

*Captive Maternal Love: Octavia Butler
and Sci-Fi Family Values*

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Introduction

Through fiction, Octavia Butler (1947–2006) influences the political landscapes of literature, critical race, and feminist theories.¹ Her writings discussed here are low-tech. Prevalent in science fiction (SF) film and literature, human/robotic inventions are largely absent in Butler’s work. Most present in her oeuvre is what is most missing in American SF: the dispossessed black female protagonist as “captive maternal.” The *raison d’être* for the captive maternal is her own survival and the flourishing of her family and community. The captive maternal is identified by four qualities: nontransferable agency; combative peer relations, usually with privileged males; a radical vision for life without trauma; and the desire and capacity to “love” through familial and communal ties that cross boundaries and sustain freedom. As spectrum, the captive maternal displaces narratives of agency dominated by masculinized master races. Butler offers this embattled maternal as the primary agent responsible for stability and sanctuary despite dystopia, slavery, exile, war, and racial-sexual violence. This protagonist, in speculative fiction that parallels and opposes neo-slavery, reflects the subordinate cultures of all worlds. Captivity created the black matrix, yet the matrix reproduces resistance detrimental to the conditions from which it emerged. Butler’s work cannot default into whiteness because of the constant specter of racism. Given its legacy in the half-a-millennium histories of black captivity in the Western world, the apocalypse the captive maternal resists is familiar. Yet bleak portraits of female life – human or nonhuman proxy – are offset by maternal abilities to transmit culture, intimacy, and honor, all that deflect macro and micro aggressions. The black female protagonist provides “mirrors” – where the marginalized see themselves in narratives; “windows” – where the normative look inside worlds that overlap their own; and “sliding glass doors” that permit passage.²

Initially, one assumes that Butler's contributions are based in her introduction of SF black heroines as healers, cleansers if not saviors, and creators of civilizations. Yet her "black women" resonate within emancipated transracial and transgender and transhuman protagonists, with virtues and vices, that overwhelm traditional or stereotypical categories; and complicate texts without fixed gender and racial identities.

"Captive Maternal Love" explores select writings by Butler: *Kindred* (1979), *Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and "Speech Sounds" (1984). These works fashion the world(s) in ways Western thought had denied as possible: as a place where black (female) agency, even when disguised in alien forms, wields an indomitable will and political strength to politically procreate whatever undermines captivity. Butler's captive maternal possesses a "black matrix"³ capable of undoing the world and building new realities; from the "matrix" or breeding female animal and the "mater" or mother, the combined contributions or exploitations of reproductive and productive labor under captivity establish the conditions for revolution.

Butler recounts how once, as the only woman and person of color on a science fiction (SF) conference panel, she asked her co-panelists why no black characters or protagonists existed in their works. One author responded that blacks were not needed because aliens were present. During another interview, she observed that typical SF depicts the future as more or less of the same: it repeats variables in conventionally known and lived experience to different degrees. Standard SF, for all of its imaginative promises, provides variations on predictable experiences. Thus, the marginalization or erasure of blacks (especially black women) and their "nonhuman" status as interchangeable with aliens is SF futurism's old past in the tiring present. Butler's writings provide a vision to destabilize both convention and the forced exile of the black maternal from the future. Her writing unmakes the political worlds reinforced by popular SF literature and film.

The upheavals in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s that followed the cataclysmic battles for the future fought in the 1960s are reflected in twentieth- and twenty-first-century SF. The popularization of SF through U.S. film began during an era that saw the de-radicalization or commercialization of the black and feminist liberation movements. Butler synthesizes two seemingly divergent trends in late twentieth-century U.S. progressivism: feminist ideologies centered on white women's economic and political parity with authoritative white privileged males; and black feminist or "womanist" critiques of structural white supremacy and capitalism/imperialism as antithetical to black women and their families. Unwanted domesticity, reproductive rights, pay inequity, access to careers and positions at the highest levels, all fueled the politics of the former group.

Inequities in education, employment, and safety, racial denigration, and sterilization abuse alongside reproductive rights shaped the politics of the second. Maternal “captivity” in the suburbs differed substantively from the violence of racially fashioned “plantation” domesticity⁴ and poverty against black life and families. Traditional feminist goals of female leadership in government and in corporate and military structures would not liberate everyone.

Butler’s feminism and fiction are antithetical to convention. Her protagonists exist to free themselves in worlds where violence and terror are expressions of the enslavement of black life (now the metaphor for captivity). This violence and terror are not more, or less, of the same human tragedies. This is not a variation of the white norm. For collective terror in white sovereign life arises as the result of invasion or war. Without whiteness as existential property and the material benefits it accrues, black collective life, particularly female life, experiences terror and violence as typified in domestic life not through foreign invasions (to which black life is also vulnerable).⁵ In conventional SF, the human faces the aggressor as alien/robot/android engineered by humans or the hostile indigenous as “discovered” by humans; these are the foils by which the human heroically defines and saves himself (and his moral compass) through others. That normative protagonist is subject not object; his humanity is a birthright, and his ability to be noble as a race traitor who opposes colonization and enslavement (through sentiment of acts of violence) is also part of that birthright. This SF does not need the captive maternal; it has taken her biography and replaced her in her own autobiography with an understudy as substitute who only gestures toward the possibilities of degradation and rebellion under enslavement that constitute her black matrix.

Although to date, none of Butler’s writings have been adapted to film, she has rewritten the script for a mass readership that brings her lens to visual texts; that ken indicts wars of captivity by also implicating the heroic protagonists – something largely unthinkable until Octavia Butler herself appeared in SF as a protagonist. If the absence in cinema is supposed to be reality, can the black female agent be considered the embodiment of the real?

Absence in the Cinematic Norm: Butler’s Maternal Protagonist

Cinema democratized, commercialized, and disseminated SF. We read movies in simultaneous, mass gatherings tracking flickering screens. Yet SF films, as visual texts, veil the captive maternal and the productive value of her black matrix, promoting a global literacy in futurisms where black

female protagonists are chimera. The master-slave, antislavery, decolonization narratives are lifted from the diaries of captive maternals with a focus on abuses of rights and productive labor but not on reproductive labor. Butler's queries, rephrased here as "Why aren't there any blacks/black women?" and "Why is SF so 'normal'?", are answered with another question: "Can two captivities, in which the heroic liberator is implicated in the violence against the captive, coexist at the same place in the same time and still be found entertaining?" The master race narrative poses as both captor and captive. A SF version of "blue-eyed soul," the master-slave narrative, replaces the fear of fertile blackness with race anxiety over aliens, androids supplant race fear of fertile blackness, and the agency of suffering and resistance to slavery, also represented by the master race, is far flung from a half millennium of black histories, even if it makes for a good cover.

(Euro)Futurism failed to depict the terrors of captivity shaped by race, reality, and materiality. So *Afrofuturism* had to be created. Afrofuturism channels factual horror into the imaginative future with the specificity of black history: enslaved production, raped reproduction, bodily theft for nation building under law (U.S. Constitution's Three-Fifths Compromise); decriminalization of rape, incest, domestic battery, forced pregnancy, and murder under slavery; criminalization of sexuality in freedom; decriminalization of homicide in convict prison work camps after emancipation and legalization of slavery (Thirteenth Amendment) – these, and more, formed the black matrix in worlds neither mirrored nor windowed in traditional SF. Hence, no sliding glass door. The conventional world of misogyny/racism/poverty inadequately theorizes violence that implicates its elites. Butler's words allow the births of other species, protagonists who cannot be usurped by alien, android, minor character, love interest (*Star Trek*), or black male lead (*Star Wars*).⁶

Off screen, the absent protagonist as black captive maternal reads visual texts in which characters struggle with the central themes of her life: violent interruption of intimacy and connectedness amid slavery, colonization, and genocide.⁷ A brief survey of SF Hollywood illustrates the world altered by Butler.

In 1979's *Alien*, Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley brought a new action heroine to horror SF. The 1986 sequel, *Aliens*, with its uber violence and militarist themes taken from U.S. marines and the war in Vietnam, transforms the white, single, female lead into a maternal figure providing protective care for an orphaned, petite, white child, Carrie Henn's Rebecca "Newt" Jorden. The carnage of the movie concludes with an exo-suited

Ripley, having destroyed the Queen's eggs, battling the Alien Queen mother aboard the returning spacecraft with militarized and masculinized technology that can destroy her exoskeleton. Violent warfare is fought on the colony or in space as Ripley ensures that aliens do not enter Earth to use human bodies as incubators for their eggs. Her life prior to space exploration on an imperial mission, which the military-industrial complex planned unknown to her, was unfulfilling but not traumatic. Terror occurs through foreign wars, not domestic violence or domestic captivity. Ripley as a sovereign white woman is free after she destroys the Alien Queen because she was never a captive to her race, although she faced gender discrimination. As maternal protector, she spoke the mater's language. That makes a world of difference. Black female terror (which is both individual and caste-fashioned) is tied to trauma from everyday life as well as vulnerability to foreign warfare. It does not possess the master's speech.

In the 1982 classic noir fiction (as *Aliens* became classic horror SF), film *Blade Runner*, not the colony but Earth is dystopia. *Blade Runner's* traditional hetero male hero, bounty hunter Deckard, played by Harrison Ford, kills android "replicants" seeking freedom. Deckard lives on "the knife's edge between humanity and inhumanity" as do four renegade replicants, including Rutger Hauer's Roy Baty and Darryl Hannah's Pris. As murderous fugitive rebels, replicants seek a cure to their four-year programmed lifespan, or incept date, and freedom.

Assimilated and passing as human, Sean Young's Rachael saves Deckard by using his gun to kill a male replicant avenging the hunter's brutal slaying of his female lover. Hired to execute the off-world renegades seeking their father-creator's key to life, Deckard fails to kill a single male but manages to grotesquely "retire" two female replicants (who serviced humans as exotic dancers or sex workers). Recovering from the fight that she had settled in his favor, he rapes or initiates rough sex with Rachael – trapping her in his apartment, pinning her to a wall, instructing her to repeat "I want you" until she is capable of embracing a man authorized to kill her – the human and replicant fall in love. During the final film battle, when Roy Baty's incept date occurs, having grieved over the bloodied body of his lover Pris, he saves her killer. Perhaps this act of grace toward the master is the slave's only power over death. Deckard flees with Rachael to the outer colonies from police who will hunt and destroy her, and from democracy's dystopia. Miscegenation's maroons avoid captivity. They have no maternal or nurturing ties to progeny and communities to make them vulnerable. Deckard is a master human; Rachael is a superior replicant. Despite her

unknown incept date, their union has a future. Engineers defy, sometimes with impunity, laws they authorize and enforce. Although criminalized and “queered” (whether same sex⁸ or hetero), master-slave sex/rape can be controlled and consumed with impunity by the master (e.g., Rufus’s relation to Alice in *Kindred*⁹ or Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemmings). The captive maternal breaks law and prohibition with lethal consequences; hence her eventual triumph is presented as uncertain.

Two years after *Blade Runner*, Sean Young played another female sexual partner nurturing a heroic male protagonist. In the 1984 film *Dune*, based on Frank Herbert’s 1965 *Dune*, winner of the 1966 Hugo (the prestigious SF literary award for which Butler’s “Speech Sounds” would be honored in 1984), Young’s character Chani, the fierce, indigenous Fremen leader resisting colonization, teaches survival and war skills to – and awakens the heart of – royal Paul Atreides (played by Kyle McLaughlin). The exiled young Atreides regains the colonial throne to the desert planet Arrakis (Dune), and the life-enhancing “Spice.” The film’s willful, powerful, political colonial women – for example, eugenicist Bene Gesserit’s order, whose members include Paul’s mother, Lady Jessica (played by Francesca Annis), as well as the Fremen – all come under the rule of the young Atreides. Female agency remains, willingly or unwillingly, the enabler of elite men, and it remains nonblack. Through Chani and Paul, Fremen merge with the House of Atreides. The women of Dune birth and bury children, but they are not hunted as slaves; they are members of the households of rulers. They inherit economies, political connections, royal bloodlines, religious-political orders, and lands. They are not disposed; the Dune women are sovereigns. Butler’s black female protagonists, however, are the dispossessed who battle all for resources to achieve some measure of safety and sovereignty. As disposable women they are attached to black men who lack resources, and tend to rage over their loss, and inability to wield power in the existing order. Butler reserves extraordinary and transformative powers for her female protagonists.

Two decades following *Dune*, a black male lead appeared in a major SF film. Evoking Isaac Asimov’s 1950 short story *I, Robot*, in the 2004 *I, Robot*, Will Smith’s Detective Del Spooner rescues humanity from a feminized renegade robot who honors the directive of preventing harm to humankind by eradicating humans given their destructiveness. To the degree that the black film star has transracial appeal, the absence of key black characters or signifiers of a racial order, the only black persona *as black* fades. A masculinized robot and a compassionate white woman humanize Del Spooner; the absence of a black female protagonist endures,

which also proved true of televised SF. In 2004, the 1978 television series *Battlestar Galactica* was reassigned gender roles (controversial for some) so that a white woman, Katee Sackhoff, became Starbuck and an East Asian, Grace Park, played Boomer (originally played by African American Herbert Jefferson).¹⁰ In the series, a straggle of human survivors, under the presidency of Laura Roslin played by Mary McDonnell, seek a planet after the destruction of their home planets by humanoid Cylons, former slaves of humans. In the series remake, a heterosexual female battles alien invaders, drinks, smokes, and loves “like a man.” Her Cylon enemies are good and bad, and predominately led by white women; Park (as a double agent, Cylon 6) is an exception. The female captives and combatants, human or humanoid, have maternal instincts, kill, die, and rebirth violently. They are masculinized as warriors and mostly, but not always, mate with men. They live and function as soldiers for their respective armies. With the minor roles of one Latina fighter pilot, one black woman love interest (who suicides), and a black woman healer who all die (no black male appears in the series as a regular character), there is the noticeable absence of black female protagonists in a military drama, in which humans flee and fight Cylons seeking human annihilation and security. Survivors of both races find sanctuary when they colonize new Earth. Cylon 6’s half-human daughter will be Earth’s new biracial “Eve,” and the humans’ cycle of life, war, death, and resurrection begins again.

In James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*, black women appear in anime. Afro-Latina (Dominican and of Haitian descent) Zoe Saldana’s Na’vi leader Neytiri, aided by her mother, Mo’at, played by African American C. C. H. Pounder, changes a bitter, paraplegic white man with a Na’vi avatar into a liberator of a living planet. (Saldana and Pounder play one of the few black mother-daughter roles in popular SF film.) Using his Westernized training and Na’vi re-socialization, he becomes capable of organizing diverse indigenous nations to defeat an imperial military. The black woman here is blue, and hence she has transracial appeal although her features and hair and those of her mother are clearly African. She is Africanized not as human but as alien; blacks and aliens now are blended, with the alien made even more exotic. When she chastises Sam Worthington’s Jake Sully, whom she rescues as he stumbles about the jungle in his avatar Na’vi guise, she scolds him for acting dangerously like a baby. She becomes his protector and enabler, making him into a liberator through tutelage, love, and sex. Her transformative powers are derived from Gaia, Pandora’s “earth mother” god, and from her own Na’vi mother who survives when her Na’vi father and former betrothed are killed in

battle with the imperialists. The deaths of those “blue men” conveniently clear the path for Jake’s succession.

Jake, the white man inside the Na’vi body, could have become Neytiri’s theoretical avatar, if she had been willing or able to control him, that is, if the white male authors had permitted this. Instead, she chooses to love him. She cradles him and gives him oxygen after the final battle, and later anxiously leans over him during the permanent transference of his consciousness into his Na’vi body. She personifies the maternal liberator who is focused on Jake, not Na’vi children. She gives birth to a white man-child, the only one who has the power to vanquish other white men’s militarism, technology, and greed. Jake is more powerful than Neytiri; he unseats her ancestral lineage and usurps every indigenous as rightful heir to political power. Neytiri’s babies will not be plantation babies. Like all of the other women discussed here, she has a powerful male to protect her (this is not true for Dana in *Kindred*, Ayananwu in *Wild Seed*, Mary in *Mind of My Mind*, or Rye in “Speech Sounds”); patriarchy is portrayed as functional for some females. Beneficiaries of “alien love,” Jake, Paul, and Deckard possess a (hetero) sexualized maternal who has empowered them. These male protagonists do not want as life partner a captive maternal: a poor, prostituted, raped, enslaved potential revolutionary whose rebellion might turn against their household.

There always appears to be an exception to the norm. In 1995, *Strange Days* was that anomaly for which Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to receive a Saturn Award for Best Director; Angela Bassett received a Saturn Award for Best Actress. (James Cameron co-wrote and co-produced the film.) In the film, Ralph Fiennes’s Lenny Nero is protected by a bodyguard, Bassett’s Lornette “Mace” Mason, who is friend to Lenny, a dishonored former LAPD cop selling illicit SQUID (“used emotions” of other lives in addictive virtual reality devices). Unrequited love allows Mace, a former waitress and black single mom, to repeatedly risk her life to bring safety and moral consciousness to Lenny on the eve of the new millennium. In 1999 Los Angeles, L. A. is the dystopia-in-waiting that appears in *Blade Runner*. Mace met and was mentored by Lenny when he was a honest cop, so there is reciprocity in the relationship. As he investigates a string of murders committed by corrupt LAPD members and woos his former criminal white lover, Faith Justice (played by Juliette Lewis), the fabric of justice, social order, and romantic love disintegrate. The murderous LAPD cops involved in the illicit trade have tried to kill Lenny and Mace, and successfully kill others as the clock counts down to the New Year. In the streets, the partying multiracial witnesses a brutal

Rodney King–style beating of Mace by rogue cops who command the citizenry to stand back. As she is about to be executed, the citizen rabble violates the law and intervenes, and the corrupt police suicide or are arrested as the honest police chief establishes order following the urban rebellion. The people prevail and they are multiracial and black. Lenny's obsession with the white, cyberpunk femme fatale singer, which had eclipsed the protective love of the black mother, ends. The antihero, a flawed and ineffective liberator, is changed by the closest approximation of the captive maternal. She, like other stereotypical black women, is masculinized as a sidekick. Hers is the big (shot)gun. She is renamed "Mace" and so masculinized and weaponized that she nurtures Lenny more than her preteen son; the new name positions Mace close to but outside the black matrix. The mirrors and windows are present, but the sliding door seems stuck.

In the 2000 SF horror *Supernova*,¹¹ Angela Bassett plays medical officer Dr. Kaela Evers – a tortured domestic survivor who has lost her ability to give birth – who partners with James Spader's pilot Nick Vanzant. Aboard their deep space medical ship, Evers originally disdains Vanzant as a recovered addict (her abusive ex-partner was a drug addict), but bonds with him as they fight her former batterer who has been transformed by ninth-dimensional matter and is rescued by the crew from a mining colony. The only human survivors, the couple kills the supernatural predator (who was rebuffed when he sought reunification with Kaela and so attempts to kill her also). They riskily climb into the only dimensional stabilizing pod, designed for one, to return to Earth. The ship robot announces that they have arrived safely with intermingled DNA – each has one blue and one brown eye – and that Kaela is pregnant with a girl. The sliding glass door has enabled them to have half a century of an earth family before the approaching supernova either elevates life or extinguishes it. As advanced as these two roles for black women in SF may be considering the prevailing norm, the characters are formed and validated by their ability to protect and serve the white male protagonist who in turn offer them love.

Protagonist as Captive Maternal

Kindred, *Mind of My Mind*, *Wild Seed*, and "Speech Sounds" all center on the challenges of constructing family where none should exist, of love and kinship despite dispossession. The transcendent values and aspirations of family, as an ideal, constitute intimacy and protection from a hostile world.

In *Kindred*, Dana, a literary person, lives in San Francisco in an interracial marriage. Her white husband is progressive and loving, yet she is estranged from her family and has no black female friends in the 1970s Bay Area. Likewise, she will have no peers when she begins to time travel, a power outside of her conscious control, back into the antebellum South to rescue a white male ancestor. The good white man, her husband, Kevin, and the bad, her ancestor Rufus, are cared for by her; but it is her ancestor whom she meets as a boy who requires her constant maternal protection. Dana is held captive by the fact that he must stay alive to create a family tree that allows her existence. The most important people – white men – in her life consume her but provide no protection from violence. Her husband lacks the power; her ancestor the desire. When Dana's husband, Kevin, grabs her as she is transported back to rescue Rufus, he inadvertently travels back with her, and finds that he, as a white man, can offer her limited protection from trauma and terror in the antebellum South; he leaves to work in the Underground Railroad.

Dana's attempts to bring late twentieth-century antiracist sensibilities into the antebellum South fail miserably. The structure, slavery, does not permit its own undoing through love; it cannot be humanized. It is opportunistic. Dana is too as she struggles to stay alive and to keep Rufus alive as well. She will fail with Alice, but that was not her primary function. Dana learns the maternal arts of cooking and healing on the antebellum plantation. She is traumatized by violence against herself and other black slaves and the depravity of the slave masters and mistresses. Yet, while weeping at the brutal whipping of a slave, she realizes that the children witnessing the horror are perhaps better emotionally equipped than she to handle the terrors of captivity; that is, they face the terrors in the reality of their unfolding, not in the emotional or imaginative desire that they will diminish or disappear.

Dana does not resist Rufus's request that she serve as the middleman between Alice and him, her enslaved maternal ancestor. This act of self-interest will insure Dana's life but end those of her kin. Encouraged by Dana to give up the enslaved man she loves, Alice succumbs to Rufus's demands and "seduction." Yet he still violently attacks her and threatens her with rape and the selling of her (their) children if she disobeys. Her suicide becomes her "escape" from slavery as well as the abandonment of her children. When Alice dies, Rufus seeks a replacement in their lineage-daughter, Dana. In classic domestic violence-incest tragedy, the father turns to the female child who favors the mother. In the plantation household, under its captivity, "incest" does not apply to the enslaved.

Dana, who countenanced Rufus's brutality, now finds slavery and its ultimate degradation – rape – an unlivable reality, so she turns to mother herself. In the physical battle that ensues, she kills Rufus and escapes back into her contemporary world, losing an arm in the dying man's fierce grip. Butler uses time travel to destabilize Dana's and the readers' modern, post-slavery ("post-racial") self-perceptions. Who is free? Captive? Sanctified by love?

In *Wild Seed*, the woman Anyanwu is discovered in Africa by Doro, the immortal, paternal, omnipotent protagonist who begins life as a black Nubian but prefers to inhabit the bodies of white men. Her longevity and fertility attract him, and he convinces her to travel to the "new world." During the colonial era, Doro begins to build a new race with his "wild seed"; he plans to eventually kill Anyanwu because, he reasons to himself, wild seed is unpredictable and uncontrollable. As does slavery, Doro consumes black bodies but as hosts for his immortality. As on the plantation, the bodies devoured most horrifically and consistently are those of black girls and women with reproductive powers who make their own demands. Love may exist between Doro and Anyanwu (or Rufus and Alice, and Rufus and Dana) but it does not negate violence or captivity. Doro's hosts, over the centuries, include Anyanwu's children. Unlike Rufus, Doro is so struck by the possible loss of Anyanwu through suicide that he pleads and negotiates an armistice to prevent it.

In *Mind of My Mind*, telepaths avoid each other's company; sociability means mental contact and that is overwhelming for them. They find their children painful to be around because adults cannot block the constant chaotic, psychic noise coming from youthful minds. The telepaths' PTSD requires that slave labor, desensitized mutes, maintain family stability to function in the world of chaos, discord, and violence. Mary fosters slavery to bring balance to the lives of telepaths and curtail child neglect, abuse, or murder. (She creates "plantation babies" not destined for slave quarters.) Her diminished virtues allow her to function more like her father, as a "daddy's girl." Doro, who sought the evolution of a creature such as Mary, realizes too late that her lethal mind can destroy him. Mary's maternal sensibilities (daughters do mother their fathers) suffer little emotional vulnerability, although suffering is part of motherhood: Anyanwu leaves animal form, the only form in which Doro cannot track and attack her, in order to nurture, just as Dana lets Rufus live longer than necessary in order to rehabilitate him. Mary so lacks conventional nurturing that she neglects her own young daughter; her husband provides the emotional stability for their child to thrive. Like the other female protagonists,

Mary remains maternal (unlike them she is also an enslaver), creating and destroying life. For all of the black female protagonists, their primary antagonists are familial, dependent men.

“Speech Sounds,” the shortest of Octavia Butler’s works discussed here, receives the most words for it melds the future into the present moment. Butler describes the story’s inspiration as coming from a fight between two men on a dirty, crowded bus that Butler was riding in order to read a draft of *Clay’s Ark* to a friend dying from cancer. Butler admits that the story line was likely “inappropriate” but was requested by her friend. Butler witnessed a bloody and brief fight that was inspirational but depressing, leaving her “wondering whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate without using fists of one kind or another.” According to Octavia Butler: “‘Speech Sounds’ was conceived in weariness, depression, and sorrow. I began the story feeling little hope for liking for the human species, but by the time I reached the end of it, my hope had come back. It always seems to do that.”

In “Speech Sounds,”¹² Rye’s safety in post-apocalypse California is threatened by literacy just as Dana’s was in the antebellum South. In the future, the ability to speak, let alone read and write, has largely disappeared. The rage over that loss leads many to brutally persecute the few who can speak or read or both. Rye boards an intercity bus in search of her brother and nephews/nieces who might be living twenty miles away in Pasadena. Rye risks travel. Her male neighbor is a potential stalker and sex enslaver. A “highly specific” pandemic or “illness” had caused her to lose her family and her talents as an intellectual: “Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death” (5). For Rye, the illness had “stripped her, killing her children one by one, killing her husband, her sister, her parents.” It severed all social ties in its ability to “cut people down.” When the driver slams on the brakes and more fights begin as “men fall into screaming passengers,” Rye speedily exits. Outside, Rye watches a man with an LAPD uniform soundlessly motioning her away as he clears the bus by tossing in a tear gas canister. He helps gagging passengers, stands down a furious driver, and beckons for Rye to leave with him in his car. Rye hesitates and stands down another man and his companions who threaten her with hand signals, grunts, and gang rape. Reflecting that “Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures,” Rye wearily watches her would-be assailant and observes: “People might very well stand by and watch if he tried to rape her. They would also stand and watch her shoot him” (2). After she gives the clear hand signal for him to

stop approaching her, he contemptuously walks away, signing. Rye then reluctantly takes a ride from the stranger, Obsidian, who, likely a former policeman, becomes her lover.

Their wordless self-introductions are communicated through signs and sexuality. Rye has met her peer in Obsidian. When she realizes that he can read the map, though, her raging grief momentarily leads to homicidal thoughts. When he signs to ask if she has children, she does not respond; her thoughts disassociate maternal love from captivity, and the narrative she weaves to convince her that ending the maternal was preferable and inevitable because “the children growing up now were to be pitied.” They had, in Rye’s mind, regressed to animalism: “They would run through the downtown canyons with no real memory of what the buildings had been or even how they had come to be. Today’s children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be.”

Recounting motherhood through personal and collective grief, Rye dismisses the future. Maternal agency alleviates trauma; political response to violence and captivity in meaningful actions can provide an outlet for suffering. Denying herself hope through agency, Rye tries to convince Obsidian to live with her (he is noncommittal). When a woman flees across the road chased by a man with a knife, Obsidian brakes the car and attempts to save her. The woman also tries to defend herself but is killed when the man stabs her twice. Obsidian shoots him, then, distracted by Rye, he is killed by the injured man. Rye ends the carnage by shooting her lover’s murderer with her gun. She is left with three corpses: her lover-protector, the fleeing woman, and the murderer.

When two three-year-olds run from the house where the man and woman had come past Rye to the dead woman whose arm is shaken by the girl in an attempt to wake her, Rye painfully recognizes a dead mother and feels ill. She begins to leave without the children, rationalizing that they “were old enough to scavenge,” that she had had enough of grief, and that she “did not need a stranger’s children who would grow up to be hairless chimps.” Yet she returns for Obsidian’s body for burial and then decides to bury the mother as well. That compassion toward a slain captive maternal changes reality. As Rye drags the woman’s body toward the car, the children make noises, then the little girl screams “No!” and utters the ultimate toddler command, “Go away!” Her brother protectively shushes her, first with a command: “Don’t talk,” then with a whisper: “Be quiet.” Rye’s world collapses.

Executive functioning explodes: Rye wonders if their mother had taught them to talk; if the children were born “after the silence.” With three living and three dead, Rye assembles a future that had not existed: “What if children of three or fewer years were safe and able to learn language? What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors.” An intellectual and an educator before, Rye is now a captive maternal. Realizing that the children were not “mindless chimps,” she mourns the loss of Obsidian-the-protector, for now “there was something worth protecting.” She decides to raise the children spared by the illness, gently carries and places the mother next to Obsidian in the car-hearse, and then carries the children to the front seat. To the crying children, she reveals what was hidden from her male lover, whispering to soften a rusted voice “I’m Valerie Rye. . . . It’s all right for you to talk to me.”

Conclusion: Wishing for the Happiness of the Beloved

Butler’s writings pose an interesting contrast with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is based on the 1856 tragedy of fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who when trapped in Ohio by bounty hunters working under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, attempted to kill her small children and murdered one daughter rather than have them abused in captivity. After her release from prison, Sethe is haunted by an embodied, supernatural being, Beloved, a young female who enters her home. Memories of rape and terror, misery and intimacy, guilt and maternal love, shaming and love follow. The lives of Sethe, her teen daughter Denver, and her lover Paul D, who is seduced by Beloved, are hijacked by the insatiable desires of the sacrificed succubus, who consumes and haunts the captive maternal. It seems that only the black female child (the three-year-old in “Speech Sounds,” Mary in *Mind of My Mind*, Alice in *Kindred*, Anyanwu’s daughters in *Wild Seed*) has the power to destabilize the captive maternal. Both seek to be free.

Here is where Butler and Morrison differ. Sethe and her family (once Beloved is vanquished) remain within a black community that first censored and then saved her. It punished her because she acted, regardless of the terrors of sexual-racial captivity, with god-like powers, with the legitimate authority to create and take life. She usurped and rivaled the powers of the enslaver. And it doesn’t matter that she did so out of love, so the black community abandons her. Butler’s protagonists actually unapologetically exercise such authority. Although they largely refrain from violently euthanizing their progeny, they tend to reserve the right to do so

in pursuing an elusive freedom and with the mandate that if the achievement of freedom will be their most notable failure, creativity will be the hallmark of their matrix: intimacy and emotional intelligence, theorizing and political agency.

Hanging our dirty laundry out to dry in cemeteries, where she plants herself as wild seed, Octavia Butler cleanses captivity. Her personal battles with anxiety and depression were shouldered with courage and resilience that allowed a brilliant artistry. Despite her early, unnatural demise, she remains scattered among countless readers, growing mirrors and windows and prying open sliding glass doors.