover or husband" (Butler 1980, 24). This ruse of marriage allows Doro to lure Anyanwu away from her home and firmly ensconces Anyanwu within the space of Doro's power before she can truly know what is happening. As they are leaving her home, Anyanwu commands Doro to leave her children alone. After that exchange he muses,

> Though she came from a culture in which wives literally belonged to their husbands, she had power and her power had made her independent, accustomed to being her own person. She did not yet realize that she had walked away from that independence when she walked away from her people with

> him … He had better get her with a new child as quickly as he could. Her independence would vanish without a struggle. She would do whatever he asked then to keep her child safe. (30)

In other words, Doro never intends to be Anyanwu's husband but to use the power of the institution of marriage to control her until she is isolated enough to be forced into submission. He uses her idea of him and of their relationship to draw her out. He takes a kind of control over her sexual relationships that he should not have, and that isolates her, as well. Doro uses time, space, and their romantic and sexual relationships as tools of power. Yet, even within a marital relationship, Anyanwu expected to have some power, and that was untenable for Doro. By the end of the first section, we get a glimpse of the way Doro intends to use sexual relationships as a part of his domination of Anyanwu through his relationship with her and when he commands her to marry his son Isaac, even though Anyanwu thinks of Doro as her husband. It is also telling that Doro waits until immediately after having sex with Anyanwu to inform her that Isaac will be her husband.

In the second section of the novel, we meet Anyanwu and Isaac fifty years later, happily married and thriving despite intermittent intrusions from Doro. Regardless of what Anyanwu previously thought, Doro is not a husband or lover. In this section of the novel, he is a master, a sexually abusive tyrant, and it is through Anyanwu's body that we understand the depth of what he is willing to do to achieve his own ends. This second section centers on Anyanwu and Isaac's daughter Nweke, who is going through transition—or coming into her telepathic powers. As Nweke struggles with the mental and emotional torment of this experience, Anyanwu nurses her, while Isaac and Doro talk and wait for Nweke to emerge from her transition-induced unconsciousness. During this period, all three characters recall the details surrounding Nweke's conception, the thoughts of which even shame Doro as he remembers the way he treated both Anyanwu and Nweke's father, Thomas (Butler 1980, 133). Trying to teach Anyanwu a lesson, Doro makes Anyanwu conceive a child with Thomas, a mentally disturbed drunkard living in a filthy cabin in the woods, hoping Anyanwu will find him repugnant. Thomas was extremely dirty, "there were sores on his body, ignored and filthy—as though he were rotting away while still alive. He was a young man, but his teeth were gone. His breath, his entire body stank unbelievably" (147). Yet, even though Thomas is repulsive and verbally abusive, Anyanwu is not

"repelled … Healer that she was, creator of medicines and poisons, binder of broken bones, comfort," she goes to work on Thomas (147). Against all odds, Anyanwu is successful in bringing Thomas back to life physically and mentally. In fact, she is so successful that Doro decides to take Thomas's body as the ultimate punishment to Anyanwu. Just before he takes Thomas, Doro says, "I want you to remember. You've come to think I couldn't touch you. That kind of thinking is foolish and dangerous" (157). For Doro, subjecting Anyanwu to his control over her sexuality and reproductive labor is not enough, and instead he wants to hit her at the core of her being. Using Thomas, Doro tries to prove to Anyanwu that whoever she births, loves, or heals is still under his control, and he has the power to kill them—and her—at any time.

Stratford et al. (2011, 120) note that "island constellations have long been convenient stepping stones of domination." In fact, from the beginning of this text, Doro has intended not only to dominate or "colonize" Anyanwu, but to bring under his power all of the people/sites radiating out from her in a kind of ever-expanding archipelago of power. Previously, Doro had shown some restraint in how he went about controlling the people close to Anyanwu, but in this second section it is clear he is growing tired of the effort. Doro tries to make Anyanwu understand that his sexual domination extends beyond just her own body, that, in fact, he controls every body and almost every sexual relationship in Wheatley and in his colonies around the world. Therefore, along with trying to punish her by forcing her to have sex with Thomas, Doro also sleeps with one of Anyanwu's daughters for the first time. Yet, no matter what he does, Anyanwu continues to be the one site, among an archipelago of sites, that he cannot colonize to his own satisfaction. For all intents and purposes, Doro has as much control over her body as any other person could have, but he will never control her body as much as she does, which irritates him because the power she retains challenges his belief in his own omnipotence.

In this second section of *Wild Seed*, Doro and Anyanwu reach an impasse, and this stalemate is reflected in Anyanwu's body. She only employs her powers to shape-shift out of necessity or due to being commanded to by Doro. Furthermore, the time, space, and even the functions for which she employs her body are all so acutely different in this second section of the text that Anyanwu's somatopic body in the first section and her somatopic body in the second section can be understood as two different sites due to the unmistakable shifts in the relationship between Anyanwu's body, time, and space. The time-space of section two, the

northeastern region of North America in 1750, is indeed made discernible through not only Anyanwu's treatment within Doro's colony, but the fact she would indeed face similar treatment outside of that colony as well. To understand this time-space is to understand that Anyanwu's somatopic black female body is in extreme danger in all spaces. The first section of *Wild Seed* is narratively and thematically one of flexibility and receptivity, while in the second section Anyanwu experiences a foreclosure of opportunity and a dispossession of power that reverberates out from her body to everything she comes in contact with. Yet, even as time moves along and she connects to the different spaces of North America, all the while allowing the surface of her body to be shaped to fit Doro's colonizing purposes, there is a core of her being that will not be moved or shaped by Doro's power.

Therefore, unlike in the first section, there is no joy or exploration in this second section of the text. Instead, there is a kind of rage-filled resignation at the foundation of the relationship between Doro and Anyanwu, especially since they have taken up the incompatible and ill-fitting roles of master and unbreakable slave, respectively. By the end of this second section, Doro tires of their fraught relationship. He believes it is time for her to die and plans to take her body after Isaac dies. Like any master of slaves, "he believed it was his right to slaughter among his people as he chose" (Butler 1980, 180). Again, Doro tries to usurp a power over Anyanwu's body that does not belong to him, and again, Anyanwu turns Doro's depravity into an opportunity for a kind of recovery, and she escapes his grasp for almost a century.

Anyanwu eludes Doro from 1741 until 1840 by taking animal shapes, which Doro cannot track using his innate power to find any other human exhibiting telepathic power. But of course, Anyanwu cannot be a dolphin or a bird forever. Her true shape, that of a young black woman, is the shape she must return to because even she needs her somatopic black female body to make sense of the world around her. After she leaves Doro, Anyanwu realizes just how dangerous it is to be black, female, and penniless, and she begins navigating the world of the southern United States in the nineteenth century as a well-to-do white man in what she calls her "Warrick shape" (Butler 1980, 200). She explains to Doro that "her Warrick shape was not a copy of anyone. [She] had molded [herself] freely to create it" (200). Anyanwu goes on to tell Doro "you have not understood how completely one body can change. I cannot leave it as you can, but I can make it over … so completely in the image of someone else that

I am no longer truly related to my parents. It makes me wonder what I am—that I can do this and still know myself, still return to my true shape" (200). In this last portion of the text not only has time and space shifted but, through her power, Anyanwu has literally been able to change her body so drastically that it would not be recognizable as the same body she had before she left. Anyanwu is also forced to acknowledge the mental and emotional consequences of maintaining her Warwick shape for extended periods of time, and the powerful privilege she has in being able to change her body at will. By spending so much time in mid-nineteenth-century America in a white male body, Anyanwu acclimates to the depravity of chattel slavery that surrounds her until she is chastised by a telepathic enslaved man passing her in chains. Anyanwu says, "I was not seeing the slaves in front of me. I would not have thought I could be oblivious to such a thing. I had been white for too long. I needed someone to say what he said to me" (194). Anyanwu's discomfort with how her own temporary whiteness makes her oblivious to the suffering around her brings attention to the manner in which racist discourses continued to gain power in the social and political landscape of nineteenth-century America. In this particular time-space, whiteness has a kind of currency and power associated with it, and these attributes separate Anyanwu from people like her, and ultimately from herself.

Anyanwu's refusal to succumb to the power of whiteness and maleness in an American context is also related to her refusal to become a master of slaves in her own secluded community or to perpetuate the institution of American slavery more generally. Anyanwu does not want powerless minions, she wants family and community and equality, which again points to the fundamental difference between her and Doro. In this third and final section of the text, Doro finds Anyanwu in Louisiana at her home, which is full of people with various kinds of powers, many of whom she has rescued from slavery or healed in some way. Yet, instead of seeing a communal space shared by family and friends, Doro sees "hostage[s]" and "good breeding stock" (Butler 1980, 204). This difference of perspective as it relates to the people around them sets the stage for the final power struggle between Doro and Anyanwu over who will have ultimate control over Anyanwu's body, and therefore her power and her people forever. Doro does not seem to understand the connection Anyanwu has to the people who make up her archipelago of relatives and loved ones, and that Anyanwu will remain connected to them, no matter how far the site of any of her bodies might travel. Unfortunately for both her and the people

around her, even though it has been a century since they last saw each other, Doro still believes that he can and should control the connections between Anyanwu and her family. He immediately tries to take control of the sexual relationships of her children, as if it his right to do so. Again, Doro never only wants to control her, he wants to control all of the pathways and intimacies surrounding her.

Throughout this third section, Doro's presence wreaks havoc in the home Anyanwu has built for herself. In exchange for leaving her children unmolested, Doro brings one of her distant descendants to one of Anyanwu's daughters in Louisiana. Through a violent series of events, this descendant and two of Anyanwu's children die. Additionally, Anyanwu's friend and the grandmother of their little community dies while Anyanwu is away. As Anyanwu grieves for the people she has just lost and as she wrestles with the realities of her immortality, she starts to consider her own death as the solution that would finally end the pain of continually experiencing the deaths of her loved ones, while also destroying any dominion Doro might have over her or the people who might come from her. Because of Doro's own powers, death has always been the most powerful of bargaining chips between them, usually with Doro holding most, if not all, of the power. Yet, in this third section of this novel, Anyanwu realizes that her own death is "the only way [she] can leave [him]" (Butler 1980, 244). Anyanwu begins to see her death as a fight for the future that will be created through her body. Adversely, Doro finally realizes that Anyanwu is the only permanent thing in his life, and he tries to will her into living through seduction, through conflict, and even through begging her to stay. However, Doro's powers lie in taking lives; he cannot make someone live, as Anyanwu shows him in this section of the narrative. It is only on Anyanwu's deathbed that Doro realizes the true limits of his power, while at the same time, Anyanwu realizes the extent of her own bodily power in making the choice to live or die. In the moments leading up to her choice, she is able to complete her most difficult project as a healer by resurrecting Doro's humanity, and it is this success that inspires her to live.

This last section of the book is thematically focused on both reconciliation and completion. As Butler (1980, 252) writes, "Anyanwu could not have all she wanted, and Doro could no longer have all that he had considered his by right … She was no longer one of his breeders nor even one of his people in the old proprietary way. He could ask her cooperation, her help, but he could no longer coerce her into giving it." In the end, even

Doro is forced to accept a kind of relationship with Anyanwu that is different from and more complex than the strict top-down approach he employed for millennia. Even though he is still that which flows between all the sites or islands in his archipelago of power, he is forced to reconceptualize his position in this community as more of a member than as a master.

Thinking of this text through an archipelagic model makes clear that the story of black women, of the Black Atlantic, and of African Americans is an archipelago of moments, of sites, and of bodies that need each other to make sense. *Wild Seed* is a prolonged discussion of different modes of personal and community-based connectivity and the ways race, time, and space can affect these kinds of connections. As the story and the characters are moved through space and time in an archipelagic fashion, Anyanwu's body and its relationship to the spaces and people of a particular time period give the reader much information through the discourses that surround her body in that particular time-place. The importance of her body in the process of making meaning in a particular time-space cannot be overlooked, and the concept of the somatope brings the black body's meaning-making power within time and space into view. In African American and Black Atlantic literatures, the body, space, and time cannot be separated, and the idea of a somatopic black body creates a terminology that represents this inseparability while also disallowing the elision of the individual components. After establishing that the somatopic black body is a concept that necessitates holding an assemblage of components in constant tension, it becomes clear that an archipelagic model of space and time allows for an analysis that can acknowledge and track the multiple sites of the somatopic black body and the multiple relationships each component has to various other sites and discourses flowing in many different directions. Moreover, one of the most important benefits of using an archipelagic model to think through Butler's work in *Wild Seed* is the insistence on the acknowledgment of the physical and spatial registers of the text. The incorporation of these registers into the critical (re)reading of the somatopic black female body adds important generic, political, and textual valences to Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, and they work in concert with her use of the speculative to engage American literature and history from a black feminist perspective.

References

Bakhtin, Mikail. 2010. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Butler, Octavia. 1980. *Wild Seed*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Dubey, Madhu. 2008. Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction. In *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory*, ed. Marleen S. Barr, 31–51. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Fernandez, Ramona. 2014. The Somatope: From Bakhtin's Chronotope to Haraway's Cyborg via James Cameron's *Dark Angel* and *Avatar*. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47 (6): 1122–1138.

Ferreira, Maria Aline. 2010. Symbiotic Bodies and Evolutionary Tropes in the Work of Octavia Butler. *Science Fiction Studies* 37: 401–415.

Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hampton, Gregory Jerome, and Wanda M. Brooks. 2003. Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton: Black Women Writers and Science Fiction. *The English Journal* 92 (6): 70–74.

McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Salvaggio, Ruth. 1984. *Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine*. Terre Haute: Black American Literature Forum, School of Education, Indiana State University.

Stratford, Elaine, Godfrey Baldacchino, Elizabeth McMahon, Carol Farbotko, and Andrew Harwood. 2011. Envisioning the Archipelago. *Island Studies Journal* 6 (2): 113–130.

Troy, Maria Holmgren. 2016. Chronotopes in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. *African American Review* 49 (1): 19–34.

CHAPTER 4

What Is "Love"? Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild"

Martin Japtok

I

In July 2017, Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson appeared, again, in headlines as archeologists claimed to have found Sally Hemings's living quarters at Monticello. Some news outlets reported the findings using the word "mistress" in describing Sally Hemings's relationship to Thomas Jefferson (see, e.g., Cottman 2017), and almost immediately, a discussion broke out in the blogosphere, on social media, and in the press over the proper way to describe what Thomas Jefferson had done to Sally Hemings, that she was his "property," not his "mistress," and that the only word appropriate in that context is "rape."[1] As Saidiya Hartman (1997, 80) has argued, "[ante-bellum] law's selective recognition of slave humanity nullified the captive's ability to give consent or act as agent and, at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave only as it assumed the form of criminality." No room for love there. At the same time, when I read the story and the ensuing debate, I wondered how Octavia Butler would comment on both.

M. Japtok (✉)
Palomar College, San Marcos, CA, USA
e-mail: mjaptok@palomar.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_4

When one says that love cannot exist where systemic and immediate oppression rule, one posits this out of ideological convictions rather than from empirical certainty. We say the exploited and the exploiter cannot love one another because we want to rule out that scenario; we do not want such twisted love to be possible. The contemporary understanding of love is that it should be a relationship between equals to which both assent and, to use Erich Fromm's paraphrase of Immanuel Kant, in which that equality is expressed by one person "never [being] the means for another one's end" and all people being "an end unto themselves and thus never a means for others" (Fromm 1979, 32, my translation). In her novel *Love*, Toni Morrison (2003, 63) defines it in the plural, as "kinds" of love, when her character L, in an interior monologue, argues that "[p]eople with no imagination feed it with sex—the clown of love. They don't know the real kinds, the better kinds, where losses are cut and everybody benefits." But can one claim that that is how love, in its multiplicity, has always been understood? Indeed, in his book *Love as Human Freedom*, Paul Kottman (2017, 3), in reference to steep hierarchies in much of world history along lines of gender, age, and other factors, argues that "we lack a convincing account of how anything that might deserve the name of love … could have plausibly come into the world out of such a painful, hierarchically determined history." Erich Fromm (1979, 13) invites readers "to ask themselves how many people [they] know that are really fully and truly capable of loving someone" (my translation). In addition, Stephanie Coontz (2005) reminds us that in much of human history, love has had little to do even with marriage, now by many understood to be its ultimate expression, and was more often its accidental byproduct than its cause.

By the same token, the ideal of perfect equality in love relationships is usually more a political goal than an observation, and it has its value as such a goal, something to strive for continually, to measure oneself up against. But do we know what concrete equality looks like? We may not, and thus we typically hedge the ideal with terms like "before the law" or "equality of opportunity," or "equity." In the history of feminism, for example, the recognition of the difficulty of defining equality came in form of a question when the kind of equality that liberal feminism was striving for was often expressed in terms of a comparison, as being "equal to men." But equal to which men? Intersectionality has also complicated the ideal of equality in the best of ways, and my point is not, of course,

that because equality is often an elusive quality that it should be abandoned as a goal: it is as a goal that it has its power and usefulness. My point, to put it simply, is that it's complicated, and that is just what Butler's "Bloodchild" thematizes and illustrates with respect to "love." James Livingston (2016, 68) argues that Freud may be "right about love and work as essential components of human nature, and that the two are connected to each other." If that is so, then the "question … becomes" whether we can "love each other for real, by foregoing the principle of productivity and applying the criterion of need—from each according to his or her capacities, to each according to his or her needs" (68). Love, in this view, manifests itself in concrete ways, not as fuzzy emotions, but as tending to one another's needs, and how that tending materializes depends on one's capacities—and also one's condition. This view of love puts a different spin on the question whether something like love can exist within the unequal power relations in Butler's story.

"Bloodchild" (1984) appears between the publication dates of *Kindred* (1979) and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–89), which also explore power differentials within relationships. "Bloodchild," Butler insisted, is not about slavery (which has not prevented many readers to see some parallels), and when depicting actual slavery in *Kindred*, Butler approaches the issue of "love" quite differently. Rufus's absolute power over Alice and his pathological relationship to power negate the possibility of love.[2] *Xenogenesis*, following in the footsteps of "Bloodchild," depicts more nuanced possibilities of what kind of relationships might be possible when power is distributed unequally. But her 1984 short story "Bloodchild" may be her most sustained meditation on the theme and treating it as a love story is in keeping with Butler's own view, as she called it "a love story between two very different beings" (Butler 2005, 30). The story takes us to a world in which a group of humans—referred to as "Terrans"—have fled earth and found a new home on another planet inhabited by the Tlic, beings both insect- and reptile-like, but larger and stronger than humans. It so happens that humans serve Tlic reproductive needs better than any animals on that planet (the Tlic implant their worm-like offspring into warm-blooded beings for their early growth period). Humans, then, are valuable to the Tlic, but also subordinate to them. The plot revolves around the imminent mating of T'Gatoi, a Tlic government member, and Gan, a human adolescent, and it depicts Gan's coming to terms with his relationship with T'Gatoi.

In asking whether one can say no to love when power relations are lopsided, whether bonds of love rather than bonds of iron can exist between oppressor and oppressed, one revisits questions posed by Harriet Jacobs (1987) in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (Truth 1993), and by Harriet Wilson's (1983) *Our Nig*. Jacobs answers this question with "No," while Sojourner Truth and Harriet Wilson, not unlike Octavia Butler, let a response hover between yes and no, between affection and delusion through internalized oppression. To that extent, passages in Sojourner Truth's 1850 *Narrative* as well as in *Our Nig* and *Incidents* may well be considered literary ancestors for Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild," and it is possible to read the story through these antecedents, and I will refer to these texts on occasion. Butler, however, is not bound by the political contexts of abolitionism and feminism or by having to write to the expectations of a white readership as were Jacobs, Truth, and Wilson. Therefore, Butler is freer to explore this question in all its painful ramifications, and she does so, with differing emphases, in much of her fiction—in *Kindred*, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, and her *Patternist* series and *Fledgling*. What I wish to show in this chapter is how history, the view of what happened and why—used in this manner, the term is often interchangeable with "ideology"—provides an important touchstone for love in "Bloodchild." In other words, whether love is possible between oppressor and oppressed, whether love can be love when the possibilities of saying no are severely restrained, depends to a significant degree on whether the lovers share the same "historical universe." Approaching the same question from a slightly different angle, "Bloodchild" allows one to ask what "love" is, what its functions are, and to observe the extent to which love may help explain relationships within specific historical contexts, especially to the individuals involved in those relationships.

II

Reading "Bloodchild" with reference to slave narratives is not something Butler invites. In a 1991 interview with Randall Kenan, she comments, in characteristically unsentimental fashion, that " 'Bloodchild' is very interesting in that men tend to see a horrible case of slavery, and women tend to see that, oh well, they had caesarians, big deal" (Kenan 1991, 498). In that same interview, she also resists readings that interpret the story in terms of slavery: "They [Terrans and Tlic] have made a deal. Yes, they can

stay there but they are going to have to pay for it. And I don't see slavery, and I don't see this as particularly barbaric" (498). However, I am not the only reader who has been unable to resist the comparison. Elyce Rae Helford (1994, 259), for example, sees the story as a "debate over the nature of a relationship which includes dependence, exploitation, and threats of violence [and which] conjures up a metaphoric representation of the relationship between master and slave." In another interview, however, Butler insists that "some people assume I'm talking about slavery when what I'm really talking about is *symbiosis*" (McCaffery and McMenamin 2010, 12), and Susan Bernardo (2019, 90–91) also discusses the story using terms like "negotiation," "interdependence," and "symbiosis." The biological meaning of the latter term is defined as "the living together of two dissimilar organisms, as in mutualism, commensalism, amensalism, or parasitism."[3] This leaves a wide range of options open for the kind of relationship that the term symbiosis might describe. Erich Fromm (1979, 37) considers symbiosis an "immature form of love" in which two persons "need one another," a form of dependency (my translation). Since, as mentioned earlier, Butler also described "Bloodchild" as a "love story," one might wonder what "love" is in the context of "Bloodchild" or how something like it might exist. "Bloodchild," it turns out, sees love, as Butler hints at by using the term symbiosis, as a functional term, something coming quite close to Paul Kottman's (2017, 4) definition, a definition he approaches by saying that his goal is not "to explain what love is" but to ask what "love help[s] us to explain" or what "love make[s] sense *of*":

> love amounts to a fundamental activity through which we make sense of the world and each other. By "sense-making," I mean a satisfying explanation of some phenomena or another, or a way of justifying actions and practices, or giving an account of something or someone. (4)

"Love," then, allows one to explain why two individuals stand in a relationship to one another, and it allows to normalize the relationship if the account one can render makes sense in and of the historical context.

One thing the story reveals is that symbiosis, as the term is commonly understood—"any mutually beneficial relationship between two persons, groups, etc."—might be difficult to achieve when interests and needs are widely differing, and how difficult it is to support a view of it even as "immature love." As Adam McKible (1994) has pointed out in reference

to several neo-slave narratives, they invite a Marxian analysis in terms of class struggle, further complicated by "race" (metaphorically rendered as species, as Elyce Rae Helford [1994] has noted) and gender. However, the Tlic, unlike capitalists in classically conceived class struggle, do not invest capital, and they virtually run no risk while humans carry grave ones. Terrans, for the Tlic, are a means of (re)production, which is the reason why ownership of the Terrans is crucial for the Tlic. The Terrans provide for themselves and the only "service" rendered by the Tlic, other than letting humans survive on their planet, is "protection"—from the Tlic. But even that protection is a kind of illusion: since the Tlic need humans to reproduce efficiently, there is no real danger of Tlic killing off large numbers of humans. The only question, then, is what kind of existence humans will live while they serve Tlic reproductive needs—whether they will serve them is not up for debate. In effect, this resembles class struggle elevated to the second power with even the semblance of exchange that existed between early nineteenth-century capitalists and wage laborers gone. As Adam McKible (1994, 224) has said, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, "history is the Master narrative a dominant culture tells about itself. This narrative effaces as much contradiction as it can, destroying certain records, highlighting others, and creating heroes and villains generally convenient to it." Under the conditions existing on the Tlic planet, the ruling class must struggle to make its version of history hegemonic, to make it accepted as *the* version by the ruled.

"Bloodchild" is a coming-of-age story, and as such, it is necessarily concerned with the issue of socialization or, in this context, indoctrination. Three paragraphs into the story, the frontlines of the ideological battle which will determine the protagonist's (Gan's) worldview as an adult become discernible. One position in this battle announces itself in the following phrase: "T'Gatoi liked our body heat and took advantage of it whenever she could" (Butler 1997, 2481). The phrase "took advantage" foreshadows what the story will reveal about the relationship between Terrans and Tlic. The same paragraph, however, also states the opposite position: "It was an honor, my mother said, that such a person [as T'Gatoi] had chosen to come into the family. My mother was at her most formal and severe when she was lying" (2481). The tension, then, is between "advantage" (for Tlic) and "honor" (for humans).

At this point, Gan, the protagonist, has not come of age yet. He has been chosen as the future carrier of T'Gatoi's young but has not faced up to the position humans in general and he in particular are in. His response

to his mother's "lying" makes that much clear: "I had no idea why she was lying, or even what she was lying about. It *was* an honor to have T'Gatoi in the family, but it was hardly a novelty. T'Gatoi and my mother had been friends all my mother's life, and T'Gatoi was not interested in being honored in the house she considered her second home" (2481). The passage is strongly reminiscent of a moment in Harriet Jacobs's (1987) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In explaining why she chose to enter into a relationship with one Mr. Sands, a white man who had shown an interest in her, she tells the reader that "[s]o much attention from a superior person was, of course, flattering; for human nature is the same in all … It seemed to me a great thing to have such a friend" (55). Though she becomes disillusioned later on with Mr. Sands's sincerity to a much higher degree than Gan ever will in relation to T'Gatoi, Jacobs attempts to elucidate her motivations for even considering what, in retrospect, she considers not only an improper but also a naïve act: entering a liaison with a person of the slaveholding class with hopes of mutuality. Gan does not narrate in a retrospective fashion and discounts the possibility that T'Gatoi might be interested in or aware of any hierarchical overtones in her relationship to humans; Gan, however, is but does not consider this hierarchy in a negative light. Why not?

It is at this point in the story that Butler initiates the reader fully into the complex role T'Gatoi plays in this human family by providing "historical context." It is important to remember, though, that Gan supplies this historical background through his narrative voice. Since this passage provides crucial information for an understanding of the role of "history" in the story, it is necessary to quote it in full:

> T'Gatoi was hounded on the outside. Her people wanted more of us made available. Only she and her political faction stood between us and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve—why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them. Or they did understand, but in their desperation, they did not care. She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support. Thus, we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people. She oversaw the joining of families, putting an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic. (Butler 1997, 2481)

Gan's explanatory comment reveals that human lives are very much bound by Tlic needs. Phrases associated with ownership and objectification abound. Furthermore, human family relations are controlled by the Tlic as well. At the same time, the passage complicates T'Gatoi's relationship to Gan and his family. She serves as a kind of protector from this system, prevents it from becoming more abusive, even if using humans to that end. She is their protection from an abusive system while she is part of it. But Gan feels—and is made to feel by his mother—that there is mutuality in their relations, even that he has a degree of power and responsibility. His mother's injunction to "Take care of her" (2482) puts T'Gatoi's and Gan's relation in just such terms, seemingly counterbalancing her earlier command to always obey T'Gatoi.

The degree to which Gan has been socialized into this abusive system becomes clear a little later. In another internal monologue, Gan reveals that he is proud to be a sort of mediator between Tlic and Terrans, someone who has been introduced into the relationship between the two species the "right" way. In a somewhat self-satisfied manner, he relates that he "was first caged within T'Gatoi's many limbs only three minutes after my birth. A few days later, I was given my first taste of egg," eggs being a Tlic means to drug Terrans and ensure their compliance while also boosting health and providing pleasure. He grows up experiencing Terran–Tlic relations as a normal part of his life. "I tell Terrans that when they ask whether I was ever afraid of her. And I tell it to Tlic when T'Gatoi suggests a young Terran child for them and they, anxious and ignorant, demand an adolescent" (2483). Gan has completely accepted the position of humans, never having known anything else. Yes, the system might need reforms, but he knows just how Tlic and Terran need to interact. Since T'Gatoi is his source of information on Terran–Tlic relations, he proves a true disciple and an admirer, but not yet a lover.

This admiration is enabled by the context in which he sees Tlic–Terran relations, and that context is provided by Tlic. To make Gan truly appreciate T'Gatoi, to see her as loving protector and family member rather than exploiter, he needs a sense of possible alternatives. And that alternative is provided by "history." As Gan tells the reader, Tlic once used to breed humans, drugging them so they would mate "no matter how we tried to hold out." Again, one is reminded of an ante-bellum Southern historical landscape in which sexual abstinence, abortion, or infanticide could function as forms of resistance. Quite apparently, humans intended to resist in just such a manner, revealing that they must have experienced their

relations with the Tlic as oppressive to want to deny themselves one of the strongest instincts in any species. How does Gan interpret this history? "We were lucky that didn't go on long. A few generations and we would have *been* little more than convenient big animals" (2484). One does not sense much resentment here. Indeed, Tlic actions are downplayed since "that didn't go on long," and humans are declared lucky. The last sentence focuses completely on the possibility of dehumanization but reveals no agency. The sentence almost forgets that there is someone inflicting the dehumanization. In the same vein, the reader learns, almost in passing and with Tlic rationalizations attached by Gan, that humans may own neither firearms nor vehicles. Gan has learned to interpret history the Tlic way. Thus, "the Tlic must be seen as protectors, to be contrasted, not compared, to the potential murderers or slavemasters the group of humans faced on Earth [and who provided them with a reason to leave Earth]. The Tlic are fair beings who endured human violence to share in a mutually beneficial relationship" (Helford 1994, 265).

Gan's view of T'Gatoi appears plausible when compared to passages in Sojourner Truth's (1993) *Narrative*. The early part of her narrative relates her experiences as a youth in slavery, and she makes clear to the reader how, with no knowledge of a world outside slavery and with few contacts with other slaves, she looked at the man who "owned" her; in the words of her amanuensis, "At this time she looked upon her master as a *God*" (21). He appears to her all-powerful so that to be on good terms with him becomes of prime importance to her: "she became more ambitious than ever to please him" (20). Similarly, Harriet Jacobs, when a child and not yet familiar with the hardships of slavery, saw it as an honor to work for her mistress: "My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit" (Jacobs 1987, 343). However, in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, some of the enslaved are not blinded by the ideology of slaveholding, and to them Truth's eagerness to please seems disturbing and distasteful: "These extra exertions to please, and the praises consequent upon them, brought upon her head the envy of her fellow slaves, and they taunted her with being the '*white folks' nigger*'" (Truth 1993, 21).

This ideological conflict between those of the oppressed who, for reasons of indoctrination or survival, opt to cooperate with the oppressor and those who, though momentarily powerless to act, distance themselves ideologically from the oppressors appears in "Bloodchild" as the conflict between Gan and his brother Qui. Qui looks coldly at the oppressive

system he is in. He can do so because, not having been chosen as a breeder and not feeling close to any Tlic, he has no stake in it—as Gan, in ventriloquating for T'Gatoi, suggests humans should be made to have. Qui views "history" by implicitly using slavery as an analogue. Following Gan's assistance at the "birth" of Tlic larvae, Gan merely looks at Qui after Qui has made the sarcastic remark that Gan has now "found out more than [he] wanted to know." Qui's response closely resembles Sojourner Truth's fellow slaves' taunts directed at her: "'Don't give me one of *her* looks,' he said. 'You're not her. You're just her property'" (Butler 1997, 2488). Qui's opposition to the system is based on knowledge of its nature, a knowledge that cannot be erased by Tlic ideology. As he tells Gan, he once "saw them eat a man" (2489). The pronoun "they" remains vague here; though it ostensibly refers to Tlic larvae, it appears to metonymically include all Tlic. Tlic young feed off humans, but all of Tlic society metaphorically feast on humans as well, as even T'Gatoi admits, though putting it into a context in which it is meant to show Tlic–Terran relations as mutually beneficial: "Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people" (2492). But humans are not healthy and thriving, but endangered and exploited. However, Butler argues that this exploitation represents a form of exchange, that the price for human survival among the Tlic is paying a form of "rent" (Butler 2005, 31).

Gan's internal of such a view, of humans justifiably being expected to provide a service, is illustrated poignantly when Gan relates birth news to a Tlic who has arrived belatedly, after T'Gatoi, with Gan's assistance, has opened up a man's body and removed the Tlic young. The first thing Gan tells the arriving Tlic is how many young have been delivered: "'Six young,' I told her. 'Maybe seven, all alive. At least one male.'" It is the Tlic who asks after the man's well-being: "'Lomas?' she said harshly. I liked her for the question and the concern in her voice when she asked it. The last coherent thing he had said was her name" (2488). The incident attests to the possibility of emotional attachment between humans and Tlic, but it also shows Gan's assessment of their relative roles: he is grateful when the Tlic asks after the fate of the human. Gan appears here to have adopted a worldview which values Tlic life more than human life, or at the very least a worldview taking for granted that Tlic will care little for humans, as a rule, even though humans may care for Tlic. At the same time, the episode gives a first glimpse of the possibility of love which Butler repeatedly identified as a main theme of "Bloodchild." In a life-or-death

moment, Lomas cries out the name of his Tlic partner, and we later learn that she rises from her deathbed to save Lomas, only to die shortly thereafter. The moment indicates a kind of mutuality that exceeds symbiosis and foreshadows the complicated possibilities of the story's ending.

However, Gan's witnessing of the birth poses a formidable challenge to his conviction that Tlic–human interaction can be made to benefit both, if only an enlightened Tlic point of view—such as T'Gatoi's—is employed to govern such interaction. He has known of the birth process, but it is at this point, as Raffaella Baccolini (2017, 135) notes, that "the certainties of the hegemonic discourse begin to crumble and be resisted": "I had been told that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together—a kind of birth. I had believed it until now" (Butler 1997, 2487). Yet he also rebels against a dawning and uncomfortable realization: "I wasn't ready to see it. Maybe I would never be. Yet I couldn't *not* see it. Closing my eyes didn't help" (2487). The last sentence points to the metaphorical nature of his realization. He sees more than merely the bloodiness of the act. The birth itself becomes a kind of metaphor for Gan's ideological state: the oppressor is inside, growing inside and living off one's own blood—and it is alien, and humans are a mere convenience to it, not a "parent." T'Gatoi's clinical coldness and her remark that "[e]verything lives inside you Terrans" underlines this alienness and the remove at which the Tlic stand from humans. Confronted with the brutality of the act, which appears to exclude the possibility of mutuality, and with the metaphorical implications of it, Gan's trust in Tlic rule is severely shaken.

Therefore, after a confrontation with Qui, in which the latter confirms Gan's budding realization of the conditions that humans live in, Gan has thoughts of suicide—he realizes there is no escape. But there is—into love. "Love" can serve as a powerful incentive to accept conditions otherwise unbearable. It can also serve as justification for not battling unbearable conditions. As Kottman (2017) argues, love can be a way of making sense of the world around us—ideally for purposes of gaining greater freedom. But can it also make the unpalatable more acceptable and be a way of "making sense" that preserves one's self respect? In a quasi-colonial relationship between two peoples, "love" must be predicated on two things: an illusion of mutuality and a historical context that makes such mutuality appear at least remotely possible. Thus, Qui's version of history must be suppressed. As Qui had prophetically said to Gan during their conflict, "If it were going to happen to me, I'd want to believe it was more, too"—more than mere implantation of eggs for Tlic reproduction (Butler 1997,

2490). To believe that he is more than an entity in a herd of "host animals" (2488), as Qui refers to human "Tlic breeders," Gan needs to reconfigure what he has just witnessed. Not willing or able to commit suicide, because such an act would not change the system but merely foist his role on someone else in his family, and lacking the means to achieve autonomy, ideological reconfiguration is, for the moment, the easiest path for Gan to take.

In her essay "Speaking in Tongues," Mae Gwendolyn Henderson (1989) develops a theory for reading black women's texts. Such texts are characterized by a "rewriting or rereading of the dominant story," Henderson says, "resulting in a 'delegitimation' of the prior story" (35). The metaphor she suggests for this transformative power is a "'womblike matrix' in which soundlessness can be transformed into utterance, unity into diversity, formlessness into form, chaos into art, silence into tongues, and glossolalia into heteroglossia" (36). The slave narrative tradition, which may be considered the ancestor of "Bloodchild," does perform such transformations. The dominant discourse, in postcolonial fashion, is filtered through the consciousness and the words of the oppressed and revealed for what it is—an ideology of oppression. The writers write from the vantage point of freedom; they have already overcome one form of oppression, and the very act of writing contributes to a "decolonization of the mind," to borrow Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1986) term, by analyzing the act of oppression, while also allowing the writer ascendancy over the oppressor: she now determines the terms on which history is told. Taking this tradition as a measure for "Bloodchild," one notes how Butler's short story departs from it in significant ways.

Butler does show both hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourse in "Bloodchild," with T'Gatoi representing the dominant version of history, Gan's brother Qui the countervailing version, and Gan being torn between the two. However, counterhegemonic discourse does not win here, and even the "compromise" between the two is woefully lopsided. In "Bloodchild," the "womblike matrix" does not transform; the text takes a hard look at the accommodations oppression may force, both ideologically and biologically, one might say. Indeed, biology plays a metaphoric role in the story and can be read as an expression of the limited ideological options humans have in their relations with the Tlic. Even the process of reproduction does not yield beings who potentially might have a vested interest in both Tlic and Terran discourses and histories, "genetically" partaking in both societies, since Gan will not give birth to a genetic

hybrid but to a Tlic, given the mode of reproduction employed by the Tlic.[4] "Bloodchild" does not appear to hold such hope for the future; if anything, there is the vague threat that humans might lose the few freedoms they have, with T'Gatoi one of the few Tlic to advocate for their rights.

Thus, with T'Gatoi functioning as the "good" master in an evil and apparently inescapable system, Gan has few choices. The reproductive process ties Gan to an oppressive system without even offering him to genetically *or* socially imprint on Tlic society. T'Gatoi proposes blended families to alter this dynamic, but the story offers no hint that humans play any decisive role in the rearing of Tlic, though they may serve as play companions at a certain stage. Indeed, the very bloodiness of the "birthing" act—which reduces humans to feeding grounds and has none of the emotional bonding or nurturing of human pregnancy and birth, since what is produced are worms which immediately start to feed on animal flesh—psychologically ties the "producer" of Tlic offspring to the system of oppression by inviting a denial of its facts. T'Gatoi offers such a denial by attempting to emphasize the emotional aspect of the transaction when she responds to Gan's request, "'Ask me, Gatoi!' [that he be at least asked whether he wants to serve as host]—'For my children's lives?'" (Butler 1997, 2491). But as she says, these are indeed *her* children, and parental emotion is only lodged in her.

Elyce Rae Helford (1994, 268) sees a hopeful moment in Gan's self-assertion, in his request that he be asked: "[Gan's] demand also reminds her [T'Gatoi] that the Tlic are dependent on humans for their survival. Cooperation is the only way to ensure that humans do not become like the unthinking native animals which destroyed the eggs to protect their lives." But is what the Tlic practice or even what Gan demands—a limited amount of autonomy, since he also insists that he keep a weapon—really cooperation? It seems only *indoctrination* will serve Tlic needs here, an indoctrination that makes human compliance appear as cooperation. Even when T'Gatoi seemingly begs, playing as if she needed cooperation, she already knows that she will use Xuan Hoa, Gan's sister, for reproduction if Gan is not willing. Indeed, she subtly extorts Gan into compliance by threatening to go to Xuan Hoa who, the narrative tells the reader, is quite willing—possibly a comment on gender roles, since serving as "host" might not appear as threatening to Gan's sister as to him; Butler's remarks quoted earlier indicate that she intended just such a comment. However, T'Gatoi does not have to beg, since she could apply superior physical force

at any moment, and her wish for cooperation eerily resembles Dr. Flint's insistence that Linda (Harriet Jacobs) *gives* herself to him "voluntarily," despite his physical and legal power to coerce her—an insistence that the oppressed surrender body *and* soul. Harriet Jacobs (1987, 55) gives as one of her reasons why she chose to accept Mr. Sands's sexual overtures that "it seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion." Rather than give in to Mr. Flint who has power over her, she enters a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, who is at least not her owner. T'Gatoi, it appears, is both Mr. Flint and Mr. Sands here. While she can coerce Gan, he prefers that she chooses not to, that he be left a semblance of autonomy. Nonetheless, their coupling is only "less degrading," but, in the context of an overall coercive system, still degrading. Thus, it is not surprising when, in the end, hegemonic discourse wins. Without emotional bonds to their offspring, Tlic hosts can only see themselves as a kind of human planter's box—a self-image that is impossible to maintain. The Tlic version of history therefore appears as the more attractive option, an option embroidered with the "concern" and "care" which T'Gatoi hopes to implement in Tlic–Terran relations.

And that is the option Gan "chooses." The story illustrates how firmly Gan has been indoctrinated into a system beneficial to Tlic and how much he has imbibed the accompanying worldview when, in a description of the mating, he tells of how he "moved inadvertently, and hurt her. She gave a low cry of pain and I expected to be caged at once within her limbs. When I wasn't, I held on to her again, feeling oddly ashamed" (Butler 1997, 2493). A mere omission of a gesture of dominance, with the word "caged" clearly indicating the nature of the relationship, and he feels shame, is grateful for any sign of benevolence, ready to read it as a sign of partnership. Yet, the story is riddled with signals that full partnership is never an option.

Moments destroying any illusions of equality occur whenever Tlic interest is at stake. For one, responses to T'Gatoi by her human "family" are usually described with the verb "obey" or its derivatives; thus, the mother is "unwillingly obedient," Gan's "older sister obeyed," and Gan, as mentioned earlier, is taught to be "always obedient" toward T'Gatoi. More poignant, however, are those moments when T'Gatoi acts on behalf of Tlic reproductive interest, whether that of other Tlic or her own. When she asks Gan to slaughter an animal so she can implant the Tlic larvae she is about to surgically remove from another human, and Gan hesitates only slightly, the response is swift: "She knocked me across the room. Her tail

was an efficient weapon whether she exposed the sting or not." But rather than feeling any resentment, Gan merely gets up "feeling stupid for having ignored her warning" (2485). This routine response reveals that he must be used to chastisements of this sort. Even toward the end of the story, after T'Gatoi and Gan have had a conversation in which Gan asks for some choice and autonomy in his relations with T'Gatoi and T'Gatoi appears to grant it, the hierarchy becomes reestablished. After informing Gan she needs to implant an egg that very night, she becomes impatient with his hesitation: "'Now!' I let her push me out of the kitchen, then walked ahead of her toward my bedroom" (2493). Though Gan continues to question her, she responds that she "must do it to someone tonight," clarifying that her reproductive needs will take precedence over any human doubts and that "someone" will have to become host, thus also underlining the objectifying overtones of Tlic–human relations. While she may prefer Gan, if need be, any other human will do. And with Gan conditioned to think of association with T'Gatoi as an honor, it is of little surprise that, after all, he wants "to keep [her] for [him]self" (2494)—it is in this tortured way, through this maze of twisted histories, representations, and naked interests, that the two arrive at something faintly resembling love. For Gan, "[l]ove *is* itself an enacted attempt at understanding, a practical form of self-education" to use Paul Kottman's (2017) words, and if Gan and T'Gatoi's relationship serves as a model as both hope it will, it is a self-education "that is communally shared" (4–5).

One can see an antecedent of this relationship in Harriet Wilson's (1983) *Our Nig*, especially as its story takes place outside the confines of de jure slavery, though the social relations it portrays resemble it. There, too, one finds moments that harshly remind the reader of the hierarchical nature of what appear to be relations governed by fondness, even attraction. At the first encounter between the protagonist, Frado, and Jack, several years older than she and the youngest son of the Belmont family to whom the protagonist is indentured, he remarks upon her attractiveness. There are a number of passages in the novel hinting at his attraction to her. The feelings appear to be mutual. The narrative presents Jack in flattering terms, and given the autobiographical nature of the text, it is noticeable that all acts of kindness and affection on his part, as well as all overtones of attraction, are considered worth recording—not unlike Gan's attempts to present T'Gatoi in the best possible light. Frado attempts to please Jack, as Sojourner Truth attempts to please her owner, and as Gan attempts to please T'Gatoi when helping her birth Tlic larvae. Frado sometimes aims

to please by playing the clown: "Occasionally, she would utter some funny thing for Jack's benefit, while she was waiting on the table" (53). It appears of great importance to her that Jack values her: "To complete Nig's enjoyment, Jack arrived unexpectedly. His greeting was as hearty to herself as to any of the family" (70). Just as Gan imagines that T'Gatoi sees "her" human family simply as family, so does Frado. But despite her implicit hopes, Jack never forgets what relation they stand in: when she amuses him with a practical joke on his mother, briefly after he has commented favorably on her looks, he rewards her by tossing her a silver half-dollar. His affection might be genuine, but can it find an expression untainted by hierarchical implications?

Outside the bounds of formal slavery, other developments are possible. In the end, T'Gatoi does not completely impose herself. One has seen she can: whenever Tlic interests are concerned, her behavior toward humans becomes cold and commanding. Even in the story's final interactions with Gan, remnants of such behavior are obvious—but so is the omission of an imposition of superior physical force. Within a materialist framework of interpretation that only looks for what interests are at stake, no satisfactory explanation for this can be given. Human cooperation and goodwill certainly ease the implementation of the reproductive "pact," but they are not necessary. Leaving Gan vestiges of individual autonomy may appease T'Gatoi's conscience—clearly, her efforts at protecting humans show that she has one—but does not entail not employing superior physical power in moments of pain. It appears that in the final analysis—though the story makes a "final" analysis difficult, maybe impossible—history provides the context for all interaction, intimate or not, but cannot completely determine it.

III

But what of love? In discussing Harriet Jacobs, Hartman describes a dilemma relevant for a reading of "Bloodchild": "*Incidents*, by utilizing seduction [a term Hartman applies in a broader sense] and inquiring into its danger, suggests the possible gains to be had. … As deployed in Jacobs's narrative, seduction suggests both agency and subjection" (Hartman 1997, 102–103)—and it does so by "refusing to pose the question of desire in terms of compulsion versus unhindered choice" (104). This comes close to the way one might utilize the term love when one sees it as an instrumental term rather than as an unchanging and uncontrollable

expression of feelings, "as a historical practice, comprised of concrete ways of treating one another that change over time," as Paul Kottman (2017, 2) puts it. Such a view opens the possibility of seeing "love" as potentially being a form of negotiation, not only with an Other but with oneself as well.

Saidiya Hartman does not use the word love but describes a related dynamic in the context of Linda Brent deciding to enter into an affair with Mr. Sands:

> In order to act, Linda must to a degree 'assume the self,' not only in order to 'give herself' but also to experience something akin to freedom; however, it requires that she take possession and offer herself to another. This act also intensifies the constraints of slavery and reinscribes her status as property, even if figuratively property of another order, at the very moment in which she tries to undo and transform her status. (Hartman 1997, 105)

One question not settled by this formulation is whether it is of no importance how the transformation of constraint into an act of giving oneself also transforms the self-understanding of the giver, which in Linda's case is one of her motivations—and which is Gan's main motivation. By negotiating his position with T'Gatoi, Gan does not escape the tight circumscription under which Terrans live on the Tlic planet, but he enables himself to hang on to a degree of self-respect, to preserve some boundaries. Butler's story thus pits a different spin on what Jennifer Nash (2011, 2) has called the "black feminist tradition of love-politics," a tradition which she says is "marked by transforming love from the personal … into a theory of justice." What love enables in "Bloodchild" does not exactly resemble justice even as it performs a larger than personal function and may provide the possibility to transform outright exploitation into something somewhat different. Still, at best that may be an uneasy arrangement within a fixed power framework which love itself may or may not fundamentally modify. Given Butler's pragmatic bent, this not exactly inspiring outcome does not surprise. As she has said, "I don't write utopian science fiction because I don't believe imperfect humans can form a perfect society" (qtd. in Canavan 2016, 120), a stark realism she also extends to the extraterrestrial beings in all her fiction.

Erich Fromm (1979, 39) describes what he terms "mature love" in this way: "In contrast to a symbiotic union, mature love represents a becoming-one under the condition that one's own integrity and independence is

maintained, and thus also one's individuality" (my translation). There may be no ultimate standard for what "love" is—I do not mean to imply that all emotions or values are contingent but that what one wishes to call "love" may depend, on one hand, on what one wishes the world to be and, on the other, on what it concretely is and how one explains one's place in it. As usually, Butler does not make it easy for her readers: whether one sees T'Gatoi and Gan's relationship as love or exploitation or a varying combination of the two depends on the yardstick one uses and on the work one expects love to do. In an interview, Butler proposed a transactional view of love, one that reverberates both with Fromm's idea of love as a way of maintaining one's individuality and Kottman's view of love as "a way of justifying actions and practices": "There are many different kinds of love in ['Bloodchild']: family love, physical love … The alien needs the boy for procreation, and she makes it easier on him by showing him affection and earning his in return. After all, she is going to have her children with him" (Potts 2010, 66). To square the circle, one might say Gan negotiates with T'Gatoi to make loving her possible while T'Gatoi has decided to love Gan—and let him bargain with her because of it—to maintain a specific image of herself just as Gan maintains one of himself.

In much of her fiction, Butler sees survival as the ultimate value: "survival as the only choice, survival as itself a kind of resistance, a triumph—structures much of Butler's work" (Canavan 2016, 60). In "Bloodchild," Tlic procreation depends on humans, and human survival depends on Tlic willingness to share the planet. Thus, Tlic and humans have a vested interest in establishing a worldview that presents their relationship in such a way that the self-respect of each can be maintained, and the story shows such an ideology in the process of establishing itself: Gan and T'Gatoi resolve that "love" should be the foundation of Tlic–Terran relations. Gerry Canavan argues that "[i]n Butler's novels power acts as it always does, rapaciously inflicting itself upon those without: it is the task of the powerless to turn the tables, or else survive in the gaps" (3). Love is the only leverage humans have in "Bloodchild" and thus assumes a functional value: it serves as an organizing principle, enabling survival, both physical and psychological. But love, in "Bloodchild" and much of Butler's oeuvre, does ambiguous work: it can potentially transform relationships in the face of materially unequal power relations (the Tlic are physically much stronger), but it can also cover up material inequities by adorning them with feelings. "Bloodchild" asks whether, in the presence of stark power imbalances not easily rectified, anything else but love can lead to conditions

exceeding mere survival. Love may be the only impetus behind the struggle for equality and equity. Without it, there is only power.

Acknowledgments I wish to thank Venetria Patton for her helpful suggestions in response to a (much) earlier draft of this chapter and Rafiki Jenkins for comments on the present version.

Notes

1. "The *Inquisitr*, the *Daily Mail*, AOL and Cox Media Group all used the word (though Cox later updated its wording). So did an NBC News tweet that drew scathing criticism, though its story accurately called her 'the enslaved woman who, historians believe, gave birth to six of Jefferson's children.' The Washington Post also used 'mistress' in a headline and a tweet about Hemings's room in February" (Danielle 2017).
2. As Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson (2013, 71) have noted, "Alice … can imagine no relationship with him [Rufus] that is not forced and unwanted, a situation exacerbated by the fact that has her own desired relationship with a black man."
3. Definitions taken from *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996).
4. Dana Franklin in Butler's novel *Kindred* might be said to have such an interest and she is forced to mediate and thus be a transformer. Thelma J. Shinn (1996, 80) has noted, in a discussion of Butler's *Wild Seed*, that the "[c]hildren of slavery must within themselves resolve the apparent duality of black and white; the real Necessity has created in them a biological answer, and their combined mythic heritages offer psychological and social answers."

References

Baccolini, Raffaella. 2017. Nationalism, Reproduction, and Hybridity in Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild". In *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, ed. Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal, 132–141. Yokine, WA: Twelfth Planet Press.

Bernardo, Susan M. 2019. Ecocritical Ideas and Butler's "Bloodchild" and *Parable of the Sower*. In *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler*, ed. Tarshia L. Stanley, 90–96. New York: Modern Language Association.

Butler, Octavia. 1997. Bloodchild. In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, 2480–2494. New York: W. W. Norton.

———. 2005. Afterword. In *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*, 30–32. New York: Seven Stories Press.
Canavan, Gerry. 2016. *Octavia E. Butler*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. For Better, for Worse: Marriage Means Something Different Now. *Washington Post*, May 1, B1.
Cottman, Michael. 2017. Historians Uncover Slave Quarters of Sally Hemings at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. *NBC News*, July 3. http://www.nbcnews.com. Accessed 4 Aug 2017.
Danielle, Britni. 2017. Sally Hemings Wasn't Thomas Jefferson's Mistress. She Was His Property. *Washington Post*, July 7. https://www.washingtonpost.com. Accessed 4 Aug 2017.
Fromm, Erich. 1979. *Die Kunst des Liebens*. Frankfurt: Ullstein Materialien.
Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scene of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Helford, Elyce Rae. 1994. "Would You Really Rather Die Than Bear My Young?": The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild". *African American Review* 28 (2): 259–271.
Henderson, Gwendolyn Mae. 1989. Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition. In *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writings by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall, 16–37. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Jacobs, Harriet. 1987. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates. New York: Mentor.
Kenan, Randall. 1991. An Interview with Octavia Butler. *Callaloo* 14 (2): 495–504.
Knabe, Susan, and Wendy Gay Pearson. 2013. "Gambling Against History": Queer Kinship and Cruel Optimism in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. In *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*, ed. Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl, 51–78. Seattle: Aqueduct Press.
Kottman, Paul A. 2017. *Love as Human Freedom*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
Livingston, James. 2016. *No More Work: Why Full Employment Is a Bad Idea*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
McCaffery, Larry, and Jim McMenamin. 2010. An Interview with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 10–26. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
McKible, Adam. 1994. "These Are the Facts of the Darky's History": Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts. *African American Review* 28 (2): 223–235.
Morrison, Toni. 2003. *Love*. New York: Knopf.
Nash, Jennifer C. 2011. Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality. *Meridians* 11(2): 1–24. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1. Accessed 29 Nov 2017.

Potts, Stephen. 2010. "We Keep Playing the Same Record": A Conversation with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 65–73. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Shinn, Thelma J. 1996. *Women Shapeshifters: Transforming the Contemporary Novel*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Truth, Sojourner. 1993. In *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, ed. Margaret Washington. New York: Vintage.

wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1986. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Melton: Currey.

Wilson, Harriet E. 1983. *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. Vintage: New York.

CHAPTER 5

"Accept the Risk": Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" and Institutional Power

Beth A. McCoy

In the college classroom, Octavia Butler's spare, elegant prose demands critical reading, sparks critical thinking, and invites reflection on both processes. Her short story "Bloodchild" is no exception. I tell students that learning the terms within which they enter and remain at academic institutions stands as the necessary precondition for pursuing what I call their "stealth majors": first, to advocate for themselves within, against, and alongside complex power structures and bureaucracies of which institutions of higher learning are only one manifestation; and second, to imagine worlds beyond those structures and bureaucracies. Better than any telling of mine, "Bloodchild" demonstrates how such study is necessary, unavoidable, and unceasing, but not only for students. Specifically, reading "Bloodchild" alongside governing college documents encourages early-career students to think carefully and critically about the terms within which they enter academic institutions even as the story underscores how important it is that they make principled demands of the institutionally

B. A. McCoy (✉)
SUNY Geneseo, Geneseo, NY, USA
e-mail: mccoy@geneseo.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_5

powerful who set those terms, even—and perhaps *especially*—when those institutions purport to be protective and liberatory.

"Bloodchild" is Butler's most-famous short story, but its plot bears repeating nevertheless. Set on an extraterrestrial world inhabited and governed by the centipede-like Tlic, the story illuminates a process of coming to grips with institutional terms. Specifically, "Bloodchild" traces what Butler (2005c, 25) terms the "coming-of-age" story of Gan, a young Terran man who is the descendant of those who fled "from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them." On arrival to this new planet, these fugitive humans shot the Tlic "as worms." But as Butler (2005a, 32, 31) points out, "Bloodchild" is no "*Star Trek*," no "British empire in space." Instead of setting up colonial *entrepots*, administrations, and extractions, the Terrans find that they must offer up something in exchange for "a liveable space on a world not their own" (31). Because the Tlic are experiencing a reproductive crisis, the Terrans agree that some of them (usually men) will carry Tlic eggs to term inside their own bodies. In exchange for this painful, dangerous Terran labor, the Tlic create a formal social and political structure to make room (e.g., figuratively, Terran reproductive freedoms; literally, a Terran "preserve" [Butler 2005c, 3]) for Terran families and futures on the Tlic world. With successive generations of Terran and Tlic, the agreement has become conventional, but the old tensions still bubble: guns are forbidden to Terrans, but some keep them nonetheless while "desperate" Tlic pressure the government to make more Terrans "available" (5).

As young Gan comes to understand what that long-ago agreement means in practice *and* theory, he demands change. His parents had promised their son's surrogacy to T'Gatoi, a high-ranking Tlic politician whom Gan has come to love deeply over the course of his life. Blended with Gan's family since before his birth, T'Gatoi strives to protect and manage not only Terran and Tlic interests, in general, but also her own reproductive needs. On the evening that T'Gatoi arrives to implant in Gan her eggs that will grow to grubs inside his body, the public emergency of a Terran/Tlic surrogacy gone wrong confronts the young Terran with the pain and possible death that birth can present (the grubs can eat the host alive). As part of Gan's education, he had been shown "pictures and diagrams" of birth countless times, but never the actuality that, as T'Gatoi notes, has "always been a private thing" (Butler 2005c, 29) that "Terrans should be protected from seeing" (28). He reels before "disturbing" (Butler 2005a, 30), bloody reality threatens himself and—implicitly—T'Gatoi with a

forbidden gun. He presses for Terran surrogates to be shown the truth so that they, like him, may make a truly informed decision about something that, as Butler acknowledges in the "Afterword," "will affect the rest of his life" (30). And he demands a shift in the relationship with T'Gatoi, the beloved who had dismissed his concerns by suggesting that he could not understand "adult things" (Butler 2005c, 25). "If we're not your animals," Gan tells her, "if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner" (26). In demanding that asymmetry (however caring it may be) transform into actual partnership, Gan decides, as Butler puts it, to become not just "a pregnant man" but one who "chooses to become pregnant *not* through some sort of misplaced competitiveness to prove that a man could do anything a woman could do, not because he was forced to, not even out of curiosity" but rather as "an act of love": an affirmative decision "in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties" (Butler 2005a, 30).

The story's complexities have proven both extraordinarily challenging and supremely useful at the public liberal arts college where I teach and where nearly all early-career students must take a critical reading and writing seminar. For many years in that seminar, I taught Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* and asked student writers to explore how Butler as a philosopher engaged John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* and René Descartes's *Discourse on Method*. But as attention to violence (e.g., sexual assault; anti-black violence; attacks against trans* persons) waged against and among college students grew nationally and locally, I shifted the course's key text to "Bloodchild" and placed the story in conversation with the college's Student Code of Conduct, the document that lays out the terms governing students' behavior.

As many readers of Butler know, the most commonly available version of "Bloodchild" appears in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, a Butler-sanctioned collection that for each story features an authorial afterword. The one for "Bloodchild" has proven to stick in more than a few readers' craws. Many readers hold authorial intent in such high regard that they might dismiss novel interpretations of Shakespeare plays as ones that the bard never could have "intended," but Butler's expression of intent in crafting "Bloodchild" registers as intolerable. At the beginning of the afterword, for instance, Butler (2005a, 30) states famously that it "amazes" her that "some" interpret "Bloodchild" as a "story of slavery. It isn't." Elyce Rae Helford's (1994) "'Would You Really Rather Die than Bear My Young?': The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia

E. Butler's 'Bloodchild'" stands as one of the most well-known interpretations of the story as a master–slave relationship. Helford, however, is not alone. When Butler delivered a keynote address at the University of Louisville in 2005, an audience member stunned the auditorium at the very beginning of the question-and-answer session. Loudly and from the back of the auditorium, the audience member demanded, "Ms. Butler, WHEN will you admit that 'Bloodchild' is about slavery?" Drawing herself up very straight, Butler firmly and slowly replied, "'Bloodchild' is not about slavery." I tell this anecdote every semester that I teach the story, and yet students still have a hard time buying Butler's claim, one that they feel is an unfair limitation on their own interpretive freedom. And they have an even harder time with considering some of Butler's claims of what "Bloodchild" *is* about: among them, a coming-of-age story, an inoculation against bot-fly phobia, and—especially—a love story. (In the wake of the #MeToo movement, it is understandable that this last has proven particularly difficult.)

But it's really Butler's insistence that "Bloodchild" is a story about "paying the rent" that unsettles student readers the most. They often express this discomfiture by ignoring the insistence altogether and by refusing to consider Butler's key question: "Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a livable space on a world not our own?" (Butler 2005a, 32). Butler's expressed amazement that some readers see the story as one of slavery appears to play a part in students' sidestepping of the question. For instance, "in trade" is taken frequently as meaning slave trade rather than exchange. Such interpretation is not uncommon. The *Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis* trilogy sparks it quite a bit, given the Oankali identity as ever-changing gene traders. No matter the textual evidence establishing *humans* as hierarchical and the Oankali as not, readers will still insist that the Oankali are colonialists and slavers. Butler's point throughout the trilogy is a subtle one: humans are so hierarchical that they will either not recognize non-hierarchy or will see it as oppression.

Such subtlety can be hard to handle, especially for students who are newly arrived to college and who have hardly had time or space to think about the multiple figurative forms of "paying the rent" that the institution asks, commands, or coerces them to do in exchange for their education. Pairing "Bloodchild" and its afterword with the conduct code proves especially useful to illuminate how the code's terms are ones that students must accept in order to forge what they (hope, doubt, assume) will be a

"livable space" (Butler 2005a, 32) in a campus world that is, to varying degrees depending on identities and experiences, both their "own" (31) and not. At the most basic levels, those terms signal what Wendy Brown (1995, 161, 162–163), describing the mechanism of liberal consent, calls "the presence of power, arrangements, and actions that one does not oneself create but to which one submits." If incoming students wish to actually register for classes at the college, they have no choice but to agree to the code's terms that they have played no role in setting. (They find it cold comfort to learn that faculty must sign a loyalty oath to the state of New York in order to be able to work at this public institution.) Understanding dynamics such as this explicitly, Gan's siblings Hoa and Qui represent for students a variety of responses to coming to grips with reality. Hoa, for instance, expects and wants to be pregnant ("she has always expected to carry other lives inside of her" [Butler 2005c, 26]). Qui, on the other hand, has seen what can go wrong and tries to run away via intoxicants and other such pursuits. Qui's sudden grasp of what the agreement *really* means often speaks to students, nearly all of whom report that despite the fact that they have passed an electronic quiz indicating that they have read and accepted the terms, they haven't really *read* the terms that they are accepting. They have not *thought* about those terms. And so much like Gan who had been shown "pictures and diagrams" of birth, many students have little actual experience with the realities and consequences of those terms, especially those that fall under the ever-expanding category of "proscribed behaviors." As an unsurprising matter of fact, many students report that they often only really *read* the conduct code when they run afoul of such proscriptions as underage alcohol consumption; electronic file-sharing using college servers, networks, or equipment; or as indicated by the "Community Standards & Code of Conduct" at Spelman College (n.d., 3) where I presented an early version of this essay, violating safety protocols by doing things like "propping open fire doors, security doors, and/or secured doors."

At least in part to prevent or at least soften the kind of last-minute, crisis-based learning that Gan and Qui might be understood to experience, I ask students to at last really read the conduct code. They must prove that they have done so by reporting back with textual specifics that enable them to explain what in the document drew their attention, what surprised, encouraged, unnerved, heartened, and angered them. Always enlightening and useful, the discussion that emerges keeps me from guessing at what is most on these early-career students' minds. It offers the

opportunity both to address interpretations of the conduct code that faculty, staff, and administration would often term student "misconceptions" and to try to do so without invalidating those interpretations, ones that students often make in good faith and for good reason. For instance, the code counts "failure to comply with the lawful directions of any college official, staff member, or student employee who is asking in performance of duties of position" (IV. B14) as a violation. When students learn about this language, they frequently respond that it is "unfair" that students are governed by such enumerated codes and faculty and staff are not. That faculty and staff are ungoverned is, of course, not true. But why would students *not* draw such a conclusion? After all, they were assigned to read the student code, not the employee ones. The outcry allows me to actually produce some of the documents governing faculty and staff behavior and to make the important point that some of those documents actually protect students *from* faculty and staff. Such context allows some students to think with more complexity about the complicated negotiation within "Bloodchild," as the politically powerful T'Gatoi plays a major role in sustaining "a livable space" for the descendants of Terrans who had arrived to the Tlic planet expecting not just to find haven from those who persecuted them on their home planet but also to dominate the Tlic that they unexpectedly encountered. Forged generations ago by gun-bearing, invading Terrans who saw Tlic as worms and home-planet Tlic who saw Terrans as invading animals, the terms of the agreement are mutually—if differently—unacceptable both within the story and to student readers. Driven by survival, the Tlic want more Terran surrogates rather than the limited number made available by careful, methodological, and political family joining; driven by frustrating understanding that the Tlic world is not their planet to dominate in Lockean terms, Terrans (including Gan's mother who counts T'Gatoi as a friend) chafe under the limited space accorded them in the Preserve. Confronting characters and readers alike with such limited space is a consistent theme in Butler's work, as Tom Foster (2013) points out in his essay titled with an apt line from Butler's "Amnesty": "We get to live, and so do they" (Butler 2005b, 181).

Understandably, students often hate being brought to this threshold. As with the humans in Butler's *Dawn* who refuse to accept that they are on an Oankali ship and not Earth, those who are used to being at the apex can find it intolerable to be told that they exist in a limited space where they do not call the shots. And indeed, expressions of shock and dismay are heard as readers discover that the conduct code "shall apply to conduct

that occurs on College premises; at College sponsored activities, and to off-campus conduct that adversely affects the College community and/or the pursuit of its objectives" (IV.A). The code also envisions little temporal or definitional outside. From "the time of application for admission through the actual awarding" of their degrees, students "shall be responsible" for their conduct. But they are also responsible for conduct that "may occur before classes begin or after classes end, as well as during the academic year and during periods between terms of actual enrollment" (IV.A). And they are responsible "*even* if the conduct is not discovered until after a degree is awarded" (IV.A). This language startles many in the class, especially when they consider it alongside sections that describe how individual administrative positions are accorded seemingly untrammeled discretion and state that the list enumerating "proscribed conduct" should not be considered "all-inclusive" (IV.B). With some vexation, students point out that the code may be interpreted as saying that behaviors may be classified as proscribed at any moment for any reason.

Upon reading these passages, students often exclaim, "We are on a preserve!" They begin to link their situations as students with those faced by Terrans in "Bloodchild," where the Preserve offers some promised measure of security and autonomy both present and future. But Gan learns of Qui's first-hand understanding that the longstanding Terran/Tlic agreement includes the possibility that he could die fulfilling his end of the bargain (i.e., the Tlic grubs could eat him from within), the promise feels broken and the measure of security and autonomy too scant of a reward. Gan begins to understand Qui's desire to get "away" even though there is no "away" possible outside the Preserve; Gan also begins to understand the other forms of "away" that Qui pursues in the present (e.g., narcotizing himself with sterile egg and sex) and might pursue in the future (e.g., perhaps self-harm with a forbidden gun). Both brothers experience anger upon understanding that an institution they need has not been fully transparent with them. In understanding this textual detail, students begin to reflect on what they report as some of their own escape behaviors, including narcotization and self-harm. They begin to consider that there is no "away" (Butler 2005c, 29), no outside of the Code of Conduct. Not only do they begin to think about how agreeing to the code's terms constitutes another form of what Butler calls "paying the rent" (Butler 2005a, 31), but they also begin or continue (as the case may be) to contemplate how both they and the college exist amid many other structures for which there are no outsides, from regimes of gender to what

Bernice Johnson Reagon (1991) and Frank B. Wilderson III (2010) have quite differently termed the structuring antagonism informing anti-blackness.[1]

In other words, then, reading Butler's work alongside institutional codes and policies closely can enable students to examine the shared and divergent histories, values, and experiences that always churn within and through what is marketed as a monolithic, coherent community. Butler skillfully and subtly illustrates how differently individuals may interpret the same set of circumstances. Gan's mother upholds the Tlic/Terran agreement but mourns Gan's pending adulthood nonetheless. Conditioned to expect that she will become pregnant to bear Terran children, Hoa embraces the possibility of bearing Tlic young. (Interestingly, students see the possibility of bearing Tlic young as non-consensual; her conditioning to bear Terran young, however, they read as consensual.) For some, including many white students, encountering the code's seemingly boundless reach (whether arbitrary and/or not) feels like a sudden, unwelcome revelation, an eruption of what they read as unfairness in an otherwise just world. For some, though, including many black students, this is no revelation at all, but instead yet one more reminder of how so many institutions (including colleges and universities) are always already immersed in the proliferation of punishable policies and laws that feed the prison industrial complex and its stark, violent raced and gendered disparities. In the process of considering what Gan would rightly recognize as "adult things" (Butler 2005c, 26), students acquire and season interpretive tools. They come to consider what might be at stake for them and for the community if they violate the terms of the Code of Conduct. For worse and for better, the stakes can be as neoliberal as considering their own tolerance for what Lise Gotell (2008, 875) terms the "risk management" that affirmative consent standards demand of sexual assault perpetrators and victims. Or they can be humane as grappling with how their actions (whether proscribed or not) might actually *harm* others. Indeed, one of the most important moments in "Bloodchild" comes when Gan forces T'Gatoi to consider that her expectation of privacy when it comes to Tlic birth is harmful to Terrans who agree to carry eggs without knowing what a birth actually means, looks like, and risks.

With this provisional and somewhat messily achieved common knowledge base, then, we move on to brainstorming responses to the essay prompt: What does reading "Bloodchild" do for/with/to/the kind of assumptions/questions guiding SUNY Geneseo's (2015) "Student Code

of Conduct," including (but not necessarily limited to) the section on "Proscribed Conduct"? Early exercises reveal how the students' first encounter with Butler's story runs up upon the shoals of what I like to call the "big equals sign" that attempts to render *x* as "just like" *y*. This flattening of significant difference can produce some interesting readings. For instance, surprised at how many times the college's Dean of Students is mentioned in the Code of Conduct, students frequently claim that the Dean is "just" or "exactly" like T'Gatoi. The ensuing discussion helps tease out some specificity and nuance. Do they mean that they expect that the Dean might actually implant them with eggs? Or are they noting a similarity between the Dean and the Tlic official in terms of both entities' access to structural power and identities as an arm of the state? Students also struggle in the grips of a syndrome related to the "big equals sign": the "space alien" phenomenon that renders *x* as utterly other to *y*. This last might be best emblematized in the reaction of one student who said, "I don't care how many times I read this story—it is not going to make me accept bug rights." The emergence of both syndromes is an indication of Butler's ability to productively provoke readers into confronting the fact that—intentionally or not—they refuse even *imaginary* worlds where people "like" themselves ("likeness" defined in multiple, always-shifting ways) have, are, and will not always and only be in control.[2]

Mingling both the "big equals sign" and "space alien," students find themselves compelled (I use the *Clay's Ark* compulsion language consciously here) to judge "Bloodchild" by the very conduct code that so many had derided. Assuming the mien of colonial administrators, many judge the characters, the plot, and even *Butler* herself according to the code. Reversing the assignment's trajectory, some refuse to consider what the story has to say about the thought informing the conduct code. Instead, the code that they may have reviled just a few days earlier becomes a happily wielded tool to be applied to the fictional Tlic world that they have only just encountered. As with those who reject Butler's declaration that "Bloodchild" is not about slavery, many students perform such judgment even when they say that divining authorial intent is their readerly job, and they do these things even and perhaps because Butler's afterword to the story provides an unambiguous statement that "Bloodchild" is not an outer-space imperial adventure. At one level, the fact that these default interpretations snap into existence at the very threshold of critical thinking is indicative of what Elsa Barkley Brown (1989, 926) has so vividly identified as "linear, Western, symmetrical notions of the world"—notions, I

would note, that often function merely as cover story for violent *a*symmetry. Such notions "emphasize objectivity, equate fairness with uniformity and sameness, and thus create and bolster individualistic competitive enterprise" (926), and they do these things even, apparently, in imaginary, speculative situations. And as symptomatized by the conduct code, these notions can operate for many students as weapons, ones that not only enable them to refuse to consider the world they already live in but also compel them upon arrival to kill the world[3] that "Bloodchild" imagines, much as the Terrans attempted to do when they first encountered and shot the Tlic as "worms" (Butler 2005c, 25).

The compulsion to judgment emerges especially around the rent-paying that, once again according to Butler, the story explores. Whether "Bloodchild" is paired with the Code of Conduct or not, nearly all students identify with Gan, but only partially. They both miss and purposely discount such textual evidence as Gan's positive expression of desire for Gatoi to "do it to" (Butler 2005c, 26) him, to implant her eggs in him so that he may *both* save his sister *and* "keep" Gatoi for himself (28). Instead, sounding much like Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, they note that because there is no "away" or "outside" of the Preserve, refusing the terms agreed to by earlier generations of both Tlic and Terran isn't really an option. And thus they use the college Code of Conduct to pronounce that Gan's consent is not freely given. They note that T'Gatoi possesses state power and wields both superior size and speed. Terrans, they say, are powerless before her potentially deadly sting and intoxicating sterile eggs. And, they observe, she draws on family ties and guilt ("Would you really rather die than bear my young … ?" [25]) to unrelentingly *pursue* Gan, to *secure*, *obtain*, and *extract* consent from him. In other words, students declare almost universally that Gan can only be read as a victim of non-consensual assault, coercion, and exploitation.

It is at this juncture that another of Butler's traps (velvety soft like T'Gatoi herself) springs. In earlier discussions of the college's standard of intoxicant-free affirmative consent, there are always those who place the possibility of false accusations of sexual assault as their prominent concern; these individuals often find the sexual misconduct policy to be authoritarian and overbroad. In considering Gan's situation, however, these same individuals suddenly join the pro-affirmative consent peers with whom they had previously disagreed vigorously. Put another way, these individuals become quite enamored of consent indeed. They hold its free expression in the highest regard. The story's capacity for provoking such a

reversal is on one level extraordinarily helpful and of a piece with the gift that the rest of Butler's fiction gives to readers: it makes room for us to catch ourselves in the act of trying to preserve that which we in practice and/or in imagination may have derided or abused until the very specter of having it wielded against us or having it taken away arises. It is indeed this lesson that Butler teaches when human beings in *Xenogenesis* lose the ability to touch each other. When such touch was freely available to them, they often squandered it in violence: murder and rape for sure, but also, presumably, in the smaller but accumulating violence of invasive, unwanted touching of one's hair or pregnant belly. So rampant was such violence that it seemed that humans valued touch as nothing more than a weapon—that is, until it was lost, and then in the losing valued it *so* much that they refuse to even consider what they might be gaining through that loss. Reading "Bloodchild" then can tumble readers' most-cherished assumptions and their most-cherished stories they tell about themselves and the cultures in which they live. Butler provokes the tumbling, but it is, I repeat constantly, never gratuitous. Rather, Butler's work flows alongside that of the Modern Civil Rights Movement. In *The Songs Are Free* video interview, Movement activist, singer, and historian Bernice Johnson Reagon tells Bill Moyers that "in any culture, any people" there exists a "need" for "in any culture, any people" to have "things to be thrown up in your community, everything to be turned over in such a way that you have another chance to look at what you have put together" and "to be selective about what you will carry forward" (Reagon 1991). Consistently, Butler's work provides the opportunity for students to experience in a relatively controlled, secure environment the fulfillment of that need.

At the same time, it is also important to steer the students back to the assignment to force (yes, I use that word) them to consider what "Bloodchild" might have to say about the thinking that goes into such governing documents as the Student Code of Conduct. For key to all such enumerated codes is the assumption that if only the terms were transparent, and if only those transparent terms were read and thought about carefully, then education would successfully fulfill its promise, take root, and produce institutional, community, and individual stability and safety. Butler's fiction indicates, of course, that this is not always the case. In *Parable of the Talents*, for instance, Marcus (responding in part to his own pain) uses Earthseed's open, transparent community terms against Lauren. Many students, faculty, staff, and administrators have learned similar lessons through hard experience. Community members of the Atlanta

University Center saw the language of clear expectations for sexual consent turned into a violent parody "sexual consent form" (Davis 2015).[4] In *Clay's Ark*, Butler highlights that honesty, openness, and transparency about pandemic do not persuade Blake Maslin of the need to stay on the Clay's Ark compound rather than run for a hospital and, in fact, may be read as provoking his privileged refusal of their terms. And the institution where I work saw the educational project of Sexual Assault Awareness Week (devoted in part to educating the campus community about the definition of affirmative consent) derailed by a professor's colloquium titled "Against 'Sexual' 'Assault' 'Awareness.'"

Even without such spectacular acts of bad faith, it is true that codes and terms end up suggesting realities that are abstract, seemingly disconnected from the concrete, messy intricacies of interactions among people where, as Butler reminds us endlessly in a truly inconvenient truth, power in some form is never absent. "Bloodchild" proves amazingly useful and fruitful here in cautioning the institutionally powerful on exactly this point. Again, Gan had been shown pictures and diagrams of what he would experience as a Tlic surrogate, a detail that is often missed in the first-reading panic that Butler's work so often provokes. But repeated and (yes) coerced re-reading can produce some real insight. If consent really is, as Brown has indicated, submission to terms that one has not participated in setting, then re-reading "Bloodchild" helps to prompt the supremely difficult, hard-to-handle reflection upon how free of coercion they actually are in so many situations. In this new phase reached through the rewriting process, students begin to express how they have always already been coerced non-consensually (e.g., by family expectations) to attend college—or even a particular college—while pressured, incapacitated, and intoxicated by the circulating headiness of an institutional reputation.

Prompted by extended encounter with Butler's work, insights such as these open the floodgates to further thinking. Some start to be able to consider how they have already been bound to each other by other powers that make them think they are acting autonomously, without coercion, and with the best information available. Some begin to think about how racial and economic categories steer them to form bonds with friends and other intimates in ways that they thought that they were choosing without any influence. Everyone becomes unsettled but intrigued when I suggest that they read Butler's "The Evening the Morning and the Night" or *Imago* (from the *Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis* trilogy) where people are drawn to or repelled from each other by pheromones that are neither generated nor registered

consciously, from oxytocin and pheromones to racial and economic categories, biological and sociopolitical forces. Butler's final novel *Fledgling* can prompt a full-scale revolt when readers encounter tightly woven, long-lived families drawn together by the non-consensual act of a venom-laced Ina bite. Some readers quail before such challenge, but others can withstand it to consider how Butler keeps imagining more equitable worlds and possibilities that are not simply retreads of the same old violence packaged as equality, to borrow Kafka's phrasing, before the law.

Reading Butler's fiction helps students understand that this is what they are learning in college: both that they already have been involved in a trade for a livable space, according to terms and conversations that long predate them, and that they may find it necessary to change those terms. In this way, "Bloodchild" presents in its tale a seed that yields an intoxication different from the narcotic reverie of the Tlic sterile egg. This intoxication is the heady thrill of actually thinking as Gan does when he makes important decisions in a space not his own. It is also a space that has no outside or, as Qui puts it, "away." We know where for Butler such active, actual thinking actually leads. It leads to Gan's gun-accompanied truth-telling to power, however much he loves T'Gatoi: "[I]f these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner" (Butler 2005c, 26).

Although I have spent much of this chapter on the challenges and risks that Butler presents to *students*, I need to close with the challenges that Butler continues to present to *me* and to other non-student academic constituencies: staff, faculty, and administration. In thinking through this chapter, I have become ever more aware of how I've been drawn into the very entrapment, the velvety caging that Butler lovingly invites her readers to experience and to avow. I remember well my first experience with such traps fifteen years ago. I was teaching *Dawn* for the first time and kept using the pronoun "he" when I referred to Nikanj, the ooloi appropriately referred to as "it." At that moment, Butler made me realize that the gender binary and stereotypical idea of masculinity as doer rather than done coursed through me like an electric current. It zapped any remaining illusions I had about myself as an enlightened, autonomous person. I did not write these cultural scripts. I did not want them. But they overran my desire anyway and compromised my ability to honor Butler's textual specificity and the endlessly changing Oankali (including the largely unlikeable Kahguhyaht) as complex persons.

In writing about "Bloodchild," I have been compelled to a similar self-realization about my own contradictions and susceptibilities as an

institutionally powerful person. Each semester, I craft long, single-space syllabi (twelve pages and counting) enumerating classroom procedures, outcomes, and proscribed behaviors. In doing so, I have practiced myself into functionally believing that such enumerations will prevent what James Snead (1981, 150) calls the inevitability of "accident and rupture." Despite myriad examples to the contrary, I keep deferring really coming to grips with the fact that institutions are composed of people who, as Butler says of her characters, always "have something to say for their position" (Butler and Delany 1998). In other words, when students perform what I understand as a violation of syllabus terms, Butler's work prompts me to remember that those students are actually saying something for and about their position. And so when the armed Gan demands that T'Gatoi "accept the risk" of "dealing with a partner," Butler confronts me all over again with a dangerous, inevitable, necessary, and unending scene wherein the institutionally powerful are made to understand that power is always in the process of being transformed through demands. She reminds me that the powerful may tell themselves that what they say is protection, liberation, or, as Gatoi herself puts it to Gan, privacy may be read by demand-makers as a distinct lack of partnership and an avoidance of risk that not be borne solely by one party but instead shared. Recently, this reminder churned up again when I taught an upper-division course on Butler's fiction. After re-negotiating the syllabus spontaneously with students throughout the semester, I told the class that I would teach the course the next time by structuring it formally with room for demands, risk, and partnership. Those are the words that I actually *said*. In my head, however, lurked the word "allow." It was a humbling moment that alerted me to the presence of what might *Mind of My Mind*'s Karl would surely recognize as "some very Dorolike ideas" (Butler 2007, 309).

Humbling realizations such as these have led me to believe that Butler's work offers an indispensable gift that many may find difficult to receive. Her work can cultivate startling thought on the part of both student *and* instructor, and, for that matter, of congregant and clergyperson, and (following Tamara Nopper[5]) activists and leaders formal and de facto. Indeed, I have begun to wonder what might happen if the institutionally powerful were to read "Bloodchild" alongside those who are and/or may be making demands of the powerful. I wonder what might happen if such reading occurred at the moment when the powerful teach, share, or deliver institutional governing principles, terms, and documents. I wonder what might happen if those of us in positions to do so were to move to make it so.

Notes

1. Notes Reagon (1991, 115), "In looking at African-American society and the dominant American society, one finds the relationship between the foundational grounds to be a power relationship, a social relationship, an economic relationship, and a relationship of inequity and antagonism." Wilderson (2010, 5) writes of "Red and Black political ontology—or non-ontology" as existing within white supremacy's "rubric of antagonism," which he defines as an "irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions."
2. Indeed, the last time I taught "Bloodchild" and read the entire story aloud with students, nearly all presumed that the Tlic were the "space alien" invaders, and not the Terrans. It wasn't until a peer read aloud the line about "light from *one of the moons*" (24, my emphasis) that the class realized that the world in which Butler set the story was not Earth.
3. As I have written elsewhere, this readerly tendency to functionally declare that Butler's non-human persons have no right to life, let alone liberty, is not at all limited to this short story:

> When I teach a course on Butler's fiction, I teach *Clay's Ark* last because its quiet provides space wherein students stunned by the novel's violent climactic cascade realize that Blake's thoughts, words, and deeds mirror the discursive violence they've performed all semester. When they read *Fledgling*, "Bloodchild," and the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, the class criminalized Tlic, Oankali, and Ina for failing to hew to liberal frameworks of consent. For instance, when learning that *Fledgling*'s Shori will perish if she cannot bite, feed upon, and enter into symbiosis with humans, class members repeatedly "forgot" that textual fact and declared instead that because she bit without consent to do so, she just *should not eat*. Witnessing Blake's folly prompts them to return to this declaration with some shame, for they now realize that they functionally determined that Shori *should just die*. Employing kinetic and grammatical analogues to Blake's dismissive "That was all," some swept their hands sideways as if emptying Shori's life into a dustbin while others used subordinate clauses that, in minimizing liberalism's non-consensual violence, condemned her to death: "Even though there are problems with consent and all, Shori still should not have bitten." With the clarity and maturity that extended encounter with Butler's work cultivates, they avow and confront the Blakean liberal compulsion that has been running within themselves: if "people like us" (502) don't determine and enforce the protocols, no one else deserves to live.

For a similar-yet-different take on student responses to Butler's fiction, see Foster's (2013) excellent essay on the *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* trilogy.

4. For an account of the controversy, see Beusman (2013).
5. See Nopper (2005).

References

Beusman, Callie. 2013. Malignantly Dense Prof Lectures Against "Sexual" "Assault" "Awareness." *Jezebel* (blog), April 19. http://jezebel.com/malignantly-dense-prof-lectures-against-sexual-assau-476428570

Brown, Elsa Barkley. 1989. African American Women's Quilting. *Signs* 14: 921–929.

Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Butler, Octavia. 2005a. Afterword. In *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*, 30–32. New York: Seven Stories Press.

———. 2005b. Amnesty. In *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*, 147–186. New York: Seven Stories Press.

———. 2005c. Bloodchild. In *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*, 1–29. New York: Seven Stories Press.

———. 2007. *Seed to Harvest*. New York: Grand Central.

Butler, Octavia, and Samuel Delany. 1998. *Octavia Butler Samuel Delany*. Interview. http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/science_fiction/transcripts/butler_delany_index.html

Davis, Janel. 2015. Atlanta Students Demand That Colleges Fight Campus Rape Culture. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17. http://www.ajc.com/news/local-education/atlanta-students-demand-that-colleges-fight-campus-rape-culture/QVyTODAoUb7EwD1r4SVBnN/

Foster, Tom. 2013. "We Get to Live, and so Do They": Octavia Butler's Contact Zones. In *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*, 140–167. Seattle: Aqueduct Press.

Gotell, Lise. 2008. Rethinking Affirmative Consent in Canadian Sexual Assault Law: Neoliberal Sexual Subjects and Risky Women. *Akron Law Review* 41: 865–898.

Helford, Elyce. 1994. "Would You Really Rather Die Than Bear My Young?": The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild". *African American Review* 28 (2): 259–271.

Nopper, Tamara. 2005. Activist Scenes Are No Safe Space for Women: On Abuse of Activist Women by Activist Men. *Critical Moment*, January–February, 18.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. 1991. "Nobody Knows the Trouble I See"; or, "By and by I'm Gonna Lay Down My Heavy Load". *Journal of American History* 78 (1): 111–119.

Reagon, Bernice, and Bill Moyers. 1991. *The Songs Are Free with Bernice Johnson Reagon*. Transcript. http://billmoyers.com/content/songs-free/

Snead, James A. 1981. On Repetition in Black Culture. *Black American Literature Forum* 15 (4): 146–154.

Spelman College. n.d. Community and Standards and Code of Conduct. http://www.spelman.edu/docs/default-document-library/community-standards-and-code-of-conduct.pdf?sfvrsn=0

SUNY Geneseo. 2015. *Student Code of Conduct*, October. https://www.geneseo.edu/handbook/student-code-conduct

Wilderson, Frank B., III. 2010. *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

CHAPTER 6

Beyond Science Fiction: Genre in *Kindred* and Butler's Short Stories

Heather Duerre Humann

Hugo and Nebula award-winning science fiction author Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006) published three science fiction series over her decades-long career: the *Parable* series, the *Patternist* series, and *Lilith's Brood* (also known as her *Xenogenesis* trilogy). She also wrote stand-alone novels, such as *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, as well as short stories and essays, most of which were published in her collection *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*. Generally recognized as a science fiction writer, and one of several important black science fiction writers publishing in English, Butler's "work needs to be understood within the context of the traditions of the genre" of science fiction, as Patricia Melzer (2006, 43) argues in her book *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. Nonetheless, her relationship with that genre bears scrutiny, for while Butler relies upon many of the traits common to science fiction, she ultimately both builds upon and subverts the genre by borrowing from other literary traditions as part of her storytelling. Butler's science fiction differs from traditional science fiction in three key ways: the narrative perspectives she employs, her sustained focus

H. D. Humann (✉)
Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, FL, USA
e-mail: hhumann@fgcu.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_6

on race and "otherness," and the manner in which she borrows from and blends traits common to other literary genres. In these respects, Butler opens up a space for new possibilities within science fiction; at the same time, her fiction raises questions of identity with respect to the constantly evolving genre.

Gregory Jerome Hampton (2010, xx), in his book *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*, points out that there is a "distinct line between Butler's work and the traditional SF written by white males." Butler offers, as Ruth Salvaggio (1984, 78) argues, a "different kind of science fiction," in part because of the strong female protagonists she frequently creates: women who must navigate flawed worlds in which "racially and sexually oppressed individuals negotiate their way through a variety of personal and societal barriers." Indeed, in her fiction, Butler forces readers to directly confront race, ethnicity, and otherness by, as Hampton (2010, xx) suggests, locating "highly visible (race, sex, of species) and non-visual (gender and sexuality) identities at the center of her text" and then makes readers "grapple with otherness as more than metaphor or allusion."

Butler's fiction portrays a range of previously under-represented cultures and characters—and, indeed, a consistent theme of her literary works is that they advocate for both social justice and racial justice while calling attention to inequities and social problems. This focus on racism, on racialized power imbalances—often disguised as species power imbalances—in combination with a focus on gender and class are hallmarks of her fiction and features of her writing which distinguish her from many traditional science fiction writers. As Gregory Jerome Hampton (2010, xiii) argues, "race matters a great deal in" her works. It is also true, as Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating (2001, 46) point out, that Butler is an author who complicates "traditional science fiction themes—global and local power struggles, for example—by inflecting such struggles with the implications of gender, ethnic, and class difference."

While these features are, to a degree at least, evident when looking at the body of Butler's fiction, two titles which work particularly well as cases in point are *Kindred* and *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*. In the case of both of these works of fiction, Butler actively engages with questions of race, gender, alterity, and difference at the same time as she plays with various generic conventions. Moreover, because of the ways these texts employ different modes of storytelling and rely on traits commonly found in a

variety of literary genres outside of science fiction, both *Kindred* and *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* emerge as hybrid texts, that is, works which cross literary genres.

Due to writers like Butler, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, hybridized works of fiction have become more prevalent. This trend has occurred not only alongside, but also in response to, postmodernism. The concept of "hybridization," which Homi K. Bhabha (1989) explores at length (by relying on notions first argued by Edward Said and other postcolonial theorists), explains how past histories and cultures persistently impact present times, pushing us to re-assess our understanding of cross-cultural relations. As Dana Bădulescu (2014) notes in her article "The Hybrids of Postmodernism," hybridization is a key characteristic of postmodernism.

Hybridization, however, is also symptomatic of the postmodern impulse. To be sure, as Mike Featherstone (1995, 4) argues in *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*, postmodernism has resulted in "previously sealed-off cultural forms more easily" flowing over what were once "strictly policy boundaries," thus bringing about the production of "unusual combinations and syncretism." As hybrid texts, Butler's works of fiction test the limits with respect to our current understandings of genre; at the same time, the way she borrows and blends different genres to suit her narratives reveals much about the cultural context in which she is writing—and ultimately serves as a mechanism for her to critique existing structures. In *Genre Hybridisation*, Ivo Ritzer and Peter W. Schulze (2016, 9) argue that genres "shed light on the aesthetic, economic, and social dimensions of the particular conditions under which they were made and which they represent respectively." Thus, in this manner, genres operate as cultural categories, due in large part to their association with the cultural practices of the society in which they are produced. Moreover, generic structures "help to observe and analyze complex (inter) medial and (inter) cultural exchanges" (9). This trend can be observed in Butler's fiction.

For example, Butler's ([1976] 2015) novel *Kindred* "contain structures found in both the historical novel and the slave narrative" (Melzer 2006, 39). This novel, however, also bears the influence of Afrofuturism and the neo-slave narrative genre, literary trends that became popular with African-descent writers in the late twentieth century.[1] In discussing the genre of the "neo-slave narrative," Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999, 87) notes that the "publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966 defined a

subject of representation that would come to predominate the African American novel for the rest of the twentieth century. Literally dozens of novels about slaves and slavery appeared in the wake of Jubilee." Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is a prime example of this genre as the novel offers an examination of life under the conditions of plantation slavery in antebellum Maryland. While *Kindred* can be understood as an example of the neo-slave narrative, the novel can also be categorized as a work of science fiction since, in essence, it is a time travel story, a subgenre of sci-fi (moreover, it is worth noting that Butler herself has gone on record as calling the novel a work of "fantasy," a genre closely related to science fiction).

Rather than diluting the message of *Kindred*—the way the institution of slavery continues to impact the present—the fact that this narrative borrows from several different literary genres and can be best understood using the lens that each of these genres provides makes the text all the richer. For one, it allows Butler to pose and respond to questions inherent to each of these forms of storytelling. She does this, in part, by presenting a literalization of the metaphor that a free person would have to travel back in time to understand what it is really like to be forced to live as a slave, which is precisely what her protagonist, Dana, does in *Kindred*.

The action of this novel concerns Dana, a twenty-seven-year-old black woman, who travels back and forth between 1970s California and antebellum Maryland and is thus forced to confront both our country's history of slavery and her own family history since she is the descendant of both a former slave and a plantation owner. Butler's decision to use a contemporary narrator to tell this story—instead of, for example, setting the novel entirely in the past—comes across as a particularly postmodern move, fragmenting and intersecting timelines and cultures. Moreover, this move aligns the novel with other hybrid texts since, according to Bhabha, they can be characterized by the way they stage the "past" as symbol, myth, memory, history, and the ancestral, while also as showing the "past" as having iterative value—a sign which re-inscribes the lessons of the "past" into the present.

Such lessons are inherent in Butler's time travel trope. Upon realizing that she has been sent to antebellum Maryland, Dana remarks to her partner, Kevin, "We're going to have to fit in as best we can with the people here for as long as we have to stay," even though that means having to "play the roles" assigned to them (Butler [1976] 2015, 65). For Dana, that means playing the part of a slave since in 1815, without papers verifying the contrary, a black woman in Maryland is automatically assumed to

be a slave and is therefore treated as one. Butler's narrative choice to repeatedly send Dana to the past (throughout the novel she goes back and forth in time several times) as opposed to just being sent back to the plantation for the duration of the book not only suggests her desire to insistently interrogate history from a present perspective, but it also suggests the many ways that the past is constantly intervening in the present. This disruption is made palpable by the way that Dana reacts and re-lives the trauma of her ancestors, even as she is made complicit in the system that causes so much suffering.

While Dana herself suffers due to what she endures and witnesses, she also becomes complicit in various forms of oppression, particularly when she journeys to the past and, albeit reluctantly and sometimes unwittingly, participates in the discourse of the white supremacist state. Particularly in the way that Dana intervenes in the relationship between Rufus (a white slaver owner) and Alice (a black woman)—both are her distant ancestors—she comes to participate in the oppressive system that victimizes both Alice and her. Rufus grows obsessed with possessing Alice, who has become the object of his affection, and he pushes Dana to intercede with Alice on his behalf. Though Dana does so reluctantly—and feels guilt over doing so—she does eventually play a role in their union. As Lisa A. Long (2002, 469) asserts, the fact that "Rufus and Alice's children are the products of rape makes Dana complicit in Alice's sexual slavery." Butler's narrative move to force a woman from 1970s California back in time to antebellum Maryland and then have her take part in events of that time period shows symbolically how the past can intervene into the present, and also that past can inscribe itself on present people and events in a literal fashion as Dana is the descendant of the child produced by Rufus's rape of Alice, as she well knows—a fact that triggered her complicity in the first place, as, in a classic sci-fi time travel conundrum, Dana would not have been born had Alice not had a child from Rufus. Moreover, the way Butler chooses to end this novel—with Dana finally returning once-and-for-all to 1970s California but losing an arm in the process—suggests the degree to which her re-visiting the past has had a profound effect on her. Unlike many of the other traumas, be they physical, psychological, or emotional, that Dana suffered as a result of her time in the antebellum South, the loss of an arm is a permanent loss and a disability that will mark her forever. Dana will never be able to regain her arm, just as the system of slavery has had permanent consequences. Such an intertwining of the symbolic and the literal becomes possible through Butler's blending of the

conventions of the neo-slave narrative and the time travel narrative. The hybridization of the neo-slave narrative genre with the science fiction genre opens up narrative and symbolic possibilities each genre alone does not.

Like *Kindred*, Butler's (2005) collection *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* includes stories that employ conventions from different genres as well as techniques common to diverse modes of storytelling. In this manner, *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* proves to be representative of a larger trend in Butler's writing. Indeed, as Melzer (2006, 39) notes, there is "a strong interweaving of elements from different genres" that can be seen in Butler's work, even though her fiction "is mostly categorized as science fiction." *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* contains selections that borrow from several traditions; however, the stories in this collection also reveal Butler's ability to use particular genres (and the conventions of specific genres) to pointedly critique social practices from both her own time (the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) and the past. Butler's choice of genre therefore works to further underscore the social messages of her works; the form and content of her short story collection work hand-in-hand as part of her political project.

Science fiction is often understood to be a rather conventional form since it relies heavily on formula and plot patterns, but as the case of Octavia Butler's fiction demonstrates, science fiction has the potential to be one of the more elastic formulas in genre fiction. Connected to this dimension of the genre is the fact that science fiction has evolved over the years, with the result being that the genre has been re-cast, re-imagined, and deconstructed by a new generation of science fiction writers including Butler. Science fiction has been praised especially for the way it can shine a light on social issues—and a number of scholars have addressed this dimension of the genre. For instance, in their essay, "Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary," Elaine J. O'Quinn and Heather Atwell (2010, 46) highlight how science fiction provides a window through which we can challenge and question the world around us. John Moore and Karen Sayer (2000, xi) make a similar contention in *Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers*, where they argue that "science fiction—at its best—represents an invaluable tool for analyzing the current malaise and envisioning alternatives to it." This genre indeed offers a quality not found in more realistic literary genres since science fiction literature authors can push "back the boundaries of the known and the possible" (xi). In fact, as both *Kindred* and *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* highlight, science fiction

also pushes us to better understand and criticize the present. To be sure, the genre of science fiction presents us with opportunities to "escape" reality, but the very act of escape, of distancing oneself, also enables one to criticize those realities since the (oftentimes fantastic) scenarios that science fiction authors present us with are, essentially, different takes on the past and present as they have shaped the writer's imagination. By viewing the past and present from a different, distanced, imaginatively transformed perspective, we may be able to imagine alternate circumstances as possibilities in the present or future.

These same features of the genre are reflected in much of Butler's fiction, yet there are a number of other recurring traits in her literary works: these include her attention to kinship relations, her repeated exploration of the themes of power versus subordination and captivity versus freedom, and her sustained focus on issues of race. Butler's emphasis on these themes can be clearly seen in her collection *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*—and all of these concerns emerge especially in "Bloodchild," the title story of the collection, which was originally published in 1984 and is Butler's "pregnant man story," a phrase Butler herself uses to describe the story (Butler 2005, 30).[2] She also acknowledges that on "one level, it's a love story" and, on another, "it's a coming-of-age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life" (30). "Bloodchild" is an interesting case in point in a discussion of genre because, though it is clearly a work of science fiction (the story has many of the requisite components of the genre, such as aliens and an extraterrestrial setting), it also calls attention to the genre's limitations while reflecting the influence of the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.

Set at an indeterminate point in the future, all of the events that make up the story take place on a planet outside of our solar system, in a "Preserve," where humans are kept by the Tlic (alien) government (Butler 2005, 3). Told from the perspective of Gan, a human male (he's described as a "Terran" by the aliens), the story relates the end of Gan's childhood and, in this sense, it works well as a coming-of-age story. All of the events of the story take place on one evening, and in the space of just a few hours, Gan has transformed from a boy to a man by making a difficult decision which forces him to confront complicated emotions at the same time as he wrestles with feelings of family loyalty and obligation versus his desire for a freer existence. T'Gatoi, an alien with a lifelong connection to the narrator's family and also the important "Tlic government official in charge of

the preserve," pays a visit to the home where Gan and his family reside in order to deposit her eggs into a willing host (3). Gan has a choice: to accept her eggs and become pregnant by her, or to refuse the request, which would mean that Gan's older sister, Xuan Hoa, would have to take on the responsibility. Gan's already difficult decision becomes further complicated when he unexpectedly witnesses a violent event that same night: a stranger and fellow human named Bram Lomas stumbles onto their land desperately in need of help. Gan and the others manage to save Lomas, who narrowly escapes dying from giving birth to alien larvae, but Gan feels scared from what he's seen.

Gan ultimately accepts the responsibility of carrying T'Gatoi's offspring, but the story nonetheless presents a rather ambivalent picture of his relationship with T'Gatoi. Gan admits to T'Gatoi that he was, and still is, "afraid," but he tells her that he has agreed to serve as host not only to spare his sister but to "keep you for myself" (Butler 2005, 28). Reflecting on this decision, Gan thinks, "It was so. I didn't understand it, but it was so" (28). This admission not only underscores the emotional ties between Gan and T'Gatoi, but it ties into broader relations about relations between Tlic and Terran as well as questions about the story's genre. Beyond the dynamic present between these two individuals, readers are also pushed to consider Tlic/Terran relations, in general, and to ponder to what extent their relationship is symbiotic. To a degree, the interaction between the two species represents a form of exploitation for the humans since the Tlic use them as hosts for breeding. However, the Tlic eggs that position humans as breeders of alien spawn also contain narcotic, medicinal, and restorative properties, therefore offering humans comfort, health, and, in many cases, an unnaturally long life span. While Tlic/Terran relations suggest the dynamic of colonizer versus colonized, Butler complicates this pattern since she depicts humans as having fled to the Tlic World (so even though it is the humans who are exploited, they are also put in the position of occupying an alien world).

In the case of "Bloodchild," Butler's reliance on different genre conventions allows her to consider many of the problems that have plagued twentieth- and twenty-first-century society, since many of the fictional events in this story hold up a mirror to reflect ongoing controversies related to post-colonialism, race relations, and gender issues (including reproductive rights). In this respect, Butler uses her fiction as a means of social critique as well as a way to explore intercultural relations and perspectives (vis-à-vis the interactions between Terran and Tlic). As Gregory

Jerome Hampton and Wanda M. Brooks (2003, 70) point out in their article "Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton: Black Women Writers and Science Fiction," Butler is one of a small group of African American writers of science fiction who shows the relationship "between the stories of a culture and the genre of science fiction" and is just one of a number of her literary works that demonstrate how Butler is "thematically preoccupied with the potentiality of genetically altered bodies—hybrid multi-species and multi-ethnic subjectivities—for revising contemporary nationalist, racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes" (Mehaffy and Keating 2001, 45). Science fiction blended with some Bildungsroman conventions enables Butler to show Gan at a crisis point both in his sexual and intellectual development, both highlighting questions of gender roles, colonialism and exploitation, Othering, and other concerns often found in African American texts outside the science fiction genre.

Butler revisits many of these same thematic and generic questions in "Amnesty," another story from the collection. Published in 2003, in "Amnesty" Butler imagines a futuristic Earth in which "globular" aliens—beings described as reaching "twelve feet high"—have colonized the planet (Butler 2005, 149). The humans and the entities of the "stranger-Community" have reached a tentative arrangement wherein humans contractually agree to work for the aliens for a specific period of time (153). Noah Cannon, the story's protagonist and narrator, works under such conditions as an interpreter (or translator) and teacher of sorts. She's supposed to "reassure" and "calm" human recruits with the aim of conditioning them to work for the aliens (153). Like "Bloodchild," "Amnesty" questions the degree to which the human/alien relationship that Butler presents is symbiotic. At the same time, the story also offers a new take on (post)colonialism. Yet, unlike "Bloodchild," which Butler insists is *not* a story about slavery, "Amnesty" portrays a disturbing portrait of life under the conditions of bondage at the same time as the story troubles the distinction between captivity and indentured servitude.[3]

While Noah Cannon tells the other humans that she's chosen to work for the aliens, details about her backstory, as well as her current day living and working conditions, call into question the degree of agency she maintains in the arrangement. At one point, Noah relays that she was kidnapped by the aliens as a child—she was just eleven when she was taken—and that she endured "twelve years of captivity," during which time she was tortured and "experimented on" (Butler 2005, 159). After being released by the aliens, Noah finds herself imprisoned again; this

time, it's by humans who are desperate and suspicious. Consequently, these humans subject Noah to harsh interrogation, abuse, and experimentation, perhaps hurting her even worse than the aliens did. Even in the present of the narrative, she still gets mistreated by the aliens as she is often forbidden from wearing clothes and suffers physical abuse at the hands of her alien employers. They punish her by delivering an "electrical shock" and, more than once, she's "held hard" by them, which causes her pain such as "aching joints and other sore places" (153–154). Despite this abuse, Noah now not only works for the aliens but also encourages other human recruits to cooperate with them, as well, thus prompting questions about her motives as well as her agency: Does Noah really believe that cooperating with the aliens is humanity's best, perhaps only, chance for survival? Or, perhaps her time imprisoned and abused by other humans soured her to people and she now prefers the company of aliens? Might her cooperation signal some form of learned helplessness? Could she, instead, be suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?

For their part, the six human recruits that Noah interacts with don't know what to make of either her or the situation they find themselves in. Some recruits, like Michelle Ota and Sorrel Trent, go out of their way to sit close to her, while others refuse to, choosing instead to leave "empty seats between themselves and Noah" (Butler 2005, 156). Others express anger with Noah for her seeming cooperation. When confronted with the startling details about Noah's abduction and the abuse she suffered under captivity, many recruits withdraw from her "in horror, suspicion, or disgust" (159). James Adio (another recruit), for instance, recoils from Noah, and he goes as far as to express contempt toward her; in response, Noah asks him, "Are you angry with me," or are you "angry in my behalf?" (160).

Noah's predicament and the ambivalent manner in which Butler constructs her present a compelling picture of life under the conditions of captivity (as well as of the consequences of the trauma of captivity). At the same time, however, "Amnesty" also pushes readers to consider imaginative social arrangements that differ from our own and, in this sense, the story reflects another tradition: the literary dystopia (an offshoot, or dark version, of the literary "utopia"). The society that Noah lives in is the epitome of a repressive regime since her every move is monitored and policed. Her condition is not unique since the story makes it clear that other humans exist in similarly precarious situations. The predicament of humans is further underscored by the fact that the recruits who Noah

interviews arrive without having eaten that day since "food was expensive and, in these depressed times, most people were lucky to eat once a day" (Butler 2005, 156). These humans have applied to work for the aliens out of desperation since the settler-Communities are hiring workers when "almost no one else is" (156). Yet, the possibility of working for the aliens means giving up the little freedom they still have, for, as Noah expresses to them, when they're in the aliens' community, they "can't move at all unless the Community permits it" (163).

Butler's choice to borrow elements common to dystopian fiction alongside her depiction of life under the conditions of captivity, thus leaning on conventions from the slave narrative, the neo-slave narrative, and the captivity narrative, makes sense on a number of levels. For one, as Jane Donawerth (2003, 29) notes in "Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia," the borders of dystopia as a genre is "not rigid, but permeable; these forms absorb the characteristics of other genres." Moreover, two of the traditions that Butler relies upon in this literary work (dystopia and the neo-slave narrative) sometimes work hand-in-hand, a point Maria Varsam (2003) emphasizes in her essay "Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others." She highlights that though there are many themes developed in neo-slave narratives and in dystopian narratives, "a common thread unites them: a conspicuous preoccupation with obtaining freedom" (204). She argues that this is especially true for female-authored texts like Butler's since this preoccupation so frequently "centers on issues of reproductive freedom, sexuality, and the control over one's body" (204). Since in "Amnesty," the aliens of the "stranger-Community" control every aspect of their existence, for humans like Noah, life under this regime is tantamount to slavery; yet, since the story also clearly portrays a dystopian society, "Amnesty" is also a story about the social arrangement between humans and aliens—and is thus making a statement about socio-political systems of the present and the past concerning relations between Others. "Amnesty" thus reveals Butler borrowing from several genres in order to reframe "the historical novel of Afro-American slavery experience in terms of the utopian impulse, a process of hope and resistance to oppression" (Varsam 2003, 204).

According to Varsam (2003, 205), by reading a dystopia, "the reader takes an active part in generating" this imagined community since it is the "reader's understanding of the narrator's message that will establish the distinction between what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' future world." If it is a "bad" world, then characters resist by rebelling against the status quo

and challenging the oppressive society. If a reader acknowledges the text as a warning, and as an education of desire, then he or she will see which kinds of power and institutions need resisting (Varsam 2003, 213). The same pattern can be seen in "Amnesty," where Butler deliberately borrows from and blends qualities of different literary genres to push readers to consider both history and the present. In this manner, the genre of literary dystopia works to forward Butler's political message. While Butler uses this genre to critique existing and past social structures, it is also Butler's incorporation of science fiction traits which helps make her political meaning clear. By setting "Amnesty" in the future and positioning the aliens in a position of power over humans like Noah, Butler employs the technique of "de-familiarization," which pushes readers to identify with a narrator or protagonist in order to condemn "those aspects of society that constitute the narrator's oppression" (Varsam 2003, 206). The strategy works to draw readers into the fictional world and identify with the narrator's critique of the present.

This same strategy can been seen in another story that appears in the collection, "The Book of Martha," which was published in 2003. A short story that demonstrates Butler's continued interest in exploring potential social arrangements, "The Book of Martha," is, in Butler's own words, her "utopia story" (Butler 2005, 214).[4] However, "The Book of Martha," a story replete with Biblical allusions, also reads much like a parable (while still employing elements common to science fiction and Afrofuturism). Parables, of course, are often religious in nature, and in "The Book of Martha," God is a character who appears in the story. In this selection, God comes to Martha, a middle-aged writer of fiction, and tells her that "he has work for her to do" (190). He asks her to complete a task that "would mean a great deal to her and the rest of humankind," which is to imagine a better world than the current one (190). The catch is that, once she's made her decision, she will have to return to live in the society she's created as "one of their lowliest" (193). This idea is a direct reference to John Rawls's (1971) *Theory of Justice*. Rawls's theory of justice centers on two fundamental principles of justice which would, in turn, ensure a just and morally acceptable society: the first principle guarantees the right of each individual to have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the liberty of others, and the second principle states that social and economic positions are to be to everyone's advantage and open to all. Butler uses "The Book of Martha" as a way to fictionalize an instance of social contract theory.

Moreover, her story also highlights a key problem cited with respect to Rawls's theory—and a possible solution to it. A difficulty related to Rawls's theory is the question of whether its principle tenets could be universally adopted. In the story, as part of his instructions to Martha, God tells her she is free to make as many changes as she feels are necessary to fix humanity's destructive ways but warns her to "keep three people in mind: Jonah, Job, and Noah" (Butler 2005, 191). Martha, in response to these instructions, "couldn't decide whether it was an honor to be chosen to do a job so huge, so poorly defined, so impossible" (194). After playing around with several possibilities, Martha finally makes her choice: to make humans have such satisfying dreams that they'll get "whatever they want or need" through them (204). That way, humans will have the "only possible utopia," a private, personalized one (204). By having Martha imagine different social arrangements and consider how some may work better than our own, Butler makes an implicit critique of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century society—and also makes a nod to Rawls's much-debated theory.

Her construction of Martha as a character—a woman who was "born poor, black, and female to a fourteen-year-old mother who could barely read" and who grew up "homeless half the time"—functions as part of her critique, as well (Butler 2005, 193–194). Details such as these about Martha's early life underscore how stratified our society is and shine a light on the fact that we don't all begin life on an even playing field. Indeed, through this story, Butler makes both a blanket critique by highlighting humanity's "self-destructive" tendencies at the same time as she calls attention to the ways human have oppressed others, whether it be by trying to "conquer their neighbors or exterminate their minorities" (210).

As a result, the message she presents here is very much in keeping with her overall political project, which is to critique hierarchies, those that existed in the past as well as those that plague contemporary society since, as she puts it, "hierarchical behavior" can lead "to racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other 'isms' that cause so much suffering in the world" (Butler 2001). Just as Gregory E. Rutledge (2001, 244) argues, much of Butler's fiction foregrounds "race and gender issues by combining speculative fiction with insightful perspectives on gender and ethnicity." This combination can clearly be seen in "The Book of Martha." To be sure, in this selection, like in so much of Butler's fiction, the overall message remains the same, but Butler, a writer aware of the limits and possibilities of genre, adapts the parable to a sci-fi exploration of social justice theory.

These traits set Butler's fiction apart from traditional science fiction even as she relies upon many of the conventions of the genre. While Butler's fiction needs to be understood within the context and traditions of science fiction (since she consistently includes features common to the genre), she ultimately both builds upon and stretches the limits of the genre by incorporating traits from other literary traditions as part of her storytelling technique. In this respect, her writing differs from traditional science fiction. By experimenting with literary form, Butler, who transcends the genre even as she helps to evolve it, is stretching the boundaries of science fiction. In the end, by merging genres, Butler not only creates opportunities for radical re-visioning, but she also creates a space to challenge the status quo with respect to social issues. Thus, Butler's form and content work together to push readers to consider new possibilities while simultaneously critiquing social practices of today and the past.

Butler deserves the reputation she has earned for her pioneering contributions to the genre of science fiction, but understanding her fiction means going beyond simply labeling her a science fiction writer. Part of this stems from the problems inherent with the genre itself, namely the reality that genre fiction still gets overlooked for not being seen as "serious" or "literary" enough, though that assessment is rapidly changing, and the fact that science fiction tends to get mired in genre contradictions, gesturing both to science and fiction as it does. Butler, however, as *Kindred* and selections from *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories* demonstrate, not only borrows from but also blends genres to better communicate her political messages as she speaks out in favor of racial and social justice. In doing so, Butler highlights the possibilities as well as limits of genre at the same time as she shows her versatility as a writer, expanding our understanding of the world.

Notes

1. Afrofuturism is an emergent literary and cultural aesthetics that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, Afrocentricity, fantasy, and magical realism with non-Western cosmologies in order both to critique present-day dilemmas and to re-examine and interrogate historical events of the past. Written by contemporary authors, neo-slave narratives are modern fictional works set in the slavery era which are primarily concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of enslavement in the New World.

Ashraf Rushdy (1999) discusses the genre in detail in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*.

2. The short story "Bloodchild" won both the Nebula Award (1984) and the Hugo Award (1985). In her afterword to the story, Butler (2005, 30) specifically labels "Bloodchild" as her "pregnant man story" and admits that she "always wanted to explore what it might be like for a man to be put into that most unlikely of all positions."
3. In her afterword to "Bloodchild," Butler (2005, 30) says, "It amazes me that some people have seen 'Bloodchild' as a story about slavery. It isn't."
4. In her afterword to the story, Butler (2005, 214) explains, "'The Book of Martha' is my utopia story." Although she says "it seems inevitable" that one person's utopia would become "someone else's hell," in the story she has "God demand of poor Martha that she come up with a utopia that would work" (214).

References

Bădulescu, Dana. 2014. The Hybrids of Postmodernism. *Postmodern Openings* 3: 9–20.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1989. Hybridité, identité et culture contemporaine. In *Magiciens de la terre*, ed. J. Martin, 44–49. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou.

Butler, Octavia. (1976) 2015. *Kindred*. New York: Doubleday.

———. 2001. A World Without Racism. *NPR Weekend Edition*, September 1. https://www.npr.org/programs/specials/racism/010830.octaviabutler.html. Accessed 12 Oct 2018.

———. 2005. *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Donawerth, Jane. 2003. Genre Blending and the Critical Dystopia. In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 29–46. New York: Routledge.

Featherstone, Mike. 1995. *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage.

Hampton, Gregory Jerome. 2010. *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Hampton, Gregory Jerome, and Wanda M. Brooks. 2003. Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton: Black Women Writers and Science Fiction. *The English Journal* 92 (6): 70–74.

Long, Lisa A. 2002. A relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*. *College English* 64 (4): 459–483.

Mehaffy, Marilyn, and AnaLouise Keating. 2001. "Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the poetics of Narrative Embodiment. *Melus* 26 (1): 45–76.

Melzer, Patricia. 2006. *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Moore, John, and Karen Sayer. 2000. *Science Fiction, Critical Frontiers*. New York: Palgrave.

O'Quinn, Elaine J., and Heather Atwell. 2010. *Familiar Aliens: Science Fiction as Social Commentary*, 45–50. Summer: The ALAN Review.

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ritzer, Ivo, and Peter W. Schulze. 2016. *Genre Hybridisation: Global Cinematic Flow*. Marburg: Schüren.

Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. 1999. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rutledge, Gregory E. 2001. Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: The "Racial" Establishment. *Callaloo* 24 (1): 236–252.

Salvaggio, Ruth. 1984. Octavia Butler and the Black Science Fiction Heroine. *Black American Literature Forum* 18 (2): 78–81.

Varsam, Maria. 2003. Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others. In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 203–223. New York: Routledge.

CHAPTER 7

Troubling Issues of Consent in *Dawn*

Joshua Yu Burnett

In 1991, Antioch College famously drafted its Sexual Offense Prevention Policy, known colloquially as the "Antioch rules," which requires that "consent must be obtained each and every time there is sexual activity … Each new level of sexual activity requires consent" (Mills 2014). The policy, then, champions the notion of affirmative consent—that is, defining consent not as the absence of a "no" but as the active statement of "yes." The policy catapulted the otherwise relatively obscure midwestern college to national prominence and, for the most part, national ridicule. Most famously, *Saturday Night Live* (n.d.) skewered the policy with a sketch entitled "Is It Date Rape?" which recast the policy as a game show and featured such caricatures as a "Dean of Intergender Relations" and a "major in Victimization Studies." In the sketch, two students, one a man and the other a woman, are presented with a variety of scenarios and asked whether or not the circumstances described were date rape; the answer is always yes until the "Antioch College Date Rape Players" perform a sketch which is, finally, *not* date rape:

J. Y. Burnett (✉)
Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA
e-mail: jcb11e@fsu.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_7

Male Date Rape Player #1: May I compliment you on your halter top?
Female Date Rape Player #1: Yes. You may.
Male Date Rape Player #1: It's very nice. May I kiss you on the mouth.
Female Date Rape Player #1: Yes. I would like you to kiss me on the mouth. [they kiss on the mouth]
Male Date Rape Player #1: May I elevate the level of sexual intimacy by feeling your buttocks?
Female Date Rape Player #1: Yes. You have my permission. [Male touches Female's buttocks]
Male Date Rape Player #1: May I raise the level yet again, and take my clothes off so that we could have intercourse?
Female Date Rape Player #1: Yes. I am granting your request to have intercourse.

The sketch's message is clear: that the affirmative consent guidelines issued by Antioch College are absurd, encourage a sense of victimization in women, disrupt the "natural" rhythm of seduction, and are overly punitive. The sketch "made it almost impossible to have a serious discussion … about the Antioch rules" (Mills 2014), effectively derailing public discourse about affirmative consent. In recent years, however, increased public understanding of the ubiquity of rape as a problem on American college campuses has led to a reassessment of the Antioch rules, and ideas of affirmative consent are now widely discussed in far more nuanced terms. Criticism of the concept is still widespread and found across people of diverse political ideologies. Still, undeniably, consent has become a part of America's national dialogue.

In this current conversation about concept, Octavia E. Butler's novel *Dawn* (1987),[1] the first volume of her *Xenogenesis*[2] trilogy, is ripe for critical reassessment as well. *Dawn*, being published four years before the Antioch rules were formulated, could not possibly have influenced by them. Yet through Butler's alien creation, the Oankali, *Dawn* too raises critical and troubling questions about the nature of consent, and it too is highly relevant to our current national conversation on consent, rape, and sexualized violence.

In the nearly thirty years since the publication of *Dawn*, a great deal of scholarship has been produced on the novel and the larger series. Critics have reached radically different—even seemingly irreconcilable—conclusions about the Oankali, who are a three-gendered, polymorphously perverse, slug-like intelligent race who are biologically attracted to difference

to the point that they can only survive in the long term through cross-species miscegenation. On the one hand, Eva Cherniavsky (1996, 104) describes the Oankali plan for humanity as "profoundly reminiscent of slavery in the United States," and Paul Youngquist (2011, 21) describes the series as being "the strangest reimagining of the Middle Passage on record," again, then, casting the Oankali as slave masters. On the other hand, Eric White (1993, 402) sees the Oankali's supplanting of humanity with posthuman Construct as being "depicted affirmatively" and even describes the Oankali as "the hero of the tale," while Adele S. Newson (1989, 393) believes that "Butler offers the Oankali as the model for fruitful existence. Theirs is a symbiotic relationship with all living organisms." Perhaps the most famous treatments of the novel and the Oankali, however, come from Walter Benn Michaels (2000, 657), who characteristically uses the series as launching ground for an attack on identity politics and argues that, through the Oankalis's creation of the Constructs, Butler "insist[s] on miscegenation as the privileged form of sexual activity," and Donna J. Haraway (1991b, 226), who argues that *Dawn* is fundamentally about "the monstrous fear and hope that the child"—that is, the Construct—"will not, after all, be like the parent." Elsewhere, in her celebrated "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Haraway (1991a, 173) also invokes Butler as one of several science fiction writers who she sees as "theorists for cyborgs," particularly for her work in the *Xenogenesis* series.

Clearly, the Oankali, as one of Butler's most deeply ambiguous and complex creations, are fertile ground for critical interpretation. The Oankali, unlike humanity, claim to be non-hierarchical, but instead "powerfully acquisitive" (*Dawn* 41). They have "saved" the last remnants of humanity following an apocalyptic nuclear war (between, apparently, the United States and the Soviet Union) and propose a sort of genetic "trade" with humanity. Essentially, by using the Oankali's third gender, the ooloi, who act as natural-born genetic engineers, Oankali and humanity will "intermingle" to create a new form of life, a human-Oankali "Construct." The Oankali, in their advanced genetic knowledge, have discovered a contradiction coded into human behavior: humanity is both intelligent and hierarchical, and thus will inevitably self-destruct. The Oankali plan to remove human's genetic need for hierarchy in the new Constructs. Yet what is striking in the novel—and yet rarely observed in the existing criticism—is that while the Oankali may be non-hierarchical in their internal culture (though even this is debatable, as several human characters in the

novel observe that male and female Oankali seem to defer to ooloi authority), every aspect of their interactions with humanity is profoundly and entirely hierarchical. If the mixture of intelligence and hierarchy is the "human contradiction," I would propose this as, perhaps, the Oankali corollary to the human contradiction: that, while their stated goal is to rid humanity of its hierarchical predisposition, their solution to that "problem" rests in interacting with humanity in a highly hierarchical fashion, and enforcing that hierarchy with both violence (e.g., forcibly removing humans whose behavior they consider unacceptable or dangerous) and coercion (e.g., essentially the sum total of all Oankali interaction with Lilith).

Almost none of the myriad criticism on *Dawn* or the wider *Xenogenesis* series has directly broached the question of consent. A few critics have noted the issue as one that appears in the series. For example, Laura Diehl (2013, 111) notes that, as with aliens in Butler's story "Bloodchild" and novel *Clay's Ark*, the Oankali "demand a physical contact that is nonnegotiable." Additionally, Nolan Belk (2008, 381) invokes Audre Lorde's (2007) injunction in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" that "use [of the erotic] without consent of the used is abuse." Thirdly, Aparajita Nanda (2013, 779) points out that when Lilith voluntarily has sex with the ooloi Nikanj, she is the first human to do so "without being drugged into a submissive state." Or, to state the case more bluntly: without being *raped*. Fourthly, Sarah Outterson (2008, 438) argues that "the way [the Oankali] force the humans to mate with them seems intrinsically violent" yet does not invoke consent as a term or concept. Finally, Rachel Stein (2004, 210) describes the novel's depiction of "bodily invasions … within the context of unequal social/cultural relations." However, when the issue has been raised, it has typically been discussed obliquely and as a side issue, as opposed to the main focus. For example, Diehl's (2013) essay is not primarily focused on *Xenogenesis* at all, while Stein (2004) is principally interested in how issues of environmental justice intersect with the bodies of women of color. Most curiously, Belk (2008) attempts to position the Oankali as embodiments of Lorde's (2007) conception of the erotic as a creative, empowering force for resistance—a reading that is quite difficult to sustain given their consistent lack of respect for human conceptions of consent.

This is a stunning critical omission, given that questions of consent are central to the novel, and the novel's treatment of the issue is both provocative and troubling. Indeed, Butler explicitly invokes the idea of

consent, and the lack of concern the Oankali give to consent, throughout *Dawn*. In one of her initial awakenings about the ship, before the Oankali have revealed herself to her, Lilith notices a mysterious scar across her abdomen and notes that "[e]ven her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge" (*Dawn* 6). Later, when Lilith first meets an Oankali, he refuses to answer a question about genetic manipulation, which Lilith recognizes as "one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good" (*Dawn* 33). Despite this mounting evidence, just a few pages later the Oankali Jdahya insists to Lilith that no Oankali "will touch [her] without [her] consent" (39). Later in the novel, when Lilith is awakening humans to colonize the Oankali's brave new Earth—her appointed task in the novel—one awakened human, Wray, attacks and tries to rape Leah, the woman who woke him, in his post-coma haze, and yet "a few days after … he was sleeping with Leah with her full consent" (171). Butler thus establishes consent as something which is centrally important to humans, if (as in the case of Leah and Wray) subject to change, but slippery at best for the Oankali. Jdahya's insistence on respecting the need for consent prior to touch is belied by the obvious fact that the Oankali have performed surgery—an invasive form of touch if ever there was one—while she was in an induced coma. Far from the affirmative consent of Antioch College, the Oankali notion of consent, if it can truly be said to exist at all, only seems to respect an explicit "no," and even then, the Oankali only consider themselves bound to respect the "no" when they believe that the human involved fully *means* it on a subconscious and physiological, as well as conscious, level. The absence of that no, even in cases of unconsciousness, is read as implied consent.

Beyond this explicit discussion of consent, *Dawn* also includes a scene of attempted human-on-human rape, one which troublingly indicts the Oankali as at least potentially complicit. After Lilith has been introduced to the Oankali, but before she awakens other humans, she spends an extended period cut off from all human contact and is desperate to find any other human to talk to. Following a misadventure where she tried to track down a Japanese man who turns out to be recently dead (and not to speak English in any case), Lilith is finally introduced to an Oankali-acclimated human, Paul Titus, who has chosen to live out his life onboard the Oankali ship rather than being part of the difficult task of recolonizing Earth. Like Lilith, Paul has not seen another human during his captivity, but unlike Lilith, who spent most of her time in suspended animation, he

has been awake for many years. While meeting Paul initially seems a "miracle" (*Dawn* 86) after Lilith's long isolation, she quickly becomes uncomfortable after Nikanj, the ooloi assigned to her, surreptitiously sneaks out, leaving her alone with Paul. In what turns out to be an ironic remark, Paul predicts that the new Earth will be rife with brutalization of women: "Some of them will want to be cavemen—drag you around, put you in a harem, beat the shit out of you" (*Dawn* 93). After Lilith realizes that he is probably right, Paul attempts to rape Lilith:

> "I've never even seen a woman in all the time I've been here."
>
> He stared at her for several seconds and she feared him and pitied him and longed to be away from him … Yet it would do no good to fight him physically. She was tall, had always thought of herself as strong, but he was much bigger …
>
> "They've had two hundred and fifty years to fool around with us," she said. "Maybe we can't stop them, but we don't have to help them."
>
> "To hell with them." He tried to unfasten her jacket.
>
> "*No!*" she shouted … He tore her jacket off then fumbled with his pants. (95, emphasis original)

Lilith is, as she predicts, unable to fight Paul off. She is not, in the end, raped, but she is brutally beaten. The beating is prompted when Lilith, upon hearing that the Oankali have used Paul's genetic material to engineer children he will never meet with women he does not know, in her anger, taunts him by saying, "Maybe they've made you do it with your mother!" (*Dawn* 96). While the taunt provokes Paul's beating of Lilith, it also likely saves her from being raped. When Lilith wakes up, her healing accelerated by the Oankali, she learns that they intervened on her behalf after Paul's attack turned from a sexual assault to a physical beating that risked killing her. The question of whether or not they would have intervened to prevent rape is left unasked and unanswered. Nikanj attempts to reassure Lilith by telling her, "He has never lost control so completely before. He hasn't lost control at all for several years" (97). This in itself is a disturbing remark, as it indicates that he has a history of "losing control" that was known to the Oankali, and yet they left Lilith alone with him and in a highly vulnerable position. What's more, Nikanj also admits that the Oankali allowed the meeting to try to encourage sex between Lilith and Paul: "His family thought you should have mated with him … They knew you wouldn't stay with him permanently, but they believed you would

share sex with him at least once" (97–98). It is unclear whether or not Paul was told of this intention, but since the novel's narration is told through Lilith in third person limited, it is abundantly clear that she was unaware of such an intention and that it was very much unwanted. The entire affair paints the Oankali in very unflattering light. Here, they do strongly mirror slave owners, pairing off their slaves without consent or consultation, and not giving a second thought to their slaves' right to consent or refuse. Lilith herself compares the situation to that of "animals" (95) being selectively bred. Even after the near-rape has occurred, the Oankali seem to feel no compunction or remorse over the entire thing. Lilith herself is aware they may not have interfered in a rape, telling Tate Monroe, the first human she awakens, that she doesn't believe the Oankali would have willingly let Paul kill her, she does "think there were some who would have let [him] rape" her (134).

Yet the picture gets more disturbing still once Lilith brings up the issue of animal-like breeding to Nikanj, speculating that the Oankali had hoped that she could have "maybe gotten pregnant" (*Dawn* 98). Nikanj assures you otherwise:

> "You would not have gotten pregnant," Nikanj said. And it had her full attention.
>
> "Why not?" she demanded.
>
> "It isn't time for you to have children yet."
>
> "Have you done something to me? Am I sterile?"
>
> "Your people called it birth control. You are slightly changed. It was done while you slept, as it was done to all humans at first. It will be undone eventually." (98)

This type of involuntary sterilization, albeit temporary, has disturbing historical echoes. Yet it becomes even more disturbing considering Butler's choice to make Lilith an African American woman, given the long history of African American women being involuntarily sterilized or forced onto long-term birth control such as Norplant, as chronicled by Dorothy Roberts (1998) in her landmark text *Killing the Black Body*. As is seen later in the novel (and throughout the series), not only are all humans thus sterilized, but they will only ever be allowed to reproduce through ooloi mediation; they will only be permitted to give birth to Constructs, never to full human beings. Despite Nikanj's reassurances, Lilith's sterilization is, then, permanent (as well as involuntary) in at least some sense. In

Imago, the trilogy's final volume, Butler reveals that the sterilization of "natural" human reproduction has not been 100% effective. Jodahs meets Jesusa and Tomas, siblings who are descended from a single pair of fertile ancestors in an obscure "resister" village. Since the initial discovery of this reproductive fluke, the original fertile woman's descendants have been compelled to reproduce with each other incestuously, producing generations of "natural" humans who suffer from the numerous debilitating birth defects that this type of inbreeding leads to. As Michaels (2000, 657) correctly observes, Butler thus "makes incest the only alternative to [miscegenation]," that is, cross-species reproduction with Oankali mates. Given the myriad issues of consent implicit in incest, this adds another complex thematic wrinkle of consent to the series. In fact, the original fertile woman herself got pregnant after "she was raped—probably many times" (*Imago* 661). In *Xenogenesis*'s speculative future, then, reproduction is inevitably fraught with issues of consent and abuse—highly coercive miscegenation through the Oankali, equally coercive incest in Jesusa and Tomas's village, or unambiguous rape of Jesusa and Tomas's ancestor.

At the conclusion of *Dawn*, an additional troubling act occurs when Nikanj tells Lilith that he has deliberately impregnated her without her knowledge or consent, despite his previous explicit promise that he would not do so until she was "ready":

> "Is it an unclean thing that we want, Lilith?"
>
> "Yes!"
>
> "Is it an unclean thing that I have made you pregnant?"
>
> She did not understand the words at first. It was as though it had begun speaking a language she did not know …
>
> "I have made you pregnant with Joseph's child. I wouldn't have done it so soon, but I wanted to use his seed, not a print."
>
> She made a violent effort to break away, realized at once that she could not break its grip … "You said you wouldn't do this!" …
>
> "I said not until you were ready."
>
> "I'm not ready! I'll never be ready!"
>
> "You're ready now to have Joseph's child." (*Dawn* 246)

This scene, unlike several other scenes I have discussed, has been analyzed in previous criticism, although often in a fashion that uncritically replicates the coercion of the scene itself. For example, Nanda describes the scene as an act of self-sacrifice and writes that Lilith "lets herself be impregnated against her will" (780), an oxymoronic descriptor which has misogynist

implications given that we are talking about reproductive freedom and consent, let alone that we were discussing these issues played out through the body of a Black woman, a group who have suffered numerous sexual and reproductive abuses throughout American history and who have all too often had little or no recourse to help from authority (in this case, the Oankali) when their consent has been violated. In a seeming justification of Nikanj's actions, Nanda points out that despite Lilith's initial rejection of the pregnancy, she "never opts out of her maternal role" (778), seemingly positing a sort of ex post facto "consent" to her involuntary impregnation, which, I will again emphasize, is deeply troubling and unjustifiable. Frankly, it mirrors anti-abortion rhetoric of women who get abortions but later regret it or are unable to obtain abortions and are later glad for the fact. While such cases probably do occur, such individual experiences do not justify denials of freedom or consent.

Nikanj's defense—and Oankali defense for their actions regarding consent in general—is that Lilith truly does desire the pregnancy, but, due to the genetically coded revulsion for the other that intermingles with Lilith's genuinely felt alien sexual desire, she cannot speak that desire, or even admit it to herself. Yet, this justification cannot be squared with any meaningful definition of consent, either Antioch-style affirmative consent or the more traditional "no means no" model. If a person specifically says they are not consenting, they *are not* consenting, even if they simultaneously feel a deep desire for the act they are verbally rejecting. Additionally, Nikanj impregnates Lilith in the immediate aftermath of her lover Joseph's violent death. This further muddies the water of consent, given Lilith's fragile and vulnerable emotional state in the moment her pregnancy is revealed to her, and shows the Oankali to be, as Lilith herself puts it earlier in the novel, "manipulative as hell" (*Dawn* 72).

Perhaps the most disturbing illustration of the Oankali's persistent lack of respect for consent is Nikanj's so-called seduction of Lilith's lover Joseph. While Joseph is drugged, Nikanj and Lilith initiate sex which also involves Joseph; Lilith, despite her many misgivings about the Oankali, desires such sex because it offers her "an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond human experience" (161). Yet she is also aware that, through Nikanj's manipulation, "Joseph was conscious, though utterly controlled, unafraid because Nikanj kept him tranquil" (162). This sort of control by pheromone is a common tactic for the Oankali, and, again, a troubling one, as it again removes the possibility of humans giving real consent. Of course, real-world human sexuality is heavily motivated by pheromones in

ways that may complicate rational consent, but there is a key difference here. Humans release pheromones involuntarily; with Oankali, it is a conscious, deliberate act. As Outterson puts it, "Pheromonal control by the Oankali turns out to be just as violent as genetically-determined hierarchical behavior in humans" (442).

When Lilith attempts to touch Joseph directly, as opposed to through Nikanj, Nikanj prevents her, saying, "No … Only through me" (162). This hints at a later revelation that once a human couple has had sex together with an ooloi, they are afterwards unable to touch each other, even casually, because that contact produces a deep-seated feeling of revulsion. In other words, once ooloi sexual contact has occurred, humans are essentially biologically *unable* to consent to sex with each other except through ooloi mediation. This is, unsurprisingly, not revealed to any of the humans, even Lilith, until after the fact, yet one more troubling case of lack of consent in Oankali sexual and reproductive matters. Not only do the Oankali not consult the humans to ask for their consent in thus altering their sexualities, the alteration itself damages if not destroys the basic possibility for unmediated human-on-human sexuality; in other words, it is a nonconsensual assault on the human ability to consent. After the act, Nikanj warns Lilith of the likely complex reaction to the encounter Joseph is likely to have, predicting that "[h]e'll be angry—and frightened and eager for the next time and determined to see that there won't be a next time" (*Dawn* 164). Joseph's response is indeed complex; he at once calls Nikanj a "thing," insists that it "will never touch me again if I have anything to say about it," and acknowledges the pleasure as far beyond that offered by any drug (169). However, Joseph's admission he experienced pleasure should not be confused for any sort of consent; indeed, sometimes, survivors of sexual assault do experience physical feelings of pleasure, which may serve to further their trauma by making them feel as if they were complicit in their own assault. We should, then, be extremely clear here: by any meaningful definition, Joseph was *raped*.

In fact, when Nikanj next initiates sexual contact with Joseph, Nikanj admits that it[3] "left [Joseph] no choice the first time" (*Dawn* 188). While Lilith interprets what happens next as a "seduction" (189), Joseph makes it clear that he does not agree. As Nikanj initiates contact with Joseph, Joseph protests, "You said I could Choose. I've made my choice!" (189). However, Nikanj continues, and when it "managed to lie down on the bed with him without seeming to force him down" (189), it insists, "You see. Your body has made a different choice" (189). While Joseph does

eventually stop struggling and begins to follow Nikanj's directions, it is clear that he does so under conditions of, at best, deep ambivalence and, arguably, gross coercion. Subsequently, until his death, Joseph never loses his tortured ambivalence toward the Oankali and his own involvement in ooloi sex, although he does continue to *have* such sex.

When Lilith and, later, other humans are awakened, their initial response to the Oankali is a deep-seated sense of physical and moral revulsion. The cause of this revulsion, Butler herself makes clear, is rooted in the seemingly fundamental human fear of the other. However, while Lilith eventually seems to lose (or at least lessen) this physical revulsion, she and other human characters never learn to feel at ease with the Oankali—even years after they have embraced sex, reproduction, and even something resembling romantic love with the Oankali. Even by the end of *Imago*, Lilith (who is by now the devoted mother of several human-Oankali Construct children) half-secretly sympathizes with the "resisters," a group of violent anti-Oankali extremists. In *Adulthood Rites*, the trilogy's middle volume, Akin, one of Lilith's Construct children—who, as the Oankali regularly point out, are able to understand Oankali psychology and behavior far more effectively than "natural" humans—disputes the hegemonic Oankali claim that humanity will survive through merging with the Oankali. Instead, he points out that "we will be Oankali. [Humans] will only be … something we consumed" (*Adulthood Rites* 443). Akin directly applies his metaphor of Oankali consumption of humanity to their miscegenate reproduction, but it can apply just as aptly to human-Oankali sexual contact as it is depicted throughout *Dawn*. Certainly, Joseph feels consumed by Nikanj after he is (as I have argued here) raped in their initial "encounter."

The initial physical revulsion humans feel for Oankali can be, as we see with Lilith, overcome, yet a sort of uncanny dread of the Oankali and their plans for humanity remains pervasive throughout *Dawn* and the subsequent two novels of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. It is my contention that it is this lack of Oankali concern for human consent in sexual and reproductive matters, and not mere physical difference, which makes them uncanny and horrifying to humanity in the long run. None of this is meant to suggest that the Oankali are vicious, brutal rapists, at least in the conscious sense. The Oankali, who as a rule do not (and seemingly cannot) lie, seem quite genuine in their insistence that human claims of non-consent belie a deeper physio-psychological consent, as in the scene with Joseph. They seem equally oblivious to the emotional distress that this lack of consent,

and the complex web of revulsion and intense desire that accompanies it in nearly all human sexual interaction with the Oankali, causes to "natural" (i.e., pre-Construct) humans. Returning to my original frame of Antioch College's controversial policy of affirmative consent, we might then read *Dawn* as a parable for the need for affirmative consent in sexual encounters, particularly ones which transcend barriers or break taboos. The Oankali disinterest in (if not outright refusal to) secur(ing/e) affirmative consent causes great emotional distress for their supposed human "partners," dis-ease in readers, and a lingering sense of uncanny horror toward the Oankali in the novel's human characters, even ones who are otherwise sympathetic to the Oankali and critical of humanity's deeply flawed nature. Thus, in our current moment of reevaluating Antioch College and affirmative consent, it is also highly productive for us to reevaluate the tangled web of consent and desire Butler weaves in *Dawn*.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus my analysis on *Dawn*, although I will also refer to the subsequent novels, *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989). For the purposes of in-text citations, although I am working from an omnibus edition of the full series published as *Lilith's Brood* (Butler 2007), I will include the title of the novel I am referring to.
2. As referenced in the previous footnote, the current omnibus edition of the series uses the alternate title *Lilith's Brood*. As I prefer the original, *Xenogenesis*, on both aesthetic and thematic grounds, that is the title I will use throughout this paper. In doing research on the paper, I attempted to find the reasoning for the change, which occurred during Butler's lifetime (2000), but was unable to find any information whatsoever on the matter, whether it was Butler's decision or a publisher's, what the reasoning was, and so on. I also made inquiries via personal Facebook and Twitter accounts; while several people offered theories (e.g., that the emphasis on "Lilith" might be meant to appeal to Butler's feminist audience), nobody was able to offer an answer. So far as I can tell, none of the previous criticism on the issue has addressed the title change except to mention it as a fact. Among criticism of the series written after 2000, some, like me, continue to use *Xenogenesis*, while others have switched to *Lilith's Brood*.
3. The practice of using "it" as a gender pronoun for ooloi is taken from the novel.

References

Belk, Nolan. 2008. The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the Xenogenesis Trilogy. *Utopian Studies* 19 (3): 369–389.

Butler, Octavia. 2007. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central.

Cherniavsky, Eva. 1996. Subaltern Studies in a U.S. Frame. *Boundary 2* 23 (2): 85–110.

Diehl, Laura. 2013. American Germ Culture: Richard Matheson, Octavia Butler, and the (Political) Science of Individuality. *Cultural Critique* 85: 84–121.

Haraway, Donna J. 1991a. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–182. New York: Routledge.

———. 1991b. The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 203–230. New York: Routledge.

Lorde, Audre. 2007. Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider*, 53–59. Berkeley: Crossing Press.

Michaels, Walter Benn. 2000. Political Science Fictions. *New Literary History* 31 (4): 649–664.

Mills, Nicolaus. 2014. How Antioch College Got Rape Right 20 Years Ago. *Daily Beast*, December 10.

Nanda, Aparajita. 2013. Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*. *Callaloo* 36 (3): 773–788.

Newson, Adele S. 1989. Rev. of *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites*, by Octavia E. Butler. *African American Review* 23 (2): 389–396.

Outterson, Sarah. 2008. Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy. *Utopian Studies* 19 (3): 433–456.

Roberts, Dorothy. 1998. *Killing the Black Body*. New York: Vintage.

Saturday Night Live. n.d. Is It Date Rape? Transcript. https://snltranscripts.jt.org/93/93bdaterape.phtml. Accessed 1 May 2016.

Stein, Rachel. 2004. Bodily Invasions: Gene Trading and Organ Theft in Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson's Speculative Fiction. In *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism*, ed. Rachel Stein, 209–224. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

White, Eric. 1993. The Erotics of Becoming: Xenogenesis and "The Thing.". *Science Fiction Studies* 20 (3): 394–408.

Youngquist, Paul. 2011. The Mothership Connection. *Cultural Critique* 77: 1–23.

CHAPTER 8

Transhumanism, Posthumanism, and the Human in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins

Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (*Dawn* [1987], *Adulthood Rites* [1988], and *Imago* [1989]), which is now titled *Lilith's Brood* (Butler 2007), chronicles the lives of Lilith Iyapo and her children, Akin and Jodahs. Lilith is an African American woman who has been resurrected by the Oankali, a highly intelligent extraterrestrial species whose name means "gene trader," and her children are "constructs," the products of human-Oankali gene trading. The Oankali have chosen Lilith to be the leader of the first groups of humans to live on Earth in nearly three hundred years. The Earth was made uninhabitable by a nuclear war in which "[a] handful of people tried to commit humanicide" (*Dawn* 8).[1] That war was the product of a "genetic problem" that the Oankali refer to as the "human contradiction," the reality that humans are both intelligent and hierarchical. What makes this "genetic problem" dangerous is that hierarchical behavior is the "older and more entrenched" of the two characteristics and, therefore, tends to guide intelligence (38–39). Thus, one of the goals

J. R. Jenkins (✉)
Palomar College, San Marcos, CA, USA
e-mail: jjenkins@palomar.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_8

of the Oankali is to modify humanity's hierarchical tendencies via human-Oankali crossbreeding because they believe that such crossbreeding will help humanity avoid another attempt at extinction. While I am interested, like much of the scholarship on *Xenogenesis*, in Butler's interrogations of liberal humanism, biological essentialism, evolution, social justice, and the erotic,[2] my focus in this chapter is to examine one issue that the scholarship has tended to overlook—Butler's distinction between transhumanism and posthumanism.

Transhumanism and posthumanism tend to be conflated largely due to the confusing definitions of transhumanism. For example, Nick Bostrom (2005, 202–203) defines transhumanism as the belief that "current human nature is *improvable* through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods" (my emphasis). Here, transhumanism is a belief system that calls for the use of science and technology to make humans *better* than they are now, that is, to make us smarter, stronger, healthier, longer lived, and less violent than we are today. On the other hand, as David Oderberg (2014, 207) notes, there is a "'minority of transhumanists'" who claim that "enhancement technologies could, through 'participant evolution,' be used to create an entirely new species. This 'posthuman' species would not consist of human beings with enhanced abilities—mere 'transhumans'—but of a new kind of being, wholly superior to humans in sufficient respects for it plausibly to be called a distinct species." Here, the goal of transhumanism is to make humans more than human, to become, as Michio Kaku (2011, 12) would put it, "like the gods we once worshipped and feared." In this view, as Sirkku K. Hellsten (2012, 6) puts it, transhumanism is just a "trend of posthumanism," or what Cary Wolfe (2010, xvii) refers to as "'bad' posthumanism." Given the definitions above, it is not surprising that many see transhumanism and posthumanism as interchangeable.

I argue that Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy not only offers us a straightforward way to understand the differences between transhumanism and posthumanism, between the discourses of being a better human and being more than human, but it also suggests that we should embrace transhumanism and reject posthumanism because posthumanism's conception of the human is "Man." Following Sylvia Wynter's notion of "Man2" (Wynter and McKittrick 2015),[3] Alexander Weheliye (2014, 139n3)

defines Man as "the modern, secular, and western version of the human that differentiates full humans from not-quite-humans and nonhumans on the basis of biology and economics." Although posthumanism offers a critique of Man, its critique assumes that humanity has reached its evolutionary end, that whiteness represents that end, and that becoming posthuman is the only way to make humans better. While these assumptions imply that extinction is humanity's destiny, Butler suggests in *Xenogenesis* that the only humans who will face extinction are those who believe in Man.

Transhumanism, Posthumanism, and *Dawn*

The transhumanist's desire to be a better human and the posthumanist's desire to be more than human are distinguished in *Dawn* by their assumptions about humanity's evolutionary status. Represented by the Oankali, transhumanism assumes that humans have not finished evolving, while posthumanism, represented by the pre-mother Lilith, assumes that humans have reached their evolutionary end. The idea that humanity has finished evolving is, ironically, shared by posthumanists and their main critics, whom transhumanists refer to as "bioconservatives" or "bio-luddites." According to Nicholas Agar (2007, 12), bioconservatives are a group of thinkers who "share a desire to keep us and our near descendants human, even if this means keeping us and them dumb, diseased, and short-lived." As the bioconservatives see it, humanity has not only stopped evolving, but part of its essence is its limitations; therefore, a human without these limitations is no longer human. Moreover, some bioconservatives argue that since "one is human by virtue of possessing a genome that gives rise to traits typical of humans," changing humanity's genome will lead to our end because one way for a species to go extinct is to have "descendants that are so different as to count as a different species" (13). Like the bioconservatives, posthumanists, which include Oderberg's (2014) "radical" transhumanists, believe that enhancing humanity will not make it better; rather, it will lead to the birth of a new species. According to that view, a transhuman is not human, but posthuman because that being lacks the limitations of today's humans. Thus, what distinguishes the bioconservative from the posthumanist is that the posthumanist believes that becoming a new species should be the goal of humanity because humanity has reached it evolutionary end. Indeed, some posthumanists argue that most of us want to be posthuman because we would possess abilities unavailable

to all humans and we would be able to fulfill our ultimate "wish"—to be "[f]lawless, immortal, godlike" (Sirius and Cornell 2015, 173).

One of the main problems with the argument that humanity has stopped evolving, as articulated in *Dawn*, is that it equates change to transcendence. In the eyes of the Oankali, change is not about transcending humanity, but improving it. For example, when Lilith asks Jdahya, the first Oankali she meets, about the "price" that humans will have to pay the Oankali for saving them and Earth from extinction, he tells her the following: "Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you. Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies, we'll share those abilities with you. That's part of the trade. We're overdue for it" (*Dawn* 42). According to Jdahya, the two things that humans owe their extraterrestrial saviors are their genetic material and their willingness to become healthier, smarter, longer lived, and less hierarchical. For Jdahya, humans must change to become better humans, and change means improving humanity, not transcending it. This point is reiterated to Lilith at the end of *Dawn* by Nikanj, the ooloi—a sexless Oankali responsible for Oankali and human-Oankali reproduction—who "made" her pregnant: "Our children will be better than either of us […]. We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they'll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits" (247–248). As Nikanj sees it, although Lilith's human-Oankali children will be less hierarchical than their mother, they will still be hierarchical. In other words, in order for Lilith's daughter to be classified as nonhuman, she would have to be born free of the human contradiction; that is, she would have to be born Oankali, a species who has "never" been hierarchical (41). Moreover, since the Oankali want their descendants to acquire some of humanity's characteristics, they are not claiming that humans should transcend their humanity to avoid future attempts at humanicide; rather, they are claiming that humans need to improve their humanity to avoid such attempts.

The Oankali's desire to trade with humans also points to another problem with the argument that humanity has stopped evolving—it defines the human solely by what it is and, therefore, excludes what it can become. For example, before the Oankali awaken Lilith from her 250-year slumber, they genetically enhanced her to be stronger, healthier, and smarter than any of the humans who will be awaken. Although she has been enhanced,

Lilith does not question her humanity until she has to decide who to awaken first:

> Anyone Lilith Awakened might get that idea—almost certainly would get it the moment Lilith opened a wall or caused new walls to grow, thus proving she had abilities they did not. The Oankali had given her information, increased physical strength, enhanced memory, and an ability to control the walls and the suspended animation of plants. These were her tools. And every one of them would make her seem less human. (*Dawn* 120)

The difference between Lilith's view of herself and the awakened humans' view of her represents respectively the difference between defining humanity by what it can become and defining humanity by what it is. If we look at humanity as always in a state of becoming, then Lilith's enhancements do not make her less human or more than human, just enhanced. On the other hand, if one defines humanity by what it is, he or she would view Lilith's enhancements as evidence that she is not human precisely because it is presumed that humans cannot be changed without becoming something else. The problem with the latter view, as suggested by the narrator, is that it insists that humans can never be better than they were before they attempted humanicide. As Bostrom notes, humans are not only a function of their DNA but also a function of their technological inventions and social context; therefore, "[h]uman nature in this broader sense is dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable." Although we look and live "markedly different from our hunter-gatherer ancestors," we do not see ourselves as less human, even though they may see us as posthuman (213). Thus, the problem with defining humans solely by what they are is that it presumes that what they are is fixed by nature and not by humans. In other words, if humans have finished evolving, human folly, not nature, is the reason for that state of existence.

Another problem that emerges from the notion that humanity has reached its evolutionary end is the belief that humans are nature's grandest achievement. As Eric White (1993, 399) argues, humanity in *Xenogenesis* is depicted as "a historical contingent, transitional phenomenon rather than the apex of biological possibility." In *Dawn* specifically, the belief that humanity is nature's finest achievement is linked to the idea of species purity. For instance, after Nikanj tells Lilith about the benefits that her children will gain from human-Oankali crossbreeding, she tells it that her daughter is not human, but a "monster," a "thing" (*Dawn*

247–248). By using such terms to refer to her daughter, Lilith contends that mixing human and Oankali DNA will lead to posthumans precisely because humans, unlike the Oankali, are a pure species. However, as Yuval Harari (2015, 16) notes, humans are not only *racially* mixed, but we are also a mixed species. He cites recent studies that have determined that roughly up to 6 percent of human DNA comes from other human species such as Neanderthals and Denisovans. In his words, "[i]t is unsettling—and perhaps thrilling—to think that we Sapiens could at one time have sex with an animal from a different species and produce children together" (17). Moreover, if Lilith is to remain true to her belief, she must also see herself as a "monster" or a "thing," since she has been genetically enhanced by the Oankali. In this light, Lilith's contention that her daughter is nonhuman because she has Oankali DNA is inconsistent with humanity's genetic makeup as well as with her view of herself. Indeed, while Lilith acknowledges that the humans whom she plans to awaken will not see her as human once she shows them her newly acquired genetic "tools," she fails to see the contradiction in her designation of herself as human and her daughter as a monster.

As implied by *Dawn*, to claim, as bioconservatives and posthumanists do, that humanity has reached its evolutionary end requires one to equate change with transcendence, to define the human as fixed, and to believe that humans are a pure species. The problem with those requirements, besides their arbitrariness and lack of credible evidence, is that they presume that humanity does not need to be improved. For the bioconservative, humanity does not require improvement because, despite our flaws and limitations, we are the universe's grandest achievement, while the posthumanist contends that humanity cannot be more than what it is; therefore, we are unable to modify our flaws and limitations without becoming something different. From the Oankali's perspective, such thinking is not only irrational, but dangerous. For instance, when Lilith complains to Nikanj that her future daughter will not be human, it calmly tells her that she "shouldn't lie to [herself]" because it is "a deadly habit" (*Dawn* 247). Lilith's denial, on the one hand, is a lie because she has herself as evidence that humans can be improved without losing their humanity. On the other hand, her lie represents the continuation of a dangerous practice in the U.S. that takes on more significance considering the debates surrounding transhumanism and posthumanism—the practice of defining and treating some humans as nonhumans. Butler suggests in *Adulthood Rites* that this practice is the result of America's investment in Man, one of

the outcomes of the human contradiction. Indeed, Butler's depiction of a white anti-Oankali village named Phoenix suggests that the belief that humanity is fixed is linked to Man's racist vision of the human.

Man Problems in *Adulthood Rites*

Adulthood Rites begins with the birth of Akin, Lilith's third human-Oankali child and her first son. Akin, who is already able to understand English and Oankali, hears someone say that he is "beautiful" and "looks completely Human." Even Lilith wonders if she should thank Nikanj for "making him seem Human so [she] can love him […] for a while" (*Adulthood Rites* 254). Since human-Oankali children will go through the same metamorphosis as their Oankali peers, they may look more Oankali when they become adults; therefore, Lilith's comments imply that she will be unable to love Akin or consider him beautiful once he becomes an adult. While Lilith's thoughts about Akin invoke a posthumanist-bioconservative view of humanity, her advice to Akin about how to deal with difference indicates that Lilith is beginning to recognize the benefits of the human-Oankali gene trade for humanity:

> Human beings fear difference […]. Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization […]. You'll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior […]. When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (329)

Although Lilith, who is now the mother of constructs, still believes that the Oankali's approach to human-Oankali crossbreeding is wrong, she also acknowledges that such crossbreeding will make humanity better.

In contrast to Lilith, the "resisters," humans who "decided to live without the Oankali—and thus without children," are steadfast bioconservatives (*Adulthood Rites* 268). The resisters are so invested in the view that humanity has stopped evolving that they are willing to let the species go extinct rather than have human-Oankali children. At the same time, the resisters' shared bioconservatism and hatred of the Oankali did not prevent them from separating themselves into racial and ethnic villages. In fact, Nikanj tells Akin that resister villages, "especially widely separated ones," are "dangerous" to each other and to the Oankali, and it is up the

Oankali and constructs to make sure that the resisters' fear of human and nonhuman diversity does not destroy everyone (279). Given this background, we are forced to address the following question: since, as Lilith notes in her discussion with Akin, the resisters' fear of the Oankali and of each other derives from their fear of difference, what is the source of that fear, and how do the Oankali plan to alleviate or eradicate that fear? It appears that the answer to this question lies in Butler's depiction of Phoenix, a white resister village that Akin will attempt to save from self-destruction by offering them a second chance at living as fertile humans on Mars. To be more specific, Phoenix's fear of the Oankali and its lack of nonwhite resisters are due to the people's adherence to Man.

As I noted in the introduction of this chapter, Man is based on a hierarchy in which humans are at the top, not-quite-humans are in the middle, and nonhumans are at the bottom. In order for Man to make sense, as suggested by that hierarchy, we must first assume, as the people of Phoenix do, that a "great divide" exists between human and nonhuman animals. The great divide argument, as Irene Pepperberg (2007, 11) notes, claims that there is a "defining difference that separates humans and nonhumans," a difference that assumes that the nonhuman lacks behaviors, abilities, or traits that the human possesses. For the resisters, as suggested by their decision to live without the Oankali and without children, the lack of a human body is what makes the Oankali and constructs nonhuman. For example, when Phoenix resisters traded for Amma and Shkaht, two construct girls who were stolen from their family by a small group of nomadic raiders, Akin heard some of the resisters, particularly Neci Roybal, voice their desire to cut the girls' tentacles. As Neci sees it, by cutting the tentacles, which are sensory organs, the girls will learn to use their "Human senses" and to "see the world as [humans] do and be more [human]" (*Adulthood Rites* 375). For Neci and her supporters, having a human body allows one to think and behave as humans do; therefore, one cannot be human without a human body.

There is, however, one major problem with Neci's claim—since many nonhuman animals exhibit behaviors that were once thought to belong only to humans (e.g., mourning the loss of a loved one, using and making tools, and acting cooperatively), the differences between humans and nonhumans appear to be "quantitative," not "qualitative" (Pepperberg 2007, 10). According to this view, the differences between humans and nonhumans are defined by degree, not by lack; therefore, there is no great divide between the human and nonhuman, only a great "continuum"

(11). For people like Neci and her supporters, the idea of a great continuum is frightening because they can no longer claim, as Pepperberg puts it, that a "distinct boundary between humans and nonhumans" exists (12). If this boundary does not exist, then the resisters cannot claim that they are different from, independent of, and superior to their nonhuman counterparts. As Nikanj suggests in its discussion with Dichaan, Akin's Oankali father, the great divide argument is a myth precisely because humans have been dependent on some nonhumans for their existence and evolution: "Even before we arrived, they had bacteria living in their intestines and protecting them from other bacteria that would hurt or kill them. They could not exist without symbiotic relationships with other creatures. Yet such relationships frighten them." For example, Nikanj informs Dichaan that without mitochondria, "a previously independent life form" that have found a "haven" in human cells and have "trade[d] their ability to synthesize proteins and metabolize fats for room to live and reproduce," humans could not have evolved into what they are today (*Adulthood Rites* 427). Nikanj's description of mitochondria is a reminder that humans need some nonhumans more than these nonhumans need them to exist. This reminder not only discredits the belief that a human–nonhuman hierarchy exists in which humans are at the top, but it also forces Neci and her supporters to acknowledge that the only way the human species can continue on Earth is through human–nonhuman symbiosis and mixing.

The belief in Man is not only responsible for Phoenix's fear of the Oankali, but it also largely explains why there is an absence of nonwhite resisters in this village. For example, when the people of Phoenix bought Akin from a group of nomadic resisters who had kidnapped him, Gabe Rinaldi, one of Phoenix's leaders, frowned and wondered why Akin had a black mother and if *Akin* was a "Human name," implying that human names are either English names or names that English-speaking people can pronounce. Even more disturbing for Gabe, as suggested by the return of his frown, is that Akin is "the first boy born to a Human woman on Earth since the war" (*Adulthood Rites* 351). Since the human in Man is "synonymous with the heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subject" in which black people become literal "no-bodies" and "exploitable nonhumans" (Weheliye 2014, 135), Gabe's questions, observations, and frowns represent the realization that Akin refutes one of Man's foundational principles—the notion that white people are humanity's evolutionary apex. In other words, because Akin is humanity's new "Y

chromosome Adam,"[4] Gabe is confronted with the fact that humanity will continue with or without white people. Moreover, Gabe's concern with Akin's race suggests that the difference that most matters in Man is not that between humans and nonhumans, but that between white and non-white humans. That hierarchy of difference explains why Akin was driven out of Phoenix:

> [Akin] knew the people and languages of a Chinese resister village, an Igbo village, three Spanish-speaking villages made up of people from many countries, a Hindu village, and two villages of Swahili-speaking people from different countries. So many resisters. Yet there were so many more. He had been driven out of, of all things, a village of English-speaking people because he was browner than the villagers were. (*Adulthood Rites* 434)

Since the people of Phoenix are resisters, it would seem that they would have driven Akin out the village due to his Oankaliness; instead, it was Akin's blackness that caused his expulsion. Thus, by driving Akin out of their community, the people of Phoenix demonstrate that remaining white is more important to them than having children or being part of a unified resister community that could challenge the Oankali's assumptions about humans as well as the power relations between humans and the Oankali. However, Tate, Gabe's partner, suggests in her remarks regarding Amma and Shkaht's human mother that Phoenix's investment in Man will be its end.

Upon discovering that Amma and Shkaht's human mother is from Ghana and that the only human languages they speak are French and Twi, Tate states the following: "Africa again […]. It probably didn't get hit [by the war] at all. I wonder whether the Oankali have started settlements there. I thought people in Ghana all spoke English." Moreover, she states that if the people of Kaal-Osei, Amma and Shkaht's home village, do not speak English, then "nobody we know would be there" (*Adulthood Rites* 372). Tate's comments are noteworthy because they imply that Africans might have escaped the ravages of the war because they do not subscribe to Man's version of the human. At the same time, she also suggests that Phoenix's unwillingness to consider, as Weheliye (2014, 8) might put it, "how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from [Man]" will lead to its downfall. What Tate's comments show, as Cathy Peppers (1995, 58) notes, is that Tate is both "adaptable and dedicated" to changing or dismantling "Man the Hunter way of life." Indeed,

when Tate states that the only people whom the people of Phoenix know outside of their village are those who speak English, she is not only referring to how being monolingual has isolated Phoenix from other resister communities, but also referring to how it has resulted in Phoenix being a monoracial community that is on its way to extinction because it is unwilling to mix with the Oankali or with nonwhite humans.

If, as I have argued so far, the people of Phoenix embody the dangers of Man, how do we read Akin's project to *save* them? According to J. Adam Johns (2010), Akin is not saving Phoenix by offering them the opportunity to live as fertile humans on Mars; rather, he is offering them another planet to commit humanicide. However, what will make the Mars humanicide different from the previous one is that Akin's offer links humanicide to evolution. For Johns, while Akin knows that his "project to 'save' humanity" will, at best, result in the "endless human pattern of alternating phoenix-like destruction and rebirth," he also hopes that "humanity will evolve—that is, that evolution will be forced by mass death" (393). While I agree that Akin is not saving Phoenix, but giving Phoenix the opportunity to save itself, I disagree with Johns's assumptions that Phoenix's fate represents humanity's fate and that evolution equals death. Indeed, when Akin is making the argument to Amma and Shkaht that the resisters should be viewed as a "truly separate people," people who are different from their human parents (*Adulthood Rites* 378), he is not only suggesting that ideology, not biology, is the foundation of human difference but also suggesting that the people of Phoenix represent only one of the many people who make up humanity. Moreover, since Akin believes that evolution is the only way to save humanity while the people of Phoenix insist on remaining human, Akin's offer to Phoenix seems to be equally concerned with saving the humans who choose to stay on Earth as with the humans who choose to live and reproduce with the Oankali. It is, therefore, noteworthy that Phoenix is the first resister village to be offered the Mars option because it suggests that Akin is attempting to remove one of the ideological factors that will keep humanity from evolving—the ideology of Man. In other words, Akin offers Mars to Phoenix because it is the best way to ensure that Man does not spread among the humans who will remain on Earth.

The assumption that evolution functions in *Adulthood Rites* as a synonym for death is problematic because it implies that Butler is privileging a posthumanist-bioconservative view of humanity. As I attempted to demonstrate in this chapter's discussion of *Dawn*, one of Butler's main points

in *Xenogenesis* is to trouble the posthumanist-bioconservative belief that humanity has reached its evolutionary end. One of the problems with that belief is that it requires one to disregard the fact that humanity is dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable. This critique is even evident in Lilith's advice to Akin on how to deal with difference. After Lilith tells Akin to embrace difference (i.e., the Oankali way), he notes that this was "one of the few times she had encouraged him to express Oankali characteristics" (*Adulthood Rites* 329). Implicit in Akin's remarks is that Lilith not only acknowledges that human-Oankali crossbreeding will make humanity better, but she also views constructs as transhumans, not as posthumans. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the reason why Lilith's children can be considered human is that they possess the human contradiction, something that the Oankali lack. We are reminded of this point after Akin expresses his dislike for his kidnappers, who made him "frightened," "miserable," and "shaking with anger." At that moment, Akin acknowledges that this "mix of intense emotions" was not only new to him, but it also came from his human mother: "[Lilith's] anger had always frightened him, yet here it was inside him" (329). In this light, it is not evolution that is linked to death and posthumanism in *Adulthood Rites*; rather, it is bioconservatism. As Nolan Belk (2016, 379) observes, while Akin finds a "place for the human species to exist unchanged," Butler does not end *Xenogenesis* with Akin's story because it ends in "stagnation." Thus, as Butler contends throughout *Xenogenesis*, to equate evolution to death is to argue, as bioconservatives and posthumanists do, that humanity has stopped evolving. Such thinking, as Butler points out in *Imago*, wrongly assumes that the only way for humans to improve themselves is to become posthuman.

Two Sides of the Same Coin: Bioconservatism and Posthumanism in *Imago*

The only first-person narrative of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, *Imago* is Jodahs's account of becoming the first construct ooloi born to a human woman. When Jodahs discovers that it will become ooloi, one of its main goals is to find mates. Jodahs eventually finds Tomás and Jesusa, siblings who belong to a resister village populated by people from Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Peru, Chile, and Spain. Although many of the people in their village, whom I refer to as The Mother, are fertile, their

children are born with or develop painful deformities due to a genetic disorder that resembles neurofibromatosis, a medical condition in which tumors grow on nerve tissue. As Tomás explains, the first mother of his people was María de la Luz, a fifteen-year-old girl from Mexico who was raped by unknown attackers. When María bore a son, her fertility inspired the people to believe that they could defeat the Oankali. However, the people's desire to have children led them to "put mother and son together" with the hope that their union would result in fertile mates for other villagers. While María's second son died, her three daughters survived and gave birth to her twenty-three grandchildren, but eight died and most of the remaining fifteen were deformed. However, since they were fertile, the survivors were required to have sex with the villagers with the hope of producing healthy children. That hope was so strong that even the deformed grandchildren "could not be spared" from this requirement (*Imago* 660–665). When Jodahs finally meets Tomás and Jesusa's people, it eventually offers them the same opportunity that it has offered other resisters:

> You can stay here [on Earth] and die uselessly, resisting. You can go to Mars and help found a new Human society. Or you can join us in the trade. We will go to the stars eventually. If you join us, your children will go with us. (605)

While the resisters whom Jodahs encounters choose Mars and to remain human, Tomás and Jesusa's people choose the trade. As I intend to demonstrate in the paragraphs below, The Mother's decision to become part of the trade is a decision to become transhuman, which functions in *Imago* as a critique of bioconservatism and posthumanism.

In his bioconservative explanation for why it is better for us to remain human instead of becoming transhuman or posthuman, Francis Fukuyama (2012, 43) states the following:

> For all our obvious faults, we humans are miraculously complex products of a long evolutionary process […]. Our good characteristics are intimately connected to our bad ones. If we weren't violent and aggressive, we wouldn't be able to defend ourselves; if we didn't have feelings of exclusivity, we wouldn't be loyal to those close to us; if we never felt jealousy, we would also never feel love. Even our mortality plays a critical function in allowing our species as a whole to survive and adapt […]. Modifying any one of our key characteristics inevitably entails modifying a complex,

> interlinked package of traits, and we will never be able to anticipate the ultimate outcome.

For Fukuyama, since our biological and ideological limitations are responsible for our biological and ideological strengths, altering ourselves to transcend any of our limitations will upset the symbiotic relationships between the *good* and *bad* qualities that make us human. It appears that this line of thought is the reason why Jodahs is unsuccessful in convincing resisters, save for the people of The Mother, to reject the move to Mars and join the Oankali in gene trading. Indeed, when Jodahs encounters a straight couple on their way to Mars, the woman asks Jodahs its opinion of their decision to move to Mars. Jodahs tells her that they "should stay" and "join them" to produce construct children who would be "free of inherent flaws." Although Jodahs explains to them that their unwillingness to alter the human contradiction will ultimately lead to their self-destruction on Mars, the man declares that what matters most to them is that they will be "fully Human and free" (*Imago* 529–531). This feeling is even shared by Marina Rivas, the Filipina that Jodahs and its family saved from imprisonment and rape. Even though Marina hates human males and admits that the "idea of … different children" with the Oankali no longer "seem[s] as bad as it once did," she nevertheless wants to go to Mars because it is "Human" (581). João, a resister from São Paulo, also considers joining the trade, but eventually chooses Mars because he wants to mate with "someone [he] used to dream about when [he] was young" (604).

Like Fukuyama, these resisters believe that it is better to be human than transhuman. However, one of the problems with such thinking, as Butler shows in *Imago*, is that it presumes that transhumans are posthuman. Since transhumans are "transitioning" or "transformed" humans, humans who are healthier, smarter, stronger, and less violent than today's humans (Sirius and Cornell 2015, 3, 9), and posthumans are "beings whose enhancements isolate them reproductively from humans" (Agar 2007, 13), the notion that transhumans are posthuman does not make sense. Yet, this is a claim made by the resisters, since they, like Fukuyama, believe that humanity cannot improve itself and remain human. However, if that is true, then the resisters would also have to see themselves as transhumans because they have been genetically altered by the Oankali to be sterile and to live radically longer than their pre-war selves. Moreover, if the resisters believed that humans and constructs are different, then the resisters would

lack an erotic attraction to constructs, since posthumanity describes not only the inability of humans and enhanced humans to reproduce but also their mutual repulsion toward each other. In this view, sexual reproduction between humans and posthumans might be impossible because we may "find each other so profoundly repellent that interbreeding is mutually unthinkable" (Agar 2007, 13). However, as Jodahs observes in his account of the unnamed resister woman's interest in him, many resisters do not find constructs profoundly repellent: "She looked interested in me—smelled sexually attracted, which made her interesting to me. Human females did tend to like me as long as I kept my few head tentacles hidden in my hair. The sensory spots on my face and arms looked like ordinary skin, though they didn't feel ordinary" (*Imago* 527). By making some resisters sexually attracted to constructs and all resisters unattracted to Oankali, Butler seems to be arguing that the difference between transhumans and posthumans is that humans would find transhumans sexually attractive and posthumans sexually repellent because transhumans will look and feel virtually the same as today's humans. In other words, as long as humans find transhumans sexually attractive, transhumans will remain human.

Another problem with the notion that it is better to be human than transhuman is that it assumes that our *bad* traits are responsible for our *good* traits. In *Our Posthuman Future*, for example, Fukuyama (2002, 173) contends that the transhumanist attempt to minimize human suffering could deprive us of our "highest and most admirable human qualities":

> No one can make a brief in favor of pain and suffering, but the fact of the matter is that what we consider to be the highest and most admirable human qualities, both in ourselves and in others, are often related to the way that we react to, confront, overcome, and frequently succumb to pain, suffering, and death. In the absence of these human evils there would be no sympathy, compassion, courage, heroism, solidarity, or strength of character. Our ability to experience these emotions is what connects us potentially to all other human beings, both living and dead.

The problem with Fukuyama's claim, as Butler suggests in *Imago*, is that pain, suffering, and death do not always lead to humanity's highest and most admirable qualities. For instance, the eugenic practices enforced by The Mother's elders led Tomás and Jesusa to leave the village because both were doomed to a life of pain and suffering. According to Tomás, he

and Jesusa left The Mother to "see a little of the world before she began to have child after child." Even though Jesusa was "covered head to foot in small very visible tumors" and "looked ugly," she was destined to "suffer" the same fate as her ancestors because she is fertile (*Imago* 664–665). Here, the people's sterility and deformities did not lead to a society that exhibited humanity's admirable qualities; instead, these human evils lead to more human evils. Indeed, Butler suggests in her depiction of the love that the people of The Mother developed for Jodahs and its ooloi sibling Aaor that our attempts to alleviate human suffering, not our ability to learn from it, may be largely responsible for our highest and most admirable qualities.

Since Jodahs and Aaor are constructs, the people of The Mother hated them because they believed that the Oankali were responsible for their situation. However, when Jodahs and Aaor began healing The Mother's elders and children of their deformities without changing them into something they did not recognize, the people began to "love" them. In fact, after Aaor grew a new leg and foot for an elder who lost her leg to amputation, the people of The Mother "forgot how much they hated [Jodahs and Aaor]" and "stopped pointing their guns at [them] to remind [them] of their power and their fear." Moreover, the people began to treat each other better. For instance, after Santos, whose nose had been repeatedly broken over the years due to his biting sarcasm and "grotesque" appearance, was given a "handsome new nose" by Jodahs, "people seemed less inclined to hit him," even though he continued "talking too much and risking getting [his nose] broken again" (736–737). According to Francisco, one of The Mother's lead elders, "if there had been people like [Jodahs] around a hundred years ago, I couldn't have become a resister" (740). What is noteworthy about Francisco's comments as well as the love the people of The Mother developed for Jodahs and Aaor is that they suggest that it is not the people's sterility and deformities that made them less violent and less xenophobic; rather, it was the removal of those physical disorders that changed their behavior for the better. Butler's point seems to be that pain, suffering, and death oftentimes lead to social practices that lead to more pain, suffering, and death[5]; therefore, our attempts to minimalize or eradicate these "human evils" may be the reason for the existence of our highest and most admirable qualities. In this light, to claim that being human is better than being transhuman is not only making an argument in favor of human pain and suffering, but it is also, as Agar (2007, 17) argues, "callous." Indeed, "to retain pain and suffering […]

so that the fortunate among us can overcome and emerge with our characters deepened" is not about retaining humanity's highest and admirable qualities; rather, it is concerned with upholding the bioconservative notion of the human.

What is noteworthy about Butler's critique of bioconservatism in *Imago* is that it shows how the bioconservative call for us to remain human is tied to the posthumanist call to stop being human. What ties these adversarial ideologies to each other is their assumption that Man is the thing we must save or overcome. On the one hand, the bioconservative desire to save Man not only assumes that Western culture is the zenith of human nature, but it also justifies social inequality in the name of being human. Fukuyama's (2002) *Our Posthuman Future*, for example, is grounded in his widely discussed 1989 article where he argues that Hegel was right in claiming that "history had ended in 1806, since there had been no essential political progress beyond the principles of the French Revolution," the principles of "liberal democracy" (xi–xii). According to Fukuyama, the reason why there were so many "capitalist liberal democracies" at the beginning of the twenty-first century and so few "socialist dictatorships" is that capitalist liberal democracies are "grounded in assumptions about human nature that are far more realistic than those of their competitors" (106, 128). As he sees it, the capitalist liberal democratic version of the human acknowledges that while we all want "equality of recognition or respect," we do not believe that "we are equal in all important respects," nor do we demand that "our lives be the same as everyone else's" (149). Thus, even though Fukuyama's (2012, 42) desire to save Man is concerned with protecting the idea that "being human entitles a person to political and legal equality" that "dwarfs manifest differences in skin color, beauty, and even intelligence," it is also heavily invested in protecting the social inequalities that exist in capitalist liberal democracies that are based on skin color, beauty, and intelligence. In other words, the bioconservative desire to save Man is really a desire to keep alive the myth that an individual's or group's genetic makeup is the main reason why they succeed or fail.

On the other hand, while the posthumanist desire to transcend Man is partly due to Western culture's limited vision of what it means to be human, that desire is also driven by the idea that Man is humanity's evolutionary zenith and end. Indeed, one of the theoretical spaces where Man is reinforced, as Weheliye (2014) writes, is in discussions of posthumanism: "many invocations of posthumanism, whether in antihumanist

post-structuralist theorizing or in current consideration of technology and animality, reinscribe the humanist subject (Man) as the personification of the human by insisting that this is the category to be overcome, rarely considering cultural and political formations outside the world of Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity" (9–10). For example, N. Katherine Hayles (1999, 2–3) argues that consciousness in posthumanism is an "epiphenomenon" that critiques Western culture's notion of consciousness as "the seat of human identity." Elaine L. Graham (2002, 1) argues that "the most definitive and authoritative representations of human identity in a digital and biotechnological age are to be found within two key discourses: Western technoscience (such as the Human Genome Project) and popular culture (such as science fiction)." For Graham, the digital and biotechnological age has allowed technologies to be viewed as "incorporated" or "internalized" parts of the human body that "call into question the ontological purity according to which Western society has defined what is normatively human" (4–5). According to Hellsten (2012, 1), posthumanism and transhumanism are evidence that "the Western—and particularly the North American—approach to birth, death, and life in general is now itself in a transitional stage." While Hayles (1999), Graham (2002), and Hellsten (2012) represent posthumanism as an attack on Western culture's version of the human, they also show, as Weheliye (2014) charges, that non-Western versions of the human are absent from the posthumanist conception of the human.[6] In other words, like the bioconservative's call to save Man, the posthumanist call to transcend Man is grounded in the belief that Man is the best we can or will do as a species.

One problem with the calls to save and transcend Man, as Butler suggests in *Imago*, is that they exclude the possibility that there is more than one way to be human and, therefore, imply that we must become posthuman to better ourselves. As I noted earlier in this chapter, the people of The Mother begin to talk to Jodahs and Aaor about the possibility of mating with Oankali and constructs after being healed of their deformities. By engaging in these conversations and eventually choosing to stay on Earth and participate in the gene trade, the people of The Mother offer a version of the human that insists that there are multiple ways of being human. For example, before Francisco met Jodahs, he had been teaching the children of The Mother that "it was better to endure a disfiguring, disabling genetic disorder than to […] find the Oankali." After watching Jodahs and Aaor heal members of his community, Francisco became "eager rather than afraid" to lay down next to Jodahs (720–721). Unlike the bioconservative

and the posthumanist view of the human, Francisco now believes that it is possible for him and his people to enhance themselves without becoming something else. As Francisco sees it, if one version of the human does not work to ensure a person's or a people's survival and happiness, then try another. This understanding of the human helps to explain Francisco's decision to be healed. Indeed, Francisco is not concerned with saving or overcoming Man; rather, he is focused on improving his and his people's quality of life and chances at survival. To arrive at this understanding of the human, Francisco must also believe that being healed of his deformities will not make him less human or more than human, but a transformed human.

Conclusion: Posthumanism's Man and Transhumanism's Human

The main difference between transhumanism and posthumanism in *Xenogenesis* is their conceptions of the human. While transhumanism defines the human as dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable, posthumanism claims that humanity has reached its evolutionary end and, therefore, must become posthuman to better itself. As suggested by the resisters' unwillingness to think of themselves as nonhuman or posthuman, even though they have been genetically altered by the Oankali to live radically longer than pre-war humans, one of the problems with posthumanism is that it presumes that we can stop being human and that we want to achieve such a state of being. The problem with that presumption can be explained by our pursuit of immortality. According to Stephen Cave (2012, 16), our pursuit of immortality, which can be reduced to four immortality narratives, is an attempt to resolve what he refers to as the "mortality paradox," the theory that death for the human mind is both "inevitable and impossible" because while we know that "we, like all other living things around us, must one day die," we are unable to imagine ourselves in a "state of nonexistence." In this light, the notion we can stop being human is flawed because to imagine ourselves as posthuman is essentially an attempt to imagine ourselves in a state of nonexistence, since the posthuman is not human nor transhuman. Wolfe (2010) makes a similar point in his discussion of Foucault's distinction between Enlightenment and humanism. According to Wolfe, "even if we take the additional posthumanist step of rejecting the various anthropological, political, and

scientific dogmas of the human that Foucault insists are in tension with Enlightenment per se, we must take yet another step, another post-, and realize that the nature of thought itself must change if it is to be posthumanist" (xvi). While Wolfe is guilty of what Weheliye (2014) refers to as the reinscription of Man as the personification of the human, he does point out that being posthuman would include adopting a nonhuman mode of thought, that is, adopting practices of thinking and reading that problematize anthropocentrism and speciesism (Wolfe 2010, xviii–xix). In this light, the resisters' unwillingness to think of themselves as nonhuman or posthuman does not represent our intellectual stubbornness, but our inability to engage in such thinking.

At the same time, even if we could stop being human, most of us would not choose to do so because we enjoy being human. As Cave (2012, 204–205) notes, many people believe that "true" immortality is defined as "living forever as a full person—that is, continuing indefinitely to enjoy life something like the one [we] have now"; therefore, a notion of immortality in which the full person or the individual does not survive is not desirable. Although we desire to live on as full persons, we also acknowledge that we must change physically to satisfy that desire. Since our bodies are working against us in our attempt to become immortal, we have come to realize that "[w]e must somehow be *transformed* to be made fit for eternity" (Cave 2012, 44, emphasis original). If Cave is correct, then our pursuit of immortality is a pursuit to become transhuman, not posthuman. In this light, the resisters' belief that they are fully human despite being transformed by the Oankali suggests that they cannot and do not want to think of themselves in any other way. In other words, the resisters' conception of themselves suggests that all humans want to be or do not mind being transhuman, but all humans do not want to be posthuman because being posthuman means being nonhuman.

Another problem with posthumanism's bioconservative understanding of the human, as explored in Butler's contrasting depictions of Phoenix and The Mother, is that it limits the human to Man. Although posthumanism depicts Man as something to be transcended, it also assumes that Man represents humanity's zenith and end; therefore, we will no longer be human if we transcend Man. In other words, while posthumanism contends that whiteness needs to be transcended, it also implies that blackness has been transcended. Indeed, since whiteness or being white is the pinnacle of being human in Man, blackness and other nonwhite notions of the human do not offer anything that can make humanity better. Such

thinking helps to explain Phoenix's lack of racial and cultural diversity as well as the difficulty Gabe has in accepting that the Oankali chose a black woman to be the mother of humanity's new Adam and that this mother gave him an African name—blackness, for Gabe and the people of Phoenix, is not a sign of humanity's present nor future, only its past. However, by having the people of The Mother choose Earth and the gene trade, Butler suggests that the only people who face extinction or lack a future are those who believe in Man, those who believe that whiteness is the pinnacle of being human. The link between Man and extinction in *Xenogenesis* draws upon a transhumanist conception of the human that presumes that there are multiple ways of being human precisely because the real differences among racialized human groups are ideological, not biological. Thus, in transhumanism, Man is not the best or only version of the human; rather, it represents just one version of the human. This not only means that humanity can and will continue without whiteness or white people, but also means that humanity can develop non-Man notions of the human without becoming something else. In this light, *Xenogenesis* is not only about the birth of a new species but also about the birth of new ways of being human.

Notes

1. While the war is not discussed in detail in *Xenogenesis*, Butler has stated elsewhere that the idea of "a horrible nuclear war in which we've one-upped ourselves to death" was a response to the Reagan administration's notions of "winnable" and "limited" nuclear wars during the early 1980s (Fry 2010, 128–129).
2. For example, Cathy Peppers (1995, 49) has argued that Butler uses four origin stories (i.e., the Biblical, the sociobiological, the paleoanthropological, and the African American slave narrative) in the *Xenogenesis* novels to show us "how to acknowledge difference without necessarily resorting to 'essentialist,' traditional humanist, bounded-self identities." Similarly, Jeffrey Tucker (2007, 181) argues that the trilogy represents Butler's use of contradiction to encourage readers to "embrace difference" and to critique the idea that racial and gender identities are biological essences.

   Eric White (1993, 399) argues that the *Xenogenesis* novels, like John Carpenter's version of *The Thing* (1982), are evolutionist narratives that depict humanity as "a historical contingent, transitional phenomenon rather than the apex of biological possibility." Unlike Carpenter's film, however, Butler's trilogy "intervene[s] in and reverse[s] a tradition of paranoiac

responses to evolution in which Nature in effect persecutes Culture" by embracing the idea that humans will and need to change (402). According to J. Adam Johns (2010, 382), the *Xenogenesis* novels reimagine "sociobiology as a tragic, radical discipline that looks, with dread as much as hope, into a posthuman future, rather than as the liberal, comic vision founded by [E.O.] Wilson and his followers." For Johns, Butler's project in the *Xenogenesis* novels is "not to critique sociobiology as liberal humanism, but to strip optimistic liberal humanism from sociobiology" (398). For Molly Wallace (2009, 124), Butler's trilogy, if read allegorically, can be read as a critique of "the conflation of nature and capital typical of contemporary neoliberalism," and Christina Braid (2006, 51) reads Butler's trilogy as a "critical dystopia" that criticizes the ways in which "state justice impels citizens into a condition of violent resistance or pacified acceptance." Braid concludes that the trilogy is a reminder that "justice must be rooted, not in the violence of self-serving ends but in selfless ends that ensure individuality within a free and peaceful community" (61). Éva Federmayer focuses on the "maternal dimension" of *Xenogenesis* and argues that the world of the novel is not a "representation of a feminist utopia with nurturing mothers or a benevolent matriarchal community" (104); rather, it is a "conflictual world" that challenges "the familiar binaries of phallogocentric Western culture" (108). Indeed, Federmayer (2000, 115) reads Lilith not as a "Mother of the Race" or a "Mother Goddess," but as a black female cyborg "whose negotiations for survival take place in the margins of hegemonic discourses, crossing back and forth across boundaries/races/genders." According to Nolan Belk (2016, 370), Lilith and her children are "seeking to survive in a universe where in the hierarchy of experience logic is secondary to the power of the erotic." As Belk sees it, Butler's trilogy suggests that "the locus of hope [for humanity] is in the power of the erotic—the trust in the body's deep desires for propagation, love, and connection" (373).

3. Katherine McKittrick notes that "the human, in Wynter's writings, is representatively linked to the figure of Man1 […] that was tethered to the theological order of knowledge of pre-Renaissance Latin-Christian medieval Europe; this figure opened up a slot for Man2, a figure based on the Western bourgeoisie's model of being human that has been articulated as, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal monohumanism's *homo oeconomicus*" (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 10). As Wynter herself puts it, we are "stuck" in Man2; that is, we are "committed to our now secular, no longer theocentric but no less absolute biocentric premise, that the human is also a purely natural organism, like any other" (18). One of the problems with that commitment, according to Wynter, is that Man2 has not only led to the "ongoing process of global warming, climate instability, and ecosystemic catastrophe," but it also presents itself as "a model of the human that

supposedly preexists—rather than *coexists* with—all the models of other human societies and their religions/cultures." By presenting itself as humanity's beginning and end, Man2 situates itself as *the* version of the human, rather than just one of many versions of the human, and insists that all other notions of the human are "underdeveloped" (20–21, emphasis original).

4. All human males, as Daniel Fairbanks (2015) notes, trace the DNA in their Y chromosome to one male who lived in Africa around 142,000 years ago. However, unlike the Adam of Abrahamic theology, Y chromosome Adam has an ancestral mother, the "mitochondrial Eve." As Fairbanks puts it, "all ancestral lines of the human mitochondrial family ultimately lead to this one woman who lived in Africa nearly two hundred thousand years ago […], close to the time when anatomically modern humans first appeared" (41). Thus, while Akin's name means "hero" and his human father's name, Joseph, alludes to Akin as a messiah figure (Tucker 2007, 173), he is not Phoenix's savior. Indeed, as suggested by Lilith's name, which references the Biblical-Hebraic Lilith, Adam's first wife, who was cast out of Eden and condemned to couple with demons and have a "monstrous brood of children" because she refused to be on the bottom during sex with Adam (Peppers 1995, 49–50), Akin symbolizes the beginning of humanity's future, the beginning of humanity's transhumanity.
5. Butler makes a similar argument in her *Patternmaster* series. As Lewis Call (2005, 280) notes, one of the sad truths about "non-consensual power," the exchange of power between dominant and subordinate groups that lacks the consent of the subordinate group, that Butler explores in the *Patternmaster* novels is that "those victimized by such power often respond by dreaming not of a liberated and egalitarian society, but of a world in which that power flows through their hands rather than through the hands of their masters."
6. For instance, while Hellsten (2012, 5) claims that Western science is "now taking us towards the oriental and ancient philosophies" that have introduced the "Eastern belie[f]s of reincarnation and 'recycling of souls,'" Hellsten's depiction of the "neoholistic world view" initiated by Western science suggests that posthumanism "could provide room" for non-Western notions of the human, but such beliefs will serve as an appendage, not the center, of posthumanism's conception of humanity. Similarly, Sirius and Cornell's (2015, 173) encyclopedic discussion of posthumanism claims that all humans "now" believe that the human is not a "natural, non-technological thing," and wrongly assumes that this belief did not exist prior to the rise of Man or transhumanism. Indeed, such thinking excludes what Don Ihde (2011, 129) refers to as a "history and phenomenology of *prostheses*" that shows that "[p]rosthetic replacements for limbs and other body parts have an ancient history." For instance, wooden teeth and detachable artificial

limbs (e.g., artificial legs and toes) "go back to ancient mummies." Thus, to claim that we "now" know that humanity is dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable is to reinforce the myth that Western culture is humanity's evolutionary zenith and end.

References

Agar, Nicholas. 2007. Where to Transhumanism? The Literature Reaches a Critical Mass. *Hastings Center Report* 37 (3): 12–17.

Belk, Nolan. 2016. The Certainty of the Flesh: Octavia Butler's Use of the Erotic in the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy. *Utopian Studies* 19 (3): 369–389.

Bostrom, Nick. 2005. In Defense of Posthuman Dignity. *Bioethics* 19 (3): 202–214.

Braid, Christina. 2006. Contemplating and Contesting Violence in Dystopia: Violence in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy. *Contemporary Justice Review* 9 (1): 47–65.

Butler, Octavia E. 2007. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central.

Call, Lewis. 2005. Structures of Desire: Erotic Power in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney. *Rethinking History* 9: 275–296.

Cave, Stephen. 2012. *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization*. New York: Crown.

Fairbanks, Daniel J. 2015. *Everyone Is African: How Science Explodes the Myth of Race*. Amherst: Prometheus.

Federmayer, Éva. 2000. Octavia Butler's Maternal Cyborgs: The Black Female World of the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy. *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6 (1): 103–118.

Fry, Joan. 2010. Congratulations! You've Just Won $295,000: An Interview with Octavia Butler. In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis, 123–133. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Fukuyama, Francis. 2002. *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. New York: Picador.

———. 2012. Transhumanism. *Foreign Policy*, September–October, 42–43.

Graham, Elaine L. 2002. *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Harari, Yuval Noah. 2015. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: HarperCollins.

Hayles, N. Katherine. 1999. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hellsten, Sirkku K. 2012. "The Meaning of Life" During a Transition from Modernity to Transhumanism and Posthumanity. *Journal of Anthropology* 2012: 1–7.

Ihde, Don. 2011. Of which Human Are we Post? In *H±: Transhumanism and Its Critics*, ed. Gregory R. Hansell and William Grassie, 123–135. Philadelphia: Metanexus.

Johns, J. Adam. 2010. Becoming Medusa: Octavia Butler's "Lilith's Brood" and Sociobiology. *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (3): 382–400.

Kaku, Michio. 2011. *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Lives by the Year 2100*. New York: Anchor.

Oderberg, David. 2014. Could there Be a Superhuman Species? *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52 (2): 206–226.

Pepperberg, Irene. 2007. The Differences Between Humans and Nonhumans Are Quantitative, Not Qualitative. In *What Is Your Dangerous Idea? Today's Leading Thinkers on the Unthinkable*, ed. John Brockman, 10–12. New York: HarperPerennial.

Peppers, Cathy. 1995. Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*. *Science Fiction Studies* 22 (1): 47–62.

Sirius, R.U., and Jay Cornell. 2015. *Transcendence: The Disinformation Encyclopedia of Transhumanism and the Singularity*. San Francisco: Disinformation Books.

Tucker, Jeffrey. 2007. "The Human Contradiction": Identity and/as Essence in Octavia E. Butler's "Xenogenesis" Trilogy. *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37 (2): 164–181.

Wallace, Molly. 2009. Reading Octavia Butler's "Xenogenesis" After Seattle. *Contemporary Literature* 50 (1): 94–128.

Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press.

White, Eric. 1993. The Erotics of Becoming: *Xenogenesis* and *The Thing*. *Science-Fiction Studies* 20 (3): 394–408.

Wolfe, Cary. 2010. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wynter, Sylvia, and Katherine McKittrick. 2015. Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations. In *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick, 9–89. Durham: Duke University Press.

CHAPTER 9

"But All We Really Know That We Have Is the Flesh": Body-Knowledge, Mulatto Genomics, and Reproductive Futurities in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*

Karina A. Vado

In a 1990 interview with Larry McCaffrey and Jim McMenamin, feminist science fiction writer Octavia Butler shares her "divergent" yet revealing adolescent fantasies of immortality and selective human breeding: "When I was in my teens, a group of us used to talk about our hopes and dreams, and someone would always ask, 'If you could do anything you wanted to do, no holds barred, what would you do?' I'd answer that I wanted to live forever and breed people …" (Butler 2010, 18). Butler then shares that Doro, *Wild Seed*'s parasitic male protagonist, becomes the outlet for these adolescent fantasies; Doro selectively breeds "specially gifted" people—irrespective of taxonomies of race—in the hopes of fashioning a super human (or supra human?) race. Doro does, however, exterminate or eradicate human specimens that have gone awry due to critical genetic mutations. Thus, he "effectively" practices positive and negative eugenics simultaneously, materializing his eugenic vision vis-à-vis the forced

K. A. Vado (✉)
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_9

procreation of what he considers genetically "fit" people—while practicing a compulsory sexual sterilization of the unfit. For Doro, defective "mixed" progeny can be dealt with in one of two ways: pseudo-sterilization (via isolation or confinement), or through his most profound eugenic intervention: euthanasia (Doro secures the eradication of the "unfit" by completely taking over their bodies vis-à-vis spiritual possession). Of course, Butler argues that she makes Doro, who is the "stand-in" for nineteenth-century discourses and Gramscian "common sense" ideologies of positive and negative eugenics in the novel, unquestionably a "bad" character (18). And yet for all the "bad" that is associated with eugenics (and the "bad" that can be found in what geneticists argue is eugenics' newest iteration—twentieth- and twenty-first-century genomics and genetic engineering), Butler's uneasy fascination with genetics, miscegenation, and sexual reproduction—be it literal, as in *Kindred*, or more fantastic as in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy—would figure prominently up through the publication of her last novel, *Fledgling*. Not surprisingly, *Fledgling*'s narrative focus is the evolution of a mixed-species or vampire–human hybrid by the name of Shori; her genetically derived powers are, notably, linked to her extraordinary melanin production.

While scholars such as Gregory Jerome Hampton, Donna Haraway, and Cathy Peppers, among others, have pointed to the myriad representations of miscegenation in Butler's oeuvre, it is not until the recent publication of Gerry Caravan's *Octavia E. Butler* that we see any direct mention of this interview. The lack of academic engagement with this interview might stem from our inability to reconcile Butler's socially conscious and highly politicized science fiction narratives, with her own intellectual fascination with sociobiology, evolutionary biology, and genetics, all fields that have contributed—whether consciously or not—to discourses of scientific racism and biological essentialism, past and present. This chapter, however, contends that this interview provides key insight into the evolution of Butler's own ideas in terms of the intersections of genomics, race mixture, and biocultural evolution that, as this chapter suggests, are worked through, yet never completely resolved, in her oeuvre. The interview, moreover, sheds light on Butler's own evolving ideas on the limitations and potentialities imbued in the fields of genetics and genomics and its re-production of racial categories. In fact, Butler, as I argue, builds on and problematizes what cultural anthropologist Peter Wade (2017) reads as the existing tensions between (racial) mixture and purity, and between equality (or equity) and hierarchy in liberal democracies and other liberal

political orders in his book *Degrees of Mixture, Degree of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism and Race in Latin America*. To borrow from Wade, Butler's narratives recognize, to varying degrees, that in terms of democratic societies the "possibility of linking mixture to democracy [is] always in tension with [biologized] racial hierarchy" (Wade 2017, 8).

This chapter therefore adds to and troubles critical readings of Butler's oeuvre that oscillate between claims of biological essentialism and one-dimensional interpretations of racial mixing in her fiction as necessarily radical or liberatory. While my chapter recognizes the sociobiological and genetic discourses ensconced in Butler's oeuvre, my analysis nonetheless resists reductive readings of Butler as a *qua* biological essentialist. In a 1996 interview with Stephen Potts, for instance, we observe Butler challenging the biological essentialist label, opting instead to "work on and against," to borrow from the late queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, biotechnological and genetic discourses to think through the tensions betwixt and between genetic sameness and difference:

> OEB: Some readers see me as totally sociobiological, but that is not true. I do think we need to *accept that our behavior is controlled to some extent* by biological forces. Sometimes a small change in the brain, for instance—just a few cells—can completely alter the way a person or animal behaves … *But I don't accept what I would call classical sociobiology. Sometimes we can work around our programming if we understand it.* (emphasis added)

What we see in this interview is that Butler disidentifies with the fields of sociobiology and genetics to show how these also *transform* seemingly "neat" or "fixed" racial categories. In other words, Butler rejects the social Darwinist leanings of genetic determinism by recognizing that although sociobiology and genetics may re-produce racialized categories, these very same genetic idioms can be strategically deployed to *work with and from* the tensions of sameness (unity and homogeneity) and difference (multiplicity and heterogeneity) that DNA, as the reigning metaphor of the twenty-first century, proffers. What is more, Butler refuses the nihilistic pessimism of classical sociobiology, suggesting instead that we (humans) need not be defined or delimited by biology. As Afrofuturist singer-songwriter and performer Janelle Monáe puts it in her song "Q.U.E.E.N," we can "reprogram the program and get down."

I then focus my re-readings of racial (ad)mixture through what I term "mulatto genomics" in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. This is not because she doesn't treat these themes in her other works, but because the intersections of race and genomics—and their possibilities and limitations—are critically and imaginatively re-considered vis-a-vis the trilogy's three "mulatto" protagonists, and their imperfect fashioning of mixed-race and mixed-species futures. I understand the Oankali's mulatto genomics as the ways in which medico-scientific discourses and hegemonic ideologies of race ambivalently inflect and become entwined with the Oankali's genomic approach to conceiving, intervening in, and advancing contemporaneous understandings of (human) genetic diversity. More specifically, the Oankali's mulatto genomics need to be understood in terms of the genetically admixed symbiotic or partner-species communities it inconsistently engenders in the trilogy's narrative. Indeed, as this chapter attempts to demonstrate, the Oankali's fraught cross-breeding project evinces the sociopolitical and racially charged ideological conundrums that arise in conflating *homogenous mixture* with evolutionary progress. I refer to homogenous mixture as it is understood in chemistry terms; to put it simply, homogeneous mixtures have a uniform composition throughout, and the individual parts of the mixture—comprised of two or more "pure" substances—are not clearly identifiable. Though myriad scholars have celebrated the Oankali's "embrace difference above all else" mantra, this chapter alternatively maintains that the Oankali's genetic engineering project insists on *variations of genetic samenes*s rather than on heterogeneous mixture. The Oankali's racialist ideologies, in fact, riskily resemble popular Latin American and Caribbean discourses of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) that render a uniformly ethnically ambiguous or "beige" populace the immunizing force *par excellence* against white supremacy.

Butler's (2007) *Xenogenesis*[1] trilogy—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—begins roughly two hundred and fifty years into the future; in this post-apocalyptic narrative, a nuclear war has devastated the Earth, rendering it uninhabitable. The Oankali, a nomadic and gifted extraterrestrial race of "gene traders," collect and "salvage" the remaining humans, albeit with ulterior motives. The human survivors are to be *selectively* crossbred with the Oankali, ensuring the Oankali's biological imperative to "merge" or "fuse" with other species, and thus diversify their gene pool. Their plan is to ultimately (re)inhabit the Earth—specifically the Amazon basin region[2]—with the "hybrid" offspring engendered vis-à-vis human-Oankali sexual matings. These hybrid

offspring, or human-Oankali constructs, will help carry the "human" race forward, albeit differently—"their hierarchical tendencies will be modified," essentially making these construct children "not [fully] human" (*Dawn* 38). But before she fulfills her role as (first) mother of a new hybrid race, Lilith Iyapo, the trilogy's feminist protagonist, is to act as a mediator of sorts between the Oankali and the humans she's to "Awaken" and convince of co-existing and sexually reproducing with this alien race.

In what follows, I take to task how both the (resister) humans and the Oankali in the series invariably adhere to ideas of biological essentialism that stifle, to varying degrees, the building or "engineering," if you will, of actual emancipatory futures for mixed-race/hybrid and/or non-normative subjects. More specifically, I trace and uncover the competing discourses of white and black eugenics that are weaved through the Humans' obsession with "human purity" (paralleling white eugenics' preoccupation with maintaining untainted bloodlines) and the Oankali's morally ambivalent genetic engineering/species interbreeding project (paralleling early twentieth-century "New Negro" eugenicists notions of racial progress vis-à-vis the *amalgamation* of the black and white races). What we see through the excavation of eugenic discourses in Butler's imagined Oankali-Earth is her ongoing participation in—and revision of—a strain of black intellectual thought that has, since the turn of the nineteenth century, adopted yet critically transformed normative notions of race as a scientifically valid category to undermine reductive readings of race on the body. That being said, this chapter looks at the development of historian Shantella Sherman terms "New Negro" eugenics—and "mulatto genomics" as its modern recapitulation—not as a morally or ethically "good" or "justifiable" pseudo-scientific practice, but rather as a historically situated mode of intellectual inquiry developed and deployed by black writers and intellectuals of the period to make sense of issues of race and (scientific) racism, colorism, reproduction, and sexuality at the turn of the century.

"It Will Be a Thing—Not Human": Reproductive Futurities in *Dawn*

Before delving into my analysis of racialized reproductive futurities in *Dawn*, we must first consider the Oankali's working definition of "race," and how this understanding inflects how they imagine and practice their

mulatto genomics. Unlike human reproduction, the Oankali's procreative strategy involves the union of three mates: an Oankali female, an Oankali male, and an ooloi (a sexless and genderless subject). The ooloi mate then handles or secures the "engineering" of Oankali and Oankali-human offspring; all contact, whether for mating purposes or bodily pleasure, is intermediated through the ooloi. The ooloi, following the Oankali's biological impetus to "gather," "archive," and flawlessly fuse unique genetic material, is responsible for re-producing racially mixed progeny (human-Oankali constructs). Yet racial mixing for the Oankali significantly departs from white supremacist understandings of race and mixed-race corporeality. The Oankali, as "natural" nomadic gene traders, acquire new genetic material to assure their continuing survival and biological evolution. Thus, species purity for the Oankali is synonymous with species extinction. The Oankali then seem to understand "race" in much the same way that contemporary sociobiology, genetics, and genomics understand race; scientifically speaking, humans descended and evolved from a single African female ancestor (i.e. maternal haplogroups). In terms of DNA then, humans—as a distinct species/race—are virtually genetically identical. Because the Oankali depend on their "body-knowledge"—that is, how their process of knowledge acquisition is mediated through genomic mapping and archiving—they read humans, for better or worse, as a genetically homogenous species or race.

Moreover, though they perceive phenotypic differences (gradations of skin color, variations in hair texture, variances in body weight/height, etc.), the Oankali willingly disregard how human societal constructions of race, gender, and sexuality are indeed the building blocks of what they see as humans' lethal genetic combination: hierarchical thinking and intelligence. The Oankali then reduce human's hierarchical tendencies as a genetic affliction exacerbated by humans' inability to "guide," rather than "serve," their hierarchical thinking with their intellectual capabilities: "It's [hierarchical thinking] a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem but took pride in it or did nothing at all … That was like ignoring cancer" (39). Because hierarchical thinking, as understood by the Oankali, is on par with cancer (a genetic mutation), the Oankali render it a dysgenic trait that may be genetically altered—or "breeded out"—through racial/species admixing. Herein we note the beginnings of the Oankali's color-evasive mulatto genomics. Although they are, for lack of a better term, genetic "equalists," their ahistorical and

color-evasive approach to "race" comes to define many of the glitches that arise in their engineering of genetically admixed communities. Indeed, if what makes humans genetically suspect is their hierarchical thinking, then it is the Oankali's genetically entrenched historical amnesia, to borrow from Audre Lorde, that invariably jeopardizes the fulfillment of seamless human-Oankali symbiosis: "'Do you remember your homeworld itself? I mean, could you get back to it if you wanted to? … Go back?' His tentacles [Jdahya's] smoothed again. 'No, Lilith, that's the one direction that's closed to us. This is our home-world now'" (36). The Oankali, so preoccupied with their reproductive (admixed) futurism, fail to foresee how humans, and their historical constructions and (mis)understandings of race and racial difference, invariably imperil, or at the very least complicate, their genetic futurities' fruition. Moreover, like *Wild Seed*'s Doro, the Oankali ignore "how well people's bodies remember their ancestors" (*Wild Seed* 224).

The resister humans, on the other hand, myopically conflate phenotypic differences with the mythologies of race. Black and brown skin and "non-European" facial features are, in the eyes of the resisters, perpetually tied to discourses of white supremacy and scientific racism that render blackness and brownness dysgenic traits. Not surprisingly, *Dawn*, from the outset, deals with white men's (and white women's) reluctance to having a black woman (Lilith) in a position of power. They do, of course, veil their fears under the guise of a sort of visceral xenophobic reaction to the literal alien Other (the Oankali). Because they are initially unable to assault the Oankali physically or verbally, their xenophobic response is transposed onto Lilith and the "superpowers" they believe she's acquired for "laying" with the Oankali: "Some avoided Lilith because they were afraid of her—afraid she was not human, or not human enough" (*Dawn* 180). The question of Lilith's (in)humanity cyclically surfaces throughout the narrative because her genetically tampered black female body renders her suspiciously and even frighteningly "superhuman." The resisters are then both fascinated and repulsed by her; Lilith becomes the corporeal figuration of the latent possibilities in the Oankali's genetic engineering project and the imminent genetic deterioration of "pure" humanity.

Thus, to render the Oankali as solely slavers or captors, and Lilith (and the humans) as victims or racist xenophobes seriously downplays the ways that Butler provocatively privileges ambivalence and contradiction, especially around the utility of genomics, in the series. Illustrating this point, Jim Miller writes in his article "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's

Dystopian/Utopian Vision" that the Oankali "are both colonizers and a utopian collective, while the captured/saved humans are both admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes. Lilith … is both the mother of a new race and a Judas to humanity. In the process of reading the trilogy, we confront and negotiate these contradictions, as Butler prods us to move beyond old dilemmas and imagine a different future" (339–340). In essence, it is the ability to work with, through, and beyond the binds, incongruities, and at times not-so-clear-cut approaches to the engineering of a new future (and new race) that can potentially lead to realizing an alternative (and even emancipatory) world that embraces and values gradations and "mutations" of "difference" above all else.

It is then Lilith's initial encounter with Jdahya (a male Oankali envoy) that sets the stage for the series' imminent mixed-race futurities. It is here that Lilith becomes privy to the "mother-ing" role that the Oankali have planned and fleshed out for her—she will be the literal engenderer of new and strong(er) mixed-race progeny (human-Oankali constructs). Lilith's future forced pregnancies and the looming birthing of hybrid offspring is but a means to an end, at least initially, for the Oankali (*Dawn* 50). As Jdahya puts it: "We do what you would call genetic engineering … We do it naturally. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation" (40). The Oankali's biological need to quite literally reproduce and embrace racial (or, in their view, species) difference, though touted as the "common good" for the (Oankali modified) Earth's soon-to-be first human-Oankali colony, is figured as a needed and therefore rightfully enforced "correction" to what the Oankali perceive as the biologically based "Human Contradiction."

The "Human Contradiction," as Jdahya puts it, involves the tenuous co-existence of hierarchical thinking and intelligence in human beings (it bears mentioning that it is this "Contradiction" that sanctions the Oankali to paternalistically render "full" humans as biologically inferior). What is more, their "Human Contradiction" invites a reading of the "contradiction" as a genetic defect, an inherited dysgenic trait that, with proper genetic tampering, can be manipulated and eradicated. The result of these genetic modifications is the manufacturing of a perfect(ed) human specimen, a human specimen worth breeding (with). The "correction" or "betterment" of humanity vis-à-vis mixed-race offspring then falls on Lilith, who at the beginning panics at the idea of engendering "grotesque, Medusa children" (*Dawn* 42). However vexing Lilith's revulsion at the

idea of mixed-race progeny is, the depiction of this revulsion is a deliberate and strategic one; it is through Lilith's ambivalence that we first see highlighted Butler's critique of a color-evasive—and even gender-evasive—approach to the conceptualization of race/racial mixing in the fields of genomics and genetics. Butler then confronts this color evasiveness by situating Lilith's racialized reproductive futurism as part of a longer history of scientific racism that, in the context of the United States, had its genesis in and through the black female body.

In *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (1997, 22) argues that

> [t]he story of control of Black reproduction begins with the experiences of slave women … Black procreation helped to sustain slavery, giving slave masters an economic incentive to govern Black women's reproductive lives … It [the control of reproduction] marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will.

In other words, under the system of slavery, the reproductive lives of enslaved women were to be appropriated and exploited for white economic progress. Echoing this reading of the violent commodification and the *pathologizing* of the black (female) body, Hortense Spillers (1987, 68) writes in her groundbreaking article titled "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" that

> *This profitable "atomizing" of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics*, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. *To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory.* (emphasis added)

Because enslaved women were fundamentally regarded as "sub-human," the policing and commodification of their procreative abilities was sanctioned, sustained, and rendered necessary for the financial success of the plantation as a business enterprise. In essence, the black woman's "captive flesh," as Spillers puts it, is rendered by the plantation economy as a "living [and quite profitable] laboratory" (68) wherein their coerced reproduction was rationalized.

Similarly foregrounding the intersections of medicine, reproduction, and enslavement in her book *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*, historian Marie Jenkins Schwartz (2006, 10) writes that the economic value attached to the fertile black female body "was at once both powerful and seductive and shaped the way women experienced enslavement, the way owners thought about the future of slavery, and the way doctors practiced medicine." In other words, Schwartz observes the tensions between the enslaved woman's ersatz biological inferiority and her mythological reproductive superiority. Schwartz's insight into the existing overlaps between slavers, medicine, and enslaved women is thus particularly useful to my analysis of Lilith's ambivalence toward what she understands as the Oankali's "unnatural" (cross)breeding project.

Schwartz recounts, for instance, how enslaved women were, more often than not, subjected to invasive medical practices and liberally experimented on as these procedures were understood as essential to the advancement of new medical discoveries[3] and scientific "progress" writ large. Additionally, because black women allegedly possessed a higher pain tolerance than white women, doctors oftentimes—if not always—performed these medical procedures without any anesthetics and devoid of any concerted effort to avoid inflicting bodily pain on their black female "patients." These faux obstetricians also botched medical procedures as this made their medical "expertise" indispensable to planters; planters considered doctors "scientific" experts that were especially useful in tracking, controlling, and "treating" enslaved women for fertility and other reproductive health issues (even though it was, unbeknownst to slavers, these doctors who strategically created the myriad ailments they were being hired to treat and "cure"). In sum, these doctors and slavers regarded black women's bodies as what African American studies scholar Sharon P. Holland (2000, 43) describes in her book *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* "the passage between humanity and nonhumanity as well as the articulation of that passage."

Thus, it is the stripping of black women's corporeal and reproductive autonomy vis-à-vis the deliberate privation of medical ethics that I believe Butler wants us to critically consider when examining Lilith's initial denunciation of the Oankali's "crossbreeding" project. This is not to say, however, that *Dawn* is a novel about black (women's) enslavement. In fact, Butler resisted what she saw as forced and reductive readings of slavery in her narratives. I'd like to momentarily turn to a 1996 interview with

Stephen Potts where Butler refuses—and critiques—totalizing readings of enslavement in her genre fiction:

OEB: Right. But so many critics have read this ["Bloodchild"] as a story about slavery, probably just because I am black.
SWP: I was going to ask you later about the extent to which your work addresses slavery.
OEB: The only places I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so.
SWP: As in *Kindred*.
OEB: And in *Mind of My Mind* and *Wild Seed* … *I mean, science fiction is supposed to be about exploring new ideas and possibilities.* In the case of "Bloodchild," I was creating an alien that was different from us, though still recognizable—a centipede-like creature. But you're not supposed to regard it as evil. (emphasis added)

More than working allusions to histories of enslavement, Butler's mulatto protagonists operate as critiques of the ways racialized and sexualized bodies emerge from medico-scientific discourses and practices in U.S. history. At the same time, Butler's mulatto protagonists explore (albeit circumspectly) the "new ideas and possibilities" that genomics and genetic admixture offer our notions of human evolution and (social) difference. So, while Butler by no means depicts the Oankali as one-dimensional "immoral" slave masters, she nevertheless asks us to critically consider that it is Lilith—a black woman whose body carries the gendered histories of reproductive coercion/reproductive labor, unethical medical experimentation, and the oft-times violent process of miscegenation—that is forced to negotiate the conditions of her survival with a "master" that can decisively impregnate her or induce her metaphorical death through sterilization or suspended animation (what Lilith associates with the caging of an animal). Lilith is thus not "permitted even the illusion of freedom" (*Dawn* 56).

We see this point elucidated in an early exchange between Lilith and Jdahya. Lilith questions the "ethics" behind the Oankali's alleged biological "need" to share and exchange genetic material with other species, likening their genetic "experimentation" on human bodies to that of experimentations conducted on animals by and for humans: "We used to treat animals that way … We did things to them—inoculations, surgery, isolation—all for their own good. We wanted them healthy and

protected—sometimes so we could eat them later" (33). In other words, humans are to the Oankali what animals (were) are to humans—they are something to be studied, prodded, modified, consumed, and discarded once their contributions to "science," "progress," and a new "hybrid future" have been spent. Jdahya, stunned by Lilith's forthrightness, asks: "Doesn't it frighten you to say things like that to me?" To this Lilith replies, "No … It scares me to have people doing things to me that I don't understand" (33). Yet Jdahya is incapable—or unwilling—of understanding that what he sees as a simple (or natural) manipulation of genes for "curative" and even evolutionary purposes is, for Lilith, at best, corporeal manipulation and at worst an act of corporeal violation.

The recurring violation and manipulation of the seemingly ahistorical—at least for the Oankali—black female body for the purposes of scientific progress is thus central to *Dawn*. At the novel's outset, emphasis is placed on Lilith's discovery of a new scar she's seemingly acquired since her last "Awakening":

> Her hand touched the long scar across her abdomen … She had acquired it somehow between her second and third Awakenings, had examined it fearfully, wondering what had been done to her. What had she lost or gained, and why? And what else might be done? She did not own herself any longer. Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge. It had enraged her during later Awakenings that there had been moments when she actually felt grateful to her mutilators for letting her sleep through whatever they had done to her—and for doing it well enough to spare her pain or disability later. (6–7)

Literary representations of the amputation, scarring, or permanent maiming of the black female body are not unique to this novel.[4] Butler explores the idea of scarring/amputation as a site of historical trauma in her earlier fantasy text, *Kindred*. In that novel, Dana—the protagonist—must come home from her time-travels back to the slave-holding Maryland of the early 1800s missing an arm. In an interview with Randall Kenan, Butler shares that "[she] couldn't really let [Dana] come all the way back. [She] couldn't let her return to what she was, [she] couldn't let her come back whole and [losing her arm] … really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (*Kindred* 501). Like Dana, Lilith is no longer "whole." The scar across her abdomen is at once a reminder of a past that still reverberates strongly in her

present (yet one she's forced to forget in exchange for "survival" on an Earth that is no longer the planet she once knew), and a reminder of the "future" or "destiny" that she'll be forced to fulfill as the (first) mother of a new mixed-race.

Though the precise location/organ hosting Lilith's cancer growth is never definitively acknowledged, we can nevertheless surmise that the cancerous growth the Oankali remove is located somewhere around her reproductive organs. Clues corroborating this reading are found in a conversation between Jdahya and Lilith concerning the "de rigueur" genetic modifications they've taken the liberty to perform in order to "enhance" her body: "'You had a growth … A cancer. We got rid of it. Otherwise, it would have killed you.' She [Lilith] went cold. Her mother had died of cancer. Two of her aunts had had it and her grandmother had been operated on three times for it" (21). Upon hearing of the surgical procedure the Oankali have performed on her (while she's unconscious, I might add), she asks what she's "lost" in exchange for her health: "What did I lose along with the cancer … Not a few feet of intestine? My ovaries? My uterus?" (21). To this Jdahya replies: "Nothing …. You lost nothing you would want to keep" (21). Given what seems to be the "family tradition" (read: malignant growth) that has plagued Lilith's women relatives, we can assume that Lilith's cancer was possibly an ovarian or uterine one. Jdahya's assurance is then somewhat disingenuous as it is the Oankali that have assured themselves of not losing the thing they need: Lilith's now genetically "fit" body and its ability to breed human-Oankali constructs.

Missing from the Oankali's presumably omnipotent "understanding" of humanity is their inability to historicize what they—and Butler, to a degree—see as the genetic-based Human Contradiction. In other words, the Oankali's biologism eschews how humanity, and its relationship to medicine and science, is complicated by the axioms of ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality. The Oankali's imminent mulatto genomics therefore seems to reproduce the sexual violence central to colonial histories of race and racial mixing promoted as the necessary reproductive futurity of the nation; after all, it is the violent sexual union between the black or indigenous woman's body and that of the European man that engenders what historian Nancy Stepan (1991) calls "constructive miscegenation" in her book *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*. Thus, in making mixture a sui generis feature of their "utopian" breeding project, the Oankali's carefully controlled mixture is the means through which the creation of genetically "perfect" hybrid offspring is realized. I

will return to the Oankali's biological need for what I see as controlled or sterilized difference in my discussion of *Imago's* "ultimate" mulatto figure: Lilith's ooloi-construct child, Jodahs.

The novel's central reproductive choice issue, which Cathy Peppers (1995, 50) aptly describes as Lilith's impending "coerced miscegenation," is then revisited when Lilith initially meets Nikanj and his family: "In a very real sense, she was an experimental animal. Not a pet … She was intended to live and reproduce, not to die … Human biologists had done that before the war—used a few captive members of an endangered animal species to breed more for the wild population" (60). Again, we see the connections Lilith draws between animals kept in captivity for reproductive purposes and her own captivity as a "human being" and future mother to an admixed race. It is important to add here that the Oankali specifically select Lilith as New Mother due to her reproductive (super)abilities: "If she had had an especially difficult time giving birth—if she had to be taken to the hospital in spite of her wishes, if she had needed a caesarean—they would probably have passed over her to someone else" (92). It is Lilith's ease in giving birth that is deemed at once advantageous and seductive for the Oankali's genetic trade. Lilith then reasonably feels that her body has been irrevocably claimed by the Oankali for their own experimental/biological purposes (vis-à-vis their reproductive futurism).

In his book *Cyberfiction: After the Future*, Paul Youngquist (2010, 166) writes that Lilith's dilemma—to either live under captivity (and enforced breeding) or to opt for what he calls the "pyrrhic choice" of dying (which Jdahya "benevolently" offers early in the novel)—is "exactly that of the captured African." Moreover, because Lilith chooses to survive (thereby "resigning" herself to her reproductive future), Youngquist writes that Lilith is ascribed the role of "nurse, midwife, and group mother responsible for the lives of those she releases from storage … she will be the first to breed too, but before that she must awaken a group of humans, becoming in the process a surrogate mom … Once a mammy, always a mammy. There is no escaping that legacy [in the world of the novel], at least for black women" (169). Because the future, as Amiri Baraka (1995) puts it in "Jazzmen: Diz & Sun Ra," "is always here in the past," Lilith's black female body, for Youngquist, embodies the historical legacy of enslaved breeding even in this post-apocalyptic setting. However, Youngquist's pessimistic and rather reductive interpretation of Lilith's maternal/reproductive role seriously downplays Lilith's identity negotiations. In fact, we need not ignore the oppressive histories and

representations of black women in the United States and the myriad ways that the afterlife of slavery remains entangled in our contemporaneous moment to critically consider how Butler problematizes and reconceives the intersections of race and admixture in the series. After all, it is Lilith's social and biological mother role—and not the mammy figure that Youngquist uncritically applies to a universe that resists, to borrow from Patricia Hill Collins, these "controlling images"—that does in fact enable the beneficial (re)population of the Earth. With it, she keeps alive the promise of (hopefully) engendering a better (albeit not perfect) future. To then say that Lilith is simply another "mammy" figure is to take away the invaluable role she plays as one of the key orchestrators (or feminist architects, if you will) of an alternative human-Oankali Earth that for all its imperfections and ambivalences nonetheless explodes what Marty Fink (2010, 522) so aptly describes, in relation to *Fledgling*, as "the misguided notion that all things foreign to our preconceptions of humanity are necessarily a manifestation of evil," particularly in terms our understanding of "pure" humanity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Dawn* ends in uneasy contradiction. In the aftermath of the death of Joseph, Lilith's Asian-American partner, Lilith receives unwelcome news from Nikanj: she has been impregnated with, and will carry to full-term, the first ever Human-Construct (girl) child. When Lilith receives the news from Nikanj, she's incredulous and livid at Nikanj's nonchalance and his matter-of-fact understanding of the violation he's inflicted on Lilith's body: "'You said'—She ran out of breath and had to start again … 'You said you wouldn't do this … I'm not ready! I'll never be ready!'" (*Dawn* 246). Nikanj paternalistically assures Lilith that he has simply offered what she has desired all along but wasn't ready to accept (yet). With this rationalization, he delegitimizes the feelings of powerlessness and humiliation that come with Lilith being "bred" without her consent or even a warning. We're then left wondering if we're supposed to read this as an act of "rape" or as an inevitable act of survival through reproductive futurism, as Nikanj explains to Lilith that Joseph's sperm could only be salvaged and used for a limited time period. Thus, whereas *Dawn* ends with Lilith's "coerced miscegenation," and her anxieties over what she considers her grotesque mother role, *Adulthood Rites* brings us hundred years further into the future. Here, we see the aftermath of Lilith's motherhood role—she has helped build and maintain Lo, a trader village populated by humans and human-Oankali constructs and buildings that are organically "grown" rather than built, and has just given

birth to Akin, her first "human-passing" construct child. And yet as we see throughout the remainder of the series, Lilith is still filled with rage.

"Another Chance for Humanity": Hybridity, and Post-"New Negro" Eugenics in *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*

In *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler*, Gregory Hampton (2010) offers a cursory analysis of what he sees as Akin's—the protagonist of Butler's *Adulthood Rites*—transgressive and potentially transformative hybrid embodiments, arguing that Akin, as a byproduct of human-Oankali interbreeding, is a "negotiator of difference" with the "natural" ability to fluidly (albeit tenuously) adapt, adopt, and mobilize across and within human-Oankali community spaces:

> Akin's hybrid state allows him to understand and bridge the complexity of human nature and the scientific logic of the Oankali … Akin is able to become a translator between the two races because his body is located at the center of what is human and what is Oankali … *Du Bois's talented tenth is embodied in Butler's constructs/mulattos because they are the individuals who have the tools to bridge the gaps of difference and ease the fear of change … With Akin the narrative suggests that the mulatto has a natural ability to negotiate difference because he represents proof that difference and change does not necessarily result in death or chaos.* (77–78, emphasis added)

If we are to understand the novel's depiction of human-Oankali interbreeding as an allegorical reference to miscegenation—the "mixing" or "amalgamation[5]" of distinct racial groups vis-à-vis sex, procreation, marriage, and so on—then Hampton's claim that Butler, in deliberately making Akin a "hybrid" (read: mulatto) subject, shows him "naturally" possessing what W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) describes as "double consciousness" needs to be taken to task. In other words, it is necessary that we complicate Hampton's reading of Akin's "empowering" hybrid embodiments through a sustained discussion of early twentieth-century white and black eugenic thought (it bears mentioning here that Du Bois himself was implicated in these discourses of racial uplift through the practice of what we could understand as an "inverted" or "distorted" eugenics). I momentarily pause in this Du Boisian moment simply because the (pure) black(ness) is beautiful ethos comes to dominate black cultural production

in the second half of the twentieth century. As such, Butler, unlike many of her contemporaries, is interested and even invested in mixed-race corporeality/futures. That is, work such as Butler's has been a minoritarian, but constant, intervention, from the 1920s through the present, into transnational discourses of admixture dominant in communities of color.

Relatedly, while it is true that the series' depictions of "racial" (and cultural) hybridity do, to a degree, function as provocative critiques, and subversions of human/Oankali dualisms, and by extension, a U.S. system of white hegemony imagined, configured, and materialized through an ostensibly fixed white/black binary, any reading which purely views Butler as celebrating hybridity is problematized by the ambivalence with which the *Xenogenesis* series treats race mixture. To put it simply, the series urges us to consider the shortcomings of contemporary (for the novel's writing) ideas of racial hybridity when understood as necessarily subversive, non-oppressive, and socially transformative. A brief discussion of early twentieth-century black eugenics discourse is necessary for my later analysis of the limitations of hybridity-as-(super)ability as presented in the novel.

In her dissertation entitled "In Search of Purity: Popular Eugenics and Racial Uplift among New Negroes 1915–1935," historian Shantella Sherman (2014, iv) examines the reinterpretation and (re)appropriation of eugenic thought by black intellectuals who "helped integrate the (pseudo) science into a social movement for racial uplift." Sherman writes that "[e]ugenics appealed to many New Negro intellectuals as an extension of racial uplift ideals that promoted marriage and reproduction between physically and intellectually superior members of the race." Moreover, Sherman notes that "[w]hile sidestepping the racist overtones of mainline eugenic theories, New Negro eugenicists utilized variations of the language and classifications established by white eugenicists to categorize the unfit among them" (3). Thus, to paraphrase Sherman, New Negro intellectuals turned eugenics discourse on its head by reconceptualizing and transforming the racist elements of the pseudo-science into a system of racial categorization/classification with which to discern the biologically (and socially) "fit" members of the black race. Similarly, the New Negro eugenicists-like Oankali decided who lived (and how they reproduced) and whose "line" should be left to die out (the unfit).

One need only read Du Bois's ([1899] 1967) sociological treatise titled *The Philadelphia Negro*, to gain a sense of how Du Bois conceived the advancement (and dare I say "lightening") of the black community through proto-genetic engineering. Du Bois writes: "Most of the blacks

[dark skinned or pure blood Negroes] are country-bred and descended from the depressed and ignorant field-hands, while a majority of the mulattoes were town-bred and descended from the master class and the indulged house-servants" (34). Sherman rightly notes that Du Bois's shifts in tenses function as a "subconscious reading of dark-skinned subjects as perpetually [and tragically] tied to their racial pasts, while mulattoes possessed a certain level of autonomy [or freedom] and ability to distance themselves from their African forbearers" (49). In other words, mulatto subjectivity, for Du Bois, was inherently tied to modernity. "Pure" blackness, on the other hand, was tragically bound to primitivism.

In the same sociological case study, Du Bois divides black Americans into four intra-racial divisions based on sexual *and* social customs. Grade 1 was comprised of "eugenically sound" families wherein the husband, because of his intellect, could be the sole financial provider for the family. His wife, by remaining in the domestic sphere, would function as a caregiver and reproducer of fit black progeny (or, one could argue, mulatto progeny, given Du Bois's renditions of these mixed-race subjects as desirable—even preferable—to dark-skinned ones). Du Bois, although himself a marginalized mixed-race subject, replicates a gendered hierarchical system of racial classification not unlike Charles Darwin's own racialist and gendered understanding of natural selection and evolution.

Yet the heteronormative and sexist underpinnings of black eugenics discourse and the imaginings of the "positive" social impact engendered by and through mixed-race (and thus racially "lighter") offspring were not unique to Du Bois's writings on the subject. Du Bois was in fact part of a larger group of "race writers" whose ideas about race/anti-racism and black uplift were animated in part by the medico-scientific and discourses popularly circulated—and legitimated—at the turn of the nineteenth century. After all, eugenic thinking was, as literary scholar Daylanne English (2004, 1) puts it in her book *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, "so pervasive in the modern era that it attained the status of common sense in its most unnerving Gramscian sense."

The ubiquity of eugenic thinking during this period stimulated the active participation of black intellectuals and writers such as Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Nella Larsen, and James Weldon Johnson, among others, in their politically motivated "distortions" and deployments of the pseudo-scientific discourse of white eugenics. In other words, "New Negro" eugenicists reconceptualized and transformed the

racist elements of the pseudo-science by rejecting its obsession with "blood purity" and, by extension, unattained whiteness. However, what scholars like Sherman miss in their scathing critiques of "New Negro" eugenics is how "New Negro" figures were nonetheless radically reimagining and purposely "warping" popular eugenic thought to differentially work through national racialized anxieties fueled and informed in part by competing discourses of modernity. One could then say, in fact, that for these particular writers, the acceptance and valorization of racial hybridity—through the act of "miscegenation"—was a promising *living metaphor* to think through and beyond the what Du Bois (1989) called the "problem of the color line" in his treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*. On the other hand, by employing similar language and conceptual apparatus, such neo-eugenic thinking also replicated much of what's disturbing about eugenics.

In light of the illuminating yet imperfect medico-scientific origins of Du Bois's rendering of mixed-race/black subjectivity and "double consciousness," Hampton's (2010) interpretation and uncritical application of Du Boisian two-ness onto Butler's hybrid or "mulatto" figures is particularly vexing as a closer reading of Butler's *Xenogenesis* intimates that for Butler, the mixing or fusion of differing races is not, in and of itself, the antidote nor corrective to racism and other forms of systemic oppression. For instance, in a fleeting yet revealing scene, we observe that Akin is barred from entering a resister village not because of his Oankali origins but because of the color of his skin: "He [Akin] had been driven out of a village of English-speaking people because he was browner than the villagers were. He did not understand this, and he had not dared to ask anyone" (434). As evinced by this scene, hegemonic ideologies of race and racism are not erased by the mere existence or representation of mixed-race subjects. Thus, Hampton's claim that "Butler's fiction demonstrates quite vividly how the term miscegenation *transcends* most conventional notions of race" misrepresents the theorizations of race and racism Butler puts forth in her trilogy (77, emphasis added). Quite the contrary, Butler asks readers to recognize the violent history of miscegenation and its inability to produce actual liberatory futures for people of color. Indeed, racial hybridity (and its alleged emancipatory qualities) is not novel nor has it ever been able to dismantle white supremacy.

Butler then strategically situates the Oankali's fascination with "vigorous" mixture alongside the resister humans' ideologies of species (and/or racial) purity to show that both problematically engage—albeit differently—in what Audre Lorde (1984, 122) so succinctly describes in her

article "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" as the "superficial aspects of … change." Butler is preoccupied both with the *imitation of (evolutionary) progress* that the necessity for racial mixture produces (the Oankali's cross-breeding project) and with the epistemic and material violence imposed by white supremacist ideologies and discourses of racial purity (the resisters' unwillingness to see social and biological difference as complementary). As Butler makes clear in a 1997 interview with Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating (2001), the *Xenogenesis* trilogy shows the perilous aftereffects of endorsing or participating in the breeding or engineering of genetically "superior" humans (the key tenet of eugenics): "Worry about the social Darwinism [eugenics]. What we have to do is learn to work with it [biologism] and to work against people who see it as a good reason to let the poor be poor, that kind of thing—the social Darwinism: 'They must be poor because of their genes,' that kind of foolishness" (108). However, Butler does not dismiss the utopian possibilities that the sciences have to offer black and non-black people of color. Through her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler convincingly critiques, resists, and radically transforms the black and white eugenics discourses of the early twentieth century.

Thus, Akin's miscegenated origins are paradoxically figured—from the novel's outset—as both a curse and a blessing. Shortly after his birth, Lilith relays to Nikanj the contradictory feelings she has about Akin's birth: "He's beautiful … He looks completely Human" (254). To this Nikanj answers: "Some of his features are only cosmetic, Lilith. Even now his senses are more dispersed over his body than yours are. He is … less human than your daughters" (254). Perhaps not surprisingly, Lilith presumptuously responds to Nikanj by saying, "Shall I thank you for making him look this way—for making him seem Human so I can love him … for a while?" (254). Despite these loaded remarks, Nikanj reminds Lilith that she nonetheless loves her construct/hybrid children. Lilith, however, reminds Nikanj that she loves them because "they [the constructs] can't help what they are … what they become" (255). Lilith thus loves her children *despite* their hybridity rather than *because* of their hybridity. Hybridity therefore becomes a thing to be tolerated by humans but not embraced, and if embraced, it is to be done reluctantly.

Lilith's own reservations and prejudices about Akin's "racial" impurity are, at first glance, particularly troubling given that she herself is a product, albeit differently, of the Oankali's human genetic modifications. Lilith, like Akin, can "pass" as fully human[6] and, also like Akin, has borne the brunt

of racialized prejudice. When she initially encounters Tino—the presumably Latino and "fully" human subject she meets while picking fruit in the bordering forests of Lo, one of many human-Oankali trader villages—Tino is taken aback by the illusory "normalcy" or humanness that he perceives in Lilith's corporeality: "I mistook you for Human … *My god, you look Human*" (269, emphasis added). This fixation with "invisibly" mixed-species subjects (Akin) or ambiguously mixed-race subjects (Lilith) speaks back to entrenched anxieties over "miscegenation" that are communicated via the Oankali-friendly humans and, to a larger extent, the resister groups in the novel. Despite her go-between status both for the Oankali and for humans (as a light-skinned black woman), Lilith holds on to normative ideas of who and what it means to be human. But unlike Akin (and Tino, to a degree), Lilith has been pressed to cross-breed with the Oankali to avoid the punishment which is enforced sterilization (negative eugenics). Nevertheless, Tino, in similar fashion to Lilith and other (resister) humans, fears human-Oankali miscegenation for the mixing, blending, and interbreeding that it brings has the potentiality of destabilizing and disrupting the constructed alien/human dichotomy that the humans so unequivocally and precariously cling to.

Similarly, while the Oankali-friendly humans do not, per se, refer to the constructs as "mongrels" nor cast dehumanizing epithets (for instance, the resisters use of "worms") at the Oankali, their covert racism is couched in their linking of beauty and perfection to what they consider "pure" or "close to pure" humanness. In a world where hybridization is increasingly inevitable, the Oankali-friendly humans, and even the resisters, have to negotiate their ideas of racial purity: in other words, as long as the construct child looks "normal" (meaning human-like), their alienness and hybridity is (hesitantly) overlooked. We see this point illustrated in a conversation between Margit, a non-human-passing construct, and Akin: "They (the Humans) blame me for not looking like them. They can't help doing it, and I can't help resenting it. I don't know which is worse—the ones who cringe if I touch them or the ones who pretend it's all right while they cringe inside" (*Adulthood* 264). Here, we observe the differing levels of prejudice Margit encounters daily from supposedly "pro-Oankali" humans. Their "acceptance" of Margit then oscillates between an open revulsion of her supposedly genetically defective corporeality—overt racism—and their benevolent racist interactions with what they consider the alien "Other" (covert racism).

Whether the Oankali-friendly humans choose to express their contempt openly or furtively for Margit's alien Otherness, they all reach the same fraught conclusion: "She was [Margit], humans said, gray and warty—more different than most Human-born children. And she could hear as well as any construct … they soon began to talk about her. 'If she looks this bad now, what will she look like after metamorphosis?' they would begin. Then they would speculate or pity her or condemn her or laugh at her" (265). Margit's hybridity, unlike Akin's, is irredeemable and unpalatable to human eyes for its exposed and perceived "monstrousness." The Oankali-friendly humans can then "embrace" difference only so long as it's neatly packaged in a human-passing construct body. The presence of hybrid constructs, even those that look like Akin, then does little to assuage the (racialized) hierarchical thinking of these "moderate" or "well-meaning" humans; the human-Oankali fusions that these humans favor are those that get as close to "Humanness"—or "whiteness"—as *genetically* possible.

Alternatively, Akin's captors and the resisters he later encounters and cohabitates with are unmistakably and unapologetically racist. Akin's captors openly call Akin a "mongrel baby" and are oftentimes depicted relaying derogatory statements such as "who knows *what* he is" (*Adulthood* 321, emphasis added). Even the red-haired man that initially treats Akin humanely casts a hostile "what the hell are you?" at him when he hears—and is subsequently disturbed—by Akin's ability to fluently speak at the ripe age of seventeen months (327). Despite Akin's internal alienness, the captors valorize and fetishize Akins's human-passing form. Iriarte, one of Akin's captors, perfectly describes this flawed logic when attempting to convince the others of the financial value of a human-passing construct like Akin: "It's better than being covered with tentacles or gray skin. It's better than being without eyes or ears or a nose. Kaliq is right. *It's looks that are important* … He is beautiful … but he has a tongue you'll have to get used to—in more than one way" (341–347). We see here how the resisters Kantian emphasis on genetic beauty[7] is used as means of negotiating Akin's alienness by conceptualizing a scale of humanness (read: racial purity) that ascribes a degree of humanity to desirable human-passing (especially children) constructs.

However, Akin's alien tongue—the one discernable signifier of his hybrid adulterations—is considered by the captors, and the other resisters in Phoenix, unwelcome evidence of his mixed-race "pedigree." His "slug-like" tongue is then a marker of difference and contagion, elements that

the resisters understand as byproducts of what they see as "unnatural" human-Oankali interbreeding. Therefore, what links the "Oankali friendly" humans with the resister ones is an obsession with racial purity that eerily echoes those of white eugenic narratives teeming with anxieties over racial "contamination" vis-à-vis the ever-present threat of miscegenation.

Yet the myriad experiences Akin shares with the resisters during the year he's stationed in Phoenix with Tate and Gabriel intensely draw Akin to the human side of his mixed-race ancestry. He then becomes something of an activist for sterilized resisters during his adolescence, later committing to help alleviate their plight by promising to lead them in starting a "pure" human colony on Mars once he's undergone metamorphoses. Although Akin's mixed-race or hybrid positionality aids in the formation of the somewhat tenuous alliance he develops with the resisters interested in starting over as an "all-human" colony on Mars (Tate, for instance), it is telling that Akin's hybridity is, however, unable to bring (or fuse) together the resister humans and the Oankali. The rift between the two groups is so vast that moving elsewhere—a form of self-imposed segregation—becomes the drastic (and possibly only) solution to ameliorating resister human/Oankali conflict. Thus Akin, like Lilith, can only hope that Mars will prove to be "another chance for Humanity" (516), echoing the anti-integrationist discourse of many black Americans when it became clear that integration did not necessarily mean nor lead to liberation.

Yet the last, and perhaps most paramount, stage of the Oankali's evolutionary mulatto genomics takes shape in the figure of Jodahs, Lilith's child, and the first ooloi construct. Thus, it is in *Imago*, a term that dually alludes to the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect and the Lacanian unconscious idealized psychosomatic image of the Self, that we observe what I suggest is the Oankali's embracing of sameness packaged as *controlled* difference. This valorization of sameness-as-controlled-difference exposes itself in the Oankali's loaded biopolitics—a term Michel Foucault develops to describe competing discourses concerning the systemic regulation and enhancement of the vitality of bodies and populations—of race and disability/able-bodiedness. More importantly, my interpretation of the Oankali's sameness-as-controlled-difference exposes the ideological gaps of the Oankali's biological imperative. In reducing humanity to its genome, the Oankali knowingly dismiss the histories of unethical medical experimentation on (disabled) bodies of color sanctioned vis-à-vis *socially constructed* taxonomic hierarchies of race.

From *Imago*'s outset, Jodahs's "abhorrent" hybridity is, for lack of a better term, an unforeseen and thus unwanted genetic mutation for humans and Oankali alike:

> I had from a Human point of view, too many fingers and toes. Seven per … [For the Oankali] Human-born males were still considered experimental and potentially dangerous. A few males from other towns had been sterilized and exiled to the ship. Nobody was ready for a construct ooloi. Certainly, nobody was ready for a human-born construct ooloi. Could there be a more potentially deadly being? (529–536)

To put it simply, Jodahs is the figuration of the Oankali's innermost fear: "a flawed natural genetic engineer," or rather, a genetic engineer that cannot engender "balanced" or a homogenized difference (542).

The Oankali's anxieties and suspicions are then predictably hurled at Nikanj, Jodahs's ooloi parent: "How can we possibly trust you? No one else has made such a dangerous mistake" (545). Jodahs's "acute" case of hybridity is rendered as disabling, a genetic defect that need to be controlled, corrected, or literally quarantined; discussions of sentencing Jodahs to lifetime imprisonment in an Oankali ship abound in the first one-third of the novel. Jodahs's imminent exile is rationalized by several Oankali elders as the necessary "good" for the uniform—and flawless—evolution and co-existence of construct, human, and Oankali communities. Yet concealed in these enunciations is the Oankali's inconsistent ideas of "difference." Jodahs, to the Oankali's dismay, is a genetic shapeshifter. Shapeshifters[8] assume or take on the phenotypic characteristics of whatever human is physically proximate. Although their "changing body" produces a sort of familiarity between their "diluted" alienness and that of humans' corporeal "normalcy," the fluidity of identity that shapeshifting produces is, for the Oankali, threatening to their perfectly calibrated admixing project. In fact, what we see in the Oankali's hunger for genetic diversity is actually a preference for what I see as sterilized difference. That is, the Oankali crave difference so long as human-Oankali hybridization produces a synthesis of humanness and biologically *superior* alienness: "The Human-born get more Oankali and the Oankali-born get more Human. I'm first-generation [Jodahs]. If you want to see the future, take a look at some of the third- and fourth-generation constructs. They're a lot more uniform from start to finish" (529). That Jodahs chooses the term "uniform" to describe the Oankali's generational admixing reveals

that hybridity, for the Oankali, is not so much about the proliferation of genetic "difference" as it is about engendering homogenous, or rather, melting-pot-like, racial (or species) mixing. It is no wonder, then, that the Oankali render racial admixing a "common sense" practice, reducing those who don't uncritically adhere to or perform their call for vigorous mixture as genetically inferior and thus reproductively unfit. In reducing their subjectivity as a pesky yet easily correctable dysgenic trait, the Oankali sentence those who are not "eugenically" sound to sterilization or suspended animation.

It is important to mention here that the Oankali identify human genetic mutations they cannot repurpose for their own species evolution as disability—not as impairment. Making the distinction between disability and impairment is thus paramount to my reading of the Oankali's racialized medical model of disability that insists on "curing" or "fixing" the disabled and/or "diseased" body. Disability studies (DS) scholars, for instance, critically foreground the existing dissimilarities between physical impairment and disability-as-social-construction. DS scholar Lennard Davis (2002, 12) writes in *Bending over Backwards* that "impairment is the physical fact of lacking an arm or leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment into a negative by creating barriers to access." In other words, the medicalization of the disabled body reveals how these bodies are rendered deviant, and thus perpetually Other. Rather than acknowledging that human bodies—like skin color—exist on a spectrum, the logic of disability precariously replicates binaries such as normative/non-normative and humanness/inhumanity. Considering DS scholarship and its necessary interventions into how we understand and read disability on the body, the Oankali's genomic approach to eugenically sound hybridity forces us to consider the intersections of race and disability in their valorization of "genetic beauty."

In the groundbreaking collection entitled *Blackness and Disability*, editor and DS scholar Chris Bell writes that

> [d]isability studies scholars contend that cultural barriers preclude the full participation of disabled subjects in society similar to the ways that homophobia and heterosexism, racism, and sexism deter queer-identified, racial minority, and female subjects from operating at their full potential … Too much critical work in African-American Studies posits the African American body politic in an ableist (read non-disabled) fashion … Similarly … too much critical work in Disability Studies is concerned with white bodies … [we need to] interrogate the meanings and uses of "blackness" and "disability." (1–3)

How, then, can we interrogate, to borrow from Bell, the meanings and (mis)uses of "race," and "disability" in Butler's *Xenogenesis*? The resisters, for instance, myopically conflate blackness, brownness, alienness, and racial mixing with disability. That is, "too much" color (or non-whiteness/non-humanness) is rendered disabling. On the other hand, the Oankali's approach to admixture questionably echoes "New Negro" eugenics, discussed earlier in this chapter, and Latin American racialist approaches to genetically "extraordinary" (read: hybrid) bodies. One need only read Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos's speculative treatise *La Raza Cosmica* (The Cosmic Race) to observe how his theorizations of a "dawning" fifth (mixed) race is imagined vis-à-vis racial mixing amongst and between superior specimens handpicked from each of the four "major" races—the black, the indigenous, the European, and the Asian-descended. In other words, the beauty and perfection of these representative human specimens is understood, by Vasconcelos, as what we'd contemporaneously understand as a body "unburdened" by "dangerous" and/or "disfiguring" genetic mutations (Vasconcelos and Jaén 1997, 41–43):

> If we acknowledge that Humanity is gradually approaching the third period of its destiny, we shall see that the work of racial fusion is going to take place in the Ibero-American continent according to a law derived from the fruition of the highest faculties. The laws of emotion, beauty, and happiness will determine the selection of a mate with infinitely superior results than that of a eugenics grounded on scientific reason, which never sees beyond the less important portion of the love act … The entire species will change its physical makeup and temperament. Superior instincts will prevail and, in a happy synthesis, the elements of beauty apportioned today among different races will endure … A mixture of races accomplished according to the laws of social well-being, sympathy, and beauty, will lead to the creation of a type infinitely superior to all that have previously existed.

Of course, Vasconcelos's, not unlike Du Bois's, racial admixing project is couched in early twentieth-century eugenic discourses of hygiene and disease control, but with a twist. The "social well-being" of Vasconcelos's cosmic race (and Du Bois's "New Negros") rests on selecting "fit" (read: healthy and thus able-bodied) *bodies of color and* encouraging these to biologically procreate for national "progress," while concurrently dissuading the breeding of those deemed "unfit" (read: too "purely" indigenous, too "purely" black, and therefore not genetically "superior"). So, whereas white eugenics' ideas of health, hygiene, disease control, and white purity

render racial mixing a dysgenic trait, race thinkers like Vasconcelos and Du Bois, at least during this period, are reconceptualizing racial admixture and "health" as mutually constitutive. In essence, it is racial admixture—or, in the case of the Oankali, racialized species admixing—that produces healthy and genetically "fit" progeny. Keeping in mind these discussions on the intersections of race (mixing), disability, and eugenics, I contend that we need to question the logics and politics of the Oankali's mulatto genomics that privileges able-bodied (or for them, non-defective) and mixed-race (or mixed-species) corporeality.

In turn, any doubts about the Oankali's racialized ableism are thwarted when Jodahs meets the humans who will later be his mates and life partners: Tomás and Jesusa, two siblings from a genetically "defective" and in-bred resister village. From the moment Jodahs encounters the siblings, he obsessively zeros in on correcting their too highly visible—and consequently abject—genetic mutations. Intimated in his descriptions of the physical disfigurement of the siblings is that for Jodahs, and more broadly, the Oankali, genetic disorders and death are one and the same; a genetically defective body could not possibly produce fit offspring for it is perpetually "corrupted" and delimited by their "tragic" genetic determinism:

> He had [Tomás] a genetic disorder … The disorder had deformed even the bones of his face. He was deaf in one ear. Eventually he would be deaf in the other. His spine was becoming involved … One shoulder was completely covered with fleshy growths … And there was something else wrong … This man was already dying. He was using up his life the way mice did, swallowing it in a few quick gulps, then dying. How could he have such a disorder? Ooloi had examined every Human, correcting defects, slowing aging, strengthening resistance to disease. But perhaps the ooloi had only controlled the disorder—imperfectly—and not tried to correct it. Resisters had been altered so that they could not have children without ooloi mates, and thus could not pass their disorder on. Controlling it should have been enough. (617–618)

As evinced in this passage, Jodahs cannot fathom purposely inhabiting what he deems a eugenically unfit body. Although the Oankali, from the trilogy's outset, argue they are intimately acquainted with human history and culture, their attempts to monolithically breed people as a means of improving human genetic stock is in contradistinction to their embracing and understanding of social and biological difference. Thus, in conflating sociocultural difference with genetic difference, the Oankali precariously

assume they are immune to the hierarchical element of the Human Contradiction. Yet in conceiving eugenically fit and mixed-race corporeality as the coveted standard, and dysgenic traits, and species/racial "purity" as genetically aberrant, the Oankali deploy an insidiously hierarchical color-evasive mulatto genomics that jeopardizes their "other chance for humanity."

Now, my readings of race and disability in *Imago* are neither indictments nor justifications of Butler's ever-complex ideas on the intersections of genomics, race, and illness/disease. On the one hand, literary scholars such as Megan Obourn (2013) have argued that Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy wholly reconceptualizes and even valorizes disability and illness. In her article, "Octavia Butler's Disabled Futures," Obourn maintains that

> Butler's trilogy presents what I will call a 'disabled futurism' that revalues injury, impurity, and lack and thereby resists [what queer studies scholar Lee Edelman describes as] 'the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism' while retaining a feminist narrative that values motherhood (specifically black motherhood) as a historically determined and embodied social identity and political position. (110)

Yet as my readings of the Oankali's color-evasive mulatto genomics show, Oankali handling of the able-bodiedness/disability binary parallels a Western medical model of disability that seeks to cure or fix the "unfit" disabled body.

On the other hand, feminist studies scholars such as Moya Bailey have argued that many of Octavia Butler's sci-fi narratives are borderline ableist. In her article, "Vampires and Cyborgs: Transhuman Ability and Ableism in the Work of Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe," Bailey (2012) argues that "Butler's depiction of Shori's hybrid body [in *Fledgling*] serves as a flash point for eugenic impulse, allowing an investigation of the deep-seated racial prejudices of our time. However, punishing characters through impairment makes disability into retribution, a just sentence for wrongdoing in an ableist world that doesn't make accommodations for people who need them" (5). Bailey, while right in focusing on the (mis) representations of disability in Butler's oeuvre, problematically conflates the characters' intentions and politics with that of the author. In fact, Butler's treatment of disability in her oeuvre parallels her ever-changing and more nuanced conceptions of race, racial mixing, and genomics. For instance, in later short stories such as "The Evening and the Morning and

the Night," and "Speech Sounds," Butler nuances and reconceives our understanding of physical and mental illness and the racial dimensions of these. In her afterword to "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," Butler writes that "'The Evening and the Morning and the Night' grew from [her] outgoing fascinations with biology, medicine, and personal responsibility. In particular, [she] began the story wondering how much of what we do is encouraged, discouraged, or otherwise guided by what we are genetically" (Butler 2005, 69). Butler, as revealed in this passage, endeavors to answer this question by complicating how we decide, through genetic idioms and medical interventions, who gets to live and who must die.

Although Butler's *Xenogenesis* was published over a decade before the unveiling of the completed Human Genome Project, her forward-thinking yet ambivalent ideas on species (and racial) admixing and genomics were already anticipating the tensions that would surface with genetic mapping: how does DNA both facilitate and make impossible ideas of genetic separation and individuation? Butler's *Xenogenesis*, and her oeuvre more broadly, thus operates in and moves between and betwixt dystopian and utopian interpretations of contemporary genomics, and what our ever-evolving genetic languages mean for politics of race and race relations. Ultimately, my critical interrogation of the Oankali's "mulatto genomics" intimates that it is the seductive yet ultimately homogenizing—and perhaps unrealizable—idea of a "harmonious" racial fusion vis-à-vis species/racial admixing that Octavia Butler complicates, and at times resists, in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy.

Notes

1. New(er) versions of the trilogy are now published under the title *Lilith's Brood* (Butler 2007).
2. It is hardly surprising that the Oankali figure the Amazon basin region as the geographical genesis for their new admixed species. In *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America*, Peter Wade et al. (2014) write that Brazil has historically figured as the utopian site for the experimentation with, and the imminent realization of, a true "racial democracy." Yet a cursory glimpse at contemporary racial politics in Brazil shows us that the racial democracy thesis has failed.
3. As recently as 2010, newfound information emerged regarding the case of Henrietta Lacks, a black American woman whose cells were unknowingly

seized by biomedical researchers for experimental purposes shortly after she lost her battle to cervical cancer in 1951. Unbeknownst to Lacks and her family, her cells—which would later be named and referred to as HeLa cells—were maintained and experimented on in myriad laboratories, experimentations that subsequently led to the discovery of significant medical advancements. It wasn't until 2013 that the National Institutes of Health publicly recognized Henrietta Lacks's contributions to the medical field. What we see foregrounded in Lacks's case and in the historical accounts of the medicalization and the pathologization of enslaved women's reproductive abilities is how the U.S. violent history of scientific racism quite literally played out—and continues to—on the bodies of black women and other women of color. Yet as historian Harriet A. Washington shows us in her groundbreaking book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, Henrietta Lacks is only one of thousands of black Americans historically—and contemporaneously—subjected to unethical medical experimentation.

4. In her book *Scarring the Black Body*, Carol E. Henderson (2002) identifies "scarring" as a commonly used trope in African American literature. The trope is doubly figured as a site of (historical) trauma and personal healing.
5. Before the publication of the seventy-nine-page pamphlet titled "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races Applied to the American White Man and Negro" in 1864, the preferred descriptive word for the "mixing" and "fusing" of the white and black race was amalgamation, a term originally used to describe the process of mixing metals (alloys).
6. The notion of "human-passing" embodied most strongly by Akin, Lilith, and Jodahs in the trilogy echoes the turn-of-the-century "white passing" narratives of "tragic mulatto" figures in the United States. The tragic mulatto trope, for instance, is popularly seen in first half of the twentieth-century novels such as Nella Larsen's *Passing,* and in race melodramas like Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Hopkins 1988) and *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self* (Hopkins 2004).
7. See chapter 4 in *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* for an in-depth look at Kant's ideologies of race.
8. Although Butler refers to ooloi subjects as "it" given their "agender" positionality, I use the pronouns "they/them/their" to better reflect the much-needed inclusive language that Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies scholars have developed to advance our understandings and discussions of gender/gender identity.

References

Bailey, Moya. 2012. Vampires and Cyborgs: Transhuman Ability and Ableism in the Work of Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe. *Social Text Online*. https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/vampires_and_cyborgs_transhuman_ability_and_ableism_in_the_work_of_octavia_butler_and_janelle_monae/

Baraka, Amiri. 1995. Jazzmen: Diz & Sun Ra. *African American Review* 29 (2): 249–255.

Bell, Christopher M. 2012. *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Butler, Octavia. 1980. *Wild Seed*. New York: Warner Books.

Butler, Octavia E. 1988. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Butler, Octavia. 1991. An Interview with Octavia E. Butler. Interview by Randall Kenan. *Callaloo* 14 (2): 495–504.

———. 2005. *"Bloodchild" and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

———. 2007. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central.

———. 2010. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.

Chukwudi Eze, Emmanuel. 1997. *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Davis, Lennard J. 2002. *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions*. New York: New York University Press.

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1903. The Talented Tenth. In *Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day*, ed. The Negro, 33–75. New York: James Pott.

———. (1899) 1967. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. New York: Schocken Books.

———. 1989. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Books.

English, Daylanne K. 2004. *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Fink, Marty. 2010. AIDS Vampires: Reimagining Illness in Octavia Butler's Fledgling. *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (3): 416–432.

Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College of France, 1978–1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hampton, Gregory Jerome. 2010. *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. 1989. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge.

Henderson, Carol E. 2002. *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Holland, Sharon P. 2000. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hopkins, Pauline E. 1988. *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2004. *Of One Blood; or, The Hidden Self*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Larsen, Nella. 2002. *Quicksand*. New York: Penguin Books.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press.

Mehaffy, Marilyn, and AnaLouise Keating. 2001. "Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment. *Melus* 26 (1): 45–76.

Miller, Jim. 1998. Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision. *Science Fiction Studies* 25 (2): 336–360.

Obourn, Megan. 2013. Octavia Butler's Disabled Futures. *Contemporary Literature* 54 (1): 109–138.

Peppers, Cathy. 1995. Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*. *Science Fiction Studies* 22 (1): 47–62.

Roberts, Dorothy E. 1997. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Schwartz, Mary J. 2006. *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sherman, Shantella Y. 2014. *In Search of Purity: Popular Eugenics and Racial Uplift Among New Negroes 1915–1935*. PhD dissertation, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Spillers, Hortense. 1987. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book. *Diacritics* 17 (2): 65–81.

Stepan, Nancy. 1991. *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Vasconcelos, José, and Didier Tisdel Jaén. 1997. *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Wade, Peter. 2017. *Degrees of Mixture, Degrees of Freedom: Genomics, Multiculturalism, and Race in Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wade, Peter, Beltrán C. López, Eduardo Restrepo, and Ricardo V. Santos. 2014. *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Washington, Harriet A. 2006. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Harlem Moon.

Youngquist, Paul. 2010. *Cyberfiction: After the Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHAPTER 10

"Learn or Die": Survivalism and Anarchy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

Stefanie K. Dunning

In a scene from the television show *American Gods* (2018), the West African Spider God Anansi materializes in the hold of a slave ship. He advises the captured Africans to go on deck and kill all the Dutch men who have enslaved them. Then, he urges them to burn the ship. One of the Africans replies, "But if we do that, we too will die." Anansi laughs ruefully and explains:

> Once upon a time, a man got fucked. That's the story of black people in America … Let me paint a picture of what's waiting for you on the shore. You arrive in America, land of opportunity, milk and honey … and guess what? You all get to be slaves—split up, sold off, and worked to death … And I ain't even started yet. A hundred years later, you're fucked. A hundred years after that? Fucked. A hundred years after you get free, you still getting fucked out of jobs and shot at by the police. You see what I'm saying?

Anansi rhetorically equates contemporary black life with slave life by defining both situations as similar states of being "fucked," demonstrating that, as Frank Wilderson (2016) notes, "Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness.

S. K. Dunning (✉)
Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA
e-mail: Stefanie.Dunning@miamioh.edu

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_10

Blackness is social death." In this scene the notion of the black social death in Western society is articulated by Anansi (played by Orlando Jones) in terms that make its denial difficult. The enslaved man implicitly evokes a sense of hope that the situation in which he finds himself will one day end by suggesting it is better that he (and the other captives) don't die. Anansi's monologue, on the other hand, announces that the prospect of freedom is impossible not only for him but for many generations of black people to come. Both Anansi and Wilderson highlight the state of captivity for the black person in Western society, from the hold of the slave ship through the contemporary moment. Wilderson, a leading figure in the Afro-Pessimist school of Critical Race Theory, calls the recognition of black social death an "iconoclastic claim" precisely because it seems to contradict long traditions of liberation, hope, and struggle in black life, letters, and arts. But could the seeming conflict between optimistic and pessimistic points of view relative to black life and expression in American culture stem from a fundamental misrecognition of what *social* death really is? I contend that Afro-pessimism's claims about social death relate not to a literal or even psychic death of the black person but rather speak to the ways in which Western society, founded upon European Enlightenment ideals, European colonizing power, and centuries of captive labor, can never confer "the mattering of life," to use Calvin Warren's (2018) phrase, upon the black person because it is fundamentally constituted by antiblackness. What this ultimately means is not that the black person can never have (social) life; rather, it means that in order to confine black social death to the dustbin of history, Western civilization, that is to say Western sociality, has to die. Jared Sexton (2011, 28) asserts as much when he writes,

> Nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonized, of all that capital has in common with labor—the modern world system.

A recognition of the ways in which black social death is a condition of the modern state, that is, Western society, means that nothing short of the end of this world as we know it will redress the existential captivity of the black person.

Once this recognition is acknowledged, we are inclined to ask ourselves what would it look like to represent the collapse of Western civilization[1] as

a good thing? Such a (re)arrangement of apocalyptic meaning informs Octavia Butler's (1993) novel *Parable of the Sower*. Though the prevailing logic of most of our societies, almost all of which have been made in the image of Europe through imperialism and colonial expansion, is that the overall impact of Western civilization has been a positive one, Butler contests this notion by representing its end as the condition of possibility for the rise of a survivalist, anarchical society co-constituted by the insights of blackness and womanism. In doing so, Butler reveals that the quotidian dehumanization and suffering which so characterize Western society that they are at times invisible does not represent progress but instead embodies the very calamity it claims to forestall via its existence. For this reason, Butler's novel is often read primarily as a dystopia. Peter Stillman (2003, 17) writes that "Butler uses 'disciplined extrapolation to explore the dark possibilities of the near future'," which exposes all the many ways that our current society troublingly mirrors the one fictively represented in Butler's novel. *Parable of the Sower* "maps a United States where governments at all levels have lost even minimal ability to maintain order, defend human rights, and protect the environment; where multi-national corporations act freely and repressively without fetters; and where extreme income inequalities exist" (Stillman 2003, 16). But for the hegemony of our current police state which "maintains order" through routine extrajudicial killings, Butler's fictional world draws heavily upon the dystopic elements of the real world. Writing about the similarity between our society and the one depicted in *Parable of the Sower*, Madhu Dubey (1999) notes that Lauren's world is "shockingly familiar" to contemporary readers.

Set in 2024, *Parable of the* Sower is a novel about the end of one world and the beginning of another. Its protagonist, Lauren Olamina, prepares herself for the collapse of civilization by learning all she can about ancient survivalist skills. Living in a gated community called Robledo which has managed to maintain a semblance of "normal" life under civilization within its walls, Lauren is keenly aware of its vulnerability and hence correctly predicts its inevitable demise. From collecting seeds to learning how to make bread from acorns, Lauren learns how to survive in a natural world where the infrastructure of society run by centralized government and corporate power has fallen. Her preparation also includes procuring and learning how to use guns; Lauren's approach to survival is pragmatic without regard for any given political position. As an empath who feels the pleasure or pain of anyone she can see, Lauren's founding of a new religion based on the principle of change closely adheres to the environmental conditions of earth itself. While most of the characters in the novel are

hoping for a miracle that will return American society to the presumable functionality it enjoyed during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Lauren knows that its unsustainability makes such a "return" impossible. Thus, Butler's novel might be understood as a harbinger of all that climate scientists, many economists, and political analysts are telling us at our current moment: we are hurtling ever closer to the end of Western civilization as we know it (Spinney 2018). As David Morris (2015, 271) points out in his essay, some critics have argued that Butler's vision in *Parable* is "unrelentingly pessimistic, while others argue that her work imagines genuine hope for social change." This juxtaposition of perspectives on Butler's work points toward a recognition of the ways in which her work is at once pessimistic and optimistic without being contradictory. In *Parable*, Butler is pessimistic about Western civilization as it exists, and has existed, while being optimistic about the ideological and social possibilities that would inevitably arise as a result of its demise. This relationship between dystopia and utopia, between pessimism and optimism, in Butler's book might also facilitate a critical recognition of the interdependence of what is and what could be.

But pessimistic attention to the failings of Western society is often dismissed as culturally myopic. Critics of this dystopian take on contemporary American life criticize this point of view by labeling it "declinism bias," arguing instead that things are actually getting better and only cognitive dissonance convinces people that somehow the opposite is true (Archer 2017). If we believe Steven Pinker (2012), who argues in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* that overall human life—due to the advances of the state and Western civilization—is better than it has ever been at any time in human history, then questioning the seeming inherent benefits of this society is dangerous and apocalypse can only represent disaster. But, as John Gray (2015) points out, Pinker's ideas are "misleading and plain wrong." While old forms of warfare may be declining, as totalitarianism increases apace with income inequality and the carceral state, the fantasy of an increasingly utopic society is undermined by police murders, school shootings, endless drone wars, and increased precarity in all classes except the top 1%. In other words, in order to perceive apocalypse as inevitable decline, one must be relatively privileged. Commenting on the chasm between the way elites in society perceive our situation (and Pinker arguably belongs to this group) and the way most people in the world feel, Richard Edelman (2020) notes, "We now observe an *Alice in Wonderland* moment of elite buoyancy and mass

despair." So while the police state protects the rights of the wealthy and racially privileged to ensure their safety in the face of an increasingly precarious world, the vast majority of the global population acutely experiences the reality referenced by the Doomsday clock, which in 2020 moved 100 s to midnight—the closest it has ever been in its history (Spinazze 2020). Apocalypse is, indeed, now. As Franklin Ginn, re-phrasing a famous line from William Gibson, has said, "The apocalypse is already here; it's just not very evenly distributed."[2] Yet apocalypse, according to *Parable*, is not the harbinger of violence and chaos, but rather it is the good news.

Unlike those who embrace the statist position that existing social conditions represent the greater good for the majority of people, Butler did not envision apocalypse as a bad thing in her novel. Contrary to Pinker, Butler did not represent contemporary Western civilization as a success; rather, in *Parable* she reveals its epic failures of both ideology and infrastructure. She demonstrates that the collapse of Western society represents an opportunity for the creation of new models of community and being, where both freedom and harmony with nature are central to an anarchic vision of post-apocalyptic life.[3] As James C. Scott (2017) argues in *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, the collapse of civilization is primarily experienced as a disaster to those in power, given that the many people who are least privileged in society are already living under circumstances of endless violence, economic precarity, environmental danger, and stretched or scant resources. As Scott points out, "Only for state elites might [collapse] have been experienced as a tragedy" (202). For Lauren, the "old ways," of both governance and belief, are structures doomed to failure whose foundations in slavery and oppression make their inevitable demise at once painful and necessary. Yet apocalypse is neither new nor unexpected if one closely reviews the history of civilization.[4] Arguably, many worlds "ended" with the inauguration of the transatlantic slave trade, and those worlds have been ending in degrees ever since. The expansion of Europeans into what they would call America, aided by captive labor, was certainly the end of a way of life for the Native peoples who lived (and still live) there; it was the end of cultural engagement with West African culture for the enslaved, the start of natal alienation and endless abusive violence; and it was the desire for "unproblematic labor" that drove technological fervor resulting in the industrial ushering in the Anthropocene with catastrophic effect for humans, animals, and flora.

Butler's novel can be read as a comment on the end of the (Western) world via evidence of its unsalvageability and also as explorations of

alternate modes of living and being. In much the same way that world-ending (apocalypse) is not "new" in human history, anarchy has also arisen throughout human history as an organizational principle for decentralized, egalitarian communities.[5] Anarchy has only ever been defined as rule by "destructive fanatics," as Peter Marshall (2010) points out above, by those who seek to maintain hegemonic centralization of power in order to maintain social, economic, and political control. Butler's novel, on the other hand, envisions anarchy as defined by anarchists through the creation of Lauren's community of Acorn. Thus, in Acorn we see that anarchy, as articulated by Edward Abbey (1996, 367), is "democracy taken seriously." And though the word "anarchy" conjures nightmare visions of murderous mobs akin to those in propagandistic films like *The Purge*, anarchy is better understood to mean a "community without a state" (Goldman 2000). Thus, the existence of anarchic-leaning[6] black communities characterizes black life in the West since slavery times, beginning with the formation of maroon communities and continuing throughout history in places such as the Gullah communities of the Sea Islands of Georgia and the Carolinas, and Africatown in Alabama.

Despite being a science fiction novel, whose genre implies scenarios that—while bearing some relation to our own—typically feel "otherworldly," *Parable of the Sower* builds upon the premise of apocalypse not through mechanisms of futurity but rather through an evocation of history. Lauren's journey, from her ruined community in Robledo into the California wilderness, is reminiscent of the tradition of the maroon in the black diaspora. In *Freedom as Marronage*, Neil Roberts (2015, 3) writes, "I defend the claim that freedom as marronage presents a useful heuristic device to scholars interested in understanding both normative ideals of freedom and the origins of those ideals." Here Roberts is thinking about the way that marronage, the act of running away from slavery to live in "fully autonomous communities" often in wild, "off the grid," places, constitutes freedom. Taking up Roberts's formulation of the relationship between marronage and freedom, we could argue that the possibility of running away to the mountains or to what Europeans would call an "uncivilized" (meaning free of Western presence) place operates as a reference within black letters to suggest "radically new models of social and political" organization (Morris 2015, 270). Central to these questions about the origins of freedom in marronage is nature. The ability to survive in, to use Malidoma Some's (1994) words, "the mysterious green jungle" determines the possibility and success of the maroon, who seeks freedom

by disappearing into it. While, on the one hand, the ability to survive outside of "civilization" requires fluency with nature, on the other hand, there remains the question of what system will govern the "autonomous community" composed of the maroons. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler represents such a community through Lauren Olamina's formation of a post-apocalyptic community, the members of which she calls "Earthseed." By rejecting both the practice and ideology of twentieth-/twenty-first-century American society, Lauren demonstrates that humanity's survival depends upon embracing an anarchical philosophy of change that requires living close to, and in harmony with, nature.

Lauren's relationship to nature is central to her ability to survive. But when most people think about the fall of society, they fear that survival is not possible without grocery stores, which require the entire infrastructure of the current civilization to exist. Butler's novel answers the questions which inevitably arise when the specter of civilizational collapse is raised: how will I find food, water, shelter, warmth? Butler represents the deep dependency that modern people have on technology, with its often attendant aversion to nature, as a life-threatening vulnerability in an insecure world. Thus, *Parable* asserts that in order to survive the inevitable collapse of civilization, one must learn how to procure food, water, shelter, and safety in the absence of government and capitalist infrastructure. Though her family, and the other people in the Robledo community, lament the loss of a civilization Lauren never knew, she is constantly warning them that things will continue to decline, so they must learn how to survive outside of civilization's constraints or die. Hence her admonition to them to "learn or die." The options available to Lauren and those like her in a world of increasing precarity are to die at the hands of those outside the walls, to die of starvation, or to perhaps agree to work for the corporation KSF, which has bought the town Olivar and will—in exchange for lifetime labor contracts—offer people food and safety. In other words, it's a modern-day form of slavery. Cory, Lauren's stepmother, attracted by the prospect of a "normal" and safe life in Olivar, is rebuffed by Lauren's father who tells her "There's nothing safe about slavery" (Butler 1993, 121). Thus, Butler's novel addresses the persistence of slavery in contemporary society. The fate of losing their community (which is inevitable) and the untenable "choice" of becoming slaves in Olivar means that the only path toward freedom is to learn to survive in the natural world. Like the maroons from centuries before, knowledge of how to survive in our natural habitat is the key to liberation. Lauren realizes that she must create

another space, one distinct from that of "modern world system," in order to actualize her beliefs and build a community based not upon authority and power, but on egalitarianism, change, and freedom. Lauren muses about the possible benefits of civilization and also contemplates its decline when she writes, "When civilization fails to serve, it must disintegrate …" (91). But wisely, she understands that this disintegration not only closes a door but opens one. The decline of civilization in the past often meant that populations dispersed—and when humanity was still close enough to its hunter-gatherer roots, it meant a return to the oldest way of human life on this planet. Lauren's imperative to herself and others to "learn" is about reacquiring all the skills that humanity has lost as captives of Western civilization. This is evident in a conversation Lauren has with Jo, a Robledo community member, who confronts Lauren about her esoteric reading habits and her strange attempts to practice living without the conveniences of civilization:

> "What are you doing?" she asked. "Trying to learn to live off the land?"
>
> "I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study books like these … I think we should make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we have to get out of here in a hurry … I think we should fix places outside where we can meet in case we get separated … Every time I go outside, I try to imagine what it might be to live out there without walls, and I realized I don't know anything." (Butler 1993, 51)

Trying to imagine a life "without walls" is at once frightening and also a challenge for Lauren—later, when her father asks idly if the world is coming to an end, Lauren thinks: no, it's not, but "your world is coming to an end and you with it" (55). In this sense, Butler's character anticipates the protagonist of the recent apocalyptic film *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2017), a human mutant who, like Lauren, ultimately chooses herself and a new world over the old one. In her preparation for another way of life, Lauren becomes obsessed with learning all she can about how to survive "outside." Survivalism connotes, in contemporary popular culture, right wing white men with guns building underground bunkers, so Butler's discourse of survivalism in *Parable of the Sower* might at first glance seem an ill fit for a novel about a prophetic teenaged black girl. Despite the association of survivalism in popular culture with masculine whiteness, there exists a black survivalist movement. Notably, the blog "Afrovivalist,"

authored by a black woman, addresses the conjunction of race, gender, and survivalism in ways that defy narratives which write black people out of this milieu.[7] When Lauren describes having packs ready to go in the event that they have to run, Butler references discourses of preparedness common among survivalists. These packs are called "bug out bags" and serve the purpose of helping one survive if society were to completely collapse. Likewise, wilderness survival skills are a key feature of many escape narratives—from Harriet Tubman to Malidoma Some. Hence, Butler's references to survivalism as enabling an escape from Western civilization allude to the tradition of the maroon in diasporic literature. And successful marronage requires survivalist skills. Thus, I read Butler's novel as excavating a lost history of black survivalism that goes all the way back to slavery and colonialism throughout the diaspora.

Furthermore, survivalism implies distrust of the social and political structures which govern our lives. Thus, it can be practiced both within civilization and deployed if it fails. Writing about peasant survivalism, John Berger notes,

> Meanwhile, if one looks at the likely future course of world history, envisaging either the further extension and consolidation of corporate capitalism in all its brutalism, or a prolonged, uneven struggle waged against it, a struggle whose victory is not certain, the peasant experience of survival may well be better adapted to this long and harsh perspective than the continually reformed, disappointed, impatient progressive hope of an ultimate victory. (qtd. in Archer 2009, 25)

Survivalism, then, can be read as anti-civilization in that the arc of its potential lies not in consolidation of societal power and infrastructure, but rather in the fundamental techniques of *being* in a wild or pastoral setting. Though the narrative of Eurocentric history encourages us to view Western hegemony as "progress," Berger suggests that survivalism is a better model for responding to the vicissitudes and instability of hierarchical society. Those of us who live in the Western world have been encouraged to see "living off the land" as a historical step backward, even as the instability of the structures that govern our lives wobble on their foundations, bringing us ever closer to the reality that we live in an un-curated, natural world in which many of us no longer know how to survive. This view, that the fall of Western society would result in a dangerous anarchy, is statist propaganda designed to undermine generative environmentalism and

global human liberation. Butler rejects the notion that living in harmony with nature, with knowledge of how to take care of one's self from the land, is somehow ahistorical. By referencing space travel, she makes clear that Lauren's philosophy is not about an unproblematic "return" to a state of pre-technology, nor does she intend to romanticize a "pure" and primitive past. At the same time, space in *Parable of the Sower* references the ways in which "black life is not lived in the world … but it is lived underground, in outer space" (Sexton 2011, 28). Neither space nor nature in *Parable* inhere to their common semantic use and instead represent vectors of black experience that interdict structures and ideas of black captivity. Instead, Lauren's survivalist ethos is tied to discourses of personal sovereignty as a repudiation of state and corporate hegemony rather than a quixotic appeal to a previous time or place.

If the first step toward freedom is the ability to survive away from the structures of society, "outside the walls," if you will, then the second cause for concern is the organization of human relationships free of statist intervention and governance. Survivalism, then, especially in the context of blackness, must be understood as a "fugitive movement," of the sort Fred Moten references when he writes that it is "a movement of escape, the stealth of the stolen that can be said … to break every enclosure" (Moten 2008, 179). We can read anarchy, in this black context, as having a "relation to the law [that] is reducible neither to simple interdiction nor to bare transgression" (179). I propose here that Lauren's community in *Parable* is an anarchy that neither interrupts the broader society nor seeks to resist it because does not set out to fight it, but rather it simply flourishes in its aftermath. Civilization in *Parable* is not struggled against so much as it is simply discarded as inadequate to the demands of freedom in a post-Western world. Writing about anarchy in another context, Kevin Dunn (2004) examines Robert Kaplan's essay "The Coming Anarchy," which was published in *The Atlantic* in 1994. In his essay, Dunn points out how Kaplan's fear of anarchy is narratively tied to his aversion to the various African countries he visits which theoretically situates anarchy as a bad thing within the purview of a "wild" blackness. Dunn writes, "The Western-defined project of (white) modernity creates normative landscapes where only one way of narrating or experiencing that space is allowed" (485). Here Dunn is talking about the way that Africans' "refusal to accept this narrative is a challenge to the exclusive Western authorship of modernity as well as its assumed primacy" (485) signals anarchy to the West since it suggests the possibility of a "black (i.e. non-white controlled)

planet" (485). Though Dunn is not making a recuperative argument for anarchy in this essay, his insights into the ways in which black control signal anarchy in Western society facilitate a reading of Butler where apocalypse is aligned not with disastrous disorder but rather with the end of Western hegemony and hence of black social death.

Butler's anarchist vision of a new community emerging from the smoldering ruins of Western civilization fundamentally challenges Eurocentrism in important ways. Central to Lauren's anarchic philosophy is a rejection of her father's Christian faith. Lauren's lack of belief in her father's religion is linked to anarchy in that Christianity, as it is practiced in the West, is tied to a notion of central and sovereign power which aligns with political notions of governance. Not surprisingly, Christianity was used to justify slavery and suppress dissent among slaves.[8] Writing about the orthodox relationship between Christianity and government power, Marlow notes, "Even the most casual glance at the history of the Church reveals a reliable and systematic pattern of political subservience; Imperialist in Rome, Monarchist in Renaissance Europe, Stalinist in Russia, and 'Democratic' in America. Clearly, Christianity not only supports authorities, but presupposes that those authorities exist" (Marlow 2009). Anarchy, on the other hand, is anti-authoritarian in toto, so a rejection of orthodox Western Christianity and the state go hand in hand. The relationship between Christianity and the state is evident in *Parable* when Lauren notes, "To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of torching things. They never miss a chance to relive the good days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back. Yeah" (Butler 1993, 7–8). Here the church is coextensive with "a country on its feet," where religious and government are mutually constitutive even where there is a juridical imperative of separation. This construction of power in religion is mirrored in the relations of the state. Thus, a rejection of Christianity parallels a rejection of the state, making Butler's novel an anarchic rebuttal that shakes the very foundations of Western order.

Butler highlights the difference in ideology between her Earthseed philosophy and Western Christianity through the rhetoric of a Presidential candidate, Andrew Steele Jarret. He extorts the American people to "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind and become one of us. Help us make American great again"

(Butler 2012, "Chapter One"). Here again Butler aligns Christian rhetoric with fascism, explicitly linking a shift in governance to a shift in spiritual belief. In contradistinction to the "law of the Father," Lauren promotes an ideology of impermanence through the verses "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only last truth is change" (Butler 1993, 2). Bearing some similarity to Taoism, which offered "the first clear expression of an anarchist sensibility," Lauren's emphasis on nature and change rejects the anthropomorphism implicit in Western civilization (Marshall 2010, 53). Like the environment, which is unpredictable and constantly in flux, Lauren's spiritual ideology speaks to the reality of the natural world. In this sense, her philosophy relies not upon fantasies of intervention at the benevolence of an overlord for whom one has found favor, but rests instead upon a foundation of acceptance of the "living world" and a movement of the human away from the discourse of subalternity and toward that of the seed, living embodiment of potential. While the state defines its relations to the black subject via property and commodification, Butler reframes the human as a seed from earth, as the fruit of the earth-tree. In other words, the model of being is transformed in Lauren's conception away from "citizen" to that of the "seed." Through this linguistic shift, *Parable of the Sower* implies an anti-statist position in favor of community over hegemony.

Butler's novel maps what an egalitarian anarchic community looks like and highlights the qualities that characterize it in a way that almost implies that we could read *Parable* as a field notebook for freedom. One characteristic of anarchic liberty is the removal of social boundaries that keep people from being who they are. Lauren Olamina's "Earthseed" community and concept evokes the anarchist notion of the fulfillment of potential as central to liberty, as noted in Noam Chomsky's (2013, 8) *On Anarchy*:

> I mean the only kind of liberty that is worthy of name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognizes no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our individual nature.

This anarchist notion of the development of "latent" powers recalls the metaphor of the seed, which is central to Butler's rendering of Lauren and her philosophy. Lauren's Earthseed community conceptualizes human potential, "to take root among the stars," as the ability to overcome the disaster of civilization. In each person, or seed, lies latent adaptability,

intelligence, and potential to create a new society and culture that, while embracing change, does not repeat the mistakes of the past. Lauren, in developing a model of life different from that of her parents, has completely abandoned the state and hence Western civilization itself. As I explain above, Lauren's first violation of Western civilization is her abandonment of Christianity in order to form her own belief system based not on a fixed notion of hierarchal power but rather upon change. Thus, in Lauren's spiritual system, apocalypse—any apocalypse—is a function of the nature of the changing universe. Therefore, adaptability—as another characteristic of communities without the state—rather than resistance is the appropriate response. Lauren is able, through her counterintuitive change philosophy, to create a vision of human survival that cooperates with circumstance rather than attempts to destroy it. Viewed through the lens of historical inevitability, societal collapse can be reframed as an opportunity for much-needed change. "Why deplore collapse," Scott (2017, 209) asks, "when the situation it depicts is most often the disaggregation of a complex, fragile, and typically oppressive state into smaller, decentralized fragments?" In other words, Scott's insight and Lauren's approach both suggest that the end of civilization can be the beginning of new life. In her recognition of the fragility of the state, Lauren realizes that alternate ways of being in the world must be adopted. And if the state is "fragile," as Scott argues, Lauren's vision is anti-fragile, which perfectly describes the society she eventually creates with her family of choice. Defining anti-fragility in his book *Anti-Fragile: Things that Gain from Disorder*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2012, 4) writes, "The anti-fragile loves randomness and uncertainty, which also means—crucially—a love of errors … Antifragility has a singular property of allowing us to deal with the unknown." The randomness and uncertainty of anti-fragility suggest the impossibility of hierarchies and authoritative power; thus, embracing it delineates a way of being which simultaneously emphasizes liberation and survival. Unlike the people and the society that precede her, Lauren is adaptable and capable of handling unforeseen crises. Her embrace of change implies fluidity, which opposes the fixity of state law and lays the framework for altered existential arrangements.

In "The Case of Blackness," Moten (2008, 177) asks, "How do we think the possibility and the law of outlawed, impossible things?" I propose that *Parable of the Sower* is a successful attempt to "think impossible things," such as the liberation of the black person from the social death of the West, inaugurated by slavery. Lauren's philosophies of change and

anti-fragility are especially useful in the face of a potential "real life" apocalyptic scenario because they don't ask that we know exactly how and when civilization might fall; they only suggest that we learn to be adaptable and anti-fragile to survive whatever comes. Embracing this way of being, which is a kind of wild ethos, means rejecting authoritarian versions of "order" as well as any actions designed to galvanize power—let alone maintain it—within the "modern world system," to return to Sexton's (2011) term. In Lauren, Butler conjures an abolitionist, anti-fragile character through the metaphor of the seed, which is central to conceptualizing "alternate modes of being," to be able to—in Calvin Warren's (2018, 172) words—"imagine existence anew." The anarchy of Lauren's community represents the end of black social death signaled by a radical break in the nation which upends its structural and ideological power. And as the nation dies, the black person—represented by Lauren Olamina—lives.

Notes

1. The reader should note that at every point in this chapter when I use the term *civilization*, I am referring to Western civilization. Through this usage I do not mean to imply or suggest that other civilizations do not and have not existed; however, the cultural context which attends Octavia Butler's novel—as well as the critical lenses through which I read her novel—all refer to Western civilization.
2. https://twitter.com/dw2/status/869630490109767680?lang=en
3. I take up the idea of abolition at great length in my book *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return, Abolition, and Interbeing* (Dunning 2021).
4. In his book *Against the Grain*, Scott (2017) argues that throughout the history of civilization, societies are perpetually collapsing.
5. See Scott (2017) for more on non-state-based communities.
6. I say "leaning" here because all of these communities were under the purview of the state, even if the state could not intervene because of the isolated location of these communities.
7. http://www.afrovivalist.com/. Though this blog speaks to survivalism in a black context, this author finds some of the rhetoric therein problematic.
8. See Travis Glasson's (2012) *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World*.

References

Abbey, Edward. 1996. The Serpents of Paradise. Ed. John Macrae. New York: Henry Holt.

Archer, Jeff. 2009. John Berger's Anti-Utopian Politics of Survivalism. *Social Alternatives* 23 (3): 24–27.

Archer, Dale. 2017. Declinism: Why You Think America Is in Crisis. *Psychology Today*, February 18. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/reading-between-the-headlines/201702/declinism-why-you-think-america-is-in-crisis

Butler, Octavia. 1993. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Warner Books.

———. 2012. *Parable of the Sower*. Kindle ed. New York: Open Road Media Sci-Fi & Fantasy.

Chomsky, Noam. 2013. *On Anarchy*. New York: The New Press.

Dubey, Madhu. 1999. Folk and Urban Communities in African American Women's Fiction: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. *Studies in American Fiction* 27: 103–128.

Dunn, Kevin. 2004. Fear of a Black Planet: Anarchy and Anxieties About Postcolonial Travel to Africa. *Third World Quarterly* 25 (3): 483–499.

Dunning, Stefanie K. 2021. *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return, Abolition, and Interbeing*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi (forthcoming).

Edelman, Richard. 2020. 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer. January 19. https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer.

Glasson, Travis. 2012. *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Goldman, Emma. 2000. Anarchism: What It Really Stands for. Anarchy Archives. http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/goldman/aando/anarchism.html

Gray, John. 2015. Steven Pinker Is Wrong About Violence and War. *Guardian*, March 13. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/13/john-gray-steven-pinker-wrong-violence-war-declining

Marlow. 2009. Anarchism and Christianity. The Anarchist Library. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/marlow-anarchism-and-christianity

Marshall, Peter. 2010. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. Oakland: PM Press.

Morris, David. 2015. Octavia Butler's (r)Evolutionary Movement for the Twenty-First Century. *Utopian Studies* 26 (2): 270–288.

Moten, Fred. 2008. The Case of Blackness. *Criticism* 50 (2): 177–218.

Pinker, Steven. 2012. *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. Penguin.

Roberts, Neil. 2015. *Freedom as Marronage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Scott, James. 2017. *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sexton, Jared. 2011. The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism. *In Tensions Journal* (5): 1–47. https://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/pdfs/jaredsextonarticle.pdf.

Some, Malidoma Patrice. 1994. *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and the Initiation of an African Shaman*. New York: Putnam.

Spinazze, Gayle. 2020. It Is Now 100 Seconds to Midnight. Press Release. https://thebulletin.org/2020/01/press-release-it-is-now-100-seconds-to-midnight/

Spinney, Laura. 2018. End of days: Is Western Civilisation on the Brink of Collapse? *NewScientist*. https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23731610-300-end-of-days-is-western-civilisation-on-the-brink-of-collapse/

Stillman, Peter G. 2003. Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's *Parables*. *Utopian Studies* 14 (1): 15–35.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2012. *Anti-Fragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. New York: Random House.

Warren, Calvin. 2018. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wilderson, Frank, III. 2016. Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption. *Humanities Futures* (blog). https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/

CHAPTER 11

Survival by Any Means: Race and Gender, Passing and Performance in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*

Micah Moreno

Octavia Butler's widely acclaimed novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) are overtly feminist in nature and speak directly to Butler's understanding of America's racially divided past and her concerns for its future.[1] She utilizes themes such as racism, slavery, classism, and war to take a critical look at the outcomes of both historical and hypothetical events and their impact on the future of US society while also providing social commentary on gender, gender roles, gendered performance, and gender passing that can best be understood in conjunction with gender theory. Drawing upon her personal history, as well as the history of African American slavery, Butler points out parallels between the role gender and race played in the survival of fugitives from slavery and in the survival of the protagonist of Butler's apocalyptic future, Lauren Oya Olamina. Butler takes a pragmatic view of both gender and race. Our

M. Moreno (✉)
Plantation High School, Plantation, FL, USA
e-mail: Micah.moreno@browardschools.com

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_11

current rigid gender and race systems pose dangers to Lauren and humanity, and thus, the novels argue, they must become and remain shapeable to enable Lauren's—and by implication humanity's—survival.

Through frequent historical references, Butler prepares readers for Lauren's northward journey after the catastrophic collapse of her community and the loss of her family. Lauren, like her ancestors, is under threat by community outsiders due to their race and gender conceptualizations. She relies on her androgynous appearance and untraditional education to pass as male in order to secure the safety and privilege she would not have access to as a female. However, it is not only gender which factors into her survival; race plays a central and equally important role and the two frequently intersect throughout the novels.

Through a series of actions, Lauren passes between genders in the novels, adopting the characteristics and duties associated with stereotypical masculinity or femininity. Her ability to easily perform these actions implies that gender is merely a learned, outward performance rather than an inherent set of genetic codes. By embracing the idea of gender passing, Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* portray gender as an ambiguous and amorphous human characteristic and suggest that the gender binary is an outdated social construction with little relevance in a modern society, certainly in the postapocalyptic one she portrays. While passing has traditionally been defined as "the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white racial category or white social identity" (Davis 2003, vii), Lauren engages in gender passing, appearing as a member of a different gender rather than as a member of a different race. But whether race or gender, Lauren views all societally ascribed identity roles as merely such and readily adopts or discards them, emphasizing their relative arbitrariness and subordinating all to the interests to survival.

Passing: An Overview

Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels delve into historically significant themes, including slavery, class, socioeconomic status, and race roles. The inclusion of these primarily serves as a warning: Butler shows how history's habit of repeating itself has led to America's apocalyptic future. The primary way in which Butler examines history is through gender passing, which is highly evocative of the racial passing common in Jim Crow

America, in which individuals were able to pass into a society that privileged whites over blacks because of their ambiguous or easily masked physical features. While many critics read Lauren's stereotypically masculine qualities as a form of androgyny or label her as a "tomboy,"[2] she actually inhabits a male-gendered persona while remaining biologically female and passing as male throughout the novels.

The act of passing is typically meant to provide access to the freedom, safety, and privilege that passers would not otherwise have access to. Juda Bennett's (1996) *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* offers a helpful look at the historical phenomenon of passing. Bennett explains that "'passing' is an inelegant term that most probably comes from the 'pass' given to slaves so that they might travel without being taken for runaways" (36). However, mistaken racial identity served as a pass which "did not only help some light-skinned blacks pass into free states but would allow for other escapes into freedom during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras" (2). Similarly, Lauren's gender identity is easily mistaken, and although Lauren never engages in acts of racial passing, she passes in order to obtain the same benefits as a racial passer: safety. As a young woman travelling alone in dangerous territory, Lauren passes as male to avoid the violence that she might be subject to as a female.

While passing, which can be full-time or temporary, intentional or unintentional, is primarily thought of as a tool to mask race, passing can serve as a tool to mask many other identifying characteristics such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. In her introduction to the 1997 Penguin Classics version of Larsen's *Passing*, Thadious M. Davis offers an insightful analysis of the act of passing within US society. According to Davis (2003, xxx), "'to pass' has come into common usage as a general descriptive verb indicative of masking or disguising any aspect of identity such as class, ethnicity, religion or sexuality, implying as well as unmasking or exposing of one viable construction of a cultural identity." As Davis explains, passing can take many forms and is almost always "tied to survival and economic pressures" (xviii) in an effort to obtain "both basic human and fundamental constitutional rights enjoyed by the … majority" (ix). Thus, passing affords individuals more than just freedom, survival, or a new identity, but the rights that they had previously been stripped of. For Lauren, gender passing is necessary in order to survive in a society that favors males over females.

Gender Passing

The characters in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* must survive the unthinkable. As a young woman, practically alone in a dangerous world, Lauren Olamina uses her quick thinking to come up with a plan. She presents herself as male to her fellow travelers in an effort to survive. For Lauren, the chances of survival while acting or appearing as female are slim and would leave her open to sexual assault, starvation, or even death. Therefore, gender passing becomes one of the few viable options available to her: by appearing or acting as male, her chances for survival greatly increase. However, in order to understand how these acts of gender passing are possible, it is first necessary to understand that gender consists of a constructed set of characteristics which humans tell each other to continuously perform. However, passing relies on performance in relation to both race and gender. As Giulia Fabi (2001, 5) explains, not only is the performative nature of these identities understood by those who dislike passing but by the passers themselves: "the awareness that personal identities are constructed was the starting point of the passer's adventures, not the end result." Thus, intentional passers utilize the knowledge that, given the right set of "ambiguous" physical characteristics, racial identity can be performed as desired.

This idea holds true for gender passers like Lauren: regardless of biological sex (male/female), gender can be performed (masculine/feminine). By creating characters that are able to "pass" as a member of a gender other than the one with which they biologically identify, Butler comments on the prescriptive nature of gender in contemporary society, suggesting that gender is merely a performance. When human beings are born, they are classified as either male or female as determined by their primary sex characteristics. This information is often used to determine both their sex and gender. Because it is not present at birth but is rather a learned set of behaviors, gender is able to be altered, turned on or off, intensified, or weakened as needed. This fact suggests that gender is "less an essential characteristic of the individual than it is a series of performative gestures that the individual learns to replicate" (Hollinger 1999, 207). In her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler ([1990] 1999) proposes her theory of gender performativity in which gender characteristics other than those typically associated with a person's biological sex can be performed; people that biologically identify as female can and do perform masculine gender characteristics and vice versa. Essential to this

theory is the idea of repetition expressed by Veronica Hollinger (1999, 207), who states that "in individual performances, the subject reiterates social ideals of gender behavior, and it is these re-citations, these active repetitions of previously existent models, that are constitutive of the individual as a gendered subject." When the outward signs of gender are repeated, they become sign and signifier of the already established societal definitions of gender. This repetition is what constitutes a gendered performance. This is the case for Lauren Olamina in Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels. Lauren was presumably determined to be a female at birth due to her sexual characteristics and was raised by her parents as female and self-identifies as female. However, she repeatedly and convincingly takes on male identities throughout the novels, constituting a masculine gender performance.

Judith Butler ([1990] 1999, 177) explains that the display of outward gender characteristics presents an illusion in which a person's sex appears to align with their perceived gender identity, asking her reader to "consider gender … as a corporeal style, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning." She believes that a person's "words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as cause" (177). Furthermore, Judith Butler argues that "such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (179). The passer is able to effectively utilize the body as a prop or tool to display gender rather than allowing the body to be the determiner of gender. In the *Parable*s, Lauren's body often determines her behavior due to her disability, hyperempathy syndrome; however, by performing masculinity and passing as male, Lauren has, in many ways, regained control of her body by determining how she wishes to present it to the outside world. Gender passing enables Lauren to not only survive, but to be empowered. Butler, who consistently identified herself in interviews as a black feminist, has a strong reason for characterizing Lauren as a gender passer. She inextricably links her with her literal and literary ancestors, with slaves and racial passers, to make clear that Lauren is not a "tomboy" and to assert that race and gender systems must evolve.

Lauren lives in a society that, despite being far into the future at the time of the novels' publication and displaying advances in areas such as technology and space travel, clearly continues to subscribe to patriarchal gender roles. Lauren's America maintains traditional men's and women's restrooms (*Sower* 13), characterizes emotionally burdened women as crazy (*Sower* 21), and depicts women as caretakers who cook and care for the children while men serve as protectors (*Sower* 80–81). Lauren later writes that it is a society in which "repression of women has become more and more extreme. A woman who expresses her opinions, 'nags,' disobeys her husband, or otherwise 'tramples her womanhood' and 'acts like a man,' might have her head shaved, her forehead branded, her tongue cut out, or, worst case, she might be stoned to death or burned" (*Talents* 55). In addition to the patriarchal gender roles to which it subscribes, Lauren's society also maintains racial prejudices and, immediately upon becoming homeless, it is clear that race will play a large role in, and possibly hinder, Lauren's safety and survival. One of these travelers, Zahra, explains that on the road, "mixed couples catch hell" (*Sower* 157), cluing the reader further into the depths to which Butler's 2027 America has sunk. One of the major ways in which racism appears in Butler's *Parable* novels is through examples of modern-day slavery. As Jane Donawerth (2000, 49) explains, "the slave narrative is often a model for 1990s dystopias," a category into which Butler's *Parable* novels certainly fall. As the novels progress, the connection Butler makes to America's past becomes increasingly apparent as direct commentary on race relations is replaced by both literal and figurative references to and examples of the slavery which America was built upon and which has, in Butler's *Parable* novels, again become commonplace.

Gender, Race, Passing, and Lauren as Trickster

Throughout the *Parable* novels, in order to evade slavery, Lauren becomes a trickster. Embodying surviving elements of African and Pan-African cultures, she resembles a trickster figure in African mythology, Esu-Elegbara, which Henry Louis Gates (1988, 5) describes in *The Signifying Monkey* as the "divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology" who repeatedly appears throughout the "black oral narrative tradition." Esu-Elegbara has many traits which contribute to his status as trickster, among which Gates describes his individuality, indeterminacy, sexuality, and uncertainty (6). As for Esu, Lauren's primary trickster characteristic, her inhabitance of

two gendered spaces, is actually a form of gender passing. The trickster Esu, like Lauren, "is … of dual gender," simultaneously inhabiting two gendered spaces, the male and female (Gates 1988, 29). Although Esu has a "remarkable penis," Gates argues, he is equally female in many ways. As explained earlier, Judith Butler shows that gender is determined not by the body's biological nature but by an intentional external performance. Therefore, Esu's physical characteristics do not inhibit his ability to be of dual gender; while Lauren's biological femaleness is always present, her status as a trickster figure reinforces her ability to pass as male.

Lauren's figurative inhabitance of two gendered spaces continues throughout *Parable of the Talents*. Lauren's embodiment of Esu is important as gender roles in African identity do not always align with those found in traditional patriarchal society. As described by Diane Lewis (1975, 234) in a research study on black sex roles and behavioral traits, women in West African societies are "expected to be independent and self-sufficient when they marry. For example, among groups such as the Yoruba, women are expected to be self-confident and competent and it is rare for a woman to be dependent economically on her husband. A dependent woman, it is said, is treated with contempt." Lauren's status as a strong, independent woman then corresponds with the responsibility bestowed upon her as a result of her Yoruba surname. However, this strength and independence, in conjunction with her physical appearance, often borders on presenting as masculine in an American context, particularly within the community in which Lauren lives that embraces patriarchal gender roles such as men being unemotional protectors and women being overly emotional mothers and homemakers.

Many of the characteristics Lauren displays throughout the *Parable* novels highlight her trickster tendencies. Early in *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's daughter Larkin exposes her mother's trickster characteristics, stating "the words are harmless, I suppose, and metaphorically true. At least she began with some species of truth" (3). Lauren is often deceitful throughout the novel and seems to operate with ulterior motives. This is, at times, sensed by those around her. Sandra Govan (2003) points out that Lauren "can be clinically realistic, even manipulative at times." Lauren utilizes her education and convincing rhetoric to convert many followers to her Earthseed religion. She systematically excludes those who question her system of beliefs by allowing them to stay in Acorn, the community she and her followers have built, but stripping them of democratic rights by not allowing them to be part of the "decision-making" process and

garnishing their pay until they accept Earthseed as their religion (*Talents* 81). Lauren's Earthseed also contains trickster elements in that Lauren bases the religion upon the idea that "God Is Change" (3). In addition, Earthseed is to provide a set of beliefs appropriate to the reality of the world around her. She asserts that the "destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars," believing that Earthseed communities should exist on earth as well as in space (*Sower* 71), just as Esu keeps one leg "anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (Gates 1988, 6). As Govan (2005–2006) explains, "Butler shows Earthseed even adopting (adapting?) classic tropes from African-American culture—masking and signifyin,'—by placing an African derived 'folk' belief system in the same privileged space as the 'major' world religions." However, it is more than Lauren's religious beliefs that contribute to her status as trickster.

Lauren's status as trickster is also highlighted by references to slavery, passing, and her African heritage throughout the *Parable* novels. Like Ellen Craft, a light-skinned slave in the ante-bellum South who attempted to pass as white in order to safely travel to the North, Lauren passes as male to obtain the safety and security that masculinity often guarantees in a society where it is considered "inconvenient and dangerous to be on the street as a homeless woman" (*Talents* 418). Butler first introduces the concept of passing in reference to race, just prior to introducing Lauren's desire to pass as male. Upon realizing the risk of traveling in a multiracial group, Lauren states: "We can be a black couple and their white friend. If Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe we can claim him as a cousin" (*Sower* 157). While the passing Lauren proposes is opposite of the generally understood black to white passing and is, instead, white to black, the passage exemplifies the fluidity and performative nature of race.[3] Daniel Sharfstein (2015) explains that these acts of "reverse passing" have been going on for hundreds of years, while Alisha Gaines argues that whites pass for black in order to gain empathy (qtd. in Eversley 2015). Regardless of the reasons, the same concepts of fluidity and performativity that are revealed by both racial passing and reverse racial passing can easily be applied to gender. This understanding of the constructed and performative nature of identity, along with Butler's conscious exploration of "the impact of race and sex upon future society" is critical to Lauren's gender passing (Foster 1982, 37) and also gestures toward the "indeterminacy" and "uncertainty" associated with Esu the trickster.

Not only does Butler tie her characters to American and African American history with her frequent allusions to slavery, but she ties them to African history. As Gates (1988, 3–4) explains, black Africans who survived the Middle Passage on their way from Africa to the New World carried "aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget." When Lauren meets Bankole while travelling north, they immediately forge a connection over the root of their last names, which signal a conscious connection to African heritage; both last names provide a foundation for cultural and historical symbolism throughout Butler's *Parable* novels and symbolize Lauren's connection with African culture, ancestors, and family history.

Whether in relation to Lauren's trickster status or in relation to survivalist, pragmatic approaches to gender, Octavia Butler's questioning of gender identity, gender roles, and sexuality in relation to race and racial identity is essential to the understanding of her *Parable* novels. Butler shows the interaction of race and gender in many ways, beginning with the characters she employs in her novels. As Mehaffy and Keating explain, Butler introduces "strong female protagonists, usually African American, and characters of many colors. In this way, her work complicates traditional science fiction themes—global and local power struggles, for example—by inflecting such struggles with the implications of gender, ethnic, and class difference" (Butler et al. 2001, 46). Often, Butler writes about women in "nontraditional roles" who are "undeniably strong and independent" and are "usually healers, teachers, artists, mothers" who explore "the impact of race and sex upon future society" through their sometimes-subversive actions (Foster 1982, 37, 47–48). Lauren Olamina serves as a particularly strong symbol of Butler's desire to challenge both racist and patriarchal traditions.

Beyond Gender Binaries and Toward Survival

In *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender*, Valerie Smith (1998, 60) notes that passing narratives can be "productive sites for considering how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender ideologies are constituted and denied." This overlapping of social categories is exemplified in Butler's choice of name for her protagonist; before she even begins passing, Lauren asserts her name is "androgynous, in pronunciation at least—Lauren sounds like the more masculine Loren" (*Sower* 195). This foreshadowing

demonstrates Lauren's understanding of the complexities of the gender binary and, ultimately, contributes to her later ability to transcend genders. Though Lauren's last name, Olamina, serves as a symbol of her African heritage and ancestry, Olamina also becomes a common substitute for her first name among her friends and fellow travelers in an effort to mask her true gender. Because one's name often offers clues regarding one's identity, and because men refer to each other by last name more often than women, it is highly symbolic of Lauren's status as gender performer and trickster that her first and last names have such rich gender and cultural significance.

As discussed earlier, the concept of racial passing can be easily transferred to gender. Patricia Melzer recognizes the role gender appearance plays in survival, stating "Lauren cross-dresses as a man on her journey … This narrative device critically points out the social constructions of gender roles in U.S. society, where being recognized as a woman can be life threatening." While Melzer (2002) refers to Lauren's altered appearance as "cross-dress[ing]," this act has a much deeper significance. Not only does Lauren cross-dress, she changes her hair, physical affect, and personality. Therefore, Lauren is not cross-dressing but actually performing masculinity and passing as male. Lauren is aided by what Michael Levy (1998, 35) refers to as androgyny, the ability to "act adaptively in any situation regardless of gender role constraints." Levy believes that Lauren's androgyny is what ultimately enables her to pass and survive outside her community's walls. Lauren herself proclaims her androgyny, stating that she's "big enough and androgynous-looking enough" to easily pass as male (*Talents* 370). It is because Lauren's gender performance is necessary for her survival that Lauren cross-dresses and utilizes her self-proclaimed androgyny to intentionally pass as male rather than being an androgynous cross-dresser, and such gender passing is in-built from the beginning into Lauren's pragmatic survivalism.

Well before Lauren is forced out of her walled community, she expresses her desire to "go out posing as a man" (*Sower* 127). Later, Zahra, one of the few surviving members of Lauren's former community, agrees to cut her hair for her. Zahra refers to Lauren's actions as "play[ing] man" (*Sower* 158). She misunderstands Lauren's true intentions, viewing her actions as a pleasurable joke or game, and suggests that Lauren will simply be impersonating a man, rather than passing by intentionally adopting a new gender identity for the duration of her journey. However, for Lauren, this is not a frivolous teenage impulse; Lauren must "play man" in order to

survive. Butler's suggestion that gender is able to be "played" supports the idea that it is not innate but is rather a performance. According to Judith Butler, "the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (*Sower* 179). Lauren's features, such as being "tall and strong" and her "man's chest and hips," make it easy for her to physically disguise herself and perform masculinity by altering her speech and behavior (*Sower* 195). Additionally, while Lauren's physical appearance plays a role in her ability to pass for male, Lauren's personal identity and background, including her education, interactions with friends and family, and health and religious beliefs all contribute to her ability to pass convincingly and effectively.

Another factor contributing to Lauren's ability to pass as male is her community's system of beliefs that male and female children should all learn skills necessary for survival; girls and boys are not separated and taught to behave according to the traditional domestic and public sphere binary in which girls are taught to take care of the home and boys are taught to go out into the world. For example, both male and female teenagers are taught the use and care of guns and other weaponry and are taken for target practice. Lennell Dade and Lloyd Sloan (2000, 677) explain that, just like in Lauren's multiracial community, strong gender binaries are not as frequently seen in African American households where "behaviors that are seen as appropriate for one sex are seen as equally appropriate for the other sex. Furthermore, behaviors that are seen as inappropriate for one sex are seen as equally inappropriate for the other sex." Butler may imply that androgyny has cultural roots, but Lauren's entire multiracial community views gender norms as highly fluid, which gives Lauren more opportunity to learn skills and behavior that better prepare her to pass. However, both throughout African American history and in Lauren's community, such gender androgyny has survivalist functions.

For example, learning stereotypically masculine skills such as shooting, Lauren rejects the feminine ideals of "tak[ing] care of babies and cook[ing]" and chastises women who choose this conventional lifestyle, realizing that these won't help her in the long run (*Sower* 50). Once Lauren is thrown into the outside world, she is forced to rely on her survival skills. Lauren's gun works to her advantage in more ways than one; by creating "the sight of [a] bulge in [her] pocket," Butler comments that

Lauren's possession of the gun acts largely in the same way a penis would. While the physicality of the gun in her pocket may contribute to Lauren's masculine appearance, the act of simply being in possession of a deadly weapon empowers and strengthens her, significantly increasing her chance of survival. Lauren's gun acts as her physical and metaphoric phallus and contributes to her ability to pass for male (*Sower* 143).

Another contributing factor to Lauren's transcendence of the gender binary is her hyperempathy syndrome, which is attributed to "Paracetco, the smart pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her" (*Sower* 11). Because of her mother's drug use before her birth, Lauren is now an empath, or a "sharer." She experiences the physical sensations of other people upon seeing or hearing them, regardless of whether they are feeling pain or pleasure. Butler's concept of hyperempathy is presumably based upon the psychological idea of empathy, or "empathic accuracy," which was being researched around the time of *Parable of the Sower*'s publication. The primary branch of "empathic accuracy," called "empathic understanding" was defined by William Ickes (1993, 591) as the ability to accurately infer the thoughts and feelings of another person. At the time, it was largely believed that empathy could be a scientifically accurate way to interpret the feelings of others. Butler's hyperempathy would serve as an exaggerated version of this concept.

When discussing her hyperempathy in her journal, Lauren writes that she "used to feel every damned bruise, cut, and burn that my brothers managed to collect. Each time I saw them hurt, I shared their pain as though I had been injured myself" (*Talents* 12). As a child, Lauren even shared bleeding, and spontaneously began to bleed upon the sight of another doing so. Patricia Melzer (2002) describes Lauren's hyperempathy as "a physical mechanism that prohibits the disconnection and alienation from others" and "represents the painful and pleasurable process of crossing differences and of actually experiencing the other's world beyond a mere willingness to understand it." Lauren's hyperempathy acts as a hindrance in the outside world; she becomes physically paralyzed with pain when observing it in another, and even describes the act of her metaphoric death alongside others who are actually losing their lives multiple times throughout the novel. However, "Lauren possesses great physical and emotional strength—she is capable of enduring suffering, privation, intense debilitating pain, and yet picking herself up to move forward" (Govan 2003). Lauren's hyperempathy renders her extremely vulnerable to outside attack; rather than shooting to injure, Lauren must shoot to kill

in order to alleviate the pain she would experience when observing a prolonged death. As a result, Lauren appears to be much more violent than her fellow travelers. However, in addition to pain, Lauren experiences the pleasure of others, explaining that, during sex, she "gets the guy's good feeling" as well as her own (*Sower* 12). Upon waking up while Henry and Zahra are having a sexual encounter, Lauren is immediately hit by the pleasure of their act. Later, while engaging in sexual contact with Bankole, her partner's pleasure is transferred onto her, letting "the sensation take over, intense and wild" (*Sower* 244). Lauren has already experienced a wide range of male feelings and sensations due to her hyperempathy syndrome. Because of this, Lauren's hyperempathy contributes to her ability to pass. It is easier for her to pass as male, displaying the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics of masculinity, because she has already involuntarily inhabited these male spaces. Lauren is a more believable passer because she already has an idea of what it takes to be a man.

Lauren's belief in a transcendence of the gender binary plays a large role in Earthseed. She bases the religion upon the idea that "God is change" and spends countless hours writing the first version of "Earthseed: Books of the Living" (*Sower* 3). Earthseed begins to truly take shape once she begins to travel north. As the founder and leader of Earthseed, known as "Shaper," Lauren ventures where few women have gone before (*Talents* 435). Most organized religions are thought to be started by men, pray to male gods, and feature male prophets; Lauren recognizes this as her father leads her community's church which, like most churches Lauren knows, subscribes to the idea of a "big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God" (*Sower* 13). However, early in *Parable of the Sower* Lauren questions whether God might be a "she" and, ultimately, Earthseed is led by a woman (14). Despite Lauren's identity as a member of the female sex, her role as leader of Earthseed symbolically interacts with her act of passing and performing as male. In addition, the very name Earthseed is strikingly masculine. "Seed" brings up images of semen, as if Lauren were metaphorically impregnating the world with her new religion. As Govan (2003) explains, "seeds are the omnipresent symbol from the packet of acorn seed Lauren carries with her to the metaphorical seed embodied in the grand idea she also carries." Her gender passing is reflected in the religion itself, as Earthseed's God is gender ambiguous; Lauren believes that God is change, and change has "no sex at all" (*Sower* 203).[4]

After Lauren establishes Acorn, her Earthseed community, which takes the shape of a "castle on the hill," she fears less for her safety and becomes

less focused on passing as male to ensure her survival (*Talents* 77). Back in Robledo, Lauren rejected the idea of becoming a wife and mother that stayed home to take care of her children and household. When her "boyfriend asks her to marry him and have children—about the only hope of a better life that he can imagine, because jobs that pay cash are almost nonexistent and life outside the walls too scary" Lauren realizes "that dream is—especially for the woman—only a dead-end of greater responsibility and fewer possibilities" (Stillman 2003, 19–20). Despite this, Lauren eventually marries Bankole and embraces her pregnancy and new role as a mother. As a pregnant woman and, later, a breastfeeding mother, Lauren's femininity becomes a clear visual indicator of her biological sex. Despite the evidence of Lauren's passing, she does engage in many traditionally feminine activities throughout both novels. She is fiercely protective of her younger brothers and frequently takes on a motherly role in her stepmother Cory's absence by cooking and cleaning. She voluntarily forms a close mother–daughter bond with a neighbor's daughter due the noticeable absence of the girl's own mother. She maintains the feminine role in her relationship with her boyfriend in Robledo, Curtis. She even dislikes being called "man" by strangers (*Sower* 187) and is consistently referred to as "girl" by her husband (*Sower* 198). Finally, the very act of keeping a diary, Octavia Butler's chosen form of narration, constitutes a traditionally feminine activity. All this goes to show that gender passing for Lauren is a tool related to the needs of her immediate environment. She engages in traditionally feminine-gendered activities based upon her relative safety.[5]

Another major event that highlights Lauren's simultaneous biological femaleness and gender masculinity is her pregnancy and role as a mother. Mothers in Butler's *Parable* novels are always controversial figures, and Lauren is no exception. Butler's mothers never get motherhood quite right, failing to serve as role models for Lauren as both a woman and a mother. Lauren's own mother died during childbirth and is characterized as a drug addict (*Sower* 11). She spent two years addicted to Paracetco, a popular drug at the time meant to treat Alzheimer's disease, which allowed her to read faster, retain more, and make more accurate calculations. However, her addiction seems to have led to her death and she never had the opportunity to meet Lauren, who is permanently disabled as a result of her mother's drug abuse (*Talents* 13–14). Lauren's step-mother, Cory, raises Lauren as her own, educates the neighborhood children, maintains a job, and keeps an orderly household. However, when Lauren's stepbrother Keith disappears and is later found murdered, Cory falls apart.

Lauren describes her as being in a "kind of walking coma" (*Sower* 124). She rejects Lauren and becomes "scared and jumpy and sick to her stomach, and she keeps crying" (*Sower* 88). She abandons her responsibilities and leaves Lauren to pick up the pieces. Lauren's role as eldest child results in her becoming "competent and self-assured," and ultimately relegates her to the position of "nurse-child to those younger" and forces her to take on "major responsibility for their care" (Lewis 1975, 232). Outside the Olamina household, Lauren's neighbors, the Dunns, "have no money for prenatal care or an abortion" and the women's "maternal instincts didn't kick in," resulting in a child who is "scrawny and splochy with sparse, stringy hair" who is later killed by a stray bullet while unsupervised in the streets (*Sower* 33). Jane Donawerth recognizes the failed mother as a common theme in feminist dystopias, writing that these novels "present a future of repressive government, liberated gender roles, and dysfunctional families. The mother is not idealized … but, instead, is absent or positioned as antagonist" (49). Donawerth goes on to explain that "just as there are no essentially feminine traits, and so no ideally nurturing mothers, so, too, there are no essential categories of sexual identity (52). Ultimately, despite being the victim of the maternal failures of her mother and step-mother, Lauren is unable to break the cycle. As a mother herself, Lauren displays many of the same detachments and shortcomings that she was subjected to as a child.

In Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, the reader comes to understand Lauren's journals through the eyes of her now adult daughter, Larkin, who narrates the novel. Larkin, who can never see past her mother's faults, consistently characterizes Lauren as a selfish person and a bad mother, not dissimilar to Lauren's own mother and step-mother. Larkin explains that Earthseed was Lauren's "first 'child,' and in some ways her only 'child.'" "All Earthseed was her family. We never really were … She never really needed us" (443–444). As a mother, an unquestionably feminine role, Lauren, like her own mother and step-mother, falters. Motherhood serves as the most essentially feminine role that Lauren has ever had. She has been a sister, a daughter, and a partner, but none of these roles have required her to embrace her biological sex like motherhood. Mothers in feminist dystopias often fall short of the stereotypical vision of the perfect mother and, like her contemporaries, Lauren is no exception. Patricia Melzer (2002) argues that Lauren's lack of motherly instincts and failure to fully accept her responsibilities serves as a sign of Octavia Butler's rejection of the "white stereotypical ideal of the nurturing, self-sacrificing

mother within patriarchal society." Rather, Melzer argues, Butler's mother characters are committed to the survival of the entire community, rather than to the survival of their own children. This holds true for Lauren, who is never able to put her Earthseed responsibilities aside for her daughter. As Shaper, as survivor, and as passer, Lauren is both literally and figuratively unable to escape history and cannot revert from her performance of masculinity, her need to pass as male, and take on such an overwhelmingly feminine responsibility. If motherhood serves as the ultimate symbol of femininity, then Lauren's femininity has miserably failed.

Lauren, like most complex literary characters, is highly flawed. She is simultaneously good and bad at almost every role she plays: daughter, sister, friend, girlfriend, wife, mother, and religious leader. She is a trickster and an enigma, drawing on her ancestral history as well as her understanding of the performative nature of gender. Above all else, Lauren is a survivor by any means necessary. Thus, gender roles, male performativity, and various kinds of passing are all subordinated to or contributive to the goal of survival. As in all her novels, Butler's pragmatism prevails. In the *Parable* novels, gender expressions, performativity, and passing do not function as means of expressing an identity or are seen as essential parts of identity but are adopted, discarded, and shaped pragmatically in the interest of survival.

Notes

1. In-text citations to these works will reference each work's title.
2. Critics include Melzer, Levy, and Agusti.
3. Examples of members of other races passing as black have gained publicity in recent years; in 2015 we were introduced to Rachel Dolezal, who infamously passed as black and served as President of the Spokane, Washington, chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. (Sharfstein 2015), and Vijay Chokal-Ingam, brother of actress Mindy Kaling, who revealed he passed as black to gain admittance into medical school (Pearson 2015).
4. An additional facet of passing is that Lauren also has spent her entire life passing as a non-disabled individual. Lauren "disability passes" in order to hide her hyperempathy syndrome from others. According to Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel J. Wilson (2013, 1), disability passing "refers to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as 'normal.'" Similar to Lauren's attempt to hide her hyperempathy, disabled individuals frequently seek to hide their disability due to shame, fear, and other factors. Like a physical or intellectual disability,

Lauren's hyperempathy sometimes prevents her from doing what would typically be considered normal. As Lauren explains, her hyperempathy greatly increases her vulnerability; because of this, her passing is essential to her survival. In Lauren's community and beyond, hyperempathy is shameful and something to be looked down upon. Those with hyperempathy are frequently tortured and enslaved. While Lauren's friend, Harry, refers to her as manipulative after learning about her hyperempathy (*Sower* 178), and Lauren's disability passing certainly contribute to her status as trickster, these examples highlight Lauren's willingness to do absolutely anything in order to survive. This unmatched survival instinct is what ultimately leads her to pass as male on her northward journey.

5. Lauren also often continues to engage in activities that can be construed as masculine. She buys condoms at the store, producing them during sex with Bankole. She is told she talks "macho" (*Sower* 168), refuses to cry during emotional events, and appears "dangerous" to those who meet her (*Talents* 192). Lauren's regular shifts from actions that correspond to her biological sex to those that do not further reinforce the idea that her gender, all gender, is simply a performance. According to Clara E. Agusti (2005, 355), Lauren "understands her body as a site of political discourse and a fluid space where gender categories are not mutually exclusive."

References

Agusti, Clara E. 2005. The Relationship Between Community and Subjectivity in Octavia E. *Butler's Parable of the Sower. Extrapolation* 46 (3): 351–359.

Bennett, Juda. 1996. *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature*. New York: Peter Lang.

Brune, Jeffrey A., and Daniel J. Wilson. 2013. *Introduction to Disability and Passing: Blurring the Lines of Identity*, 1–12. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Butler, Octavia. 1993. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

———. 1998. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Warner Books.

Butler, Judith. (1990) 1999. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Octavia, Marilyn Mehaffy, and AnaLouise Keating. 2001. Radio imagination: Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment. *Melus* 26 (1): 45–76.

Dade, Lennell R., and Lloyd R. Sloan. 2000. An Investigation of Sex-Role Stereotypes in African Americans. *Journal of Black Studies* 30 (5): 676–690.

Davis, Thadious M. 2003. Introduction to *Passing*, by Larsen, vii–xxxiv. New York: Penguin.

Donawerth, Jane. 2000. The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope. In *Future Females, the Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. Marleen S. Barr, 49–66. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Eversley, Melanie. 2015. Whites Pass for Black to Gain Empathy, Experts Say in Wake of Dolezal Case. *USA Today*, June 14.

Fabi, M. Giulia. 2001. *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Foster, Frances S. 1982. Octavia Butler's Black Female Future Fiction. *Extrapolation* 23 (1): 37–49.

Gates, Henry Louis. 1988. A Myth of Origins: Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey. In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, 3–43. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Govan, Sandra Y. 2003. The *Parable of the Sower* as Rendered by Octavia Butler: Lessons for Our Changing Times. *Femspec* 4 (2): 239–258.

———. 2005–2006. Sometimes I Sit Here, and I Wonder . . . Octavia E. Butler Passed This Way Once . . . 1947–2006. *Obsidian III* 6/7(2/1): 12–13.

Hollinger, Veronica. 1999. (Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender. *Science Fiction Studies* 26 (1): 23–40.

Ickes, William. 1993. Empathic Accuracy. *Journal of Personality* 61 (4): 587–610.

Levy, Michael M. 1998. Ophelia Triumphant: The Survival of Adolescent Girls in Recent Fiction by Butler and Womack. *Foundations* 72: 34–41.

Lewis, Diane K. 1975. The Black Family: Socialization and Sex Roles. *Phylon* 36 (3): 221–237.

Melzer, Patricia. 2002. "All That You Touch You Change": Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents. Femspec* 3 (2): 31–52.

Pearson, Michael. 2015. Mindy Kaling's Brother: I Faked Being Black. *CNN*, April 8.

Sharfstein, Daniel J. 2015. Rachel Dolezal's "Passing" Isn't So Unusual. *New York Times Magazine*, June 15.

Smith, Valerie. 1998. Class and Gender in Narratives of Passing. In *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*, 35–60. New York: Routledge.

Stillman, Peter G. 2003. Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's Parables. *Utopian Studies* 14 (1): 15–35.

CHAPTER 12

Of Blood and Blackness in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*: On Post-Racial Utopias in Posthumanist Discourse

tobias c. van Veen

Fledgling is Octavia E. Butler's last novel, and due to her untimely passing in 2006, one of few stand-alone novels in her oeuvre. It is unique in that it combines vampiric tropes from gothic fiction—blood/life, night/feeding, death/afterlife—with the critical allegorical commentary on race, gender, and technology that is unique to her reworking of genre science fiction and fantasy. In this essay, I argue that Butler continues her project of questioning what it means to be "human" by exploring entangled questions of race, violence, and metaphysics. The metaphysical concepts and discourses of what it means to be human are never far from what Derrida pointed out as the ethnocentrism of the law, those policing operations that seek to adjudicate between subject and object, a "certain juridico-political calculation" of the who and the what (see Derrida 1995, 273). Vampires trouble such calculations over who, or what, they are, and thus the morality of their actions is likewise troubling to any ethics that grounds its

t. c. van Veen (✉)
ReImagining Value Action Lab (RIVAL), Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Canada

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1_12

metaphysics in the subject. Though vampires appear to inhabit this liminal in-between, neither entirely human nor animal, conventional interpretations—as to their morality and ultimately their place among the world of the living—are often grouped into two camps, the subhuman and the superhuman. Yet, the subhuman and the superhuman are not necessarily opposed. Indeed, vampires appear to be both/and: whether or not vampires feed from animalistic desire, and whether or not vampires are superhuman exemplars of the post-human undead, beyond good and evil, the vampire has long been the site of questioning the presumptions made by Western philosophy around who, or what, is an ethical subject, and who, or what, is human. If there is an essence to the vampire, it is this undecideability, and given Butler's focus on the liminal status of blackness, particularly black women, in societies rife with racism, the vampire presents a metatrope of blackness itself, as that liminal category of living labour, neither entirely human nor animal. Tropes of vampiric liminality often remain undecidable in popular lore, shapeshifting between the undead human and figures of animalia (usually the bat), just as the vampire is caught between night and day, an ex-human nightwalker who flees sunlight to embrace darkness. These tropes appear, on the one hand, as the superhuman, Nietzschean *übermensch*, unbelievably strong and powerful, who in numbers would overtake the Earth; while on the other hand, vampires are perceived, and often treated, as subhuman creatures driven by insatiable urges for blood, feeding on humans whose rational consent to a cosymbiotic relationship is perpetually called into question by Butler. Neither above nor below humanity, neither supremely superhuman nor entirely animal, vampires contain elements of both and yet are neither; to this end, they can already be read as allegorical for how Western culture perceives the return of the racialized other, as that living-on of postcolonial violence in the form of its living-dead remainders. Blackness, like the vampire, always returns as a living remainder of the colonial past, a past always embedded in the present unfolding of systemic racialization; and like vampires, black bodies are perceived as both attractive and repulsive, hyperviolent yet hypersexual, neither human nor animal, and yet, when needed to serve, both/and. Popular vampire lore often plays on this tension between mindless bloodlust and forlorn romanticism, between the horrors of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the redemption and dark comedy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Here, in Butler, this tension is split once again along the lines of racialization, between white and black Ina, in an allegory that

speaks to the legacy of racialized violence against African Americans, so much so that, I contend, no reading of *Fledgling* can ignore its ethical grappling with the history and injustice of white supremacy. Butler's gripping account of racial tensions between black and white Ina sets in motion a call to trace the deconstruction, in the novel, of the many signifiers of race—as im/purity, property, and possession—and of all those sociopolitical, cultural, and historical forces that would maintain the violent hierarchies of white over black, human over animal, self/other, us/them. Such forces would include the system of the law that, as Young (2015, 210) points out, situates *Fledgling* as a "critique [of] traditional American legal systems that repeatedly fail to address social injustices, particularly the injustice of slavery." The critical study of race, in its legal but also ontological and temporal dimensions, I contend, is key to understanding its *speculative* force in *Fledgling*—or rather, the politics, culture, and history of blackness in the United States are inseparable, in *Fledgling* and across Butler's oeuvre, from the speculative and shapeshifting forms of radical blackness that emerge throughout Butler's work. In this respect, the narrative of *Fledgling* suggests a profound meditation on the legacy of slavery and the ongoing effects of historical injustice, violence, and trauma upon black life—or rather, the impossibility of black "life," when living-on as undead remainder. *Fledgling* tells the familiar story of a white Ina family, the Silks, seeking to preserve the purity of *their* race—for all racism is absolute purification of the universal (race)—by murdering a black Ina family, that of the black female protagonist, Shori Matthews. The story is familiar because we all know this family story, because it is our story, in what we might call the "family history" of the West: the familiar story of destroying black families to preserve the white, in the colonial exercise known as nation-building. At stake in this reading, then, is an attempt to chart an Afrofuturist critique of posthumanism for its neglect of the categorical problematic of race (that it too often sidesteps the messiness of race in its rush to think species), by way of a deconstructive approach that would seek to provide insight into what a black posthumanism drawn from Butler's *Fledgling* might consist of and the systemic destruction of all indigenous families and territories, too. This familiar story attempts to erase black family lineage and memory, though it cannot help but entangle, in all its problematic resonances and implications, black and white bodies. It is at the point of this entanglement, between black/white, who/what, that Butler's work engages the realm of the speculative, inherent to

all fiction but amplified in fantasy and science fiction, that remains central to the Afrofuturist strategy of remaking race as a framework for transformation. In Butler, such black becoming is often a messy process of impure de-formations and miscegenations that threaten the absolute mastery of race itself. Given that antiblack racism is often perpetuated as a form of containment in which essentialized stereotypes enforce black unbeing, the Afrofuturist strategy of race is often to accelerate its stereotypy into modes of black alter-being that threaten the confines of typology to begin with. In Butler's *Fledgling*, such genetic entanglement is precisely what Shori's family is investigating, as they attempt to genetically alter the stereotype of the nightbound vampire by combining Ina with black human DNA, rich with the benefits of melanin. Shori is one of the first Ina hybrids to emerge who can tentatively walk unharmed by daylight. She is impurity personified, the melanin remix of a black female clan: an Ina vampire who walks by day, bred from black human DNA. But it is not just Shori herself who transgresses racial boundaries; it is also the way she treats the humans upon whom she feeds that so threatens the order of white supremacist Ina. Rather than treating humans as slaves upon which to feed, to Shori they become partners, lovers, friends, and family. And so the novel is also an allegory, writ large, of the problematic entanglements of post-slavery America, of the ways in which black and white folks tentatively define what it means to be partners, lovers, friends, and family. But in this case, the historical tables are turned: for it is a black female vampire defining these familiar relations, and Shori's vampiric powers of seduction and strength ensure that these entanglements are never entirely equal. And so here all the moral ambiguities of the (quasi)cosymbiotic relationship between humans and vampires, which is to say, the ethical stakes of this messy entanglement, makes Butler's work unmappable to any simple historical allegory, of slavery or otherwise. Nor is it reducible to a tale of vengeance, even if read as a reverse allegory itself to the parasitism of white culture upon black. What *Fledgling* sets in motion are the uncertain effects of this messy entanglement between human/vampire and white/black, and the stakes are nothing less than life and death, including for those already undead, the very survival of the vampire—which is to say, blackness—in the (post)modern world. At stake then too is the law, human law and Ina law, and how ethics is construed across unequal relations between species. While Butler's work, on the one hand, opens the question of a posthuman ethics that would entangle with species difference, it demands to be read, on the other hand, as allegory to the unequal and unjust application of the

law (or lack thereof) upon black populations, particularly in the United States. At stake then is the question of cosymbiosis—of how to shape mutually beneficial, *ethical* relationships across differences as marked as species without foregoing the messiness of race. While *Fledgling* is situated "in the wake" of racialized violence and its trauma, in its sociohistorical construction as a novel and in its fictive lifeworld, its speculative, Afrofuturist force is such that it imagines modes of co-symbiotic belonging that are in *excess*—though not purely, not wholly—of the impositions of black unbeing. The concerns Butler addresses are nothing less than what Christina Sharpe (2016, 50) sees as the task of critical race theory itself: "how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, the afterlife of property." These are themes that, once transformed through the speculative liminality of the black vampire, offer powerful insights on *how* "to inhabit and rupture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives" (Sharpe 2016, 50), which is to say, how the novel as a *black novel* and how themes and characters of blackness *in* the novel rupture the epistemologies and ontologies of what Paul Gilroy (2004) calls white raciology, which I here define as the discourse that upholds whiteness as the raceless race, and invisible face, of the human.

Butler's work is especially powerful in how it considers the contingency of the human from the positionality of a black female author historically excluded from its privileges. As Valorie Thomas (2003, 83) reminds us, the positionality of the author cannot be divorced from its textual effects, wherever "motif[s] of Black feminist cultural production" are at work. *Fledgling* furthers Butler's exploration of black female protagonists who are (or who become) not quite human, providing a speculative model for the study of the social and biological constructs of race, including the very "race" of the human species. In *Lilith's Brood* (aka the Xenogenesis trilogy), Lilith Iyapo gains physical powers from her cosymbiotic relationship with the alien Oankali; ethical dilemmas arise, however, in the modifications to binary human sexual relationships this requires (particularly the loss of heterosexual intimacy), as well as ethical debates among the Oankali as to how to treat violent humans, and as to whether human males, considered dangerous for their violent tendencies, can be likewise hybridized (see Butler 2007). In the *Parable of the* Sower series, Lauren Oya Olamina is born with "sharing," a hyperempathic trait that causes her to feel the pain and sensations of others, leading to ethical questions as to whether this trait *ought* to be extended to humanity as a whole as an actualization of Earthseed, her philosophy that calls for an ethical recognition of the

inherent divinity of all beings—a proposition somewhat problematically advanced by posthuman theorist Pramod K. Nayar, who sees it as a means to genetically eliminate racism (see Nayar 2014).[1] In this respect, *Fledgling* is crucial to understanding the relationship between discourses of Afrofuturism—that (re)imagine blackness in the future/past by way of science and speculative fiction but also cultural aesthetics, performance, spirituality, and music (see Womack 2013)[2]—and posthumanism, which critically re-evaluates Western anthropomorphism and its history of exclusionary humanism while proposing models for posthuman entanglements with the animal, machine, earth, and alien (see Braidotti 2013). At stake in this reading, then, is an attempt to chart an Afrofuturist critique of posthumanism for its neglect of the categorical problematic of race (that it too often sidesteps the messiness of *race* in its rush to think *species*), by way of a deconstructive approach that would seek to provide insight into what a black posthumanism drawn from Butler's *Fledgling* might consist of. Or, look like: which is to say, possibly not a post*human*ism at all, possibly an exhumanism or a feminist xenogenesis always from elsewhere, drawn from cosmic darkness. Such a reading calls for a critique of posthumanist tendencies that would *absolve* an ethical responsibility to addressing race, and that would see in Butler a "postracial" approach that would *resolve* race as-such. In order to address such tendencies, I turn to the work of Pramod K. Nayar, whose critical theses around posthumanism remain invaluable to thinking-through the legacy of Eurocentric humanism, which is why I subject them to a critical, yet affirmative, deconstruction. Following in the wake of black feminist studies,[3] I keep the focus on a critical race studies approach that emphasizes the necessity of discussing blackness, black culture, and black feminist protagonists in Butler's work, while nonetheless expanding the theoretical trope of the "critical" to the speculative insights to be gained from science fiction and fantasy, but also posthumanist studies as a whole, in what is becoming known as speculative race theory.[4]

By necessity, this essay is but one stage of a broader discourse staged around the fledgling field of Afrofuturist Studies, which, since the formative work of Kodwo Eshun (see Eshun 1999, 2003), Alondra Nelson (2002), Paul D. Miller (2004) and others has intersected political theories of posthumanism and accelerationism (for an overview, see van Veen and Anderson 2018). Indeed, Mark Dery's (1994, 180) essay that coined the term Afrofuturism emphasized how black speculative and science fiction responded to the concerns of "a community whose past had been deliberately rubbed out." These approaches have since developed into

Afrofuturism 2.0, a Pan-Africanist assemblage of perspectives that represent, in the words of Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (2015, vi–viii), "the emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages, migration, human reproduction, algorithms, digital networks, software platforms, bio-technical augmentation that are increasingly materialized vis-à-vis contemporary technological advances." At stake in Afrofuturism 2.0 is an Afrodiasporic constituency (re)imagining the conditions for an emancipatory black technogenesis, given the historical trajectory of the coevolution of human and machines, whereby what was once considered but a laboring machine, allegorized in the very invention of the term *robot*, now deconstructs and reconceives, through the effects of a radical black political imaginary, the very concepts, relationships, and definitioning of both human and technology.[5]

On the one hand, Afrofuturism is in part the critical denaturing of Eurocentric and white supremacist futurisms that have effected the climate crisis of this planet, pulling us into increasingly dystopic orbits, an apocalyptic yet entirely realistic scenario that haunts Butler's novels. On the other hand, Afrofuturism has coevolved alongside—and is increasingly read as a response to—the discourse now known as Afropessismism. Particularly in the work of Frank B. Wilderson III (2010), Jared Sexton (2016), and Orlando Patterson (1982), Afropessimism posits blackness as ontologically suspended (if not negated) in its unbeing and social death under (what appear to be) intractable conditions of white supremacy.[6] In response to but also anticipating the tenets of Afropessismism, Afrofuturism signals—in over 125 years of black speculative performance, music, and fiction—a shift toward what Valorie Thomas (2018) recognizes as the equanimity, sagacity, and balance of the black radical imaginary in the face of diasporic vertigo. Afrofuturism revalues black future visioning as necessary to the project of dismantling white ontology and its antiblack necropolitics, or what Derrida—who, I remind the reader, was a brown Algerian Jew, or, in Parisian racist slang, a *Pieds-Noir*—often called the "politics of the very worst" (see Derrida 1994). Derrida's focus on the intersection of ethnocentrism and Western metaphysics is crucial here, as it has established the parameters of critical posthumanist discourse and its deconstruction of the ethnocentric boundaries of human/animal, man/machine, who/what. At the same time, Derrida is often engaged throughout the work of Fred Moten (2017), whose deconstructive interruptions and improvisations of Afropessimist discourse provide a means to rethink Butler's evocations of black social death and trauma that otherwise would

be recaptured in the tendency toward neo-eschatology and finalism in Afropessimism. The bulk of my attention, however, will be deconstructing, in a critical vein, Pramod K. Nayar's posthumanist reading of *Fledgling*, so as to unfold what is at stake in the intersection of posthumanism and race, blackness and animalia, capitalism and violence. By way of critiquing Nayar's work on Butler, I further a critique of posthumanist tendencies that neglect critical race studies, emphasizing that not just Butler's work but all posthumanist theory needs to be discussed with close attention to blackness, black culture, and black feminism.

Prelude: Black Woman Is the Origin (ary Violence) of the World

Shori awakes in desperation and darkness: "I awoke to darkness. I was hungry—starving!—and I was in pain. There was nothing in my world but hunger and pain, no other people, no other time, no other feelings" (Butler 2005, 1). In Sun Ra's terms, Shori awakes both "on the other side of time" and "after the end of the world" (see Zuberi 2004). She arrives with no memory in this world. Or of this world. Her awakening is positioned as an absolute erasure of origin. She does not know what has happened, nor who (or what) she is. And already she is hungry, though she does not understand for what (or whom). At the beginning of *Fledgling* there is already a caesura between the who/what, played in the assumptions the reader makes of who or what the protagonist is—and who or what they eat. Yet the two terms are, from an anthropocentric perspective, which is to say the grounds of white Enlightenment humanism, reversed: Shori, as a what, is an Ina vampire, and what she eats is a who, a human subject. Mostly she feeds on blood, but in the novel's opening moments, drained of energy, hiding in darkness, Shori devours the first human that comes to her, scarcely conscious of the act, an act nonetheless of quasi-cannibalism—not cannibalism proper, for Shori is nonhuman. The novel opens with a scene that can be described, after Sharpe (2016, 14), as symbolizing "abjection from the realm of the human"—yet not entirely into the domain of the animal. Shori's hunger is described as a "violence," a hunger for "fresh meat," and what she catches she calls "my prey" (Butler 2005, 3). She thinks that which approaches her is an "animal"—a crucial signification that I will return to—and so,

> It fought me, tore at me, struggled to escape, but I had it. I clung to it, rode it, found its throat, tasted its blood, smelled its terror. I tore at its throat with my teeth until it collapsed. Then, at last, I fed, gorged myself on the fresh meat that I needed. (Butler 2005, 2)

Shori does not know that she has killed a human, one who has come to find her and help her. But already the themes of murderous, if not cannibalistic violence, blackness, and animalia are intertwined, suggesting that the novel is setting the stage for the ways in which the boundaries of who and what, subject and object, will become further blurred, marked by racialization and abjection from subjectivity, law, and community. The marks of violence that haunt the opening suggest how such blurring of boundaries already reinscribes the violence that bound them to begin with—that originary violence at the genesis of any law defining subject/object. It foreshadows a violence to-come wrought upon bodies that transgress the unwritten yet "traditional" social coda of the Ina, wrought into biological determinations of DNA and reinforced through cultural arguments, systemic acts of violence, and juridical procedures that exonerate whiteness and white violence—up to a point. The point of this breaking, in which whiteness in its problematic entanglement is countered by black resistance, will also be the very point at which any reading of the novel as allegory of slavery must encounter the transformational force of the novel's speculative blackness.

I. Enter the Ina: Posthumanism and Race

Through *Fledgling*'s character arcs and conflicts—including the Ina's constant need to feed from the blood of humans, which forcefully creates cosymbiotic relationships—Butler allegorizes the long history of slavery and its aftershocks, the "afterlife of property" including nonconsensual medical experimentation upon African Americans, interracial master/slave rape, and white "feeding" and cultural parasitism upon black cultures and bodies through tropes of genetic alteration, cosymbiotic parasitism, darkness as blackness, and the biosemiotics of blood, as mark of right by lineage and purity. At the same time, Butler furthers the proleptic dimensions of Afrofuturist reimaginings by contending with posthuman visions of a hybrid species of Ina, genetically engineered with melanin to walk during the day. Such hybridization is perceived as a threat, even as it seeks to ensure the very survival, and future, of the Ina as a species: "Ina racists . . .

don't like the idea that a good part of the answer to your daytime problems is melanin," says Wright, Shori's white, male human lover and cosymbiont (Butler 2005, 147). Butler inscribes the Ina future as an Afrofuture, where the future of vampires is to become black through technogenesis of melanin—for the Ina need to blend into the daylight, in a world become increasingly dense with surveillance, where there is now a lack of the space and privacy that previous centuries of Ina took for granted. As Susana Morris (2012, 153) writes, the novel's "Afrofuturism posit[s] that blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse, but in 'recovering the histories of counter-futures' . . . [*Fledgling*] insists that blacks fundamentally are the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society." Morris cites from Kodwo Eshun's influential essay on chronopolitics—the politics of temporality and its tellings, past and future—which explicates how Afrofuturism infiltrates new counter-futures into the present by recovering, reinventing, and repurposing the past (see Eshun 2003; van Veen 2016). Such an intervention into the whitewashed future, precisely by revising the past, comes by way of intervening in the Eurocentric vampire tropes of what Morris (2012, 146) calls the "enchanted icon of whiteness." Butler remakes vampiric cosymbiosis as an allegory for future interracial and interspecies relationships—an allegory that, we should note, does not escape imbalances of power, nonconsensuality, and parasitism. These latter speculative moves are far from utopic, yet at the same time they do not collapse utopia to the familiar cautionary tales of dystopia, offering instead a challenging, at times subtle, at other times graphically violent, investigation of what it might mean to live as/with the posthuman, in the shadow of race/ism, struggling for an uncertain future.

Among the vampires, the Ina are distinguished between white and black families, a divisioning that can be read as racialized effects of the two distinct interpretations of Nietzsche that have schismed the sociopolitical unfolding of the twentieth century and beyond: as either superhumans naturally destined to rule over the weak, with all its social Darwinism and biological racism, or as a novel hybridity of vampire and human, black and white, striving for a posthuman cosymbiosis that would evolve and adapt through ethical entanglement (and given Shori's pansexual feminism, certainly beyond the 19th century morality of "good and evil" that Nietzsche sought to surpass). The latter reading has been particularly emphasized in posthumanist approaches, such as that of Nayar's (2012, 796) reading of *Fledgling*, where "posthumanism does not see the human as the center of

all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of connections, linkages, and crossings in a context where species are seen as coevolving." To an extent, I agree that Butler's oeuvre as a whole, and certainly *Fledgling* in particular, explores various modes of species cosymbiosis, but Butler always does so with attention to the ways in which race intersects the ethical dilemmas such entanglements present. For entanglement is never entirely equal, which is precisely the importance of science fiction and fantasy to thinking-through such allegorizations of racial strife and colonialism that shape the future visionings of our world. For that which inscribes "our" world is precisely that which is in question—who or what claims such an authority to adjudicate the world and its future? There is always one species with an ethical obligation, what Derrida (1995, 286) calls an "excessive" and "incalculable . . . responsibility" in the unfolding of coexisting species differentiation, precisely because it holds the imbalance of power. In the West, this species is nominally that of the "human," but the human, traditionally codified as white-male (property-owner) is not a category open to all: it is precisely the site of the struggle of such (exceptional) power.

The protagonist of *Fledgling*, Shori Matthews, is a 53-year-old Ina, a vampiric species, inhabiting what appears to be the body of a ten-year-old African American girl. Shori's child body already challenges Western notions of which bodies hold power and what those bodies look like. In Shori's character, we find a breakdown of the boundaries between child/adult and human/nonhuman that critically reflects racist discourses on African American children as possessing superhuman or animal strength—thus unmaking them as children and marking them as targets for (social) death. Near the beginning of the novel, when Shori is struggling to regain her memory—a memory of her black maternal family and sisterhood that never returns—she asks Iosif, an Ina who knows her and has helped in her rescue, a series of questions. Shori begins:

> "Are we just another race?"
>
> "No. We're not another race, we're another species. We can't interbreed with them. We've never been able to do that. Sex, but no children."
>
> "Are we related to them? Where do we come from?"
>
> "I think we must be related to them," he said. "We're too genetically similar to them for any other explanation to be likely. Not all of us believe that, though. We have our own traditions—our own folklore, our own religions. You can read my books if you want to." (Butler 2005, 67)

Taken out of narrative context, this passage is striking for its troping of race and species, family and children, lineage and lost origins, and a cultural and genetic difference of the Ina that is cosymbiotic to humanity yet shrouded in its mysteries. What I wish to underscore is how Shori's questions could be those of any black child speaking to her parents—the difference being, however, that here racial difference has been allegorized, or rather genetically reified, to species difference. In this conversation, "race" is implicitly recognized as a social construct, and not as meaningful a difference as species. And yet as the conflict in the novel unfolds between white and black Ina, it is this racial difference—and not, as expected in a posthumanist reading that would downplay race, the species-difference between human and Ina—that becomes crucial. It is racial difference that becomes the catalyst of violence and murder, on the one hand, and the very possibility of species coevolution through technogenesis, on the other; in short, it is racial difference, and not purity, that will lead to the survival of the species.

The Black Animal: Violence of the Law

In the unfolding of *Fledgling's* beginning—a novel titled to suggest such beginnings, beginnings perhaps of a "race war" but also of a reconciliation amongst black and white Ina—one finds two moments of violence. I focus here on these moments because later in the novel, Shori will be judged for these and other violent (re)actions, her behaviour scrutinized before Ina law—just as the Silks will be. The first violence is forgotten: all that remains are cinders and ashes, as Shori discovers the remnants of an act of destruction that has left houses and bodies burnt beyond recognition, "burned remains" that are synecdoche to the "fragments" of her understanding of "what I saw" (Butler 2005, 4). This originary trauma and violence at the outset of the novel, resulting in Shori's now incomplete memory, is followed by a secondary act of violence: in order to survive her life-threatening injuries, she unknowingly eats a human friend who comes to rescue her. This scene of unimpeded devouring is depicted by Butler in such a way that its horror is not entirely clear until much later, and the guilt Shori feels is later weaponized against her by the Silks, the family of white supremacist Ina responsible for the death and destruction of Shori's family that—though we do not know it at the time—opens the novel. During the trial which decides the fate of the Silks and Shori alike, the Silks wield Shori's "animal" violence as evidence of her uncontrollable violence and

anger—calling her a "clever dog," and, through one of their human cosymbionts, a "goddamn mongrel cub" (238, 173)—despite the fact that it is the Silks who caused the murderous destruction of Shori's black mothers and sisters to begin with.[7] Shori herself realizes the racialized parallels being made, saying of a turn in the juridical process, "Perhaps the new representative will at least dislike me as one-individual-to-another, and not as man-to-animal" (239). At stake here are two traumatic themes of African American history—the intentional destruction, by white colonizers, of black culture, history, and family life, and the dehumanization of African Americans as subhuman animalia, thus justifying all manners of absolute violence. What I want to underscore first, here, is the significance of questions of race, not only in the abstraction of its structural position but in the particularities of African American culture and history, to explicating the novel's posthumanist entanglements with species difference. Second, I want to emphasize a trope that will be furthered throughout *Fledgling*, as racial conflict shapes the central narrative—that if the Ina are a different species, then the "racial" difference of black to white Ina is equivocated, *by the raciological discourse of white Ina*, to human/animal difference. Or to put it differently: at the liminal undecideability of the who/what in Western metaphysics, which is to say, the vampire, one finds the entanglement of the animal—that being whom we as humans eat yet keep and adore as pets while both objectifying and romanticizing the purity of an untechnical "nature." This act of animalization in the novel partakes of a schema that pervades Western metaphysics, shaping the dehumanizing effects of raciology—that either nonwhites are subhuman, and thus akin to animals, justifying their enslaved treatment; or, for the same reasons, animals deserve their liberation, just as nonwhites do, or have (I will return to this problematic equivocation found in animal studies below). And here in *Fledgling*, just like the red herring reversal of race to species, one finds a reversal of the human/animal hierarchy: it is humans who are eaten by the Ina, usually by way of a (problematic) consent through the drinking of blood, but sometimes, out of sheer and tragic necessity, devoured whole, in a bloody, quasi-cannibalistic sacrifice. The structural position here of sacrifice forms a deconstructive interrogation of the who/what distinction in Western metaphysics. In an interview entitled "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," Derrida (1995) discusses the privileges of "man" or *Dasein* in Heidegger and Levinas, seeing as condition for the Western metaphysics of the "subject" the general logic of what he calls "carnophallogocentrism," or the ways in which the

presencing of power (logocentricism) is upheld through phallic modes of incorporation (devouring sacrifice, but also occupying, colonizing, possessing). Derrida (1995, 279–280) links "the question of the 'who' to the question of 'sacrifice,'" pointing out that the prohibition upon murder—the putting-to-death-of-the-other—is only marked "on human life." For all others, including those deemed the structural category of animalia, sacrifice is "putting to death as denegation of murder" (283). Though there is animal sacrifice, their sacrifice is not murder. Ethics is absolved in the putting-to-death of animalia, which is why raciological discourse reduces the other to (at least) subhuman status, if not that of sacrificial animalia itself. Thus in Western metaphysics, one finds a typology of races (and racisms) that justify all manner of enslavement, occupation, and colonization of nonwhite peoples, as notably found in Kant and Hegel (see Bernasconi and Cook 2003; McCarthy 2009). Raciology, from this perspective of the *logos* of race as an ordering of metaphysical violence, *internalizes* species-difference by dehumanizing some humans as sub/inhuman—and so they are sacrificed, in gas chambers, plantations, and work camps. Such is the anthropomorphic privilege of eating meat that intersects the absolute violence of raciology. That this is an unequal intersectionality, and not an equivocation or parallel between nonhuman categories of race and animal, I will return to below. But this raciology is not necessarily one of internalization of a species-difference that would *justify* its denegation of murder (in short: while there is no *natural law* justifying the putting-to-death of animals, even if it would *appear* as such, particularly after-the-fact, neither is racialized murder merely the transference of this "sacrifice" from species to race, or vice-versa, as often assumed in posthumanist theory). Rather, the violence of sacrifice, of carnophallogocentrism, renders imprecise any precise origin (and thus boundary) of violence between race and species to begin with. It is here that a quadratic semiotics emerges in *Fledgling*, in the structure of sacrifice that *appears* to sanction the white supremacist murder of Shori's family, insofar as it *appears* as the binary inversion of Shori's sacrifice of her human friend in order to survive. The appearance of sacrificial equivalence between race/species is precisely the effect of the discourse of raciology that would seek its justification. Yet this does not mean there is no entanglement. If sacrifice means eating-each-other (requiring putting-to-death), entanglement means eating-with-each-other, which still requires figuring out who/what to eat. Sacrifice remains, but entangled sacrifice means living-on with the remainder. For white supremacist Ina, the black Ina are not *proper* Ina,

and here the metaphysics of the *proper*, of who/what is proper to the Ina *species*, underscores the constitution of a *racial* difference that *supersedes* species difference, sanctioning the murder of some Ina by others. Yet even this difference is unstable in Butler's careful rendition: this "racial" difference will be construed as a genetic species difference, precisely through the introduction of melanin into the Ina species, in an effort, no less, to save the Ina and allow them to move about by day.

The entanglement of race/species here is inescapable in this moment, the very moment of sacrifice, in the *ex nihilio* of a protagonist who knows not what or who she is, a being without memory, suffering on the one hand the trauma of absolute erasure and yet that *strange* Nietzschean lack of remorse, for she knows what she has done yet cannot mourn those whom she does not remember. Strange, because Ina are already liminal beings between dark and light, life and death, a species already uncanny in that they appear human, yet are not quite human, feeding upon humanity like a domesticated food supply. Butler's pragmatic description of human–Ina cosymbiont practices, from culinary feeding off the flesh to the love bites of bedroom intimacy, furthers Nicholas Royle's (2003, 23) observation of how the uncanny is "bound up with analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called 'everyday life.'" The uncanniness of a race/species difference takes place, here, in domesticated scenarios just as it occupies "the Silk's uncanny performance of nineteenth-century, eugenic-based racism" (Young 2015). It is also here that blackness and race exceed any sense of tokenistic representation, insofar as the identity of blackness is not just about Shori being a "black character," but that blackness is unfolded as precisely that which threatens the white social order of Ina. Where and how race/species intersect reveals an unstable semiotic violence; the terms themselves are slippery, just as today discourses seeking to avoid "race" deploy "ethnicity," as if the latter somehow escaped the discourse of raciology. Blackness, as the unfolding of the *différance* of race/species difference in the novel—*différance* as that nonpositive movement forever differing and deferring precisely as condition to, yet destabilizer of, meaning (see Derrida 1984)—allegorizes African American experience of white supremacy, but is also a necessary, structural condition of thinking-through the problematics of species/race difference germane to posthumanism. Such would be a responsibility-to-come for any critical posthumanism that, in Derrida's (1995, 273) words, thinking of the intersectionality of the animal and the subject, would be "well beyond humanity" and that would "call for a different kind of rights … prescribing, in a

different way, more responsibility." Such a responsibility would call for addressing the sacrificial entanglement of race/species.

My argument up to this point has emphasized the entanglement of race/species and the complex scenarios of sacrificial violence that mark their inseparability in *Fledgling*. I now want to turn to Pramod K. Nayar's (2012, 797) reading of *Fledgling*, which seeks to emphasize its posthumanist traits of human–Ina cosymbiosis:

> *Fledgling* is the story of Shori Matthews, the sole, now amnesiac, survivor of a murderous attack on her family. Shori is an Ina—vampires that have coevolved with humans on earth for centuries. The Ina have been genetic experimenters, and Shori, a product of such an experiment, can tolerate sunlight. The Ina are "another species" that cannot "interbreed with humans" (67) and are humanity's "cousin species" (67). Shori, the vampire-human hybrid, is rescued by a man, Wright, who becomes physiologically and emotionally addicted to her when she bites him. Later, Shori moves into a community of Ina along with Wright and her other human "symbionts." A Council of Judgment of Ina families is summoned to sort out the thorny issue of Shori's family's massacre. During the Council Shori's symbiont, Theodora, is murdered. The Silk family, which is behind the attacks, argues for the purity of Ina blood and against genetic experiments such as Shori. The Council punishes the Silk family by taking away its unmated sons. The other Ina look forward to the time that Shori will bear children, so that her profitable mutations will be passed on to future generations of a hybrid species.

Nayar concludes his summary by pointing out that Shori is a "profitable" bearer of future Ina children. As I will explicate, Nayar presupposes a capitalist valuation of life that, I suggest, is integral to his reading of human–Ina cosymbiosis in *Fledgling* as exemplary of "biological citizenship." Before commenting further, I would like to cite Fred Moten (2003, 16), who points out the peculiar relationship, forged in shackles, between black maternal production and the (re)production of the material—though one might also say, materiel—of slavery:

> This is to say that enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a being maternal that is indistinguishable from a being material. But it is also to say something more. And here, the issue of reproduction (the "natural" production of natural children) emerges

> right on time as it has to do not only with the question concerning slavery, blackness, performance, and the ensemble of their ontologies but also with a contradiction at the heart of the question of value in its relation to personhood that could be said to come into clearer focus against the backdrop of the ensemble of motherhood, blackness, and the bridge between slavery and freedom.

It is through the lens of Moten, connecting black maternality to capitalist materiality and the devaluation of black women to the value system of racialized capitalism itself, that I wish to re-read Nayar's posthuman reading of Butler's *Fledgling*. I note absences: Nayar never once mentions that Shori is black. Nor that the Silks are Aryan white supremacists. Rather, the emphasis is upon her black family as "genetic experimenters," and she is later characterized "for being an exception to the species (Ina) norm: she is a modified vampire, the radical other of the vampire species (itself the other to the human)" (Nayar 2012, 798). It is as if blackness and all semiotics of blackness and indeed even the signifier "black" have been erased from Nayar's posthumanist discourse. Indeed, the word "black" only appears twice in Nayar's essay (twice more in the endnotes), and in both instances, to emphasize the "racial" *acceptance of black Ina*—in itself, a red herring to Butler's allegorization of black liberation struggles. Here is Nayar (2012, 806):

> Brook offers Wright the following insight: "they're [Ina] not human . . . they don't care about white or black" (162). All this seems to indicate recognition of Shori's Ina (that is, species) ethics, despite her hybrid biology.

Nayar's reading focuses upon a posthumanist trope of resolving species difference with human/nonhuman cosymbiosis and ignores the racial difference among the Ina as the primary catalyst of sacrificial violence, and indeed, as the central narrative of the novel itself. Nayar reiterates the quote above, a few pages later:

> This rejection of one kind of biological racism—we can think of it as epidermal, based on skin color—of the variety practiced by humans ensures that Ina constitute a postracial world. (The human attacker is the one who calls Shori a "dirty little nigger bitch," 173.) (Nayar 2012, 812)

Nayar claims that epidermal biological racism has been rejected by the Ina to constitute a postracial world. We already know that the Ina certainly do

care about white/black; Shori's family is murdered not only for their genetic experimentation with human DNA, but because they tarry with the melanin of *black* DNA. Further, a closer reading reveals that no "postracial world" of the sort can be "ensured," because Nayar omits or misreads the context to the citation he provides, falsely attributing to the "human attacker" what is, in fact, the will of a vampire. While it is Victor, a human, who calls Shori a racial epithet, he is under symbiont control of the Silk family, and Victor himself realizes that the words are not his own. Here is the citation in context, with Victor speaking to Shori:

> "Dirty little nigger bitch," he said reflexively. "Goddamn mongrel cub." Then he gasped and clutched his head between his hands. . . . It was clear that he was in pain. His face had suddenly gone a deep red. "Didn't mean to say that," he whispered. "Didn't mean to call you that." He looked at me. "Sorry. Didn't mean it."
>
> "They call me those things, don't they?"
>
> He nodded.
>
> "Because I'm dark-skinned?"
>
> "And human," he said. "Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina. That's not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn't let you and you . . . your kind . . . your family . . . breed." (Butler 2005, 173)

Not only is epidermal racialization a textual problematic that undermines any postracial reading of the Ina in Butler's novel, what is at stake here are multiple levels of racialization—insofar as it is a process of sacrificial desubjectification and objectification—that continue to blur the boundaries between species and race. Race is more than skin deep, which is why when Fanon spoke of epidermalization, he correlated it to the white *objectification* of blackness, at the level of ontology, of being itself (see Fanon 2008; van Veen 2017). Here, blackness signifies the flesh of the human species but it also signifies the structural position of race as that which is not just "dehumanized," but *desubjectified*, and thus rendered for sacrifice through the denegation of murder.

Given the entanglement of race/species in the above passage—which is not difficult to decipher—it remains curious why Nayar displaces race to a human problem when it evidently remains, in Butler, a problem for the Ina too. When race is mentioned in Nayar's analysis, it is subsumed under a general, and I contend problematic, turn to Agamben's (1998) theory of bare life—a pervasive, useful, yet universalizing political theory from an

entirely Eurocentric positioning that is seen by Nayar as encompassing "*all* politics" (Nayar 2012, 797, my emphasis). This critique of Agamben's deployment in posthumanist discourse is one that I share with Alexander Weheliye (2014, 35), who, in *Habeas Viscus*, writes that "Agamben imagines the field of bare life as eradicating divisions among humans along the lines of race, religion, nationality, or gender … If bare life embodies a potential dimension of contemporary politics as such, we might ask, then, why certain subjects are structurally more susceptible to personifying its actualization." Weheliye also asks why the concentration camp is the only paradigmatic example—rather than, say, the slave ships of the Middle Passage or the plantation. What I here have called raciology—after Paul Gilroy's (2004) use in *Between Camps* to signal the Foucaultian *discourse* of race in all its material exercises of power, by way of the metaphysics of the *logos*—is complementary to Weheliye's (2014, 3) theory of "racializing assemblages" (primarily of white supremacy) that "discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans," thereby barring "nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west." In an Afropessimistic vein, Weheliye writes that blackness "designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot" (3). While I am critical of how Nayar's discourse obfuscates race, I agree that Butler's novel suggests posthuman modulations of cosymbiotic belonging and subjectivity—though, unlike Nayar, I contend that *Fledgling* is inseparable from a critical discussion of race, even as the novel affirms an Afrofuturist opening to reconceiving black subjectivity beyond the constraints of white racializing assemblages. I would like to suggest that Butler's troubling of species/race suggests alternative conceptions of blackness as an emergent technogenesis, coevolving not in utopian abstention from racializing assemblages but rather precisely through, among, and around them, signaling a denegationary black accelerationism of sorts—racing but not erasing race—in an Afrofuturist reading.

Nayar's turn to Agamben is problematic here as it produces an indiscriminate universalism of the human that absolves racialization (in the novel and in general), and it ignores the ways in which the troubled ambiguity of the species/race difference in *Fledgling* gestures toward different modalities of the human and of the (post)humanist project (which we can allegorize to the Ina), as found, for example, in the work of black Caribbean feminist Sylvia Wynter (see Wynter 2003). But most problematic is how

deploying Agamben's discourse—at least without a significant deconstruction of its universalizing premises by way of a critical race theory approach—dissolves a priori blackness to bare *animal* life. At stake here once again is an equivocation of blackness to animalia. Nayar argues that Shori's character trajectory is that of "the straining toward this 'good life' from a 'bare life' [*zoe*]"—a "straining" from its origins in *zoe* toward a Platonic "good" that requires as its condition, then, the massacre of her black family, mothers and sisters, by the Silk family. Blackness is thus construed as somehow an originary deficiency qua bare life, and the raciological *conditions* that led to Shori's emergence in a state of bare life are entirely dismissed.

Nayar turns to Kaushik Saundar Rajan's (2006) theory of "biovalue" to situate what he argues is a thematic of biological citizenship in the novel. It is in a discussion of biological citizenship that Nayar will again seek to position race. Biovalue is a concept already produced under a logic of property, of what is *possessed* by a subject. Nayar reads the explication of biological citizenship through the work of Rose and Novas, writing that "Citizens, Rose and Novas argue, increasingly understand themselves in biological terms, and see themselves as possessing 'biovalue'" (Rose and Novas, qtd. in Nayar 2012, 797). It is unclear why Ina ought to be thought under the rubric of *citizenship*, and indeed of property and possession to begin with, given the cognitive estrangement already at work in a vampire fantasy grappling with questions of race, consent, and violence. But something *akin* to citizenship—and *kin* is perhaps a better word, as it echoes throughout Butler's work, as in *Kindred* (sounded-out as *kin-dread*)—takes place among the archaic and violent punitive measures of the Ina trial. And certainly the violence of the logic of the proper, as obliteration of that which would denature the myth of natural purity, and as structural to capital, as the possession of the other as servile object, is at stake. It is here that race is mentioned in Nayar's essay, but only as a subset of belonging that goes undistinguished from ethnicity, by defining biovalue as "a feature of an economy where the properties of life, from mere living to the reproductive/regenerative, are enmeshed within the systems of global financial, and therefore political, exchanges so that the state and business corporations invest in specific characteristics of particular species, races, or ethnic groups" (797). Biovalue is here attenuated to the logic of property and exchange proper to the biopolitics of global capitalism. What I want to point out is how biovalue is championed as a means to biological citizenship—one sees oneself as possessing "biovalue"—and not critiqued for how subjectivity is now contained, defined, marketed,

and traded precisely through "the systems of global financial, and therefore political, exchanges," a phrasing that would give pause when considering the pivotal (if not founding) role of slavery to capitalism. Rather than celebrating biovalue for its universalizing of subjectivity under a logic of capitalist self-possession, I would rather point out the violence of race, and racialization, as a necessary condition to biovalue. Indeed, an alternate reading of *Fledgling* now appears, wherein biovalue is vis-à-vis the historical and economic necessity of structural racism and slavery to global capital, or what Cedric J. Robinson (2000) calls "racial capitalism." Racial capitalism is (always) already possessed by biovalue: that's precisely what it has always exchanged for bare life, dealt out as the necropolitics of death, and unevenly distributed through racializing assemblages that target blackness.

The second instance of the word "black" continues Nayar's posthumanist reading of the "postracial:"

> Part of her new biological citizenship as a hybrid means that Shori would, like the Ina, reject any kind of race- or species-based discrimination. No racism exists among the Ina: "The Ina weren't racists. . . . Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because the human races meant nothing to them. They looked for congenial human symbionts wherever they happened to be, without regard for anything but personal appeal" (148). And later Brook says to Wright: "they're not human . . . They don't care about white or black" (162). This rejection of one kind of biological racism—we can think of it as epidermal, based on skin color—of the variety practiced by humans ensures that Ina constitute a postracial world. (The human attacker is the one who calls Shori a "dirty little nigger bitch" 173.) Shori, the Ina hope, with her dark skin approximating to the African American, will not only be postracial but also post-species and the inaugural moment of a whole generation: "Ina families all over the world were happy about my family's success with genetic engineering. They hoped to use the same methods to enable their future generations to function during the day" (133). (Nayar 2012, 812)

I quote at length here because Nayar's reading of Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling* performs its own kind erasure of blackness that mirrors the violence of erasure that Shori herself suffers. The novel is read as a postracial fantasy, ignoring both the ongoing and unfolding violence perpetuated by the Silk family, and the turmoil that the novel's end produces. While Shori has her supporters, so do the Silks. The racialized struggle is far from over. There is by no means closure nor stability to Shori's position, nor that of

the Ina. In Shori's words, though punishment has been served, there does not appear to be justice: "What about my mothers and sisters, my fathers and brothers? What about my memory? They were all gone. The person I had been was gone. I couldn't bring anyone back, not even myself. I could only learn about the Ina, about my families. I would restore what could be restored. The Mathews family could begin again. The Petrescu family could not" (Nayar 2012, 309–310). Far from "ensuring" a "postracial world" of the Ina, Shori and her symbionts, along with the Ina families that supported her—some massacred, such as the Petrescus, by the Silks—must now live with the memory of racialized violence. Further, the pending threat of the Silk family remains, whose perpetrators are not put to death. Though their punishments include dismemberment, the healing powers of the Ina ensure that they will recover, unlike Shori's memory, or those murdered. And though the punishment calls for "three hundred years" of peace—a timeline that resonates, uncannily, with that of the Triangular Trade—along with the exile of the Silks, one can speculate that had Butler lived long enough to write a sequel, she might have explored how such racial violence plays out over the *longue durée* of Ina life, where vampires live to be centuries old. In short, the memory of such violence, and the racialized desire for vengeance, remains. Just as it does in our lifeworld.

Nayar's posthumanist discourse ignores race at its own peril, inscribing its function as a secondary belonging rather than situating it as the core tension, as that very transcendental signifier that adjudicates the power relations of what Derrida calls the metaphysics of ethnocentric violence—in short, of who/what decides who is a who or what. This transcendental signifier governs the (social) system while (falsely, in its delusion) elevating itself outside it, situating itself as the sole arbiter of *who* is to live and thus *what* is to die, beyond reproach of its own ontological questioning. What is at stake in *Fledgling* is the force, manifested as violence, of any raciological hierarchy, what Derrida in *Of Grammatology* identified as the empirical violence of attempts to subdue and control the effects of *différance* through "evil, war, indiscretion, rape; which consists of revealing by effraction the so-called proper name, that is to say originary violence [that violence of the "proper and the property" without foundation that would elevate white supremacist Ina to the role of transcendental arbiter of life and death]" (Derrida 1997, 112). In an ethnocentric context—and this context is inescapable, I contend, as does Derrida, preventing us from any easy pretense of a postracial worlding—what is at stake here is

"classification as denaturation of the proper, and identity as the abstract moment of the concept" (112). Ina Blackness here is precisely that which is classified as different qua denatured from its white supremacist "nature," as genetic origin of origins, difference by way of a denatured modulation of *tekhne* that would call into question the naturalization of Ina whiteness itself. What *Fledgling* unfolds is the *différance* of a genetically modified melanin blackness that proffers new modes of belonging and living, in a nonhuman life that already perforates the naturalization of life/death—as if the Afropessimist "afterlife of slavery" is here rendered material in the very figure of the vampire itself. Melanin blackness allows the Ina to evolve—from the dark of night to the daywalker, and it is this *différance* of Ina blackness that is a threat to the established order of Ina whiteness. Race and the order discourse of raciology, taking into consideration the effects of empirical violence that *found* white supremacist Ina culture, is precisely the key struggle of the novel, as the Ina trial between Shori, her supporters, and the white supremacist Silk family demonstrate. As we read the novel, we are led to ask: will the Ina evolve not only genetically, incorporating melanin sisters into Ina blackness, but culturally? Blackness here is that dangerous supplement—and here I echo Fred Moten in his many improvisations upon Derrida's critique of ethnocentrism as integral to the critical mode of deconstruction that affirms its othering, its excentric other that threatens the stable orbit of any hidden order of violence (i.e., until it unfolds into the light of the obscene, of murder). This unfolding of otherwise hidden racial violence begins with the attempted cover-up of a massacre—one that also cannot be thought without its allegorical function to a long history of such racialized attacks and massacres, notably the Zong massacre of 1781, in which at least 130 enslaved Africans were thrown overboard, as "insured cargo" (see Baucom 2005). Further, it continues with violent tragedy after tragedy, as Silk-employed armed assassins indiscriminately murder—precisely because of the need to discriminate, *with prejudice*—Shori's Ina supporters and symbionts. They do so in ways that are emblematic of white supremacist violence against African Americans, and that resonate in the novel with the fiery imagery of the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi fascism—by torching and burning down their family houses, in their sleep.

In Conclusion: Signifyin' on Shori and Capitalism

Shori, as a black female vampire, signifies upon tropes of white capitalism as the parasitical model par excellence of vampirism. In *The Things That Fly In The Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*, Giselle Liza Anatol (2015, 3) speaks of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, writing that in charging

> Western "civilization" with hypocrisy, Césaire describes the "appetite" of capitalists such as the "merchant," the "adventurer and the pirate" (10), whose greed—a type of vampiric thirst—exported all items of value from the colonies, sucking the land dry of raw materials and the laborers dry of their physical efforts, energy, and wealth. Césaire also aligned later colonizers' actions with that of the vampire. Apparently invoking the European literary tradition, the Martinican writer referred to "these Gothic invasions, this steaming blood" (19) of brute military force, as well as a sort of vampiric conversion or transformation of the colonized since, rather than truly educating their subjects, colonizers were involved in the "hasty manufacture of [. . .] subordinate functionaries."

The figure of Shori as black female vampire is at once ironic as it is (re) doubling—first because she reverses the parasitism of the colonizer/colonized relationship (as well as in its white-colonizer, black-colonized schema), but also because of Shori's positionality as female. Yet the reversal is neither simple nor complete—thus its irony, an irony that I ready as uncanny as it is structural to the allegories of racial capitalism it speaks to. As the very figuration of (re)doubling and (re)production that cannot be allegorized in its totality, the black female vampire personifies that insatiable need, that hunger and violence of capitalism itself, to engorge itself, to feed upon the living. Yet, Shori does not (simply) become the colonizing vampire, the slave become the master. It is here that critical posthumanism, and Nayar's posthumanist reading of *Fledgling*, affirms a valuable aspect of the novel's Afrofuturist imaginary. Her relationships with her humans is cosymbiotic—and far more so than those of the white supremacist families of the Silks, who seek to control and punish their humans, allegorizing the psychological terrorism common to plantation slavery (see Genovese 1976). Rather than a dialectical reversal, in which the positionality of the terms remains intact, the figure of the black female vampire displaces the inherent violence of parasitism situated in the vampiric. Martin, a human cosymbiote with the Williams family, notes how upon

first being introduced to and living with the Ina, that "The whole thing was too weird for me. Worse, it *sounded more like slavery* than symbiosis. It scared the hell out of me" (Butler 2005, 204, my emphasis). Yet unlike other human symbiotes, particularly those of the Silks—and note here the language of possession—Martin is given the choice to join. Not yet physically addicted to the secretion of the Ina, he decides to stay, for psychological reasons that, perhaps, do not fully disavow the remainders of slavery to be found in Ina cosymbiosis, no matter how "ethically" practiced. There is a remainder of a relationship of parasitism to violence, just as any posthumanist reading of *Fledgling* as postracial utopia must deal with the remainder of race. Martin says: "But psychologically . . . Well, I couldn't forget it. I wanted it like crazy. Hell, I thought I was crazy. All of a sudden, I lived in a world where vampires were real. I couldn't tell anyone about them. Hayden had seen to that" (Butler 2005, 204). Once inducted into the secret of cosymbiosis, the psychological dependence upon that life-world almost precludes choice, and demands secrecy. Further elements of control remain: Hayden has ensured that Martin cannot speak of the Ina, by way of the Ina's technique of vampiric hypnosis through which human memories can be erased and reconstructed through the act of vampiric feeding. In this complexity of power relations that should trouble any posthumanist fantasy of postracial vampires, I want to reiterate that the parasitical figure of capital is not wholly reversed by repositioning it in the figure of the black female vampire, just as its violence is displaced, but not negated (one could even think of human consent to vampiric addiction as a kind of displacement of this violence). As in all of Butler's novels, the utopic imagining of an anticapitalist, antiracist, antisexist future is always displaced at the moment of its realization—even as its outlines remain, precisely through the efforts and struggles of black women who cultivate, in their lived struggle, this Afrofuturist imaginary by way of a transformative becoming, the effects of which upend social relations of power, time and space. In Butler's displacement of postracial utopia, we approach the dryness of a critical, even Afrofuturist assessment of human history and its future prognosis: that violence cannot be erased, only mitigated; that addictions cannot be eliminated, only managed. Cosymbiosis and post-capitalism, for Butler, do not negate the racialized violences and enslavements of capitalism; rather, they redistribute their effects just as they redistribute (and thus redefine) responsibility, as we seek to negotiate shifting boundaries of race/species, of who/what is sacrificed, but not murdered.

The way in which the figure of the black female vampire personifies capital calls to mind Gates Jr. discussion of signifyin(g), whereby the rhetorical strategies of black vernacular and its trickster tropes undertake "ironic reversal[s] of a received racist image" (Gates 1988, CH2). Shori, in this sense, is signifyin' on the white vampire tradition as *emblematic* of capitalism, as remarked by Césaire but also, infamously, by Marx. Yet the operation of signifyin' here does not merely reverse that which it receives. Capitalism, even racial capitalism—and following Williams (1994), all capitalism is racial capitalism—is a historical process and cannot be contained to the kind of figure that is a racist image, such as, in Gates' infamous example, the simian. Racial capitalism in its ideological functioning—producing not the veil that hides reality, but the reality that produces desire for the veil, as Žižek (2008) would have it—is that ensemble of material racialized relations that produces racist images perpetuating materialized racial hierarchies—which is to say, it is generative of racist ideology, and not just in the sense of racist discourse(s), but in the way in which capitalism (and thus its exploitations, its historical cosymbiosis with slavery) appears as "natural" in its reification of slavery. Thus, Shori as *black* vampire speaks to the afterlife not just of property, but to the afterlife of a black *maternality* not subsumed to material production, in all its rebellious signifyin' that refuses its containment to reproducing the laboring means of profit. Such refusal speaks to black posthumanist trajectories of cosymbiotic belonging that call for more responsibility in not absolving race but remembering its erasure. Re-reading Gates, at the close of this essay, one is struck by his turn to science fiction as the means to think this affirmative space of black signifyin(g), a space not just semiotic but truly universal, not as conceptual hegemony but as partaking of the stars and stuff of what Sun Ra called the "Outer Darkness." I close with Gates to think of how the coordinates of Butler's Afrofuturist feminism can be read, intersecting yet challenging discourses such as posthumanism that strive for ethical entanglements—for like the Ina, Afrofuturism exists as a "simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe [that] exists within the larger white discursive universe, like the matter-and-antimatter fabulations so common to science fiction" (Gates 1988, CH2).

Acknowledgments I would like to thank the students of my 2016 and 2018 seminars on "Posthumanism (and the Race for Utopia)" at Quest University, and editor Martin Japtok for his infinite patience.

Notes

1. In a forthcoming article, I critique Nayar's proposition for suggesting that white supremacy can only be overcome by genetic engineering, which has the effect of reifying cultural racism into biological determinations while excusing those who espouse it through an innate naturalization (see van Veen forthcoming). See also Sami Schalk's (2018) *Bodyminds Reimagined*, which reads Lauren's hyperempathy through the lens of disability, as both literal and metaphoric trait. I agree with Schalk's call for "a more contextualized approach to [*Parable*'s] complex and generative representation of disability" that would neither overemphasize nor underappreciate its effects while situating its discussion in the sociohistorical framework of gender and race, though I would likewise question whether the meaning of hyperempathy, even through the lens of disability studies, is that it "challenges cultural assumptions about the supposedly inherent value of a technologically-created, disability-free future" (109), and not just because Butler's future is dystopic, but because here the value of a critical posthumanist approach (including Nayar's) might likewise question whether "disability" is, crucially, the key concept under which to think hyperempathy. While the effects of hyperempathy are "disabling," as Schalk points out (and thus I agree that any analysis must address disability, and disability studies), they are just as beneficial as a novel, evolutionary ability, and are deployed strategically by Lauren to survive. Thus, thinking beyond "dis-ability" or at its speculative limits to concepts of transformation, mutation and cosymbiotic evolution might be beneficial to denormativize the radical and speculative force at work in Butler's evocation of hyperempathy.
2. I draw here from Ytasha Womack (2013, 9), who provides several useful definitions of Afrofuturism, notably as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation," in which "Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future" by combining "elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs."
3. Notably bell hooks (1984), Sylvia Wynter's (1979) "Sambos and Minstrels," and, among others, the work of McKittrick (2015), Sharpe (2016), and Thomas (2018).
4. See, for example, various approaches to conceiving the relationship between race and the speculative—and thus speculating upon race/racing speculation—in Richard Iton's (2010) *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, André Carrington's *Speculative Blackness*, Francesca T. Royster's (2012) *Sounding Like a No-No*, and Reynaldo Anderson and Reynaldo Anderson and Clinton R. Fluker's (2019) edited volume *The Black Speculative Arts Movement*. The work of Fred Moten, particularly *Black and Blur* (2017), also resonates here.

5. For the science fiction origins of the term *robot* by playwright Karel Čapek to allegorize African-American slavery, see van Veen (2013).
6. The work of Christina Sharpe and Sylvia Wynter are often considered Afropessimist, though the term and its project have taken on a particular resonance, so I mention here only authors who have wholly embraced the term. Wilderson's work in particular draws from Saidiya Hartman's (1997) black feminist studies of subjection. The *Oxford English Bibliography* definition, written by Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Wilderson, defines Afropessimism as "a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence," reading "civil society" here as *white* civil society.
7. Note too, how in Butler the origin of originary violence is specifically wrought against black women.

References

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Anatol, Giselle Liza. 2015. *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Clinton R. Fluker, eds. 2019. *The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Black Futuristy, Art + Design*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Charles E. Jones, eds. 2015. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. New York: Lexington Books.

Baucom, Ian. 2005. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bernasconi, Robert, and Sybol Cook, eds. 2003. *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.

Butler, Octavia. 2005. *Fledgling*. New York: Grand Central.

———. 2007. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central.

Derrida, Jacques. 1984. La différance. In *Margins of Philosophy*, 1–28. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge.

———. 1995. "Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject. In *Points . . .*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, 255–287. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

———. 1997. *Of Grammatology*. Corrected ed. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dery, Mark. 1994. Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. In *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery, 179–222. Durham: Duke University Press.

Eshun, Kodwo. 1999. *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet.

———. 2003. Further Considerations of Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2): 287–302.

Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Gates, Henri Louis, Jr. 1988. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Genovese, Eugene D. 1976. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books.

Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*. London: Routledge.

Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terrory, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hooks, Bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press.

Iton, Richard. 2010. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post–Civil Rights Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McCarthy, Thomas. 2009. *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McKittrick, Katherine, ed. 2015. *Sylvia Wynter: Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Miller, Paul D., and aka DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid. 2004. *Rhythm Science*. Cambridge, MA: Mediawork/MIT Press.

Morris, Susana. 2012. Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. *Butler's Fledgling*. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40 (3/4): 146–166.

Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2017. *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Nayar, Pramod K. 2012. A New Biological Citizenship: Posthumanism in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*. *Modern Fiction Studies* 58 (4): 796–817.

———. 2014. *Posthumanism*. Cambridge, MA: Polity.

Nelson, Alondra. 2002. Introduction: Future Texts. *Social Text* 71 (Summer): 1–15.

Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rajan, Kaushik Sundar. 2006. *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Robinson, Cedric J. 2000. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Royle, Nicholas. 2003. *The Uncanny*. New York: Routledge.
Royster, Francesca T. 2012. *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Schalk, Sami. 2018. *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Sexton, Jared. 2016. Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word. *Rhizomes* 29 (1). https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02.
Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Thomas, Valorie. 2003. "1 + 1 = 3" and Other Dilemmas: Reading Vertigo in *Invisible Man*, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and *Song of Solomon*. *African American Review* 37 (1): 81–94.
———. 2018. Unenslaveable rapture: Afrxfuturism and Diasporic Vertigo in Béyonce's *Lemonade*. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 39 (1): 48–69.
tobias c. van Veen. 2013. Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe. *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5 (2): 7–41.
van Veen, tobias c. 2016. The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation. In *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, 63–90. New York: Lexington Books.
———. 2017. Robot Love Is Queer: Afrofuturism and Alien Love. *Liquid Blackness* 3 (6): 92–106.
———. forthcoming. Afrofuturism and the End Times: Armageddons Past, Present, and Future in Black Science Fiction. In *L'imaginaire post-apocalyptique dans la littérature et au cinéma*, ed. Christos Nikou and Danièle Chauvin. Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier.
van Veen, tobias c, and Reynaldo Anderson. 2018. Future Movements: Black Lives, Black Politics, Black Futures. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 39 (1): 5–21.
Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Wilderson, Frank B. 2010. *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of Us Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Williams, Eric. 1994. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
Womack, Ytasha. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
Wynter, Sylvia. 1979. Sambos and Minstrels. *Social Text* 1 (Winter): 149–156.

———. 2003. Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (3): 257–337.

Young, Hershini Bhana. 2015. Performing the Abyss: Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and the Law. *Studies in the Novel* 47 (2): 210–230.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2008. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.

Zuberi, Nabeel. 2004. The Transmolecularization of [black] Folk: *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism. In *Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Phillip Hayward, 77–95. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Index[1]

[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes.

M. Japtok, J. R. Jenkins (eds.), *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46625-1