NOWHERE TO GO BUT FORWARD:
THE FICTION OF OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

A dissertation
submitted to the faculty of the
University of Minnesota
by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2016

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Lois Cucullu for all of her generosity and insight.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Eric Prindle for his love, support, and gentle encouragement.

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Introduction: The Seeds of Dissent: Science Fiction's Radical Promise

"What good is science fiction to Black people? What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what 'everyone' is saying, doing, thinking—whoever 'everyone' happens to be this year. And what good is all this to Black people?"

– Octavia Butler, in an interview with Andrea Hairston

Feminist Origins: The Roots of the Genre

The twentieth century saw a transformation of science fiction. In a mere seventy years, the genre evolved from fringe stories printed on the pages of pulps and read almost exclusively by a small and homogenous group to a mainstream genre that has been lauded for its prophetic foresight, its acute political analysis, and its deep engagement with philosophy. Although the genre is now too expansive and varied to carry the weight of single purpose, it was, in its early years, imbued with the moral mission of enlightening its readers and making them more compassionate people through the exercising and expansion of their imaginations. In 1929 Hugo Gernsback stated that "not only is science fiction an idea of tremendous import, but it is to be an important factor in making the world a better place to live in, through educating the public to the possibilities of science and the influence of science on life … science fiction will make people happier, give them a broader understanding of the world, make them more tolerant" (qtd. in Roberts, Science 68). Although certainly Gernsback's confidence in science as a cure-all for

social and personal ills is distinctly antithetical to the postmodern critique of science that was to come decades later, his assertion that science fiction could make the world a more livable place by opening hearts and sharpening critical consciousness is still very much alive in contemporary science fiction. It is, perhaps more than any other popular genre today, an activist literature, arguably filling the vacuum left with the phasing out of both Victorian social realism and much of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

Although most early science fiction was written by white men for an implied straight, white, male, adolescent audience, the genre has slowly expanded to include both writers and readers who are female, queer, and of color. As it became more inclusive and more illustrative of a broader spectrum of realities, science fiction also began to infiltrate the literary mainstream, as H. Bruce Franklin attests when he writes that, in the 1970s, "science fiction moved inexorably toward the center of American culture, shaping our imagination more than many of us would like to admit" (qtd. in Booker 1). Although the reasons behind its burgeoning legitimacy were many, Victoria Hollinger argues that science fiction owes its fairly recent popularity to postmodernity and the accompanying themes of estrangement, otherness, hybridity, and technology. She writes that "through the circulation of simulacra and the cyborging of the human body, experiential reality feels less and less connected to the 'natural' world and more and more like science fiction" (Hollinger 219). What we see, then, between the 1930s and 1970s, is a shift in science fiction's purpose: if science fiction began as a genre meant to challenge and empower its readership through the celebration of scientific progress, it evolved into a genre meant to, somewhat ironically, reflect the difficulties of our modern age. In both cases though, the genre has historically sought to use dissonance to spark comparison and critique.

If we take as a given that science fiction taps into the anxieties that permeate our modern world, it stands to reason that, despite its common depiction of future worlds, the genre is deeply

rooted in the present, and, by default, the past. From its beginnings, science fiction has been a predictive literature, but rather than groundless speculation, its prophecies are rooted in the assumption that the future will follow on a fairly straightforward trajectory from the present. Therefore, although it claims to be about the future, most science fiction serves as a critique of the present, a lament of the past, and a warning about the shape the future will take if our current society is not reformed or reimagined. Fredric Jameson comments specifically on science fiction's ability to access the past when he writes that "one of the characteristics which makes science fiction a particularly fertile form of social critique is that it can be seen as breaking through to history in a new way—achieving historical consciousness by way of the future rather than the past" (qtd. in Miller 347). According to Jameson, accessing the past via the future allows for more dialogic and expansive perceptions of both time and causality and creates the possibility of previously unseen connections. Rose Braidiotti argues that this preoccupation with the present is "what distinguishes contemporary science fiction from nineteenth-century science fiction in that, rather than offering utopian scenarios, it reflects our sense of estrangement regarding the rapidity of current change. Science fiction, in other words, defamiliarizes the present, not dreams of possible futures" (151).

While most science fiction depicts the future as a clearly traceable offshoot of the past and the present, Octavia Butler's fiction is singular because she questions and often defies this trajectory. While she certainly assesses the past in a work like *Kindred* (1979) and examines the present effect of political policies in, for instance, the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-9), she resists the urge to suggest that the future can be little more than a straightforward continuation of the present and actually suggests that such an attitude would end disastrously for humanity. Rather, Butler demands that her characters radically re-envision humanity, both socially and genetically. In the future worlds that Butler creates those who survive are aggressively hybrid and willing to

lose parts of themselves while taking on aspects of other/alien species in a relentless and completely necessary march towards cyborg identity. It is this identity, Butler asserts, that is humanity's most promising chance for future survival, and embracing it will require humanity to change in ways that cannot be predicted through simple analyses of present and past states of being.

In many ways, science fiction has always had the groundwork for a writer like Butler. Despite, or perhaps because of, its mostly white roots, science fiction is a literature intensely fascinated with encounters with otherness. These Others have taken on myriad forms, and the reactions to them range from the progressive to the reactionary, but nonetheless, the genre, as Donna Haraway writes, is "concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others" (qtd. in Janes 92). Gilles Deleuze echoes Haraway's claim, stating that "science fiction is indeed all about displacements, ruptures, and discontinuities" (qtd. in Braidiotti 149-50). This disruptive encounter, whether it comes in the form of alien invasion, cyborg romance, or any other of the countless ways writers have fictionalized the meeting of self and other, has forced science fiction heroes and heroines to continuously reevaluate humanity and its subsequent values, practices, and communities. Darko Suvin, arguably science fiction's most prolific and insightful critic, writes that science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement" (qtd. in Roberts, Science 7). Given the essential presence of otherness in the genre and the necessity of evaluating and reacting to this otherness, it was likely only a matter of time until white male authored science fiction opened up to include a wider variety of voices who could address otherness from an array of vantage points.

When Octavia Butler published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976, there was little attention paid to it outside of the science fiction community, but nevertheless, the novel

introduced themes such as negotiation of power, hybridity, and communalism that Butler would return to and develop throughout her career. Through her revision of such speculative conventions as space exploration, utopia, time travel, alien encounter, and apocalypse, Butler was able to both critique and expand how science fiction has dealt with questions of difference, power, catastrophe, and ideal social organization. Many of Butler's interventions stem from her employment of tropes and themes from African American literature such as transformation through struggle, finding power in limiting circumstances, critiques of authority or convention, and the importance of alliance, but, at the same time, it cannot be said that Butler merges speculative fiction and African American literature uncritically. For, just as much of Butler's fiction contains implicit (and sometimes explicit) critiques of the sexism, racism, biological determinism, and xenophobia inherent in much science fiction, so too does her fiction not merely incorporate themes from African American literature but also critique them. Patriarchal nationalism, the glorification of the black mother, simple power reversals that do little to address hierarchy's roots, and uncomplicated appeals to overly simplistic identity politics, characteristics that can be found in some black American literature, are things that Butler addresses head on. In short, Butler takes what she finds helpful from both genres and discards, revamps, or critiques what she finds limiting or problematic.

Octavia Butler has not only intervened in science fiction as a black writer but as a feminist one as well, and, like she does with both speculative and black literary tropes, she celebrate, combines, and critiques the conventions of feminist scifi freely. For this reason, it is worth taking a little time to trace the evolution of feminist science fiction. (This will be done in more detail in chapter two, seeing as much early feminist science fiction was utopian). Women's science fiction burgeoned in the 1970s and the 1980s, but before those decades science fiction, to quote Luce Armitt, had "not historically been a progressive genre gender-wise. Unfortunately,

irrespective of its superficially futuristic stance, science fiction was traditionally a genre obsessed with nostalgia and conservatism" (qtd. in Sargisson 213). According to Eric Rabkin "there is no denying that women characters have been exploited as sex objects by science fiction publishers and cover illustrators'" (qtd. in Hampton XX), and Mark Dubey concurs that science fiction has "traditionally valorized 'hard' science over the 'soft' feminine genre of fantasy, driven by the supra-rational and putatively antiscientific principles of magic" (32). Scott Sanders notes that the vast bulk of science fiction "equates women with nature, body, and feeling, and men with science, intellect, and reason" (36). These four critiques are but a few of hundreds, suggesting that many critics, while condoning science fiction's suggestion that a more just world is possible, agree that it has often fallen short in its gendered politics.

At the same time though, the seeds of science fiction's eventual feminist narratives were present in the genre's origins and merely needed to be developed. Braidiotti notes that "science fiction writers locate their historical roots in the nineteenth-century Gothic tradition, which is one of the few genres of the period that allows women to play active roles as travelers, murderers, thieves, and adventures" (152). Indeed a small portion of early science fiction allows women to play active roles in scientific discovery, Isaac Asimov's robot stories, written and published in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, being one example. In Asimov's stories, Dr. Susan Calvin is one of the heads of the U.S. Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation, and even though she is often kept in the dark by her staff about their recent discoveries and experiments, sometimes catastrophically so, we are meant to think that this is due to her coworkers' arrogance and chauvinism rather than because of her incompetence. (Through her ingenuity and intelligence she saves the day more than once). Although examples like Asimov's are fairly few and far between in the early years of science fiction, female fans of the genre have a long history, at least in the United States. Feminist science fiction zines, such as *Janus/Aurora* and *The Witch and the Chameleon*, began to be

published in the 1970s. These publications "situated not only the texts, but also their fandom in specific socio-political movements such as feminism, civil rights and gay rights" (Merrick 117). Furthermore, WisCon, an annual feminist science fiction conference and convention held in Madison, Wisconsin, has been one of the most well attended science fiction fan gatherings for the past four decades (http://www.wiscon.info/index.php).

Although there are, of course, exceptions as we have already seen with Asimov, on the whole female characters in science fiction before the 1970s could be distilled down to two types: they were either overwhelmingly negative and feminine (Kate Wilhelm's captive breeders, for instance) or overwhelmingly positive and unfeminine (Elizabeth A Lynn's powerful swordswomen, for example). Both models decried femininity's imposed limitations and restrictions and indirectly suggested that in order to have fully realized and complex female characters in science fiction, other characterizations needed to be available, namely ones that did not demonize conventionally feminine traits such as nurturance and collaboration. Butler's heroines embody this ideal: while possessing physical strength and intelligence, they are, down to a one, nurturers and collaborators. They are also able to function as victims, heroes, followers, leaders, negotiators, and wielders of power, often simultaneously.

Another issue that feminist science fiction writers found and still find themselves addressing is the role technology should play in future worlds, specifically in the lives of women. This question became critical because so often in early science fiction technology was used as a replacement for the feminine body, essentially rendering women obsolete. Sharona Ben-Tov, one of the foremost scholars on the impact of technology on the American imagination, elucidates the tension between femininity, science, nature, and rationality that was commonplace in early science fiction and talks about how these tensions were pushed to the forefront when women began producing science fiction themselves. She writes that "the question at the heart of feminist

science fiction seems to be something like: 'if nature is feminine and human technological capability masculine, then how do I qualify to run this spaceship?' Without intending to," Ben-Tov asserts, "feminist science fiction tells a story about women's relationship to nature and to technology" (10-1). While it is still often assumed that nature, particularly as it relates to reproduction, is antithetical to technology, many writers of feminist science fiction question where the female reproductive system ends and technology begins. Certainly, this is a pressing question for Butler, who unabashedly incorporates technology into her reproductive processes, albeit without pitting science and nature against each other. Given Butler's distaste for dichotomies, a trait we will examine closely throughout, this is hardly surprising.

Despite Ben-Tov and other critics' assertions that science fiction still has a long way to go until it has shed the misogynistic assumption that metal is preferable to flesh, A.I. more reliable than intuition, and reason superior to emotion, feminist science fiction has undeniably flourished since the 1970s. Gender had become a key site of symbolic weight in a vast amount of the science fiction produced over the past four decades, and often sexual politics and the related questions of the body, love, and technology are driving ideologies in contemporary science fiction texts. Janet Bergstrom points out the almost exaggerated attention paid to gender in contemporary science fiction and hypothesizes that "where the basic fact of identity as a human is suspect and subject to transformation, the representation of sexual identity carries a potentially heightened significance, because it can be used as the primary marker of difference in a world otherwise beyond our norms" (qtd. in Springer 41). Bergstrom's assertion is interesting: in literary worlds where humanity is being constantly reevaluated due to encounters with technology and other forms otherness, gender identity becomes that much more of a loaded concept, a way to assert humanity in the face of destabilization or outright siege of the status quo. Gender, and women in particular, become signifiers of the old order, purveyors of nostalgia, keepers and

protectors of culture (an attitude that is also present in some African American fiction). This is something Butler is able to avoid in her protagonists seeing as they unabashedly align themselves with otherness, despite personal and/or cultural costs.

While plenty of science fiction, feminist or otherwise, depicts women as the gatekeepers of humanity, there is no shortage of science fiction that overtly celebrates the transformation or even the elimination of gender as we know it. In *The Female Man* (1975), Joanna Russ indicts patriarchy for suppressing women and leading to their deaths, suggesting that the only way this fate is avoidable is by abolishing the gender binary and replacing it with something less classifiable. In *Up the Walls of the World* (1978), James Tiptree creates aliens with ambiguous gender characteristics, as does Marge Piercy in *Women on the Edge of Time* (1985), Ursula Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and Suzy Charnas in her *Motherlines* trilogy (1974-99). By the time we get to Octavia Butler's work in the late 1970s and beyond, the reimagining of gender identity cannot really be seen as a new intervention. What Butler does do that is new, however, is address and partially resolve the abovementioned problem of science fiction heroines needing to renounce femininity in order to gain power. Butler's heroines are collaborative negotiators and nurturing mothers (while not being solely defined by these traits). In this way, they are not terribly far removed from the mothers Charlotte Gilman Perkins creates in her 1915 *Herland* in that they see mothering as a sociological responsibility, a way of strengthening community in general as opposed to the more Freudian fulfillment of individual desire. Where Butler's work diverges from Gilman's is in the attitudes of her maternal cyborg heroines. While they understand the necessity of what they are doing, they are not wholly fulfilled by their maternal statuses, and they often resent the sacrifices that their mothering roles have forced them to make. As we will discuss in more detail later, Butler not only revitalizes the contemporary science fiction heroine by allowing her to be both maternal and heroic, but she also critiques

notions found in much early feminist utopia and some African American literature about the correlations between maternity and feminine worth. While her characters are all caretakers of a sort, this role challenges rather than perfects them and sometimes stands in the way of the progress and growth they are attempting to enact.

As far as the reworking of gender identity is concerned, Butler's work is in dialogue with writers such as Piercy and Le Guin, both of whom have created ambiguously gendered utopias, but rather than suggesting that gender identity needs to transform in and of itself, Butler suggests that humanity, as a whole, needs to find new forms of embodiment and cognition in order to survive. In Butler's work, therefore, gender does not undergo a revision in isolation but rather changes as a result of humanity as a whole becoming something new. For Butler, gender is one of many tired and ineffectual modes of identity that humanity would be better off ridding itself from. Another, at least in some contexts, is race.

Black to the Future: The African American Intervention

"Speculative fiction allows me to experiment with the effects of that cancerous blot [history], to shrink it by setting my worlds far in the future or to metonymize it so that I can explore the paradigms it's created. I could even choose to sidestep it altogether into alternate history. Science fiction makes it possible to create visions which will shout down the realism imprisoning us behind a wall of alienating culture."

– Walter Mosley

While feminists were relatively quick to adapt science fiction to their own artistic and political ends and often found the genre to be a fruitful means of meditating upon difference, struggle, and limiting social norms, black writers have been slower to claim the genre as their

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own. This is not to say that black American writers have not regularly employed speculative modes over the past two centuries, often in order to indirectly critique their own societies. Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902) fictionalizes a thought-to-be-lost Ethiopian civilization in order to shine a light on American racism. In 1920, W.E.B. DuBois published "The Comet," a short story that depicts a relationship between a white woman and a black man in New York after toxic gas has killed the rest of the world. George Schuyler's *Black No More* (1931) satirizes a world in which legible race has been eliminated thanks to a scientific process that can transform blacks into whites. Black writers have also regularly evoked apocalypse, a well-loved sub-genre of science fiction, in their works. Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative depicts a physical altercation with his master as a metaphorical end of his days as a slave, with accompanying rebirth as a man who is free, intellectually if not yet physically. Charles Chestnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) depicts the dying of the old south and the coming of a new political age through the means of a destructive storm that lays the groundwork for the world's rebirth. Storms are used similarly in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Perhaps an even more potent example of nearly apocalyptic alienation occurs in the final pages of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). In a 1994 interview, Greg Tate, a cultural critic and staff writer for the *Village Voice*, observed, while speaking specifically about *Invisible Man*, that twentieth century black writing has had "huge dollops of fantasy, horror, and science fiction." Tate goes on to detail how *Invisible Man* "deals with the condition of being alien and alienated, and speaks, in a sense, to the way in which being black in America is a science fiction experience" (qtd. in Grayson 9).

Tate's point is shared by critics such as Isaiah Lavender who argues that, "the African American historical and cultural condition is inherently the stuff of science fiction" (37). John Rieder echoes this sentiment, stating that:

environmental devastation, species extinction, enslavement, plague, and genocide

following in the wake of invasion by an alien civilization with vastly superior

technology—all of these are not merely nightmares morbidly fixated upon by

science fiction writers and readers, but are rather the bare historical record of

what happened to non-European people and lands after being 'discovered' by

Europeans and integrated into Europe's economic and political arrangements

from the fifteenth century to the present. (124)

Mark Dery concurs that "African Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien

abductees. They inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of

intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and

technology … is too often brought to bear upon black bodies" (8). It would seem, therefore, that

just as early science fiction contained the seeds that eventually made it attractive to feminist

writers, aspects of black American experience have predisposed writers to employ speculative

modes that would eventually explicitly dovetail with science fiction.

While black science fiction as it is known today can largely be traced to two originary

figures—Samuel Delany, whose first work was published in 1962, and Octavia Butler, whose

first work was published in 1971—it is not hard to see why black writers before this incorporated

the speculative and the fantastic into their writing. Neither is it hard to fathom why the genre

eventually became the preferred narrative mode for many black writers. Perhaps the fact that

black writers started producing science fiction rather late in the genre's evolution has to do, at

least partially, with early science fiction's close ties to scientific racism and imperialism. John

Rieder notes that "evolutionary theory and anthropology, both profoundly intertwined with

colonial ideology and history, are especially important to early science fiction from the mid-

century on" (2). There are theorists who take Rieder's observation a step further and assert that

science fiction as a genre would not have blossomed when it did if not for Darwin's (often misused) ideas about evolution coupled with the interface with "alien races" that imperialism demanded. Early science fiction, these critics posit, is inextricable from its racist desires to explain the supposed atavism and degeneration of the people its authors (or at least their societies) wished to dominate and exploit.

While these are logical and compelling arguments that may, in part, explain why black science fiction is a relatively new literary phenomenon, it is also true that African American literature has evolved to include many of the same tropes and themes as contemporary science fiction. Isaiah Lavender points out that "both science fiction and African American literature are the consequence of cultural memory: they are related to the rise of industry and slavery, respectively—two key factors in the history of the United States" (39). Less abstractly, a large portion of both science fiction and African American fiction examine the past in the hopes of making sense of the present and establishing hope for the future. Both are deeply committed to questioning reality through the device of symbolism, and both engage with questions of cause and effect. Both genres are intensely interested in social constructions of power and how this power is challenged, threatened, or strengthened by the incorporation of difference. It is undeniable that racialized monsters, aliens, and cyborgs exist in both early and contemporary science fiction, and while this certainly can and no doubt has alienated some readers, it has led others to examine racialized power differentials. The alien encounter, perhaps more than any other trope in science fiction, has created parallels between science fiction and realist African American literature, seeing as both genres are committed to exploring the stability and cohesiveness of identity and the effects of oppression and alienation upon these identities.

Despite the parallels that many critics see between lived black experience, black literature, and science fiction, the genre has been slow to recognize not only black readers and

writers but also its own perpetuation of racism, despite, or perhaps because of, its obsession with difference. Some early science fiction was provocatively racist, such as Robert Heinlein's *The Sixth Column* (1949), whose victor in a future race war was unsubtly named Whitey. The highest honor available for a character of color in such novels was sacrificing his life for his white comrades, as does the one black character in Leigh Brackett's story "The Vanishing Venusians" (1944). Other early science fiction texts tried resolutely to be "colorblind," imagining a future in which race was no longer a social category. Novels like Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953) embodied the white liberal fantasy of a single black character functioning amiably and unselfconsciously in a predominantly white society without a detailed account of any sort of shift in the fundamental structures and ideologies that presently govern humanity. The change is merely one of attitude, which the reader is supposed to accept has transformed without a known catalyst.

While early space operas tended to, at worst, demand that characters of color give their lives for their white counterparts, and, at best, place black characters into white worlds with little comment or conflict, lost race narratives, which reached their heyday in the late nineteenth century, addressed racialized fears, as they were connected to Darwinian theory, explicitly. From around 1870 to the 1930s, there were two major strains of the lost-race motif. One, drawing largely on utopian traditions, is exemplified by Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and Gilman's *Herland* (1915). The other, more commercially successful strain of lost-race fiction is marked by adventure rather than utopian social engineering and is exemplified by H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1886), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912). As Brian Stableford notes, stories that depict "previously undiscovered" human species tend to be written by writers "harshly critical of the contemporary human condition and wholly in favor of 'progress'" (qtd. in Kilgore, Queering

236). This "progress,' however, often comes at the expense of people seen as less advanced, and, after Darwin, less evolved. H.G. Wells, more than any other author, paved the way for a Darwinian reading of the future with his publication of *The Time Machine* (1895), which split future humans into two distinct species, the Morlocks and the Eloi.

Lost race fiction, which usually depicts a civilization of isolated people who have somehow remained unaffected by the modern world and live in a state of noble primitivism, tends to rely on locations that would have been considered exotic to nineteenth century British or white American readers. Amongst these locations, unsurprisingly, is Africa, which appears in the work of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Michael Crichton, Robert Heinlein, A.M. Lightner, Paul McCauley, Mack Reynolds, and Mike Resnick to name a few. While some white science fiction authors have portrayed Africa as a place of interesting and even politically transcendent futures, such as Arthur C. Clarke, who depicts a politically stable, wealthy continent in *The Foundations of Paradise* (1979), more often Africa is depicted as a place that cannot be fully navigated or understood. Therefore, the entire continent often gets dismissed from the future, particularly in post-apocalyptic literature. As Douglas Kilgore notes, "few writers have tried to grapple with the continent as a place where real people possess a respected past and a potentially interesting future" (Beyond 122). Given this reality, one of the greatest contributions black authors such as Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson, and especially Octavia Butler have made is the inclusion of Africa as an actual livable place in their fiction, a continent with a real history, a tangible present, and a possible future.

Although Octavia Butler predates both Afrofuturism and Astrofuturism, it is worth briefly mentioning both of these movements within black science fiction if for no other reason than to illustrate their indebtedness to Butler. Afrofuturism was coined in 1993 when Mark Dery defined the term in a collection of interviews with Samuel Delany, Tricia Rose, and Greg Tate

published in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Dery connected Afrofuturism to the growing futuristic narratives of people of African descent. Alondra Nelson next used the term publically in 2002 "to challenge the notion of a future without race" when she guest edited a special issue of *Social Text*. One of the more recent evocations of Afrofuturism appears in a 2007 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* edited by Mark Bould and Rone Shavers, where Bould states that science fiction "avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them" (qtd. in Lavender 11). Given the rather loose parameters of Afrofuturism, and the fact that critics seem to connect the term to artistic representations of black people in the future, but lack specificity beyond that, Douglas De Witt Kilgore first used the term "Astrofuturism" in 2003 to classify art that combines race, space travel, and utopianism. Specifically, Kilgore argues that space flight will free earthly civilizations from the myopia of racism as technology expands the human horizon and shapes all of us into something better.

"Devoted to breaking the limits placed on humanity by the surface of this planet," Kilgore explains, "Astrofuturism forecasts an escape from terrestrial history" ("Astrofuturism" 1). Although depictions of black people making lives for themselves on other planets go back at least as far as the 1950s, with the music and album art of Sun Ra being one example, it seems unlikely that Kilgore was not at least partially influenced by Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), where protagonist Lauren Olamina spends her life preparing humans for space travel and colonization, due to her conviction that earth will soon be uninhabitable. In Lauren's mind, and consistent with the tenets of Astrofuturism, the difficulties of settling other planets will force the human race to mature intellectually, emotionally, and biologically. Racism, sexism, xenophobia, as well as a rolodex of other social and economic ills will fade away as humans band together to survive their harsh new environments, Lauren believes. Butler addresses similar themes in *Imago* (1989), the third book in her *Xenogenesis*

trilogy, which features humans being sent to Mars so that they can overcome their hierarchical behaviors and build a civilization that will, unlike their original one, hopefully not end in ruin.

The idea that there is no saving the human race as is, given historical legacies of slavery, imperialism, war, and environmental devastation, is now a common one in Astrofuturism, but is an idea that was largely pioneered by Butler. The hypothesis present in most of her fiction, one supported by Kilgore, is that in order for the human species to actually realize its full potential, socially and biologically, it must try again, elsewhere and in an altered format. This second attempt must consciously seek to undo much that humanity has been and done in the past, not through repression or denial but through confronting and understanding centuries' worth of conflict so as not to recreate it. While a large part of Butler's futures rely upon an understanding of the nuances of power and the complexities of hierarchy, Butler also posits, as a type of safeguard, that residual propensities for greed or violence that prove impossible to weed out of society through dialogue and collaboration will be offset by the hard physical labor and creative social engineering needed to colonize new planets. Given the possibility that the task of space colonization will not fully absorb human hostilities and shortsightedness, Butler suggests that the less savory aspects of humanity will slowly disappear as humans interbreed with the different species of alien they are likely to encounter. For Butler, humanity can most quickly and most assuredly be improved by becoming something other than what it currently is.

Obviously embedded in Astrofuturism are notions of exploration and expansion, both of which contain ugly possibilities that Kilgore does not shy away from. He writes that:

> the idea of a space frontier serves contemporary America as the west served the
> nation in its past: it is the terrain onto which a manifest destiny is projected, a
> new frontier invalidating the 1893 closure of the western terrestrial frontier. But
> it is also the space of utopian desire. Astrofuturist speculation on space-based

exploration, exploitation, and colonization is capacious enough to contain

imperialist, capitalist ambitions and utopian, socialist hopes. (Astrofuturism 1)

For Kilgore, part of what makes Astrofuturism exciting is the fact that, in Ralph Waldo

Emerson's words, it avoids "foolish consistency." It is spacious enough, malleable enough to

contain both hope and horror, promise and paranoia, celebration and catastrophe. While both

Butler and Kilgore concede the unlikelihood that humanity's second (and third and fourth and

fifth …) attempt at existence will be flawless, they are both hopeful that it will be an

improvement upon our current world. While Astrofuturists are generally optimistic about

humanity's capacity for maturing in positive ways, they also acknowledge that their ideology

unavoidably contains the historical remnants of Westward expansion and manifest destiny.

Advanced technology and scientific prowess do not, Astrofuturists warn, serve as an antidote to

hierarchy and oppression. Nalo Hopkinson channels this very idea in *Midnight Robber* (2000), a

novel that depicts Toussaint, a futuristic society on a faraway planet colonized entirely by people

from the Caribbean. Despite their history of colonization and slavery, Hopkinson's society is still

deeply stratified and hierarchal. More important than the fact that the citizens of Toussaint don't

quite "get it right" the second time around is the fact that Hopkinson is attempting to examine

what the building of extrasolar societies might look like, given the previous history of the people

involved. She is, in short, asking the kind of questions made possible by Butler's pioneering

work.

Why Black Women's Science Fiction?: The Works of Octavia Butler

By now, the points of affinity between African American fiction and science fiction

should be fairly clear, as should Butler's impact on and critique of both genres. Given the fairly

recent dearth of dissertations about a single author, let me take a moment to justify my decision to focus on Butler exclusively. She is, as I mentioned earlier, along with Samuel Delany, one of black science fiction's originary figures and deserves critical attention not only because of this, but also for the many ways she has melded the conventions of science fiction and black literature in the creation of something distinct. Secondly, although it is beyond the scope of this project to examine this in detail, Octavia Butler's influence on black writers of science fiction who came after her is unquantifiable.

I am comfortable asserting this because this project did originally start as a more general study of black women currently writing speculative fiction. It analyzed the work not just of Butler, but of Gloria Naylor, Nalo Hopkinson, Toni Morrison, Nisi Shawl, Jewelle Gomez, Dionne Brand, Grace Nichols, Tananarive Due, Andrea Hairston, Maryse Condé, and Grace Perry. The project became unmanageably long, but more importantly, it lacked any semblance of a unifying argument. As far as black women's science fiction is concerned, this is a good thing, as it shows that the groundwork laid by Butler has been embraced, altered, and transformed so that there is very little cohesive about it. However, as a piece of scholarly writing, my project lacked a central focus. Oftentimes the only thing linking the texts I was examining was the race and gender of the author. It therefore seemed logical to narrow the focus to Butler, partially because she was the first black woman to write science fiction extensively, and partially because, despite the many writers who have followed in her footsteps, her themes are still singularly challenging, even radical. Both her literary genre bending and her vision of future worlds and the work needed to establish them are unique. Her depictions of hybridity, motherhood, collectivism, and negotiations in the face of power imbalance, to name just a few of her themes, are both reliant upon and wholly transformative of both of the genres in which she situates herself.

I see the specific intervention I am making in the field of scholarship on Octavia Butler thusly: while there are critics who have noted what often gets referred to as Butler's "African Ethos," which, as far as I can tell, refers to Butler's depictions of motherhood, caretaking, and nurturance, as well as her tendency to create heroines who are heavily dependent upon the communities that support them, much of this scholarship attributes this ethos to Butler's race and gender without further comment or exploration. While certainly, every writer is shaped by the confluence of many identity markers, I want to deepen the conversation and show that Butler is purposely engaging with the tropes and conventions of both African American literature and speculative fiction in highly singular and innovative ways. Her work is not solely identitarian but also highly literary. Who she is matters, of course, but too many descriptions and analyses of her work are overly quick to attribute all of her authorial choices to her body.

Secondly, while feminist critics of science fiction have been quick to embrace and celebrate Butler's work, most of their analyses have focused on the ways Butler revises patriarchal notions of heroism, hierarchy, and technology that are present in much science fiction but fail to see the ways in which Butler's work opposes the essentialism and xenophobia of much feminist science fiction. Butler's work is lauded for its genre bending, but not its genre critique.

Thirdly, despite Butler's status as an African American woman, no critic that I have come across specifically addresses Butler's status as an American writer. Certainly Butler's work is deeply engaged in the institution and legacies of American slavery. She is equally engaged in concepts that have intrigued American thinkers and writers for centuries: manifest destiny, religious freedom, expansion and imperialism, and the interactions between indigenous and settler communities. The frontier looms large in her work, as does survivalism, individualism, exceptionalism, and hyphenated identities. While Butler works very hard in her novels and short stories to create futures that show what she believes humanity is capable of becoming, much of

what stands in her characters' ways is deeply rooted in American history and the American psyche.

Although overlooked by many critics, Donna Haraway is one critic who has noted both the extraordinary futures that Butler creates and also her reliance on black literature when developing her fictional worlds. Haraway writes that "unlike Lessing, Piercy, Russ, Le Guin, Atwood, Wolf, or Tiptree, Butler uses the conventions of science fiction to fashion speculative pasts and futures for the species that seem deeply informed by Afro-American perspectives with strong tones of womanism and feminism'" (qtd. in Hampton 77). Shannon Gibney adds that "Butler never presents an overt critique of the 'Anglo' focus of the 70s feminist movement; rather, her black female characters, her choice of race and class as subject matter in addition to gender, and her predominant literary concerns of power and domination convey this message themselves" (108). While I disagree with Gibney about the level of explicitness of Butler's critique, I do agree that through her protagonists, who function both as messianic visionaries and average wives and mothers, Butler is able to critique the conflation of motherhood and worth found in much black fiction while also celebrating the ethos of communalism found in these same works. She is also able to critique the imperialist ideologies and rapacious individualism found in much science fiction and even poke fun at the utopianism of twentieth-century feminist science fiction that preaches collectivity but often relies upon extreme homogeneity.

One of Butler's most notable interventions involves the redefinition of heroism. Paul Gilroy has defined black cultural practice as a specific, or even privileged, positionality of in-betweenness in Western modernity" (qtd. in Thaler 4), and Butler's heroines very much exist in this liminal space between acceptance and exclusion. In fact, it is their ability to exist between center and periphery that shapes their heroism, and this privileged positionality stems largely from their race, gender, and class statuses. Douglas Kilgore has noted the social, political, and

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economic placement of most of Butler's heroines and states that "if humanity as a whole is subject to the fear of bodily violation and exploitation, in Butler's futures it is black women who have the longest familiarity with it. Such unfortunate experts know the best strategies for survival" (Memorial 355). Their blackness, their femaleness, their poverty, their status as mothers, even their illnesses and/or disabilities are precisely what equip Butler's heroines to lead in future worlds. Their pervious disadvantage becomes competence and their historical familiarly with marginalization makes the ideally compassionate leaders.

Two things are important to note here. Firstly, Butler is not merely reversing the parameters of power so that the formerly powerless are now made powerful. Rather she is creating future worlds that rely upon negotiation and co-dependence, worlds in which humans are asked to relinquish large parts of themselves and experience physical and emotional forms of violation in order to survive. Butler's heroines succeed largely because, as Kilgore points out, both their histories and daily realities have prepared them to make such sacrifices. Secondly, as poor black women who are often suffering from bodily disease, Butler's heroines have less of a stake in the status quo and are therefore more likely to be receptive to the changes humans are asked to undergo in order to survive. Butler isn't asserting that there is anything essential in black female identity that equips them to fare better in the future worlds she creates. Rather, it is their treatment by their peers and their society that has outfitted them with the skills and attitudes their success depends upon. Universally, Butler's heroines are in some way cyborg, although not in the conventional technologized use of the term. Rather, their humanity is in some way altered and enhanced by their relationships with otherness, and the end result is usually a transformation of humanity writ large. Donna Haraway writes that "women of color might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (Manifesto

32), and certainly it is the fusion of these "outsider identities" that have rendered Butler's heroines capable of the adaptability required for their leadership and their survival.

Also singular to Butler's work, and related to the aggressive hybridity of her heroines, is her unapologetic notion that polite co-existence, while better than outright hostility, is not socially transformative enough to serve as a permanent future solution for society. Rather, for Butler, truly realized humanity goes far beyond the liberal ideal of tolerance and comes from the merging of species, the elimination of criteria that would seek to differentiate and create hierarchical taxonomies. Raymond Williams has argued that "part of the power of science fiction [is] that it is always potentially a mode of authentic shift: a crisis of exposure which produces a crisis of possibility; a reworking, in imagination, of all forms and conditions" (qtd. in Morse 8). This "authentic shift" characterizes Butler's fiction perhaps more so than any science fiction writer who has ever worked in the genre. This shift, for Butler, consists of humanity confronting, accepting, and eventually merging with a clear Other. In this merge, aspects of humanity are lost, while aspects of otherness are gained and reworked, but it is made clear that the only way forward for humanity is in an altered state. Those, like Butler's heroines, who are able to accept this thrive, and those who don't stagnate and eventually perish. While Butler is not terribly interested in preserving identitarian categories such as race and gender, she is quick to point out that certain identities lend themselves to an acceptance of hybridity and a willingness to relinquish parts of the self when survival is at stake.

A Note on Structure and Chapter Overview

The following five chapters will look at many of the interventions that Butler has made in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature, utopian literature, stories about time travel, cyborg

narratives, and alien invasion stories. It will regularly reference both her revisions and critiques of white authored science fiction and black literary tropes. Although micro-arguments will surface in each chapter, the unifying strand used to link all five chapters will be Butler's examination of how the black cyborg mother (using the last two terms loosely) is uniquely situated to survive in the futures she creates, again, not due to anything innately tied to her identity, but because of the positions of invasion and compromise that her past and present realities have forced her to accept. As we will repeatedly see, Butler's heroines retain cognitive advantages from having spent most of their lives as Othered subjects. Related to Butler's privileging of the social over the biological, another theme Butler will repeatedly explore is genetic determinism and the role of choice, asking specifically how the interaction between these two things might play out in future civilizations.

My chapters are not organized chronologically but thematically. This is because when I am looking at the interventions that Butler has made in, say, utopian fiction for example, I first need to establish what these generic conventions are. Similarly, when I am looking at how Butler is evoking slave narratives in her writing that features time travel, I need to devote time and attention first to examining the conventions both of slave narratives and also of time travel literature. Because different subsets of speculative fiction contain different themes and tropes that affect the specific intervention that Butler makes, it felt logical to structure the project in this way.

In my first chapter we will explore how apocalypse has been used, throughout history, as a device in literatures of oppressed or socially marginalized peoples. While Butler certainly employs the apocalyptic tradition as it has been evoked throughout both science fiction and black American literature, she also critiques and re-envisions the exceptionalism, survivalism, and regressive gender politics of many apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic texts. Unlike most apocalyptic narratives, Butler's stories privilege the physically and socially weak, not because of their weakness, per se, but rather because of the adaptability their weakness has equipped them

with. Unsurprisingly, apocalyptic fiction regularly engages questions of power and powerlessness; however, Butler's stories never showcase straightforward scenarios of the bad losing power and the good gaining it or vice versa, a fairly typical setup in much apocalyptic fiction. Rather, Butler's depictions of power are not only constantly shifting, but they are muddied by desire, shame, uncertainty, biological proclivities, and the difficulty in distinguishing between love and coercion. As a result, Butler's apocalyptic fiction undermines the dichotomous morality of most apocalyptic literary worlds in which the strong survive to wield their power and the weak acquiesce or perish.

We begin the second chapter, which focuses on utopia, by talking about utopian surplus, an idea devised by Ernest Bloch. Utopian surplus occurs when humanity is forced to change or adapt in ways that could not have been previously predicted. Utopian surplus can often be traced to the human drive for survival. When humans have to change in order to stay alive, they will do so, Bloch asserts, but often not before (minus a few visionaries). In Butler's utopias, the process of approaching utopian surplus is more fruitful than utopian outcomes themselves, and likewise, utopian failures teach society more than utopian successes, as long as those failures don't cross the threshold into apocalypse. In this sense, Butler is closely aligned with feminist utopian writers such as Gilman, Le Guin, and Monique Wittig, who create utopian scenarios that allow for experimentation and failure and privilege process over endpoints. Unlike the above writers' utopias, however, Butler's utopia is fiercely heterogeneous, and it is this multifaceted heterogeneity, Butler implies, that allows for its success. In Butler's utopian writing, we, once more, see a young, poor, black woman triumphing, largely because she has little stake in the world that currently exists and therefore has little to lose and much to gain in her utopian dreaming. Butler's utopia in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* is deeply Astrofuturist (long before Astrofuturism was a defined concept), in that she proposes that utopian

surplus will be accelerated through space travel and planetary colonization. Given the unpleasant associations of these actions, Butler's utopian visions ask if there are new and potentially more compassionate and negotiation-based ways to colonize, but never questions that expansion is a necessary step in the social and biological betterment of humanity.

In the creation of her utopian spaces, Butler also questions the feasibility of conventional feminist utopia (a subset of science fiction that never really fell out of popularity in the twentieth century, but had its heyday in the 1970s) as well as such black separatist movements as Garveyism. While Butler questions the uncritical valorization of motherhood found in both feminist utopian writing and some strains of black nationalist thought, the assumption of women's close connection to the natural world, and the homogeneity of separatist movements, be they female or black, she celebrates (although still slightly alters) the communalism and commitment to justice of such spaces. Butler's utopia is one in which motherhood is not posed as the sole method of community building and technology is not demonized at the hands of nature worship. Butler's utopias are heterogeneous in all possible ways, and even though collaboration and communalism are social virtues, individual growth is foregrounded as well. Butler's utopian space is also, paradoxically, depicted as both imperfect and impermanent. Conflict exists, and indeed, growth and progress rely upon this conflict. It is a well-established trope in science fiction that a lack of challenges leads to both social and biological dormancy; we see this as early as Wells's work, and it is a theme Gilman addresses twenty years later. Indeed, the Oankali, the alien species in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, constantly seek out other species to reproduce with precisely to avoid such stagnation. Butler's utopias, therefore, are utopian precisely because they refuse to remain static.

In my third chapter, on time travel, I will first establish how, paradoxically, time travel narratives are more about the present than they are about either the past or future moments that

the traveler experiences. This, of course, makes them fruitful vehicles for critique. Yes, Dana, the protagonist in *Kindred*, travels to the past, but this largely results in a better understanding of her own time. Through her travels, Dana, a black woman who grew up without economic security and now lives without familial support, is able to analyze the implications of her marriage to Kevin, a successful white author who funds a life of relative luxury. While the text suggests that Dana is, to some degree, complicit in her own oppression, it does not condemn her and indeed illustrates the parallels between her own life and her relative's slave past. These parallels largely center upon the need to compromise, sometimes with those who seek to exploit, in order to survive. We see Dana do this to some degree with Kevin, and to a much greater degree with Rufus, the slave owner who fathered her great great grandmother. As with Butler's other heroines, Dana learns that power, coercion, and negotiation follow complicated and confusing trajectories, and her success ultimately relies on her ability to remain adaptable and avoid simplistic dogmas.

Butler not only employs the widely used science fiction trope of time travel, but she also evokes slave narratives in *Kindred* in order to play with the idea of authorial objectivity in a way that undermines, or at the very least interrogates, the claims to truth that such narratives rely upon. Through her experiences living as a slave, Dana begins to explore how it might be possible to access undocumented history through her body. Time travel makes it possible for Dana to question whether embodied experience is somehow superior to intellectualized ways of knowing. Rather than taking a hard stand either way, Butler allows embodiment to exist alongside the intellectualization of slavery, and ultimately Dana has a fuller understanding of the compromises her ancestors were forced to make. Unlike slave narratives that understandably had to depict slaves as morally unassailable and heroic, Dana is able to transcend any semblance of ethical simplicity and gain a more nuanced understanding of power, betrayal, and compromise.

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Connectedly, Butler also uses time travel to question how history is traditionally recorded, transmitted, and perceived by depicting Dana as someone who has direct access to the past and yet still cannot fully make sense of it.

Whereas many older time travel narratives depict future worlds in order to critique the attitudes or ideologies of the present, Butler uses the past as a tool for creating a more livable future. In particular, Butler is interested in exploring Black Nationalist sentiments of the 1960s and 70s that faulted older generations of black Americans for being too accommodating to white interests. Rather than address this issue directly, Butler depicts a modern woman being forced to live and work as a slave. This position is complicated by the fact that Dana has a direct interest in keeping her master alive long enough for him to father her ancestor. Her very existence is tied to the survival of someone who exploits, abuses, but also depends on her (Rufus can barely read and write while Dana is well educated), illustrating the nuances of power, oppression, and codependence that created racialized American legacies. Similar to Butler's other texts, it is assumed that Dana's background naturally equips her to be more receptive to the complexities of power and crises of compromise that a slave would have had to make in order to ensure her survival. It is this receptiveness that leads to Dana's more complete and nuanced comprehension of history.

In my fourth chapter I am looking at Butler's cyborg figures, in which I also include vampires and shape-shifters. The power of the liminal and altered body, particularly when that body is female, is possibly Butler's most significant intervention in both science fiction and black literature. Butler's cyborgs are transgressive, but they are also maternal. They ignore conventional borders between races and species, but they also nurture. Their hybridity is not usually the result of technological innovation, which addresses feminist concerns about the privileging of the technological over the corporeal. Butler's cyborgs procreate with all manner of

non-humans, and although some characters, both human and otherwise, insist upon hurling the type of disparagement typically aimed at women who don't make "proper" reproductive choices, Butler's maternal cyborgs, because of the choices they make, are able to act as humanity's only hope for survival through transformation.

My fifth and final chapter focuses on how Butler uses aliens to interrogate difference in ways that seek neither to neutralize nor to absorb that difference, but to force humans to negotiate with it, even incorporate it into themselves in ways that are ultimately self-effacing but also hugely beneficial. As we will have seen in Butler's other works by this point, embracing hybridity is consistently rewarded, and it tends to be those with less power, and therefore less of a stake in human society, who are able to become hybrid with the most ease. This is not to say that the merging of humanity and alienness is ever depicted as an easy process by Butler, who always makes room for resistance. Given Butler's commitment to complexity, however, it should come as no surprise that her resisters, while noble in their resistance, are often heinously xenophobic, chauvinistic, and shortsighted at great peril to themselves and others. Likewise, her messianic protagonists are often riddled with self-doubt and imperfect in their relationships with others.

Butler has rewritten the conventional science fiction hero: she is black, she is disempowered, she is poor, she is often ill, and she compromises and nurtures, rather than fights. While she is certainly capable of resistance, her methods rely more on stealth, negotiation, and intelligence than on strength or force. Given this new brand of hero, it makes sense that Butler's narratives have replaced war with compromise, human arrogance with cooperation, and hierarchy with collaboration. She has likewise revised notions of uncomplicated power relations and has also questioned the equation of motherhood and worth that some feminist utopia and black literature espouses. Lastly, she has questioned the productivity and limitations of homogeneity, a characteristic that can be found in both genres since their geneses.

Disastrous Pasts and Hopeful Tomorrows: Octavia Butler Rewrites Apocalypse

"They want it to end here, the way all their stories end, encircling slowly to choke the life away. The violence of the struggle excites them, and the killing soothes them … and they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your death alone in these hills … if you don't go with them, they'll hunt you down, and take you any way they can. Because this is the only ending they understand."

– from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*

The Origins and Popularity of Apocalypse: A Very Short Introduction

In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theories of Fiction* (1966), Frank Kermode identifies what he calls a "pattern of anxiety," a recurring perception that we are living at the end of an era (Seed 2). Indeed, one does not have to search very far or for very long to determine that our culture is obsessed with apocalypse and, seemingly paradoxically, whatever it is that may come afterwards. Cormack McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1990), and Max Brooks's *World War Z: an Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006) are just three of the most popular of thousands of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic (AOPA) novels written in the past few decades. AOPA fiction comes in a wide variety of ideological and aesthetic orientations. There is the eco-feminist post-apocalypse offered by Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the romance-tinged yet still dystopic post-apocalypse featured in Suzanne Hollins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-10), and the Christian apocalypse of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind* (1995-2007) series, which details the end times as they are described in the book of Revelation.

Cinephiles are also not lacking opportunities to see scores of fictional worlds reduced to so much flaming wreckage. As with the novels cited above, the destruction in these films comes in an array of flavors. *Independence Day* (1996) and *War of the Worlds* (three different versions of this film were released in 2005 alone) depict the conventional but visually appealing narrative of alien invasion. *Planet of the Apes* and its sequels (there have been ten U.S. based films made between 1968 and 2014) focus on the blurring of distinctions between the human and the animal, and *The Matrix* franchise (1999 and 2003) taps into anxieties surrounding the future impact intelligent machines will have on human life. The *28 Days Later* franchise (2002 and 2007) provides two of the numerous filmic depictions of apocalypse through zombie infestation, whereas *WALL-E* (2008) is Disney's spin on the end of planet earth and the ability of (certain) people to pick up and make a life in galaxies far far away.

While a detailed knowledge of video games is not something I can claim, as of March of 2015, a Google search claimed that there are no fewer than two hundred thirty-four video games currently available that can be classified as AOPA. A similar search for AOPA television shows yielded seventy-one programs, with *Battlestar Galactica* (1978-79 and 2003-9)*, Firefly* (2002), and *Heroes* (2006-10) being perhaps the most popular. Academia is no slouch in the realm of the AOPA either. The late 1990s and early 2000s showed scads of scholarly texts on AOPA being published, with James Berger's *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), David Seed's anthology *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis* (2000), Peter Paik's *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (2010), and George Slusser's *Pocket Apocalypse: American Survivalist Fictions from Walden to The Incredible Shrinking Man* (2000) being some of the most commonly cited.

Of course, just because AOPA narratives are currently popular does not mean that they are new. It is with good reason that Kermode uses the word "recurring" in the opening paragraph

of the chapter. Like Freud's repressed, apocalypse and the fears that accompany it are something that come, seemingly fade, but then always come again, albeit often in different manifestations than before. According to Kermode, one of the reasons AOPA tales continue to appeal to us is because they offer a rescue of sorts, a chance, once the destruction is over, for renewal and rebirth, a second (or third or fourth) chance for an ill civilization. "An ending … does have the appeal of rescuing us from the ultimate nightmare of endless, undifferentiated duration" Kermode declares (qtd. in Seed 3), and it seems that one of the most popular means of apportioning out this undifferentiated time is through a series of nearly obliterating disasters and recoveries. Even with AOPA literature's ability to be both contemporaneous and highly specific, human fragility, the delicate and often precarious balance between life and death, and the collapse of our institutions, our families, and our very selves are all fears that AOPA literature evokes regardless of the time and place of its setting or production. Therefore, it is a literature that manages to feel both reliant upon the details of a narrowly focused reality and universal.

Before looking at how Octavia Butler has contributed to and revised literary understandings of AOPA literature, it will be useful to give a brief overview of the history of AOPA literature because many of the foundational elements put in place during AOPA literature's origin are addressed and reworked by Butler. "Apocalypse" comes from the Greek word "apokalupsis," which means a disclosure of something previously hidden or unknown (Montgomery 5). The idea that apocalypse will assert itself in order to usher in an era of new knowledge, that it will shed light on that which was previously unseen, is part of what connects apocalypse to the promise of a potentially better future. The connection between apocalypse and utopia will be developed further in the following chapter, but, for now, Magnus Enzenberger eloquently summarizes this link by noting that, "the idea of the apocalypse has accompanied utopian thought since its first beginnings, pursuing it like a shadow, like a reverse side that cannot

be left behind … without apocalypse no paradise. The idea of the end of the world is simply a negative utopia" (qtd. in Seed 7).

It is likely a safe assumption that the biblical book of Revelation is the most widely known example of ancient apocalyptic literature in western culture, and, according to Maxine Montgomery, "it involves an unveiling of truth" (5), detailing the specifics of what will occur when Christ returns to earth and collects his followers. However, according to Montgomery, it wasn't New Testament writers who first developed the tenets of apocalypse but rather writers during the earlier reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175-163 B.C.). Montgomery explains:

> The writing of … [AOPA] literature was restricted to the circle of the wise—the learned, those who claimed to have a special revelation from God. In its early manifestations the literature was strictly prophetic, involving encouragement for the Jews during successive phases of their history. Not surprisingly, such writing enjoyed a wide popular appeal to the Jewish nation. During the time that the literature flourished, the Jews were experiencing persecution from corrupt political rulers whose laws were at variance with orthodox religious belief. Although fear and despair were at their height, apocalypse served as a source of encouragement for these oppressed people. … They could endure suffering because they knew an end was close at hand. (5)

There are two interesting points in Montgomery's observations that I would like to expand upon, as they are relevant to both our discussion of why AOPA fiction is currently popular and our discussion of how Butler uses and revises the established themes and parameters of APOA fiction. Firstly, Montgomery notes that AOPA fiction has its roots in a culture that was experiencing tyranny and oppression. The reasons such literature would appeal to both writers and audiences are not hard to unravel: these narratives offered escape from violent and often

unlivable lives and also contained both retribution against one's enemies and the promise of something better. It seems that in its early manifestations, the AOPA tale was inherently a moral one. The noble victims would eventually be rewarded for their devotion to a cause or a god, and their victimizers would be punished. All would eventually be set right, even if it took the destruction of the world to make it so. D.S. Russell comments further on this idea of early apocalypse being tied to notions of justice when he writes that: "it [around 175 B.C.] was an era of severe testing—of persecution, suffering and death—when the hearts of the faithful longed passionately for the breaking in of God upon human affairs and the destruction of the wicked" (qtd. in Montgomery 5). While it would be a stretch to say that god intervenes as directly in contemporary AOPA literature as he often did (or, at least, promised to) in early Judeo-Christian texts, it is true that apocalypse has not lost its moral overtones. In fact, while Butler does not infuse her AOPA tale with simplistically reductive morality, she does not transcend it altogether.

Although the threat of apocalypse is implicit in almost any literature that seeks to impart a moral, in the Early Modern and Romantic eras AOPA literature as we know it today (or how it was known in the ancient world) did not exist on a wide scale, one exception being Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). I.F. Clarke notes that "during the last thirty years of the eighteenth century, a new literature of anticipation began to emerge in the first rudimentary tales of the future" (16), but these narratives usually depicted a future world with very little attention paid to the process of how said world came about. Therefore, while apocalypse may have been implied, it was rarely a central theme. It could be argued that the Puritan sermons delivered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of which Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741) is perhaps the most well-known example, contained apocalyptic elements, and surely they did take inspiration from the book of Revelation, but rather than apocalypse occurring on a planetary scale in these sermons, apocalypse usually referred to the taking of a

single person's life, the ending of their world, but not the world at large. Like early Jewish and early Christian apocalypses, Puritan sermons posited apocalypse as an event that would cleanse the earth of evil, initially sinner by sinner, but eventually as a massive force of destruction that would engulf the world entirely unless, of course, hearers of the sermon repented and proceeded to behave themselves. Rather than assure believers that God was just and would avenge them, as ancient apocalyptic literature did, apocalypse evolved into something used to threaten and dominate.

Much of the AOPA literature written in the late nineteenth century can be classified as disaster narratives, and many of the causes of and reactions to disaster developed by H.G. Wells still impact contemporary AOPA literature. One such text is Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1898) which gained further popularity in 1938 when Orson Welles adapted it for radio broadcast. Other AOPA texts that have been pivotal in forming the genre as we know it today are Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" (1941) and "The Last Question" (1956), Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950), and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960). These texts, despite the healthy doses of horror they deliver, ultimately posit disaster as a regenerative force that allows for the expulsion of folly or evil and the establishment of a new and hopefully more successful world order.

Given that AOPA literature originated among people who were experiencing intense oppression, it is hardly surprising that the genre began and has continued to evolve into one that offers a critique of the society that has helped produce it. Clearly a world poised on the brink of obliteration is full of dire problems, problems that often have complex and violent histories, the effects of which have not been adequately addressed or repaired, or, as James Berger puts it, the "post-apocalyptic world is a study of symptoms and of representations that partly work through and partly act out the past that haunts them" (XV). Indeed, while AOPA literature both performs

and attempts to come to terms with past trauma, it is also a genre that, by its very immediacy, engages with the present. Echoing this point, Veronica Hollinger writes, "when faced with the trauma of … apocalyptic events, science fiction's future orientation becomes blocked and science fiction becomes a present tense kind of literature. That is, it begins to function in the popular imagination more and more as a metaphorical discourse through which to describe/construct the present, rather than as an extrapolative exercise through which to imagine the future" (218). Because of this tendency of AOPA fiction to package depictions and critiques of the present in a future setting, it, like utopian fiction, often gets classified as activist literature.

It is worth mentioning that this critique of the present that AOPA literature provides is not limited to depictions of failed leadership or institutions. AOPA fiction also often makes literal the inability of the human consciousness to properly perceive, process, and react to the word's end. Susan Sontag explains: "the imagery of disaster in science fiction is above all the emblem of an inadequate response […] the inadequacy of most people's response to the inassimilable terrors that infect their consciousness" (qtd. in Barr, "Jews" 201). AOPA fiction is not merely a portrayal of destruction in its many forms; it is also a critique of the human inability to accept failure and adopt new ways of being that will not shorten the path to doom. As we will discuss shortly, Butler's protagonists almost universally recognize and accept the signs of imminent destruction and are able to adapt to what their changing environments require. Through this, Butler implies, the apocalyptic cycle can, perhaps, be interrupted, redirected, or perhaps usurped entirely.

The ability of AOPA literature to critique present times and offer a blueprint for a future that is less likely to end in destruction is one of the reasons the genre is attractive to writers like Butler who are interested in depicting more egalitarian worlds, despite the genre's common tendency to celebrate masculinist survivalist fantasies. Although it is true that a significant portion of the genre veers in this direction, it is also true that apocalyptic themes have been

present in African American literature since its origins. In an oft-quoted passage of Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), the writer mentions preferring a thousand other worlds to the one he is being forced to experience as a slave, showing a tendency already in place in early black American literature to speculate about alternative existences, ones that avoid or transcend current suffering. Robert Lee expands on this point when he asserts that "slave narratives … yield [an] … explicit apocalyptic signature, be it as personal suffering, the religious dream of Zion, or, failing abolition and suffrage, the call for insurrection" (171). Certainly there are overtones of the known world forever ending when Frederick Douglass fights his master, Covey, as depicted in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Not limited to the slave narrative, apocalyptic nuances are also present when the narrator in Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) takes part in a riot in Harlem and when Sethe kills Beloved in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). The storms in Charles Chestnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) all serve as apocalyptic levelers to greater or lesser degrees.

What is notable about these examples is not only the violence of world-altering events, but also the themes of renewal that emerge once the wreckage has been cleared. Fighting Covey gives Douglas the determination to pursue both education and freedom, the riot is what teaches the narrator in *Invisible Man* that his identity is not without value (even though he must protect it by remaining underground), and it is Sethe's murder of Beloved that forces her other daughter, Denver, to seek solace and protection from the community, which eventually provides Sethe with the support she needs to begin healing and rebuilding her life. In the novels of Chestnutt, Hurston, and Naylor each flood causes the death of a main character, forcing those remaining to regroup, evaluate their changed realities, and ultimately grow wiser and more self-reliant.

Further examining the uses of apocalypse in black literature, Maxine Montgomery writes that "African American novelists have used the image of the end of the world … [to show the] end of an oppressive sociopolitical system and the establishment of a new world order where radical justice prevails" (11). While differentiating the ways apocalypse manifests in black literature specifically, Montgomery writes that, "white Americans espoused a theological perspective which entailed a belief in a futuristic heaven divorced from the present, [while] blacks looked forward to a reversal of their sociopolitical situation in this world and the release that comes from defining the self through terms drawn from within the culture" (13). Montgomery notes that while many white-authored texts have historically viewed apocalypse as a way to escape an irreparably flawed world in favor of a paradisiacal resting place, black apocalyptic texts have often employed tropes of disaster in order to alter the world in an attempt to make it, if not closer to a heavenly ideal, at least a better place to live. Significantly, these new worlds created by black-authored apocalypse are still sites of struggle, but the struggle tends to be productive rather than destructive, fruitful rather than obliterating.

Present in much AOPA fiction is the notion of exceptionalism. When only some people will survive, it follows that many texts establish criteria by which people live or die. The most benign form of these criteria is luck, but many AOPA texts develop more malignant reasons for survival, namely a set of characteristics that essentially differentiate between the weak the strong, the inferior and the superior. Typically these characteristics consist of some combination of strength, skill, wealth, ego, and craftiness. In misuse after misuse of Darwin's theory of natural selection, many AOPA narratives rely upon contemporaneous definitions of idealized and reductive masculinity and femininity, seemingly without asking themselves what traits the post-apocalyptic worlds they have created might actually favor. Rather than uncritically celebrating conventionally perfected humans, Butler's AOPA heroines survive because of their willingness to

compromise and negotiate with difference, but also, quite markedly, because of the imperfection of their bodies. In fact, it is largely because of their compromised physical forms that Butler's heroines flourish in post-apocalyptic settings, because their passion for adaptation, even when the changes they undergo are partially destructive of their humanity, is what allows them to thrive.

Butler wrote many of her novels before Paul Gilroy published *The Black Atlantic* (1995), but her work in some ways anticipates his assertion that "people of the African Diaspora constitute a cultural vanguard whose history puts them in the best position to negotiate a coming catastrophe … a heritage of slavery proves apocalyptic knowledge—or might, if it could be mobilized to imagine the world to come" (165-6). According to Gilroy, harrowing historical circumstances have prepared black people and black characters to weather impending doom, not completely dissimilar to how Jewish suffering served as a safeguard against total destruction in early apocalyptic texts. While Butler does not discard the idea of exceptionalism in her AOPA texts, her survivors become exceptional because of their historical marginalization, as opposed to something they possess innately. What's more, Butler also works choice into her heroines' apocalypse survival plans. By this I mean that while Butler certainly establishes criteria in which those who have been victimized are often "selected" to survive in a way that is not lacking in Darwinian resonances, her heroines have the choice to turn away from the sorts of adaptations they must make in order to survive. Likewise, characters who don't possess the type of background that predisposes them to apocalyptic survival can make a choice to engage in the compromises needed to survive. Predisposition, then, is a factor in Butler's AOPA fiction, but it is not the determining factor, as it is in the bulk of AOPA fiction.

It's the End of the World as We Know it (and I Feel Fine): Gender and Survivalism

Before beginning our discussion of the AOPA works of Octavia Butler, it is worth looking at the role the survivor normally plays in AOPA fiction, since Butler's writing reworks conventional depictions of the survivor. "Since the late 1970s," writes James Berger, "the fascination with and authority vested in the figure of the survivor has been one of the defining features of the American post-apocalyptic sensibility" (47). Berger explains our fascination with survivors and the authority with which they are imbued: "the survivor and his testimony are invested with several distinct but related forms of authority. It is first epistemological, for the survivor has seen, and knows, what no one else could see and know. This authority of knowledge, or 'epistemic privilege,' confers a kind of ethical authority, for the survivor's knowledge is often knowledge of a radical transgression of moral boundaries" (48). According to Berger, the survivor, by virtue of having survived, has glimpsed that which would be unimaginable to most and thus has attained singular knowledge. He has also navigated extreme situations and witnessed humanity at it basest level and therefore is both morally and physically equipped to serve as a leader in a post-apocalyptic world.

Berger's analysis of the post-apocalyptic survivor is an attractive one, but it perhaps paints an overly idealistic picture, for, despite all of his awe-inspiring qualities, the AOPA survivor also has a history rooted in both voracious individualism and an opportunistic willingness to embrace questionable morality when necessary. In order to have lived through situations that most did not, the thinking goes, the survivor must have possessed, pre-disaster, exceptional traits not found in most humans: the aforementioned superior strength, intelligence, foresight, and often access to social, political, and economic resources unavailable to the general public.

Also tied to survivalism is rebellion against institutions and disrespect for laws and figures of public authority. Edward James writes about survivalist literature of the 1980s as "being associated with those groups who actually prepared for post-nuclear survival in the backwoods of America, and who in the 1990s became associated with the Militia movement" (52-3). What James implies, if doesn't state explicitly, is that survivalism, in the U.S. at least, is often tied to militaristic, racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic ideologies. James explains that in survivalist literature of this flavor, "the holocaust is used to cleanse the world of its corrupting forces … and restore the good old masculine values of the (fictional) American West" (52-3). This ugly strain of survivalism is something that Butler's fiction does not ignore. As we will see in my discussion of *Parable of the Talents* in chapter two, the post-apocalyptic landscape Butler creates is threatened by an organization called Christian America, a group of men who espouse conservative patriarchy as the goal towards which society should be striving. By having her post-apocalyptic heroine wage war against Christian America through the tools of collective socialism and respect for difference, Butler both makes explicit the ugliness imbedded in much survivalist fiction and also implies that there is a different way to be a survivor. Specifically, Butler asserts that traits not usually associated with exceptionalism or superiority are those which allow her characters to survive apocalypse and be good leaders once the world has all but ended.

In her re-writing of the survivor role, Butler questions if there might be elements embedded within survivalism worth recuperating. One of these is the presence of a frontier, a widely used trope in science fiction, not least of all because it symbolizes boundless potential. Even though the frontier raises alarm bells for both feminist and postcolonial critics, there are, as Carl Abbot claims, types of beneficial social behaviors that can only happen on frontiers. He writes:

frontier life has long been seen in American culture—including science fiction—

as a possible antidote to selfish individualism … the challenges of problem-

solving and community-making in new settlements … demand[s] wide

participation, cooperation, voluntary association, and support for public

institutions. Far from undermining the civil community, the frontier balance[s]

individual competition against the needs of the larger group. (qtd. in Gavin Miller

208)

Although they don't, Abbot's words could refer specifically to the types of frontiers Butler

creates, in which community survival is prioritized over the fulfillment of individual desires

(which is not to say that individual happiness is discarded entirely). Perhaps because Butler is

aware of the possibility of frontier life backsliding into one of the problematic survivalist

fantasies that populate the genre, she commits to prioritizing an ethos of cooperation and

communalism. From this version of frontier-inspired survivalism springs not hatred of the Other

and the desire for a cleansing apocalypse but hope that past mistakes needn't be repeated through

shared labor and active and open dialogue.

Apocalypse Now: Octavia Butler's *Clay's Ark* (1984)

Although Butler depicts apocalypse stemming from a variety of causes in her many

works that broach the topic, among the most common of these is transmittable illness. One of the

reasons plague is such a common vehicle of doom in AOPA literature stems from the fact that

widespread and untreated illness destabilizes the authority of medical knowledge. Add to this the

fact that "medicine has a long and ignoble history of reinforcing racial inferiority and legitimating

its reproduction" (Youngquist 178), and it becomes even clearer why many black writers, Butler

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included, take a certain pleasure in writing about diseases that medical science is powerless to cure.

Just as unstoppable plagues can be used to question the invincibility and benevolence of medical science, quarantine is often used in to evoke segregation and sometimes to justify violence against those who are deemed too diseased to mix with and potentially infect the healthy social body. This alludes to anxiety about miscegenation, and this connection is often developed further by the fact that the diseases Butler writes about are transmitted through maternity or blood. In her depiction of blood and parental-borne illness, Butler both mocks racialized anxieties and argues that such modes of fear aren't just dangerous but potentially apocalyptic.

A third reason plague is used by Butler in her AOPA fiction is because it connects to the valorization of supposed weakness. As we will see in *Clay's Ark*, illness can serve as a source of strength in apocalyptic times, not least because the ill are often more likely to do whatever impending disaster requires of them, largely because they have less of a stake in keeping the world as it is (since this is the world they are sick in). In *Clay's Ark,* the fourth and final novel in Butler's *Patternist* series, which traces humanity's failure to successfully merge with an alien species to their great detriment, illness is spread by an alien organism from the second planet of Proxima Centauri. This organism infiltrates its human carriers' minds and bodies and either kills them (this happens to the majority of people) or alters their chemical and genetic makeup and causes them to give birth to quadruped children. The novel's chapters alternate between past and present, with the past chapters detailing how a single astronaut named Eli became infected with the Clay Ark organism and brought it back to earth. The present chapters detail Eli and his small group of infected people's attempt to capture and infect Blake, a doctor traveling from Arizona to California, and his twin daughters, Keira and Rane.

Even before the reader becomes aware of the presence of the Clay Ark organism, both the past and present landscapes in the novel evoke the apocalyptic. On his drive back to California, Blake notes the dry and desolate surroundings: "it was as though they had left 2021 and gone back in time to a primordial desert. The Indians must have seen the land this way" (19). Without awareness of the full implications of his words, Blake harkens back to an older time, implicitly suggesting that the time is right for renewal. Similarly, his mention of "the Indians" implies that an entire civilization is about to be largely obliterated.

Moving on from these ominous beginnings, it does not take long for Blake's apocalyptic adventure to begin. He and his daughters are captured when they have to pull over from a dust storm, despite the fact that he drives an "armored, high-suspension Jeep Wagoneer … a carefully preserved relic of an earlier, oil-extravagant era … bigger and heavier than the few other cars on the road" (6). Early on the novel presents a parched landscape (the desert), a nod towards more idyllic origins (Indians), an environmental disaster (a dust storm), the threat of violence (the armored Jeep), and the indication that great social and economic changes have already occurred (the end of readily available gasoline). To add to this, we are also told that religion has fallen out of fashion (58), that films about the end of the world are more popular than any other genre (179), and that those who have been able to avoid the "sewers" and "cesspools" of modern urban life spend their days in either walled neighborhoods or farms that are "holdovers from the nineteenth century" (22). In short, Butler has created an apocalyptic landscape that is largely indistinguishable from many others, making what she does next all the more surprising.

As it turns out, technology gone awry, human arrogance, greed, climate change, skyrocketing crime, unraveling social fabric, all the usual scapegoats in apocalyptic destruction, are merely distractors from the true destructive presence in the novel: tenacious non-human life. Butler, a self-proclaimed lover of both virology and irony, has created an apocalyptic landscape

infused not with death, but with life, albeit a form that is not immediately recognizable or valuable to her human characters. Unsurprisingly, those who recognize and are willing to adapt to the presence of this life form in a timely way are those who survive. Therefore, respect for life is a key component to staying alive in Butler's apocalypse, but one's definition of life must be expansive and receptive to profound difference.

Soon after he returns from Proxima Centauri, Eli narrates his experience as the sole survivor and carrier of the Clay Ark organism to earth:

> The ship had died, the three people he had come to love most had died with it to prevent the epidemic he had probably just begun. He should have died with them. But of the four, only his enhanced survival drive had saved him—much against his will. He had been a prisoner within his own skull, cut off from conscious control of his body. He had watched himself running for cover, saving himself, and thus nullifying the sacrifice of the others. To his sorrow, to his ultimate shame, he, and he alone, had brought the first extraterrestrial life to Earth. (31)

Eli is alive, we learn, solely because of his inability to terminate his own life; his desire to live ultimately overrides his knowledge that, due to his actions, humanity will be forever altered. He is, in this moment, the pinnacle of the self-serving individualist, albeit his decisions are not entirely deliberate or rationally made. While this figure usually preserves the status quo, Eli's invader-induced individualism transforms it. Through Eli, Butler casts the last man not as one who has outlasted destruction because of superior strength or intelligence or power, but as someone who is essentially weak, constantly torn between externally-imposed biological imperatives and his own morality. The last man in Butler's world is not a covetable position, but an almost impossibly conflicted one.

A large part of Eli's trauma stems from the fact that, as in most of her novels, Butler envisions the transformation of humanity that is not entirely voluntary. The humans facing apocalypse in Butler's novels, Eli included, are asked to compromise weightily: they will lose a significant portion of their humanity but gain gifts and talents that, hopefully, will prevent them from ever teetering on the brink of apocalypse again. As we will see repeatedly, one's willingness and ability to adapt to the shifting demands placed on humanity as it undergoes transformation will successfully outlast apocalypse, and this willingness and capability is largely socially determined. Eli, as an astronaut and thus someone who was likely fairly privileged in his life pre-disease, is more persistent in his resistance to the Clay Ark invasion of his mind and body than less powerful characters, at least initially. Accepting not only social but biological change in Butler's novels is easier for the disempowered, but not impossible for others, suggesting that Butler privileges choice more than genetic or social determinism.

In *Clay's Ark*, Butler not only revises the notions of the last man and apocalyptic plague; she also rewrites alien invasion, an event that ushers in more than its fair share of apocalypses and is almost uniformly depicted as unambiguously catastrophic. Butler does not deny the initial damage done by alien invasion, but this damage is not the whole story. While seventy-five percent of people infected with the Clay Ark disease do die, those who don't become faster, better coordinated, and stronger (26), and it seems that one's ability to survive is inversely proportional to the resistance one poses to the organism. Butler explains that: "the disease organism caused changes that could be beneficial—if the host survived its initial onslaught. Surviving hosts became utterly resistant to more conventional diseases and more efficient at performing certain specialized functions" (47). Unlike typical aliens, the Clay Arks eventually alter their patterns of replication so as to benefit their hosts. Although not an intelligent organism, Clay Arks mirror the type of stealth and adaptability that Butler lauds in her human characters.

Butler further complicates the power dynamics inherent in alien invasion narratives by depicting the Clay Arks as simultaneous destroyers and regenerators. Given this complexity, it is unsurprising that symbiosis and eventual transformation are privileged forms of contact, as opposed to more straightforward dichotomies of domination and subservience. Meda, one of the humans infected by Eli and now living in an isolated community of humans and Clay Ark children, tries to explain to Blake the symbiotic way the Clay Ark organism works in congress with the human mind and body: "the organism doesn't use cells the way a virus does," she explains. "It combines with them, lives with them, divides with them, changes them just a little. Eli says it's a symbiont, not a parasite" (39). In response to her description, Blake asks Meda if he can examine some of her cells with his microscope and describes seeing:

> Tiny, spiderlike organisms in her flesh, some of them caught in the act of
> reproducing along with her cells—as part of her cells. They were not viruses.
> According to the computer, they were more complete, independent organisms.
> Yet they had made themselves at home in human cells in a way that should not
> have been possible—like plasmids invading and making themselves at home in
> bacteria. But these were hardly plasmids—solitary rings of DNA. These were
> more complex organisms that had sought out higher game than bacteria and
> managed to combine with it without killing it. They had changed it, however,
> altered it slightly, subtly, cell by cell. In the most basic possible way, they had
> tampered with Meda's genetic blueprint. They had left her no longer human. (51-
> 2)

Using the Clay Arks' tenacious drive to replicate, Butler evokes another troubling trope in AOPA literature, namely the loosening of sexual morality in justification of preventing human extinction. *Clay's Ark* contains numerous scenes of infected people either working to contain or

acting upon their desires to scratch, bite, or rape non-carriers, since transmission is most effective when passed through bodily fluids. Similar to her multivalent depictions of the power relationships between humans and aliens, Butler neither condones nor condemns the sexualized behavior of people infected with the Clay Ark organism but rather emphasizes their ability to resist the urges they feel and to make choices accordingly. Certainly Butler seems to suggest that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is hardwired into her characters (and exacerbated by the Clay Arks, who are posited as yet another organism that is attempting to survive at any cost), but acting upon these drives is less hardwired. Butler's decision to allow infected humans to exercise choice fulfills two important purposes. Firstly, it implicitly critiques the masculinist fantasies of sexual lawlessness that populate AOPA fiction, and secondly, it allows infected humans to feel that they have at least partially retained their humanity. Their transformation into something different, in other words, does not result in a complete obliteration of the self and its values and agency. Apocalypse is not total even if the destruction of purely human life forms is imminent. What's more, Butler asserts that rationality has the ability to trump biological imperatives, thus boding for a future world better than the one that led to apocalypse.

In the following passage we see Eli exercise this emotional and physical control, just after he has returned to Earth and is desperate to spread the Clay Ark infection. Here he stands outside a secluded farmhouse and contemplates the family within:

> He had scented at least one man in the house, but there were several women. Their scents attracted him powerfully. Yet the moment he caught himself moving toward the house in response to that attraction, he began to resist. For several minutes he stood frozen outside the window of one of the women. He was so close to her he could hear her soft, even breathing. She was asleep, but turning restlessly now and then. He literally could not move. His body demanded that he

go to the woman. He understood the demand, the drive, but he refused to be just

an animal governed by instinct. The woman was as near to being in heat as a

female human could be. She had reached the most fertile period of her monthly

cycle … no wonder he could not move except to go to her. He stood where he

was, perspiring heavily in the cold night air and struggling to remember that he

had resolved to be human plus, not human minus. He was not an animal, not a

rapist, not a murderer. Yet he knew that if he let himself be drawn to the woman,

he would rape her. If he raped her, if he touched her at all, she might die. (18)

Unlike many an AOPA last man figure, Eli is able to prioritize his own moral code over

biological drive. Eli's ability to make choices and follow through on them directly opposes

ideologies of determinism, which are rife in many end-of-the-world scenarios, and also contrasts

the tendency in much AOPA literature to depict the doomed as merely being acted upon by forces

outside of their control. In the face of impending Clay Ark apocalypse, Eli's agency is limited and

temporary, but he asserts it nonetheless, and in doing so forges alliances with those he eventually

infects. For Butler, resistance is never a futile act, but rather something that builds bridges

between people even as they undergo changes that they cannot prevent.

In a similar scene that pits choice against drive, a newly infected Rane is not as

successful as Eli in suppressing her desire to spread the organism, and she forces herself upon a

stranger whose behavior she finds repugnant but whose body she cannot seem to resist:

She rubbed herself against his hairy body, smiling outside and screaming inside.

It was as though she were two people. One wanted, needed, was utterly

compelled to have this man—perhaps any man. … Yet some part of her was still

her. That part screamed, soundlessly weeping, and clawed with imaginary fingers

at the ape's ugly, stupid face. Her true fingers quivered, hesitated for a moment at

his belt. Then the organism controlled her completely. Her body moved only

under its compulsion and her feelings were abruptly reconciled with her actions.

Part of her seemed to die. (183-4)

Although Rane is not able to assert rationality over impulse, it is significant that she is self-aware enough to grieve the temporary loss of her humanity even as she claims that the organism has won. Of course, winning and losing are never simple or straightforward in Butler's fiction, and although Rane is initially unable to overcome the organism's demands, a few scenes later we see her resisting the organism in an attempt to escape her captors, despite the fact that they provide the contact (sexual and otherwise) that her newly-diseased body craves as well as the knowledge needed to ease her transition from human to hybrid. As a side note, it is worth noticing Butler's playfulness in casting the post-apocalyptic sexual outlaw as an adolescent girl rather than the standard middle aged white man.

Regardless of the significant detriment to herself, Rane chooses to resist the Clay Ark organism's insistence that she remain close to her infectors. As aforementioned, resistance is always made possible in Butler's fiction, although those who practice it usually don't fare as well as those who collaborate and adapt. We see this when Rane's attempt to free herself ultimately results in her death. Given the fact that, when compared to her sister, Keira, Rane is the conventionally more desirable and powerful of the two, her death isn't terribly surprising when Butler's metrics are taken into account. Neither is the success of Keira, who is dying of leukemia at the time her family comes in contact with the Clay Arks and therefore has a more compelling reason to accept her rapidly changing body. We once more see Butler implying that the "fitness" of surviving apocalypse is tied to an ability to choose change over convention. While this choice to prioritize change is easier for those with less power, Butler does not assume this powerlessness

as a prerequisite for survival. Her definition of fitness, in other words, is influenced by external

factors such as wealth and health but not solely determined by them.

In another intervention Butler makes in the highly individualistic AOPA genre, the Clay

Ark organisms do not only impact the individuals who carry them but also the dynamics of the

community where infected people live and work. Initially, most newly-infected people attempt

escape when their symptoms begin to manifest because they fear the intense desire for physical

and emotional contact they suddenly crave from other members of the community. Ironically,

they also have a greater chance of surviving if they remain within the enclave of infected people

as repeated re-infection heightens survival odds. "Nobody can fight the compulsion alone," Meda

tells Blake. "We need each other" (41). Similarly, when Eli is wandering alone through the desert

during his first days back on earth, we are told that "he needed the company of other people

almost as badly as he needed water" (4), clearly illustrating the importance of contact. Whereas

infectious disease is usually spread most effectively by human dispersal in AOPA fiction, Butler

has created a lifeform that privileges those who remain closely bound, physically and

emotionally. In her apocalypse, people who cannot or will not break communal ties fare better

than loners.

Butler continues to criticize the notion that society will ultimately be redeemed and

rebuilt by a lone man who is better, stronger, faster, and smarter than the rest of us by ultimately

valorizing Keira, Blake's daughter who suffers from acute myeloblastic leukemia. We are told

early in the novel that Keira is "not responding to treatment" and that she wears "a wig because

the epigenetic therapy that should have caused her AML cells to return to normal had not worked,

and her doctor, in desperation, had resorted to old-fashioned chemotherapy" (7). Like those

infected with the Clay Ark organisms, Keira's cells are mutating and reproducing in ways that

will impact her life, namely, by ending it. Despite Keira's grim diagnoses, by novel's end, Keira's

illness has been transformed from a source of weakness to a source of strength. Perhaps because she has already accepted her own body as diseased, she is quicker to accept the ramifications of Clay Ark infection than Blake and Rane are. Although she initially agrees to attempt to escape with them, she almost immediately regrets her decision, particularly after Eli tells her more about the disease and the way that it will change her, if it doesn't kill her:

> "When we've changed," he said, "when the organism 'decides' whether or not we're going to live, it shares the differences it's found in us with others who have changed. At least that's what we've decided it's doing. We had a woman who had had herself sterilized before we got her—had her tubes cauterized. Her organisms communicated with Meda's and her tubes opened up. She's pregnant now. We had a guy regrow three fingers he'd lost years ago. You … There's no precedent for it, but I think you may be getting rid of your leukemia. Or maybe the organism's even found a way to use leukemia to its advantage—and yours. You're going to live." (206)

Butler's commitment to communalism is further emphasized here: the Clay Ark organisms are somehow able to communicate with each other, almost telepathically, across a range of bodies. Moving back to the subject at hand, the valorization of the conventionally powerless, Butler depicts Keira's cancer as something that could potentially be useful in the post-apocalyptic world that humanity is facing. Not only does her cancer "teach" the Clay Ark organism valuable lessons in regeneration, it also predisposes Keira to the cooperation and acceptance that is essential for survival. Unlike her father and sister, Keira, who never had the luxury of viewing herself as healthy, whole, and intact, does not find the idea of Clay Ark infection horrifying but rather revels in her increased strength, speed, and sensory perception.

While Butler may be unwittingly privileging ableism here, as so often happens in AOPA literature, her (and Keira's) valorization of the able body is tempered somewhat by the fact that increased physical ability is spread by a disease that anyone can catch and is therefore not reliant upon certain traits that one is either born with or without. What's more, the fact that increased speed and strength come only after the body has been invaded and weakened complicates the trope of the sole AOPA hero who gets to live because he is genetically and/or intellectually superior to those who don't. What's more, even greater in Keira's eyes than her newfound strength and speed is the Clay Ark organism's ability to mutate her cancerous cells in a way that is beneficial to her. Clearly, having less investment in the whole and impenetrable body is an asset, as it allows Keira to mentally and physically adapt to the disease while her father and sister are still fighting against the indignity of having been invaded by an alien organism. This implies that one has a better chance of successfully transitioning to an enhanced physical status if they are able to accept their body's limitations and weaknesses first. In order to become a post-apocalyptic superhuman, in other words, one must have little investment in their status as an intact and self-reliant being.

In fact, it is the rage of being infected by and potentially controlled by an alien organism that compels Blake, a healthy and able-bodied physician, to insist that there must be a way to contain and eliminate the Clay Ark organism through modern medical science. "'You're obviously not well,'" Blake tells Eli after he and his daughters are captured. "I have my bag with me. Maybe I can help'" (20). When Eli insists that Blake is powerless to prevent or contain the spread of the Clay Ark organism, Blake grows visibly angry. Eli, rather than lashing out, shows compassion, telling Blake "this whole thing is going to be hard on you, Doc. You're going to want to ignore just about everything we say because none of it makes any sense in the world you come from" (28). Because of Blake's unwavering faith in his own expertise, he spends the

majority of the novel attempting to flee to the nearest available hospital, which ends up killing him.

When comparing Blake's rigidity to Keira's flexibility, it is worth noting that Keira's acceptance is aided not only by her recovery from leukemia, but also by the fact that she, unlike her father and sister, is not repelled by the children of those infected by the Clay Ark organism. These children are polarizing because, through them, it becomes undeniably clear that those who carry the Clay Ark organism in their bodies are no longer fully human. It is through the Clay Ark children that Butler introduces a mode of difference that cannot be rationalized or mitigated into non-existence. Whereas adults infected by the disease merely grow paler, thinner, and hungrier, their children walk on all fours. One such child, Joseph, is described thusly: "he was a beautiful, precocious child, but he was a quadruped. His senses were even keener than those of his parents and his strength would have made him a real problem for parents of only normal strength … Most important, though, the boy was not human" (174). Despite Jacob's beauty, nearly every character in the novel, including his own father, initially reacts to him with disgust. After one cursory glance at Jacob, Blake exclaims, "'Jesus, what are they breeding back there?'" (68). Similarly, when the effects of the disease are explained to Rane, she asks, "'What do I do if I live? Give birth to one little animal after another?'" (93). She is rebuked for her prejudice, but this does not enable her to hide her revulsion when Jacob confronts her.

As is common in Butler's work when she is forcing her characters to encounter difference, she tests them slowly, ramping up the severity of difference gradually until they must either ultimately accept or reject the transformation that humanity is undergoing. Oftentimes the transformation is depicted as largely beneficial at first, as we see with the increased speed, strength and perception of those who have been infected by the Clay Ark disease. It is only when a character has become partially acclimated to these positive aspects that they are pushed into the

more difficult aspects of negotiation and hybridity, in this case, non-human children. Although Butler's characters must all eventually choose whether they will resist or collaborate, these decisions are never absolute: it is not uncommon for Butler's protagonists to collaborate reluctantly or doubtfully or to resist without passion or vision. No matter what their ultimate decision is, however, Butler never eliminates the presence of choice, albeit choice that is interlaced with many difficult-to-untangle threads and influences. In a genre largely built on the powerlessness of humanity, Butler's characters retain their power, even if over nothing more than their individual actions.

It should be noted that two of these many threads impacting choice can be boiled down to aesthetics and pleasure. Butler initially posits the changes her humans must endure as not only beneficial, but pleasurable, often sexually so. The aspects of the compromise that are more difficult arise from human aesthetic aversion, in that she makes the non-human collaborators, or the end products of this collaboration, ugly or in some other way unappealing. We will see this developed more in my fifth chapter on aliens, but suffice it to say that even though the children of Clay Ark infected humans are not ugly, per se, there quadruped status is unsettling to most of the characters in the novel. The conflict Butler sets up is this: her humans, who are actively working to decide whether they will resist or embrace the change that is required for their survival, find two warring drives in play, drives that don't disappear once they have submitted to change. These drives are their desire for pleasure and their desire for beauty, the type of beauty that has often been associated with the human form and that is greatly altered by whatever transformation humans are being asked to undergo.

In a genre where the heroes are almost uniformly men, it is worth pointing out that nurturance, particularly of a feminized sort, is another characteristic that equips one to withstand a Butlerian apocalypse. While Butler avoids implying that women are innately more nurturing

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than men, she does emphasize aspects of their backgrounds that cultivate these sensibilities. In *Clay's Ark* women immediately recognize the quadruped children as outsiders not unlike themselves and therefore establish bonds with the children much more quickly than the male characters do. An example of this mutual recognition occurs when Keira meets Jacob for the first time and almost immediately declares, "'Jacob's beautiful, really … the way he moves—catlike, smooth, graceful, very fast. And he's as bright or brighter than any other kid his age" (68). When Eli hears the way Keira reacts to his son he is instantly grateful. "'I liked the way you got along with Jacob'" he tells her. "'They're good kids, but the reactions they get sometimes from new people.'" Upon hearing this, Keira is immediately made to remember her own childhood as the daughter of a white man and a black woman: "She knew about ugly reactions. Probably Jacob knew more, or would learn more, but walking down a city street between her mother and her father had taught her quite a bit" (119). Because of Keira's parents' marriage and her resulting racial identity, she is no stranger to ostracism, and thus, Butler suggests, she is better suited to understand and empathize with Jacob's outsiderness. Similar to how Keira's illness allows her to be instantly more accepting of the Clay Ark disease, growing up as a biracial child has equipped her to identify with those who have also had to suffer through similar societal disapproval and nurture them accordingly.

Unsurprisingly, Eli's acceptance of Jacob specifically and the quadruped children generally does not come as easily as it comes to the women in the novel, even when his own children are concerned. Butler tells us that, not accepting his son's quadruped status, "again and again, he tried to teach Jacob to walk upright" (175). As the bringer of the Clay Ark disease to Earth, Eli no doubt feels especially compelled to "prove" the extent to which Clay Ark infected children can assimilate into human society and develop the human aspects of themselves while suppressing the non-human ones. This becomes a personal battle for Eli, who seems to believe

that if he can fully humanize the children, the plague he has carried to earth will be seen as less of a curse. Butler explains that:

> Eli loved the boy desperately, longed to give him the gift of humanity that children everywhere else on earth took for granted. Sometimes Eli sat and watched the boy as he played. At first, Jacob would come over to him and demand attention, even try, Eli believed, to comfort his father or understand his bleakness. Then the boy stopped coming near him. Eli had never turned him away, had even ceased trying to get him to walk upright. In fact, Eli was finally accepting the idea that Jacob would never walk on his hind legs with any more ease or grace than a dog doing tricks. Yet the boy began to avoid him. Eli was slow in noticing. Not until he called Jacob and saw that the boy cringed away from him did he realize that it had been many days since Jacob had touched him voluntarily. Many days. How many? Eli thought back. A week, perhaps. The boy had ceased to come near him or touch him exactly when he began wondering if it were not a cruelty to leave such a hopeless child alive. (176-7)

Whether or not Jacob has telepathic abilities is less the point than the fact that Eli contemplates killing Jacob, even though he openly admits to loving him. Whereas he claims that his motivations stem from compassion rather than fear, none of the women have a similarly murderous reaction. and they too are well aware of how the world will likely receive the Clay Ark children. (Meda and Keira both mention the likelihood of the children being imprisoned and studied.) Over and above the guilt he feels as the bringer of the disease to Earth, Eli has a harder time accepting a non-human future of intelligent life on Earth than the women do because, as an able-bodied man and a former astronaut, he has more invested in the future of mankind's scientific, technological, and aesthetic progress than do Keira, Rane, and Meda.

Despite his initial (and understandable) investment in the future of humanity, by novel's end, Eli, with the help of several female characters, seems to have accepted the likely future he and his world face. "'We're the future,'" he finally and reluctantly admits. "'We're the sporangia of the dominant life form of Proxi Two—the receptacles that produce the spores of that life form. If we survive, if our children survive, it will be because we fulfill our purpose—because we spread the organism'" (192). Although there is resignation in Eli's statement, there is also hope and an acknowledgment of choice. He will not kill Jacob and his siblings, or himself, or any other members of his community. He will continue his balancing act of asserting his own humanity and accepting the ways the organism has altered his brain and body. And, as it turns out, his humanity will be needed in the world that he has ushered into existence. "'Everything will be chaos soon,'" Stephen, a younger member of Eli's community, predicts, once the disease begins to spread after a trucker Blake scratches escapes. "'There have been outbreaks in Germany, England, France, Turkey, India, Korea, Nigeria, the Soviet Union … It will be chaos. Then a new order. Hell, a new species. Jacob will win, you know. We'll help him" (212). Eli agrees with Stephen, indicating that he has accepted the new form humanity is about to assume. Although his adaptability is less instantaneous than Keira's, it is ultimately what saves him. That, and his willingness to abandon humanity in favor of hybridity.

Throughout *Clay's Ark*, plague is posited not so much as an agent that will cleanse the earth of evil and reward the just, as was the case in the genre's beginnings, but that which will allow human life to continue, albeit in an altered state. Those who are willing to accept the new face of humanity stand a much better chance of surviving than those who resist this transformation. Rather than creating a simple social reversal in which the previously strong are disenfranchised and the previously weak are rewarded, Butler interrogates the complexities of power and looks at how those who have conventionally functioned as victims, while not

necessarily any nobler in their victimhood, have inadvertently collected the skills needed to withstand apocalypse. Similarly, Butler examines why those with wealth and status have a harder time adjusting to a world that is changing in ways they can't control. This being said, acquiescence and resistance are muddy and often overlapping subject positions in Butler's apocalyptic landscapes. While those not willing to part with or adjust their newly-obsolete power don't tend to survive in Butler's fiction, she does rewrite both the AOPA hero and villain, resisting the urge to rely on simple depictions of good and evil and complicating the nature of power and the role of choice. With this visionary agenda in mind, let us now turn our discussion to another vision science fiction writers have explored for decades, utopia.

<center>**Radical Hope and Everyday Work: Octavia Butler Rewrites Utopia**</center>

"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. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system."

<div align="right">– Octavia Butler</div>

Perfect Daydreams: Defining Utopia

"Everybody's life is pervaded by daydreams. One part is just stale, even enervating escapism … but another part is provocative, is not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation. This other part has hoping at its core, and is teachable."

<div align="right">– Ernest Bloch</div>

Before briefly outlining the history of utopia generally and feminist utopia particularly in order to show how Butler's fiction both fits within and revises the genre, it seems important to settle on a working definition of the term, a task that is harder than it sounds, given the many scholars who have weighed in on the subject. Lyman Tower Sargent writes that utopianism "is a political theory specifically directed towards the creation of human happiness" (109). Gary Morson adds to this, with perhaps the most straightforward definition we will encounter: "a work is a literary utopia if … it depicts (or is taken to depict) an ideal society; and … regarded as a whole, it advocates (or is taken to advocate) the realization of that society" (qtd. in Ferns 10). According to Tom Moylan, utopia falls into three categories:

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The first … tend to be systematic, escapist, and often located in new and

uncharted parts of the world. The modern utopia … may be characterized as

heuristic or instructional (exposing the reader to the unfulfilled potential of the

collective human project), reformist or subversive of modern economic and

political arrangements, and oriented towards its realization in the future (often

under the auspices of the wonders of modern science and technology). Finally,

the critical utopia … rejects utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream.

(qtd. in Yanarella 8)

While Butler is certainly critical of the establishment of utopia in "new and uncharted parts of the

world," so much so that she disowned her novel *Survivor* (1978), which featured a group of

humans colonizing intelligent alien lifeforms on a faraway planet, Moylan's second two

characterizations of utopia fall closer in line with what Butler writes in her two novels *Parable of

the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), in that both novels mock the possibility of a

perfect society while also unabashedly striving for improvement in a fairly programmatic, but still

largely negotiable manner.

Darko Suvin emphasizes utopia's ability to cultivate intellectual depth: "Utopia is the

verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions,

norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in

the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an

alternative historical hypothesis" (qtd. in Ferns 11). For Suvin, authors of utopia reinvent history

and emphasize future possibility in order to create literary worlds that differ enough from their

own worlds to create a sense of estrangement. This estrangement, according to Suvin, is the first

step in the creation of a better world. Like AOPA literature, utopia, perhaps even more so, gets

classified as activist literature

Gert Ueding argues that literary criticism should give up its attempt to define utopia all together, since, in his opinion, all literature is utopian already: "whenever literature portrays reality, it shows the deficiencies of particular circumstances, thus implying that a need for a solution and for change exists" (qtd. in Raphael-Hernandez 27). Frederic Jameson echoes Ueding's ideas when he writes that "it would seem that the Utopian form is far from being absolutely restricted by its own limits, is capable of mutation and of the seemingly unlimited reflexive reincorporation of anti-Utopian positions and impulses which on the face of it negate the form as such" (190-1).

The above scholars' thoughts are a mere sampling of the vast array that exist, raising the twin questions of why utopia seems so difficult to define and why, despite this difficultly, so many scholars have attempted to do just this. For even though claims that the genre is simplistic and obsolete are many, it seems that neither authors nor critics have found it easy to entirely part with the inherent hope utopia embodies, and for many scholars and creators of utopia, the question of how to maintain the positive aspects of utopia, such as peace and communalism, while dispensing with the more naïve, simplistic, or problematic aspects, such as exclusion and xenophobia, has become a central one.

In order to show how Butler reformulates utopia, both ideologically and structurally, it is worth briefly noting the shape that past utopian literature has taken. Older utopian texts tend to follow a rudimentary narrative which begins as the male protagonist leaves his world to visit utopia and ends when he returns home. Barbara Goodwin suggests that the traditional utopian form is that of "a voyage to a perfect society which is viewed as an integrated totality" (17), while Northrup Frye offers a slightly more elaborate account:

> in utopian stories a frequent device is for someone, generally a first-person
>
> narrator, to enter the utopia and be shown around it by a sort of guide. The story

is made up largely of a Socratic dialogue between guide and narrator, in which

the narrator asks questions or thinks up objections and the guide answers them …

as a rule the guide is completely identified with his society and seldom admits to

any discrepancy between the reality and the appearance of what he is describing.

(13)

Whereas there are certainly literary utopias that do not follow this formula, enough do that the

explorer's penetration of utopia, his hasty acceptance of its strictures, and his subsequent flight

from it are easily recognizable elements of the genre, as is the characteristic noted by Frye, in

which the explorer is quick to take what he sees happening at face value, investing the society and

its people with a type of unassailable truth that places them above reproach of any kind,

particularly when their society is compared to the explorer's own. This formula is one that Butler

finds unhelpful for two main reasons. First off, by eschewing the presence of an invading

protagonist Butler can challenge and undo the Othering that classical utopia relies so heavily

upon. Secondly, by refusing to situate utopia as separate from the world at large, Butler can

question the boundaries, geographical and otherwise, that exist between utopia and elsewhere,

boundaries that classical utopias have adhered to determinedly. When aspects of utopia, with its

promises and its failures, exists among us, it becomes the seeds of resistance rather than a tableau

of innocuous perfection.

The difficulty of establishing one widely accepted definition of utopian literature, as well

as utopia's history of repression and provincialism, has led many writers to revive and develop

singular aspects of utopia, instead of trying to sustain the genre in its entirety. As a result, several

writers and theorists have focused less on the end result of a society that claims to be utopian, and

more on the processes the society engages in while attempting to perfect itself. For these writers

and theorists, utopia is more of a quest for limited perfection than a pre-meditated social program

that establishes and sustains a narrowly defined type of perfection. Jim Miller writes that "utopian fiction has more to do with social/cultural/economic critique than with imagining perfection … It seeks to inspire us to desire … but not necessarily for a predetermined solution" (339). Miller's words are significant in that they privilege process over outcome, but also because they point to a major trend in current utopian theory: the presence of unspecific, unfixed, and amorphous utopian dreaming and its preferability over the rigid and prescriptivist blueprints of earlier utopian literature. Foremost amongst the aspects of utopia that writers and critics choose to isolate and develop is the concept of utopian dreaming, first detailed by Ernest Bloch and used heavily by Butler in the establishment of the Earthseed communities she details in both *Parable* novels.

Bloch states that utopia is "never fully present in the here-and-now, and necessarily eludes all attempts to locate it with complete empirical precision." Rather, "utopia represents … the happiness and freedom for which all people yearn in the innermost depths of their being" (qtd. in Paik 6). For Bloch, utopia's strength lies in the fact that at least part of it will always be deferred, will remain a set of ideals toward which to strive rather than something to realize fully. For Bloch, utopian happiness and the hoping it inspires is too individualized and too subjective to survive widespread and uniform regulation, partially because this regulation would attempt to make uniform human desire, and partially because this regulation would attempt to situate utopia fully in the present, when its survival is tied largely to a future that should exist only as a form of hope.

For Bloch, utopian thought can exist precisely because it has not yet been realized. To further develop this idea, Bloch has coined the term "utopian surplus" as a way of describing the hope that he believes always exists within humanity, hope that gets renewed and reworked continuously. "All concrete utopian activities or events contain a spiritual surplus, Bloch explains:

In each victory of the human project there remains a specific type of hope which

is not that of the present and which carries that victorious moment beyond itself,

anticipating the next one. This spiritual surplus, also called utopian surplus,

allows a specific event or activity to transcend its particular period and connect

with the ultimate universal human ability to strive toward changes. (qtd. in

Raphael-Hernandez 16)

As a type of hope not solely rooted in the present, utopian hope is often lacking specific details

and completeness. These characteristics of uncertainty are pivotal for Bloch, so much so that he

"differentiates between true and untrue futures, as well as the type of hope each inspires. Untrue

futures include all acts that will happen in the future as mere repetition of acts that have already

happened before" (Raphael-Hernandez 17), whereas true futures are marked by radical breaks

that are yet to be conceived. Utopia is not, for Bloch, more of the same, even if that same is good.

Rather, utopian thought, by definition, has to be that which has not come before, and is hence

unknowable. Raphael-Hernandez clarifies: "Only acts that have not happened before can be part

of a true future. The utopian surplus is connected with true futures because it embodies the

visions of completely new circumstances that have not existed before in history" (17). As we will

see shortly, Butler's Earthseed communities are intent upon expanding the purview of human life

to other planets, not because they are interested in recreating life as it exists on earth, but because

the unforeseen challenges and consequences of inhabiting other worlds will force humanity to

change in ways that cannot be fathomed beforehand.

The Many Faces of Utopia: A Brief History

Now that we have begun to define utopia, it seems logical to briefly overview the genre's history so as to better situate the many interventions made by Butler. Lyman Tower Sargent traces the origins of utopia to the ancient world, where they almost always involved the goals and actions of small groups of people collaborating with one another. "Greek utopias," writes Sargent, "had as a basic assumption what we call the small face-to-face community. It was inconceivable to them that a good society could be a large one in which citizens could not all regularly meet and converse. The idea that something bigger might be possible surfaced only as Greece declined and Rome grew" (18). Notably, diminutive societies are a characteristic that the genre has rarely been able to transcend, and Butler is no exception: her Earthseed communities are small and the members rely upon direct contact with one another. Regular face-to-face communication is necessary, in Butler's eyes, for the formulation of new utopian dreams and the constructive processing of dissent.

Jumping ahead many centuries, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Comical History of States and Empires of the Moon* (1657), and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) form a major part of the utopian genre's prehistory. The utopian genre as we know it today, John Rieder claims, was established and popularized in the nineteenth century when tales of exploration and colonization of faraway lands were at their peak. Rieder writes: "Scholars largely agree that the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also the crucial period for the emergence of the genre" (2-3). Margaret Atwood comments further upon the importance of the nineteenth century in the building of the utopian genre: "The nineteenth century, especially the second half of it, was so cluttered up with [utopias] that Gilbert and Sullivan wrote a parody operetta called *Utopia Limited*" (81).

The word "utopia" was coined by More as the name of the imaginary country he described in his book. The word itself means "no place," implying that utopia is notable first and foremost because neither its location nor its existence is possible. Fredric Jameson attempts to reconcile some of these contradictions when he suggests, echoing Bloch, that "'utopia's deepest subject, and the source of all that is most vibrantly political about it, is precisely our inability to conceive it, our incapacity to produce it as a vision, our failure to project the Other of what is'" (qtd. in Baker 134). Elizabeth Grosz builds upon Jameson's words when she states that "utopia is quite literally translated from the Greek as 'no place is the good place,' that is, utopia is 'beyond a conception of space or place,' existing only in the imagination" (qtd. in Plante 176). Utopia, according to these theorists, draws both its power and its political usefulness from the fact that it is not really meant to exist in time and space as we know it. Rather, it is meant to exist in a realm belonging solely to imagination, which is where it holds its radical potential to transform.

In fact, when utopianism is not permitted to remain in the realm of the imaginative, when prescriptions for utopian societies are enacted and enforced, the results are often, as scores of scholars have noted, disastrous. "During the Cold War," Jameson notes, "utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects" (xi). This legacy of associations has, of course, impacted perceptions of literary utopia so much so that critics such as J.C. Hallman believe that the usefulness of literary utopia, if it ever had any to begin with, is largely irrecoverable: "After WWII, utopia was no longer just a synonym for naiveté," Hallman declares, "now, decades further on … earnest utopian thought and earnest utopians are a glowing ember at best, and utopia's legion failures seem to suggest that the best course of action would be to crush it—snuff it out for good" (qtd. in Atwood 66). Jameson, for one, disagrees with this assertion:

"Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment," he argues, and "therefore the best Utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively" (xiii). While certainly Jameson is right to assert that much can be learned from utopia's failure, the violence, repression, and commitment to "purity" that he also mentions are legacies of the utopian genre that Butler emphatically writes against.

When looking at why utopian fiction is often denigrated, despite the efforts of critics such as Bloch and Jameson to preserve its relevance as a literary genre, Chris Ferns explains that utopian literature is:

> often characterized by a certain prescriptive quality, suggesting, not simply that
> things might be otherwise, but that they ought to conform to a specific vision.
> While utopian fiction may have the potential to open up wider horizons, its effect
> is often impoverishing rather than enriching: instead of opening up space for the
> imagination, the utopian vision merely fills it with a construct, to use Ernest
> Bloch's phrase, "made banal by the fulfillment." (4)

Ferns notes that although utopian thought has the possibility of being both expansive and visionary, trying to implement widespread and programmatic perfection inevitably reduces that vision, regardless of its specifics, to banality at best and violent failure at worst. With the almost universal posing of small scale utopianism as ideologically preferable, Butler grapples with the question of how utopianism can remain effectively non-prescriptivist while also avoiding the exclusionary practices that so much utopia is built upon. As we will see shortly, the question of who is allowed to join utopian communities and who is not is an issue that Butler repeatedly returns to in her quest to create utopian spaces that don't merely mimic the hierarchies that exist in the worlds surrounding them. Unsurprisingly, given her privileging of choice, membership in

Butler's Earthseed communities is completely voluntary, but also Butlerian is the fact that there are certain social traits that predispose some to choose utopian collectivism over others.

When specifying what strands of traditional utopian thought should be discarded and which ones should be developed further, no critic has been more outspoken that Jameson. For him, the aspects of utopian thought that ought to be lifted from classical utopia and developed in both our literature and our world are: full employment, the abolition of private property, the equality of the sexes, and more abstractly but completely in line with Butler's vision, the complete incorporation, as much as is ever possible, of that which is radically Other (147). Jameson writes: "Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness … to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet" (xii). Similar to Bloch, Jameson sees utopia as a space in which to conceive of ideas, bodies, and social organizing principles so radically different from that which have come before as to be almost inconceivable.

Despite Jameson's optimistic outlook, Chris Ferns and many other scholars remain skeptical of the possibility of literary utopia producing anything other than narrow and static totalitarian societies. "While it is true that a number of writers have set out to represent utopia as other than a prescriptive and authoritarian ideal," writes Ferns, "the influence of the traditional utopian narrative paradigm has proved … difficult to escape" (xi). Similarly dubious of utopian fiction's value, Northrop Frye has dismissed it as "'a relatively minor genre never quite detached from political theory'" (qtd. in Ferns xi). In Frye's estimation, the explicit political nature of much utopian fiction often compromises its artistry and dooms the form to gloomy didacticism.

Another common criticism of utopia, claimed by scholars such as Ernest Yanarella and Edward Rothstein, is that utopia seeks to remain outside human history. "Lacking a foundation in

human time and socio-historical development," writes Yanarella, "instances of the edenic pastoral either incorporate no institutionalized organizations into their science fiction scenarios or found such future orders upon a rigid, disciplined, authoritarian state" (100). Similarly, Rothstein criticizes utopian societies that consider themselves immune to the effects of time when he writes that, "utopia stands outside of history. It is the city on the hill, society's dream image" (8). For both scholars, utopian hope is rendered impotent by the fact that utopian society's very existence seems dependent upon its removal from any world that would be identifiable to the reader as her own. This isolated and insulated utopian paradigm is largely absent from Butler's texts. In fact, the opposite is true: Butler's Earthseed communities are constantly in contact with the world at large. Butler clearly feels that depicting a society outside of human history and its resulting causality isn't a feasible option for a writer who is trying to say something significant about how societies can formulate relevant and radical utopian dreams.

Partially as a result of existing outside of historical trajectories, many utopias are depicted as closed, exclusionary, and discriminatory. Iris Marion Young writes that the existence of traditional utopia is predicated upon the inclusion of few and the exclusion of most: "'any move to define an identity, a close totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure … any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep these borders firmly drawn" (qtd. in Sargisson 177). Jessica Langer echoes these ideas when she writes that "a condition for utopia is exclusion—the utopia, in its perfection, must exclude the imperfect" (172), and John Rieder adds that "the association of such exiling or violent purgation of internal contradictions with the consolidation of a utopian enclave … is a well-known structural feature of many utopian fictions" (124). These critics are correct to point out that utopian literature tends to be exclusionary and intolerant of both difference and contradiction, an idea antithetical to Butler's body of work. Dohra Ahmad notes that the lines of

exclusion are hardly ever drawn randomly. In a genre that seeks to distinguish and purge undesirable aspects from its society, utopian populations tend toward uniformity along racial, gender, sexual, and class lines. "American utopian novels imagine a nation that is racially homogeneous," writes Ahmad, "and a world that is unevenly developed" (11).

Despite this history of uniformity, Butler's Earthseed communities in both *Parable* novels function only as a result of their heterogeneity. As far as other breaches of conventions are concerned, Butler dispenses with the guide figure common in early utopia: instead of utopia being explained to outsiders by a self-proclaimed insider, Butler's utopian spaces are crafted collaboratively and spontaneously by her protagonists, often with no long range purpose in mind other than survival. While she does not dispense entirely with the Socratic questioning found in early utopias, this questioning is not the sole purview of an identifiable leader, but is rather something all community members engage in for the purposes of social advancement. Butler also retains the collectivism present in early examples of the genre, but not at the complete expense of individuality, evidenced by the fact that all the members of Earthseed are encouraged to specialize their skills and interests as they see fit.

One way that Butler's utopian literature does not veer significantly from the utopias that came before it is in its quest for geographical expansion. Despite Jameson's belief that there are aspects of utopia that are worth developing further, he joins many others in critiquing much early utopian literature for relying upon scripts of imperial expansion. He writes: "we do well to remember … that Utopia is very much the prototype of the settler colony, and the forerunner of modern imperialism" (204). Ahmad develops this observation further: "classical utopias have been thoroughly imbricated in the ideologies of empire ever since the inception of the genre. Two successive waves of utopian activity each relied upon a central apparatus of colonial activity: exploration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and developmentalism in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (6). While Butler is certainly aware of this legacy, her work is more in dialogue with Astrofuturism than with conventional imperialistic narratives. While the members of Earthseed unflinchingly believe that the continuation of human life can only be made possible through space expansion, Butler suggests that the difficulty inherent in this project will force humanity to evolve, and thus, hopefully, not repeat its past mistakes. Starting civilization anew and with the knowledge gained from centuries of catastrophe, will, Butler hopes, yield a new and better form of humanity. Expansionsim, for Butler, is not tied to dreams of increased wealth and power, but rather, is tied to Bloch's utopian dreaming in that it will provide challenges and transformations that cannot possibly be conceived of beforehand.

Another common criticism of utopia that Butler addresses is the genre's aversion to conflict and the type of human growth that often stems from such conflict. The stagnation that comes from having all needs and desires met is a scenario first popularized by Wells's Eloi, who have lost their ability to function as rational adults due to the elimination of almost all conflict from their world. The common narrowness and ignorance of utopian residents isn't read by most critics as harmless naiveté, but as an unfortunate state of underdevelopment, one that dooms inhabitants of utopia to exist as perpetual children. Butler revises this convention by not only incorporating conflict, pain, suffering into her utopias but by depicting these as vital elements needed to keep inhabitants emotionally literate and intellectually complex. In fact, as we will soon see, part of what makes Butler's utopian dreaming so vital is the constant threat of global apocalypse: conflict on a large scale creates incentive to form better social and political arrangements.

The Black Utopian Tradition

While Butler does not intervene in the black utopian canon to the same extent that she intervenes in the feminist one, her utopias are very much in dialogue with those established by black writers. Like feminist literature, black literature is also part of the utopian tradition, although it has often been neglected in histories of science fiction. "The earliest African American utopian text is Martin R. Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859)," writes Ingrid Thaler, "which projects an all-black utopia in a 'civilized' Africa" (12). Since then, a number of African American utopian texts have been published, among them Sutton Griggs' *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), Pauline E. Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1901), and Edward A Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904). All imagine their utopias in African nations.

Even when not set in Africa, much black writing contains utopian proclivities. In *Blacks in Eden: the African American Novel's First Century* (1996), J. Lee Grimes discusses "the use of the Garden of Eden as a structuring device for many early African American novels" (65), and Charles Scruggs writes that in much African American literature "the visionary city is always present within the tangible, and often terrible, conditions of black urban life … often the visionary city lies dormant, asleep; but it contains within its dormant state the potency of dream and the possibility of making the dream manifest, if only temporarily" (281). Rather than serving as the organizing principle of the narrative, utopian hope simmers beneath the surface of many black texts, where it is often posed as the potential converse of the suffering that exists explicitly. Connected to this idea of utopia as a deferred but possible future point on the horizon of an otherwise bleak world, Susan Willis writes that "black women's writing produces utopia out of the transformation of the most basic features of daily life (qtd. in Gant-Britton 284). The utopian dream in most contemporary black literature is not overt, unified, or prescriptive, but constituted

through lived experience that is reflected upon, critiqued, and transformed into hope for a future that is better than the present reality the characters face.

Women Writing New Worlds: Feminist Utopia

Butler's specific interventions in utopian literature not only incorporate Astrofuturism but also critique and rework feminist utopian literature. Carol Kolmerten tells us that utopian fiction written by women "constitutes a continuous literary tradition in the West from the seventeenth century until the present day" (336). Kolmerton goes on to note that between the years of 1890 and 1919, "more than thirty American women wrote utopian novels depicting their versions of a better world" (336). Jane Donawerth traces the tradition into the twentieth century, telling us that, "the feminist utopia continued in the pulps even though it virtually disappeared in the hardback book trade from the 1920s through the 1950s, marking utopian transformations of domestic spaces and duties through technology and revising gender roles" (qtd. in Miller 336). If feminist utopias in the style of such writers as Rebecca Harding Davis and Charlotte Perkins Gilman had fallen out of favor by the middle of the twentieth century, the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s sparked a slew of new feminist utopias by such writers as Marge Piercy, Suzy Charnas, Ursula Le Guin, Monique Wittig, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Samuel Delany. Many of these functioned as critical utopias, in which utopian tropes were simultaneously expanded upon and critiqued.

Hoda Zaki helpfully outlines many of the common themes and characteristics of early feminist utopias, many of which persist in contemporary examples of the genre as well:

> Taken as a group, feminist utopias appear to share a number of significant
> political characteristics. One of the most obvious is their elaboration of a basic

model of community: a cooperative society, which emphasizes the organic nature

of its ties and the overriding importance of the common good, enjoys a high

degree of unity and cohesion, and is liable to no serious tension between the

individual and the larger community. Often these societies represent a conflation

of the public and private spheres: personal relationships are foregrounded and

less attention is given to descriptions of reorganized economic and political

institutions. Many utopias which nostalgically depict agrarian societies show a

late-capitalist concern for ecology. (245)

Many other critics have noted these dynamics of communalism, pastoralism, and/or

environmentalism, and the lack of distinction between public and private spheres as well.

Summarizing the analyses of others, Robin Roberts adds to Zaki's ideas, focusing specifically on

feminist utopia's tendency to valorize traits conventionally associated with femininity:

In the feminist utopia, countries, worlds, and even universes are ruled and

improved by feminine values that emphasize the domestic and familial. Typically

women [writers] make issues of family, sexuality, and marriage more central

than do men. Similarly … [feminist utopias] are also "classless, without

government, ecologically minded … sexually permissive. The feminist utopia

does not have compulsory heterosexuality or homosexuality but instead is pro-

choice and consequently often contains a variety of sexual relationships,

reflecting the liberty so treasured in the feminist vision. (67)

While communalism, sexual freedom, nurturance, and environmental preservation are worthwhile

goals for any society, feminist utopias aren't always able to avoid the technophobia, xenophobia,

and essentialism that other forms of utopia are subject to as well. Roberts notes that "feminist

utopias enact the strategy of separatism" (66) and also that "emphasis on women's capacity to

bear children typifies early feminist utopias" (77). For Roberts, "these fictions rely on a simple reversal of values to create a world that challenges and improves upon patriarchal society. In the process, they create alternative visions of what science could be if it were based on feminine rather than masculine values. However, to create such a world early feminist utopias had to eradicate men completely" (73). While Roberts doesn't completely define what she means by "feminine rather than masculine values," her observation about the tendency of feminist utopia to employ simple gendered reversals is one that Carol Pearson also notes when she writes that, "'the most common plot structure of the feminist utopia novel is the conversion story in which a male narrator comes to see a feminist society as superior to a male-dominated one" (68).

As scholars such as Mary Anne Doane and Gayatri Spivak have repeatedly pointed out, mere reversals of power do nothing to challenge hierarchy and keep both centers and peripheries intact. Valuing "feminine" ideals rooted in such values as nurturance, cooperation, and non-violence is not only essentialist, but also does nothing to challenge the notion that any organizing principle that asserts hierarchy in any form will inevitably exclude and frustrate at least some members of that society. Butler recognizes this conundrum and is less interested in changing the face of power and more interested in transforming the shape that power takes. "The role of utopia has changed," writes Ferns, "the purpose of utopian narrative has become less the advocacy of specific alternative sociopolitical formations, and more the stimulus and education of desire" (231). With this in mind, let us now turn to an examination of how Butler's novels re-imagine both the pitfalls and potential of utopia.

A Utopian Update: Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents

"It is not a 'happy ending' that we need, but a non-ending. That's why none of the narratives of masculinist, patriarchal apocalypses will do. The System is not closed; the sacred image of the same is not coming. The world is not full."

— Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters"

In *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Butler attempts to create utopian societies that break from and critique the history of utopia. As in her apocalyptic scenarios, those who can change triumph over those who cannot, calling into question the static nature of early utopias. As was also the case in *Clay's Ark*, one's chances of survival are greatly enhanced when one embraces hybridity and Otherness and learns to live collaboratively. In both Butler's AOPA and utopian societies, survival is rooted in choice and not genetics, although making the choice that favors survival is heavily tied to (although not completely determined by) social circumstances, in that the conventionally less powerful, those with less of a stake in the world as it is, usually triumph over those committed to the structures and values of the past. Butler uses the divide between these two groups to create narrative tension and articulate utopian desires. These desires are not part of the sort of premeditated agenda long decried as prescriptivist by critics of utopian literature, and nor do they avoid conflict or suppress individual happiness. Rather, they stem from a will to survive and are arrived at spontaneously by a group of people committed to what they refer to as "the movement of humanity from adolescence to adulthood" (*Sower* 221). The fact that utopian-oriented groups do not have detailed plans as to how this maturity will come about illustrates Butler's commitment to Blochian utopian dreaming: their plans gain power and avoid stagnation largely through their unknowability.

Parable of the Sower and *Parable of the Talents* both follow Lauren Olamina, a young biracial woman born around 2009 who comes of age during the death throes of western civilization. Lauren's landscape is riddled with crime, poverty, resource depletion, and climate catastrophe, all the results of intense privatization, corporate greed, and extreme social and political conservatism. Despite her many detractors, it does not take Lauren long to realize that humanity as she has experienced it is ending, and that any chance it has of surviving will need to take place on a planet faraway. Indeed, the ways that humanity will likely have to change and grow in order to survive elsewhere excite Lauren rather than scare her. In response to the challenges of cooperative expansion and social reengineering that face her, Lauren founds Earthseed, a pseudo-religion whose main tenet is an acceptance of change. Members of Earthseed live communally, specialize based on individual talents, and teach one another constantly. In this way they very much mimic early feminist utopias. Where they differ is in being heterogeneous in nearly every way possible, and embodying the colonizing ethos of space travel and settlement, albeit not uncritically. Rather than being "discovered" and eventually lauded by social outsiders, as was the paradigm in nineteenth and early twentieth century utopias, the members of Earthseed actively seek discovery on their own terms, terms that, as we will see, are deeply respectful of whatever it is they may find in their colonizing missions, a logical attitude given their profound conviction that a society's strength is dependent upon its hybridity.

Another way Butler differentiates Earthseed from the static utopias that came before it is by foregrounding the extent to which survival is dependent upon the willingness to change in any manner of previously inconceivable ways. To make this point clear to her members, Lauren organizes Earthseed's founding principles in poetic verse: "All that you touch/You Change./All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth/Is Change./God/is Change" (*Sower* 3). The idea that change is eternal, inevitable, and unavoidable, more so than any conventional god,

appears on the first page of the novel and is repeated several times throughout. By ascribing change god-like status, Lauren is both emphasizing its importance in the quest for human happiness and implying that past gods have failed humanity largely by demanding steady consistency, something Lauren believes will doom the world rather than free it.

Despite Lauren's singular commitment to transforming humanity, she does not become a purveyor of totalitarianism. Rather, Lauren behaves compassionately towards her opponents and welcomes their opposition, even while remaining unwavering in her own convictions. Although she doesn't question the necessity of change, she seems to genuinely realize what most people have at stake in the maintenance of the status quo, even long after their worlds have stopped providing for and protecting them. We see this in a conversation that Lauren has with Joanne, her closest childhood friend. "'Did you ever read about bubonic plague in medieval Europe?'" Lauren asks Joanne.

"'Yes,'" Joanne replies. "'A lot of the continent was depopulated … some survivors thought the world was coming to an end.'"

"'Yes,'" Lauren responds, "'but once they realized it wasn't, they also realized there was a lot of vacant land available for the taking, and if they had a trade, they realized they could demand better pay for their work, A lot of things changed for the survivors … it took a plague to make some of the people realize that things could change'" (*Sower* 49). In this exchange with Joanne, Lauren is simultaneously observing, lamenting, and questioning why catastrophe is often the most successful way of enacting human transformation. She is also clearly linking the current society she lives in to the plague-ridden society of twelfth century Europe. The fact that others have survived through adaptation strengthens Lauren's hope that the same could hold true for her and her followers. Lauren is also asking, partially rhetorically, if there might be a way of changing her world before more mass death and destruction forces the change.

"'Things are changing now, too,'" Lauren tells Joanne in a continuation of their previous conversation, "'our adults haven't been wiped out by a plague so they're still anchored in the past, waiting for the good old days to come back. But things have changed a lot, and they'll change more'" (*Sower* 50). Although Lauren has strong relationships with the adults in her life, she notes that gradual social deterioration dooms the members of her society to a slower rate of adaptation and hence puts them at greater risk of extinction than those who lived in a world where plague swiftly killed the elderly, effectively erasing the influence of past ideas and values. With logic that may seem rather heartless, Lauren suggests that the continued adherence to ideologies rooted in the past may ultimately be humanity's undoing, particularly when these ideologies are so closely tied to fears of difference. "Let the past/Teach you," Lauren writes, "Past customs,/Struggles,/Leaders and thinkers./Let/These/Help you./Let them inspire you,/Warn you,/Give you strength./But beware:/God is Change./Past is past./What was/Cannot/Come again./To Survive,/Know the past./Let it touch you./Then let/The past/Go" (*Talents* 412-3). Respect for and willingness to learn from the past is, in Lauren's mind, not the same thing as being committed to irrelevant ideas and behaviors that will hinder and not aid one's quest to survive.

While Lauren's attitude may sound like it fits right in to the typical survivalist ethos that leaves the weak dead and the strong scrambling to become more powerful, Butler goes to great lengths to show that resistance to change is not something that can be directly correlated to identity. To illustrate this point, she not only depicts several people Lauren's age who cling to the past out of fear and desperation (Joanne from the above conversation being one example), she also introduces Bankole, a doctor in his fifties whom Lauren befriends and eventually marries. Throughout *Sower*, Bankole is compared to Lauren's father, who, like Bankole, is older, well educated, and has more worldly experience than Lauren, but who, unlike Bankole, clings to his semi-stable life inside a walled suburb and his Christian god. As we saw in *Clay's Ark*, both death

and survival are rooted in human choice rather than being linked to identitarian traits beyond human control. That being said, Butler once more suggests that there are certain social conditions that increase the likelihood of one's receptiveness to change, such as a lack of power in its many forms and little interest in maintaining the social order as it stands. "We're survivors, Len," Lauren tells one of her Earthseed companions who lacks power in many of the same ways she does. "You are. I am … We've been slammed around in all kinds of ways. We're all wounded. We're healing as best we can. And, no, we're not normal. Normal people wouldn't have survived what we've survived. If we were normal we'd be dead" (*Talents* 379).

Despite Lauren's lack of power as a young, poor, black woman, Butler playfully casts her, at least initially, as a fervent survivalist, a figure that, as we discussed in the last chapter, is typically white, male, individually-focused, physically strong, prone to violence, and generally powerful. In the aforementioned scene with Joanne, Lauren tells her: "This is what I've been doing—reading and studying these … books on survival in the wilderness … on guns and shooting … on handling medical emergencies, California native and naturalized plants and their uses, and basic living: log cabin-building, livestock raising, plant cultivation, soap making—that kind of thing" (*Sower* 50). Although Lauren initially espouses self-reliance and her innate worthiness (since she, alone, is able to see the truth of the situation), she comes to realize, fairly quickly, that these methods of survival are not, solely and in the long run, going to create anything resembling a livable life. Butler, therefore, uses Lauren's foray into survivalist exceptionalism to critique both post-apocalyptic and utopian literature that offers up either enhanced individualism or prescriptivist social engineering in place of an actual paradigm shift in the reconceptualization of power.

Given the ways Lauren's foresight critiques the attitudes and practices of her community, she is unsurprisingly chastised rather than celebrated for her vision. Joanne, frightened by

Lauren's gloomy forecasts of future chaos, informs the adult community and Lauren is either reprimanded or ostracized by most of the neighborhood. While Lauren is initially hurt by Joanne's betrayal, she does eventually develop sympathy for Joanne's wish to continue living in the same way she always has: "She wants a future she can understand and depend on—a future that looks a lot like her parents' present," Lauren explains, "I don't think that's possible. Things are changing too much, too fast" (*Sower* 114). Although the reality of the situation frustrates her, Lauren is quick to acknowledge that resistance to change is deeply rooted in human consciousness and perhaps even the human body. She writes:

> There seem to be solid biological reasons why we are the way we are. If there weren't, the cycles wouldn't keep replaying. The human species is a kind of animal, of course. But we can do something no other animal species has ever had the option to do. We can choose: We can go on building and destroying until we either destroy ourselves or destroy the ability of our world to sustain us. Or we can make something more of ourselves. We can grow up. We can leave the nest … and become some combination of what we want to become and whatever our new environments challenge us to become. Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them. And some of the new people who emerge from all this will develop new ways to cope. They'll have to. This will break the old cycle, even if it's only to begin a new one, a different one. (*Talents* 393)

Whereas Lauren's sentiments at the beginning of the passage veer into the territory of biological determinism, she quickly resuscitates the argument by citing human choice as that which can rise above seemingly ingrained biological imperatives. What's more, humans who make the choice to change are more likely to evolve not only socially, but biologically given the ways they will be asked, far in the future, to negotiate with other species and other worlds.

There are three distinct but interrelated ways Lauren sees humans transcending cycles of destruction and moving towards something resembling utopia. First, they must consciously choose to refuse perpetuating cycles of dominance and greed both in regards to each other and the planet. Butler, therefore, infuses utopian dreaming with the type of individual agency that is generally lacking. Secondly, they, as a society, must accept the need to "grow up," as Butler terms it. With this comes the necessity of pursuing life elsewhere, as the challenges inherent in populating and developing new worlds will, Lauren believes, be the catalyst for this maturation. Along with this project comes utopian hoping, the faith in the not-yet-realized, the currently unarticulated. It is comfort with the unknown that Butler requires of her heroines, and in order for this comfort to exist they must willingly part with all that is dysfunctional in their current worlds, despite uncertainty about what will replace it. Thirdly, Butler requires that her characters accept and welcome symbiosis and hybridity when colonizing new worlds. In her ideal utopia, the demands placed upon humanity by unfamiliar planets populated by unfamiliar species would curb, even transform, the human need to create and assert hierarchies. Significantly, Lauren notes that whatever modes of existence come next for humanity will be based not only on what humans want but on what their new worlds demand. She sees the two entities, desire and demand, as holding each other in check but also formulating new "coping" strategies, as she calls them.

Turning now to more of the specifics of the utopia that Butler is interested in creating, a large portion of both novels detail Lauren's establishment and strengthening of Acorn, a community based on shared vision, collaboration, and the renewal of all things, including human life. As one example of this final value, when a member of Acorn dies, their body is burned and their ashes used to fertilize an oak sapling. "We give our dead/To the orchards/And the groves./We give our dead/To life" (*Talents* 5), writes Lauren in her journal. Several critics have noted this dynamic of renewal at work in the *Parable* novels. Gavin Miller writes that, "the failed

state, as imagined by Butler, is not so much a catastrophe as an opportunity for the rebirth of the human species" (202). Michael Miller adds to this when he notes that a large part of Butler's ability to critique both survivalist and utopian fiction, while also recreating them, stems from the criteria she uses when determining who gets to survive and what shape their new society will take. Miller writes: "Her future debt-slaves are not the victims of some essential flaw in human nature, but rather of clearly identifiable historical causes. Hence, despite the bleak landscape, change is possible" (352).

From this belief in the importance of both choice and adaptability, Lauren establishes Earthseed communities that are, although Butler dislikes the term, very close to being utopian, if not in outcome than in structure and process. "Butler does not offer a full-blown utopian blueprint in her work, but rather a post-apocalyptic hoping informed by the lessons of the past" (336), writes Jim Miller. "Of central importance," he adds, "is the notion that 'God is change,' which suggests that the point of Earthseed is not to reify some canon of ideas or create a rigid set of rituals, but rather to maintain a radical openness toward others and the world" (356). Gregory Hampton builds upon Miller's ideas when he writes that "Earthseed sounds like a utopian religion except for the very important fact that it exists because it acknowledges the impossibility of perfection and permanence" (92). The above scholars are right to point out that the Earthseed community is committed to an ongoing discussion of ideas and principles that are expected to change and remain imperfect. Similarly, communal dynamics that are free of conflict are not considered either desirable or possible. For these reasons, Earthseed functions as what I call an anti-utopian utopia, by which I mean that Lauren seems perfectly aware of the shortcomings of the utopian dream, and yet, despite this legacy, remains committed to her communities of people working towards common goals of peace, progress, and education.

When asked by her brother, Marc, a devout Christian, why people should identify with and believe in Earthseed when there are so many other belief systems available, Lauren appeals to Earthseed's ability to represent truth, albeit not truth that is fixed or exclusionary of other truths. She explains to Marc how she began building Earthseed: "I didn't make it up. It was something I had been thinking about since I was 12. It was—is—a collection of truths. It isn't the whole truth. It isn't the only truth. It's just one collection of thoughts that are true" (*Talents* 138). As a Christian minister in training, Marc refutes Lauren's claim, telling her that he already has access to truth in its unified, eternal, and indisputable form. Despite her love for Marc, Lauren isn't interested in what she sees as his falsely coherent faith, and, as she tries to explain to him, her decision to worship change would grow quickly contradictory if she were to purport to have stumbled upon a system of belief eternal and unchanging.

If Earthseed communities can be defined as anti-utopian utopias, part of what makes them so is their focus on process rather than outcome. A large part of the work of building Earthseed is just that: work. Initially, the work is subsistence level, but eventually it progresses to more long-range community building. "There's so much to do before it can even begin," Lauren writes in her journal. "I guess that's to be expected. There's always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven" (*Sower* 75). Of course Lauren is not referring to the Christian heaven, but to her group's eventual foray into space. Whereas necessary drudgery is usually present in most utopian narratives about community building and cannot be altogether avoided in Earthseed, Lauren does attempt to benefit both individual members and the community at large by allowing people to choose, develop, and teach others the skills and knowledge for which they feel best suited. "Every member of Earthseed learned to read and to write," writes Lauren, "and most knew at least two languages—usually Spanish and English, since those were the two most useful. Anyone who joined the group, child or adult, had to begin at once to learn these basics and to acquire a trade.

Anyone who had a trade was always in the process of teaching it to someone else" (*Talents* 26).

Lauren perceives of teaching and learning as reciprocal acts. Throughout both novels Lauren writes with excitement about her wish to personally educate each child in her community, not only as a way of strengthening Earthseed, but also to better challenge, expand, and solidify her own understanding of the religion and the life that it asks people to live. "I would love to teach Dominic [a baby at the time the first Earthseed community is established] Earthseed as he grows up. I would teach him and he would teach me" (*Sower* 198). Lauren not only acknowledges that the roles between student and teacher frequently shift, but she welcomes opportunities to learn from others. The power that comes from educating others is seen by Lauren as constantly in flux, and held by many simultaneously.

Building upon this theme of education as reciprocal and dialogic, instead of worship services, members of Earthseed hold "gatherings," which Lauren also calls "discussions." "They're problem-solving sessions," she explains, "times of planning, healing, learning, creating, times of focusing, and reshaping ourselves. They can cover anything at all to do with Earthseed or Acorn, past, present, or future, and anyone can speak" (*Talents* 72-3). This prioritizing of dialogue makes for a cathartic and solidifying experience for the group, where again, process is prioritized over solutions. During gatherings, power is used and distributed as laterally as possible: anyone may introduce discussion topics, questions are encouraged, dissent or conflict is worked through rather than repressed. While these types of meetings are not atypical in feminist utopian fiction of the 1970s and 80s, Butler infuses the gatherings with tension by using Marc, as an opposing voice, whose Christian ideals block his ability to teach and learn communally. "'I want to preach,'" Marc tells Lauren soon after he arrives at Acorn.

"'Preach, then,'" Lauren tells him. "You say what you want. But afterward there will be questions and discussion.'

'I'm not out to teach a class,'" Marc tells her when he hears this. "'I want to preach a sermon.'

'That's not our way, Marc,'" Lauren tells him. "'If you speak, you have to face questions and discussion. You need to be ready for that'" (*Talents* 162). Despite Lauren's warning, Marc attempts to preach a conventional Christian sermon at the gathering and is challenged by several Earthseed members, many of whom quote biblical scripture to support their belief that god is change. Marc, who feels attacked and disrespected, leaves Acorn soon after and begins his career in the Church of Christian America, one of the dominant conservative sects that grows powerful in the later days of societal disintegration.

The situation with Marc being what it is, it cannot be said that Earthseed is completely free of the same sort of exclusionary aspects that many utopias have had throughout history, but exclusion is not based on identity but rather on ideological mindset. The only people Earthseed consistently alienates are those devoted to fixed dogma who show an unwillingness to constantly reevaluate their beliefs. Being closed, in other words, is seemingly the only way one can be rejected from Butler's utopia, and even then, the dissenter must choose to leave, rather than being forced to do so.

Even with the many positive aspects of Earthseed that I have touched upon, several scholars have found reason to criticize or at least be wary of the community that Lauren creates as well as its underlying goals and ideologies. Most of this criticism is aimed at Earthseed's goal to eventually establish societies on distant planets.

"Earthseed is adulthood/" "Lauren writes, "It's trying our wings,/leaving our mother,/Becoming men and women./We've been children,/Fighting for the full breasts,/The protective embrace,/The soft lap./Children do this./But Earthseed is adulthood./Adulthood is both sweet and sad./It terrifies./it empowers./we are men and women now./We are Earthseed./And the

Destiny of Earthseed/Is to take root among the stars" (*Talents* 432). For Lauren, establishing

communities such as Acorn is a temporary safeguard against the destruction of humanity, a

means of slowing down social deterioration, not preventing it entirely. For people to truly avoid

the end of the world, Lauren believes, they must make new worlds elsewhere. In fact, she asserts,

it is their "destiny" to do so.

Lauren's obsession with space exploration and the possibility of human life flourishing

on other planets is established early on in *Sower* when Lauren, while doing her evening chores,

takes a moment to wistfully look up at the sky. "I pick out some of the constellations and name

the stars that make them up. I've learned them from an astronomy book that belonged to my

father's mother. I see the sudden light streak of a meteor flashing westward across the sky. I stare

after it, hoping to see another. Then my stepmother calls me and I go back to her" (5). As the

novel progresses, Lauren's knowledge about her universe (and beyond) expands, and so does her

excitement regarding the possibility of human life existing elsewhere. In one illustrative passage

she relates what she has learned via a radio broadcast (television is in short supply in the

impoverished community where she lives) and is unable to hide the happiness with which she

receives the news:

> There was a long report on the radio today about the findings of the big Anglo-
>
> Japanese cosmological station on the moon. The station, with its vast array of
>
> telescopes and some of the most sensitive spectroscopic equipment ever made
>
> had detected more planets orbiting nearby stars. That station has been detecting
>
> new worlds for a dozen years now, and there's even evidence that a few of the
>
> discovered worlds may be life-bearing. I've listened to and read every scrap of
>
> information I could find on this subject, and I've noticed that there's less and less
>
> argument against the likelihood that some of these worlds are alive. The idea is

gaining scientific acceptance. Of course, no one has any idea whether the

extrasolar life is anything more than a few trillion microbes. People speculate

about intelligent life, and it's fun to think about, but no one is claiming to have

found anyone to talk to out there. I don't care. Life alone is enough. I find it …

more exciting and encouraging than I can explain, more important than I can

explain. There is life out there. There are living worlds just a few light years

away, and the United States is busy drawing back from even our nearby dead

worlds, the moon and Mars. I understand why they are, but I wish they weren't.

(*Sower* 74)

While sympathetic to why money is not being spent on space exploration in a world of rapid

decline, for Lauren, developing the capacity to live on planets other than Earth is the ultimate

form of adaptation and hence the best way to ensure human survival.

"'Space could be our future,'" she tells nearly anyone who is willing to listen. "'I believe

that. As far as I'm concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things left

over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us. It's hard to get anyone to see

that, though, when there's so much suffering going on just outside our walls" (*Sower* 18). Despite

initial waves of dissent from nearly everyone she shares her vision with, Lauren is unrelenting:

"'space travel is the ultimate Earthseed aim,'" she states repeatedly, "and the ultimate human

change short of death. It's a destiny we'd better pursue if we hope to be anything other than

smooth-skinned dinosaurs—here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the ashes of our

cities'" (*Sower* 199).

Although Lauren is too old to actually begin a life on a new planet when Earthseed's

goals are realized, she does live long enough to see the first shuttles launched into space carrying

Earthseed members and the supplies they need to begin building new civilizations. "I know what I've done," she writes:

> I have not given them heaven, but I've helped them to give themselves the
> heavens. I can't give them individual immortality, but I've helped them to give
> our species its only chance at immortality. I've helped them to the next stage of
> growth. They're young adults now, leaving the nest. It will be hard on them out
> there. It's always rough on the young when they leave the protection of the
> mother. It will take a toll—perhaps a heavy one. I don't like to think about that,
> but I know it's true. Out there, though, among the stars on the living worlds we
> already know about and on other worlds that we haven't yet dreamed of, some
> will survive and change and thrive and some will suffer and die. (*Talents* 444)

In language marked both by maternal overtones and utopian dreaming, Lauren talks about both living and thriving and suffering and dying. Both will occur in the future societies she hopes Earthseed will establish. The cost of colonizing new worlds is, in Lauren's estimate, more than justified by the promise of worlds not yet dreamed of and the challenges these worlds will pose. She is, however, aware of the legacy of her actions and understands that death and hardship are inevitable.

Even given Lauren's ultimately benevolent goal of prolonging human life, several critics have found aspects of Lauren's agenda of space exploration problematic. Ingrid Thaler writes about the difficulty of ever depicting the exploration and colonization of the cosmos in a way that does not evoke a history of Euro-American exceptionalism:

> The metaphor of the stars is integrated into a religiously coded US-national
> ideology that justifies colonization by claiming geographical space, now
> extended to extraterrestrial space, as property. Earthseed continues the national

history of expansionism to outer space and promises a new country and new

heaven. Claiming to present an alternative to hegemonic practices, the novel

actually engages in a European-American rhetoric of manifest destiny in the

nineteenth century, which has been identified as a driving force behind the

American ideology of new world order and historically has constructed America

as sacred space … the novel contributes to a US-American myth whose doctrine

justifies colonization. Nevertheless, Earthseed is a settlement that comes into

existence because the American idea has gone down the drain. Thus, *Parable of

the Sower* ambiguously analyzes the American myth of exceptionalism and

considers it utterly failed while rewriting it. (94)

While Thaler's points are certainly valid, Butler's novels are able to at least partially avoid the

traps that many narratives of space exploration and colonization fall into. Lauren's initial

Earthseed community clings together precisely because they were victims of American capitalist

enterprise and were characterized as refuse deemed unworthy to access the American Dream.

This marginalization impacts every decision they make regarding the new society they build

together. What's more, even though the desire to keep humanity from extinction might be

construed as ethnocentric, Lauren regularly emphasizes the likelihood of humans reproducing or

in some other way merging with other lifeforms in the future and thus maturing into something

altogether different. Ultimately, she believes, people's ability to become hybrid will be the

determining factor in their survival. While Lauren freely admits that mistakes will no doubt be

made in the process of colonizing space, that both individuals and societies will have their periods

of regression, she is hopeful that the hubris, violence, and domination that were the guiding

principles of past colonial projects will be avoided, at least partially. The maternal imagery of a

mother gently pushing her children from the nest further implies that this colonizing mission is

based less on opportunistic greed or militaristic and/or imperialist expansion and more on the a desire to nurture humanity into its next phase, hopefully in ways that prioritize peaceful growth and thoughtful coexistence over domineering destruction. As Donna Haraway reminds us, hierarchy is not power's only shape, and Butler suggests that there are an infinite number of scripts left to be written in which different societies encounter each other, and each one of these provides a potential utopian blueprint. She refuses, in short, to assert that the way power has traditionally played out between victimizer and victim is the only possibility but instead insists on Blochian utopian dreaming, which suggests that collaboration exists in ways heretofore undreamed of.

While Butler's revision of colonial processes is both provocative and somewhat anxiety-producing, she also revises the notion of the feminist utopian leader or sage, a figure who is usually depicted as almost inconceivably wise, generous, nurturing, and unshakable in her confidence that her society is, without question, morally righteous. Lauren, on the other hand, is presented as an imperfect leader, constantly questioning her own will to power, and failing, rather spectacularly, in her role as mother. Ellen Peel shares Butler's ideas about Lauren's uncertainty and ambivalence regarding her leadership:

> In an interview conducted between the publication dates of the two novels Butler expressed her own doubts about Lauren's quest for power: "I had a lot of trouble writing [*Sower*] because I knew I would have to write about a character who was power-seeking. I didn't realize how much I had absorbed the notion that power-seekers were evil … I had to come to the realization that … power, money, knowledge, religion … can be beneficial or harmful to the individual and is judged by how it is being used. And also, of course, by the entrenched interests doing the judging. (64)

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Butler is clearly invested in portraying Lauren as someone who does not seek power out of self-interest, but rather channels power towards the greater goals of Earthseed. Even while being certain about the value of Earthseed's mission of galactic expansion, Lauren is equally uncertain about her own knowledge and abilities. "I realize I don't know very much," Lauren states early on in *Sower*. "None of us knows very much. But we can all learn more. Then we can teach one another" (51). By showing that she is not above taking advice, learning, and revising her leadership strategies based on the feedback of those around her, Lauren is constructed, to use Sheldon Sacks's term, as a "fallible paragon" (qtd. in Peel 64). Lauren's imperfection, instead of hindering those around her, only further endears her to her followers who respect her honesty and trust her decision making largely because it is informed by their input.

One of the most profound ways that Butler constructs Lauren as a fallible heroine is by structuring *Parable of the Talents* as a collection of journal entries assembled by Lauren's daughter, Larkin. In the novel Larkin includes her own writings, as well as those of her father, Bankole, her uncle, Marc, and, most prominently, her mother. At the age of three or four months, Larkin is kidnapped by an ultra-right wing terrorist group called the Christian Crusaders and adopted by a married couple aligned with The Church of Christian America. Larkin grows up not knowing that she is related to Lauren and only begins to suspect that they might be relatives when she sees Lauren's picture and notices the startling resemblance. The fact that the novel is written from the lost daughter's point of view and contains Larkin's anger at her mother further humanizes Lauren and also questions what is inevitably if not intentionally discarded during quests for power. Functioning as a narrative that is essentially pieced together by Larkin, *Talents* serves as a document through which Larkin tries to puzzle through her feelings about her absent mother and make sense of the connection she shares with this woman. "I still don't understand," she writes early in the text, which seemingly is published very soon after Lauren's death, "and

now that she's dead, I'm not even sure I ever will" (2). Although the bulk of the book is excerpts from Lauren's journal, the placement and sequencing of the entries are meant to answer many of Larkin's questions regarding why her mother did not work harder to find her after she had been kidnapped and why Earthseed seemed more important to Lauren than anything or anyone else, including her own daughter.

Not surprisingly, Larkin's portrayals of Lauren range from hostile ("She sacrificed us for an idea!") (*Talents* 150), to more charitable. "My mother was not a fanciful woman apart from her belief in Earthseed," Larkin writes when trying to fathom why so many people saw Lauren as an ideal leader. "That, I think, was why the people of Acorn trusted her so. She was practical, straightforward, fair, honest, and she liked people. She enjoyed working with them. She was a better-than-average community leader. But beneath it all was always Earthseed and a longing, an obsession, that was far stronger than anyone seemed to realize" (*Talents* 187). Clearly, Larkin feels a great deal of jealousy towards Earthseed, which she often refers to as her mother's other, favored child. Whereas Larkin does not lead a meager existence or die a horrific death like many of the characters in the *Parable* novels, she is excluded from Lauren's life because she is not part of Earthseed and hence not part of the privileged followers who Lauren feels are more deserving of her time and efforts. Lauren's casting aside of her maternal connection in the face of her larger leadership duties questions the assumption so often found in feminist utopia that motherhood is the single most powerful way women can transform society.

A final factor in Lauren's fitness as a leader relates back to Butler's suggestion that, in a changing world, those who lack conventional forms of power more easily adapt than those who have power to lose. Lauren, like Keira in *Clay's Ark*, is ill, and this illness directly enhances her effectiveness as a leader. The condition Lauren suffers from is called hyperempathy and causes her to feel the pain and the pleasure that she sees others enduring. "I feel what I see others feeling

or what I believe they feel,'" Lauren explains. "'Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an 'organic delusional syndrome' … It hurts, that's all I know'" (*Sower* 10-1). While the exact biological and psychological mechanics of hyperempathy remain unclear, Butler suggests that the pain and pleasure Lauren feels is not actually physically present in her body. "The sharing isn't real," Lauren explains. "It isn't some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's delusional. Even I admit that" (*Sower* 9). In an interview Butler confirms that Lauren's hyperempathy has roots in both physical and mental abnormalities: "She is not empathetic," Butler states. "She feels herself to be. Usually in science fiction empathetic means that you really are suffering, that you are actively interacting telepathically with another person, and she is not. She has this delusion that she cannot shake. It's kind of biologically programmed into her" (Potts 335). Similar to how Keira is able to adapt to the demands of a changing world largely because of her illness, so too does Lauren's illness drive her efforts to create a different world, one in which she won't have to feel the pain of others as often as she does in her current world. "I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what Dad thinks or wants or wishes" (*Sower* 10), Lauren declares, but this is not entirely true seeing as she spends both novels attempting to create a society in which there is less pain for her to involuntarily feel.

As Jim Miller notes of Lauren's hyperempathy, it is "not a comfortable ailment in dystopia, but one which encourages a deep sense of solidarity with others" (357). In agreement with this, Jerry Phillips writes that, as a sharer, Lauren's "sense of self is phenomenologically bound up with the humanity of the other" (306). Over the course of the second novel, Lauren begins to realize that this ability to merge with the Other is a benefit, not a nuisance. Slowly, she shifts from being embarrassed about her syndrome to seeing the potential of hyperempathy to make her a more utopian thinker. "I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before," Lauren professes, "but the way things are, I think it would help. I wish I

could give it to people. … A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all" (*Sower* 102). Although she readily admits that her "biological conscience" is not the same as genuine feeling, Lauren also implies that if everyone were able to merge with Otherness in the same way she can, utopia might be more possible. As has been already noted, much classical utopia is rooted in the idea that the Other is a disruptive presence, that it needs to be rooted out and eliminated in order for common goals to be established at met. In Butler's utopia, however, the presence of Otherness, the understanding and embracing of it, is, perhaps above all else, the shortest path to utopian dreaming.

All Tomorrow's Parties: Some Closing Thoughts on Utopia

Despite claims that utopian literature has outlived its usefulness, authors keep creating utopias and scholars keep analyzing them. This is likely because the hopefulness embedded in the narratives is too seductive to abandon completely, despite the genre's problematic roots. Butler is rightfully intent upon criticizing the characteristics of utopia that need to be criticized but also asks what from the genre can be recuperated and reformulated to create societies steeped in radical hope and unfathomable dreams. Unsurprisingly, Butler critiques the notion that, for a society to work, it must maintain homogeneity, purity, and conviction in its own moral rectitude and rather focuses upon utopian engineers who are imperfect, uncertain, and committed to the incorporation of Otherness into everyday life. In Butler's utopias conflict and tension are never eliminated but are rather forces that the residents can recognize, react to, and grow from. The process of working through disputes and learning reciprocally creates the substance of utopia for Butler more than the society's end product. Similarly, involvement in utopian communities is choice-driven, meaning that no one is selected for or excluded based solely on pre-existing traits.

This being said, the colonization of space is essential in Butler's utopian vision, not because she puts stock in imperialist power but because she believes that the unknown challenges humanity will have to confront are the very thing it needs to evolve in ways that will prevent its extinction. Similarly, Butler appropriates tropes of contemporary feminist utopia, such as the privileging of communalism and closeness to nature, and employs what she finds useful in these themes and discards what she does not. Lastly, in a genre known for societies that never seem to change, that remain untouched by the hand of time, Butler makes acceptance of change a non-negotiable aspect of survival and implies that those most receptive to change, the conventionally less powerful, will inherit not just this world but many worlds to come. And furthermore, she implies that because of their legacy of victimization, they stand a better chance of using power well than those who came before them.

All That History Will Allow: The Use of Time in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

While Toni Morrison, Grace Perry, Dionne Brand, Maryse Condé, and Nalo Hopkinson all feature time traveling in their works, perhaps the most sustained foray into the historical and political ramifications of time travel occur in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). *Kindred* follows the experiences of Edana (Dana), an African American woman in her twenties living in Southern California in the 1970s, who is working to become a successful author and is married to a white man named Kevin. Without knowing why, Dana is transported back to the antebellum plantation where her great-grandmother, Hagar, was born. Initially unbeknownst to Dana, Hagar is the product of a slave woman, named Alice Greenwood, and the master of the plantation, the accident prone Rufus Weylin. For reasons initially beyond her or the reader's understanding, Dana is summoned to the past whenever Rufus's life is in danger. After saving his life a handful of times, Dana realizes that in order to ensure her own existence, she must not only keep the slave-owning and abusing Rufus alive, but must also ensure that he rapes Alice. Her existence is therefore predicated upon not merely her complicity but her active instigation of violence.

In her introduction to *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature* (2013), Daylanne English writes "time, justice, and the written word are deeply intertwined—so much so that this triad lies at the heart of the African American literary tradition … from its very beginning" (1). With English's claim in mind, we will explore how time is perceived and manipulated in Butler's *Kindred*. We will look at how time travel is used not only to dissolve temporal barriers but also to allow bodies access to the past in ways that formulate knowledge as not only an intellectual experience but a somatic one as well. We will also talk about how time travel attempts to represent that which has largely been thought to be

unrepresentable and examine the intellectual and ethical problems that this type of representation causes.

As was the case with AOPA and utopian writing, we will examine how Butler not only updates the conventions of the time travel tale, a staple of science fiction literature since the nineteenth century, but also how she employs conventions of slave narratives in order to question the assumption that time travel leads to unprecedented freedom and understanding. Lastly, we will see how Butler continues to develop the themes of compromise and codependence by placing her protagonist in a situation where she must protect a slave master, and even facilitate his rape of one of her ancestors, in order to ensure her own existence. As is always the case with Butler's heroines, Dana's ability to understand the nuances and difficulties of powered relationships stems largely from her impoverished upbringing and her racial and gendered identity. Therefore, even though we see her making the choice to save Rufus, as well as herself, she is better able to live with her choices because her life in 1970s U.S. culture has predisposed her to understand that the lines between power and freedom, negotiation and collaboration, are often murky at best.

In order to fully appreciate how time functions in Butler's neo-slave narrative, it is important to develop an understanding of the form and purpose of slave narratives authored in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Kindred* unabashedly breaks spatial and temporal rules in order to question the veracity of historical truth and objectivity, the sort of truth and objectivity that slave narratives, marketed as firsthand insider accounts, professed to have. Ironically then, Butler, who relied heavily on slave narratives when conducting her research for *Kindred*, constantly questions the extent to which any narrative can claim total veracity and unassailable authority. The type of authority that comes from narrating something that one supposedly witnessed firsthand is similarly cultivated in time travel narratives, in which it is assumed that if one was present during a particular situation, one has a clear grasp of it. This is an attitude that

Butler writes against. Indeed, for Butler, historical witness does not confer any clearer form of knowledge upon her protagonist than do less direct ways of knowing the past. In her postmodern neo-slave narrative, Butler questions the very mechanisms of experience, mastery, and objectivity and questions their presence in both slave and time travel narratives.

As has been well documented, one of the main goals of slave narratives was abolition, and it stands to reason that potential sympathizers would more likely be won over to the cause if they felt that they were being given unmediated yet fully processed accounts of the struggles between master and slave. However, in order to be successful, authors had to package the experiences of slavery—a position wholly Other to most readers—using the literary conventions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. David Blight tells us that in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), perhaps the most widely read non-fictional account of slavery published in the nineteenth century, Douglass includes several characteristics of the sentimental novel, the picaresque and captivity narratives" (5). I would add that Douglass's narrative also includes elements of the conversion narrative and the transcendentalist essay popularized by Emerson and Thoreau.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that the slave narrative is "set in motion by the mode of confession'" (qtd. in Spaulding 10), something we see most specifically in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1860), in which the author continually and conspiratorially confesses how slavery victimizes women and families, relying not just on the confessional mode made popular by Victorian era fallen women novels but also on domestic guides such as those published by Harriet Beecher Stowe and popularized in *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830-78). Both Jacobs and Harriet Wilson, in her slave narrative *Our Nig* (1859), appeal to the notion that slavery prevents women from attaining the type of domestic order that Stowe paints as the virtuous ideal, making their appeals not just about the ways slavery compromises their humanity, but also about

how it compromises their womanhood. Indeed, both Jacobs and Wilson paint domestic space under slavery not as that which will bring peace and contentment to the women who manage it but rather as a sort of gothic castle of horrors, where one form of violence is followed closely upon by another.

What we can take from this is that while such narratives as Douglass's, Jacobs's, and Wilson's were largely committed to providing detailed accounts of the lives of slaves, the texts also employed the rhetoric of abolitionist debates, the emotional intensity of baptism and redemption, appeals to morality (especially of the feminine sort), and epic and/or picaresque narrative arcs that would have been recognizable to eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences. Antebellum slave narratives, therefore, function as much as a document of the literary subjects and styles popular at the time of their writing as they shed light on the lives of slaves.

Time travel in *Kindred* is used to ask what antebellum slave narratives omitted or simplified in an attempt to appeal to their audiences. While doing this, it also questions the notions of truthful objectivity that slave narratives and their audiences took for granted. Neo-slave narratives are not burdened with the task of convincing society of the necessity of abolition and thus can dispense with much of the moralizing of earlier narratives. Neo-slave narratives have the luxury of presenting morally imperfect and multidimensional slaves and relationships between masters and slaves that are less than straightforward. Through representing in meticulous detail that which remained implied or unrepresented in antebellum slave narratives, Butler raises questions about how history has and should be documented and understood as well, as what role the body should play in the cataloging of historical truth. Certainly bodily pain and degradation feature prominently in both antebellum and neo-slave narratives, often as a sort of violent proof of victimization, and this begs the question of whether or not somatic or embodied ways of knowing have become their own sort of deterministic absolutism. If an intellectualization of

history is lacking, narrow, and dismissive of the lives of actual people, Butler asks, is embodied knowing somehow "superior?"

Rather than answering this largely unanswerable question directly, time travel allows for Butler's characters to understand slavery both bodily and intellectually. The realness of their physical pain is undeniable, but, given the benefit of one hundred and fifty years of hindsight, they are also able to contextualize what is happening to them intellectually and without having to worry that their depictions will alienate abolitionists. Time travel allows for an interweaving, rather than a ranking, of the epistemologies of knowing and feeling, questioning the extent to which these knowledges were ever diametrically opposed.

Non-realist depictions of slavery, made obvious through the use of science fiction tropes, both ask how historical narratives fail to depict the entirety of slavery but also ask if there are ways of understanding slavery and its ramifications that are not explicitly historical. Isaiah Lavender tells us that "SF constructions of slavery tend either to recontextualize captivity narratives in terms of new technologies or to employ technology to relocate in time the observation or experience of bondage as a cultural norm. Either approach uses technology or science to distance and defamiliarize the institution and practice of slavery" (54-5). Lavender mentions both distancing and defamiliarization as strategies writers use to recast the experience of slavery, both means of telling familiar stories in ways that render them strange, dissonant, foreign. The manipulation of time, the dissolving of its borders, the questioning of its linearity, is precisely what allows for this defamiliarization that is pivotal to more complicated understandings of what it means to have been a slave.

The jarring dissonance that Dana feels, as a modern woman who is forced to inhabit a world in which she is a slave, is partially caused by her embodiment of a past that cannot be fully understood, that is inaccessible to those with the sensibilities of her time and place. Several

scholars have claimed that Dana is merely a spectator to slavery; they posit that her education, her status as an American citizen, and her knowledge of slavery's end, mean that she can only ever observe slavery, even when others insist that she participate in it fully. While Dana may hold an advantage over her fellow slaves because of her awareness of history, her conviction of her own worth, as well as her ability to read and write, she has little power over when she travels back to the past and, while there, is viewed by Rufus, her master, as a slave like any other. However, Dana is able to simultaneously feel, understand, and comment upon her experience. Time travel permits her to interweave different types of knowledge. *Kindred* suggests that embodiment and intellectualization are both necessary ways of knowing, but it also suggests that there might be aspects of slavery that will always remain psychically out of reach.

The manipulation of time is, of course, a well-known aspect of much postmodern writing, a characteristic that the neo-slave narrative employs extensively. In *Kindred* Butler is able to take part in the postmodern tradition of temporal play but is also able to question how the postmodern tradition's tendency to declare identity passé, to assert that the body is first and foremost a construct, often overlooks the very real ways that identity still very much matters. Timothy Spaulding writes that postmodern neo-slave narratives:

> engage, to varying degrees, aspects of postmodern subjectivity, history, and
> textuality by examining the instability of our narrative representation of the past.
> However, even as they reject realism and embrace non-mimetic devices in their
> treatment of history … many writers of postmodern slave narratives retain a
> stable conception of identity and historical authority that comes out of the
> cultural and racial politics of the sixties and is, at times, at odds with postmodern
> thought. In so doing, these writers forge a distinctly African American form of

postmodernism—one influenced by postmodern thought but rooted in black

history and informed by black identity politics. (3)

Certainly for Butler, the body is the device through which she plays with notions of time, truth,

and subjectivity, but it is also what firmly roots her narrative in lived, physical experience.

The question of whether the past can be accessed and understood in a meaningful way

tends to divide scholars. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson argues that "what

we think of as the past is an 'imagined' concept, put together selectively from fragments, based

on our present ideological needs" (Alexander 10-1). For Anderson, the delusion that the past's

truth can be fully known misleads communities, hinders them, forces them to worship arbitrary

constructs as if they were indisputable truth. Like Jameson's science fiction future, Anderson's

past is, first and foremost, a reflection of present values. Somewhat contrastingly, Terry Eagleton

argues that postmodernism, in its rejection of historical objectivity and continuity, limits

postmodernism's ability to confront the past with any political efficacy (19). For Eagleton,

postmodernism's claim that the past can never be fully legible is a far cry from claiming that the

past is completely imagined. Furthermore, Eagleton posits that postmodernism's problematizing

of all knowledge does not allow for historical inquiry that, while aware of its limitations, still

attempts to confront the past in intellectually honest and rigorous ways.

In line with Anderson's viewpoint, *Kindred* does not only aim to make us reconsider the

past; it also asks us to examine the present, which in *Kindred's* case is 1979. Butler has been very

open about how her story critiques Black Nationalist discourses from the 1960s and 70s that

denigrated African Americans who were seen as being too compliant to white America's dictates,

a set of behaviors that younger generations attributed to a slave past. By placing a contemporary

black woman on an antebellum plantation and having her confront what, to her generation, seem

like unthinkable choices, Butler renders sympathetic concessions and alliances that slaves often

had to make and critiques ideologies that assert that slaves who collaborated with or in some other way supported white interests were worthy of little more than derision. In an interview, Butler elaborates on this point: "*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery" (Baccolini 28).

Butler uses time travel to question what Itabari Njeri calls a "'vulgar, compensatory nationalism' that … is premised on undeviating loyalty to simple, ahistorical racial designations that suppress … complexity" (qtd. in Rushdy 102). Rushdy adds that such discourses in Black Nationalist movements of the 60s and 70s gave rise to patriarchal constructions of the black male familial leader, not just in political contexts, but in art and literature as well. "In dramatic, literary, and filmic representations," writes Rushdy, "one school of African American artists has produced what Wahneema Lubiano calls the 'black nationalist patriarchal family romance,' premised on the emergence of strong African American males and the often simultaneous marginalization or denunciation of African American women" (110). *Kindred*, therefore, can be seen as a double intervention in as far as it raises questions about both race and gender in America's past. Through Dana's time travel, Butler questions the assertion that slaves were somehow weaker and more compliant than their descendants by placing one such descendant into a slave setting where difficult concessions must be made for the sake of survival. Butler also questions the overreliance on strong and dominating patriarchs by creating a heroine who is intelligent, savvy, and able to succeed with the help of very few men.

Furthering our discussion of history's connection to identity, literature, and postmodernism, Lisbeth Gant-Britton notes that "many black women writers have seen literature as the primary way they could re-envision an egregious history" (279). While this is a fairly

straightforward statement, it speaks to a profoundly different way of conceiving of history: not as solely imaginary, not as completely verifiable, but rather as an entity that can be mined, molded, returned to, even altered for the purposes of enhanced understanding of the present and one's place in it. Narrating history can take on a therapeutic quality, and by accessing history black women can construct narratives that begin to address and work through painful pasts. Clearly, this process becomes more accessible with time travel. If Gant-Britton's statement is to be believed, history, particularly as it is depicted through literature, is a powerful force largely because it is something that can be re-represented and reshaped for purposes other than just exposing reality, but in ways that allow writers and their characters to both better understand the present and create more livable futures.

Commenting further on how the neo-slave narrative can intervene upon history to render it a more useful tool in the present, Timothy Cox writes that neo-slave narratives:

> deploy variant ironic narrative strategies that de-sacralize their respective slavery subjects without sacrilege. The idea is to bring the middle passage, daily persecution, and struggles for self-governance back into perspective as meaningful in a world fraught with meaninglessness, both in its origin and in its future. The novels force readers to take something unknowable because forbidden and to recall it, to imagine it, to speak its name. (36)

For Cox, then, de-sacralizing a past that has largely been perceived of as untouchable allows that past to be reimagined in ways that would remain impossible were the past to be left intact out of a sense of misplaced respect. Incorporating time travel into her neo-slave narrative is how Butler punctures the hegemony of untouchable historical truth and uses history as a malleable tool.

Elaborating further on the narrative effects of de-sacralizing slavery, Cox writes that: "the sacred qualities of the slavery past are systematically undercut … in order to recuperate their

secular relevance in the present. By sacred qualities, I mean the 'untouchable-ness' or unspeakable-ness or ineffable-ness that figures the past as some kind of haunting thing with which its inheritors can never come to terms" (36). In *Kindred*, Butler uses time travel to literally and figuratively bring Dana; her husband, Kevin; and the reader closer to the lived reality of slavery. Through Dana's physical and emotional wounds, the past is made both present and effable. What's more, if Dana refuses to "touch" the past, namely by making sure that Rufus impregnates one of her relatives, her very existence might well be terminated. Not only Dana's understanding of self but the continuation of her actual physical self rely upon her entrance into and manipulation of a past that was clearly violent.

Continuing Cox's line of argumentation, Timothy Spaulding writes that science fiction and other speculative genres, more so than realist genres, "defamiliarize both the history of slavery and traditional approaches to writing that history. By deploying elements of the fantastic … these writers force us to question the ideologies embedded within the 'realistic' representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction" (2). Adam McKible, building on Spaulding's ideas, suggests that black women writers are often especially well-suited to use fantastical or speculative narratives to critique the process of historical representation. Because of "the 'privilege' of their marginalization," he claims, they are more likely to have developed "consciousness that defies the purported truthfulness of History, a perspective that envisions Truth as a fictionalized assemblage and erasure of events rather than as a factual representation of actual social or historical relations" (qtd. in Henton 111). Just as Butler suggests that young black women with largely disempowered backgrounds are best-suited to engage with the wholesale hybridity and the muddied power relations that transforming humanity require, McKible suggests that black women writers, again, because of their specific subject positions and historically-rooted experiences, are particularly well-suited to question historical objectivity and singular truth. They

are also freer, I suggest, to revisit the slave past as a means of gaining an understanding of their own complexities, seeing as they are not in the same position as writers of antebellum slave narratives who had to gear their writing largely toward the goal of abolition.

Lisa Long agrees with Spaulding and McKibble to some degree, although for her, what is most important about the reality-bending aspects of science fiction is not only its ability to produce alternative narratives that allow history be accessed differently but science fiction's willingness to involve the bodies of protagonists in events that they did not originally participate in. Referring specifically to Butler, Long writes that *Kindred* suggests "that all historical writing is a sort of science fiction, as their authors seek vainly to enter the minds and bodies of their historical subjects. Yet they embark on no fantastic voyages; rather, the novels dramatize the inherently violent nature of the pursuit of historical veracity" (461). Long suggests that any quest meant to verify historical certainly cannot happen without violence and pain of some sort.

Speaking of damage, and harkening back to Anderson's point about depictions of the past inescapably reflecting the values of the present, Dana's days spent as a slave are made particularly difficult for her because she holds contemporary sensibilities and modern ideals about both racial and gender equality. This difficulty encourages readers to contemplate how one would go about truly knowing history in a meaningful way without have access to the ideological framework of the time one is trying to understand: legibility becomes an epistemological problem rather than a temporal one. If the past is still at least partially illegible to Dana, who is literally inhabiting it, this raises the question of whether directly observing history, being an active part of it, unproblematically confers knowledge and understanding. *Kindred* suggests that the past remains foreign and confusing even when direct access occurs.

Dana's difficulty fully absorbing what is happening to her despite her historical knowledge of slavery brings up a second point that is worth dwelling on momentarily, namely the

instantaneous mode of travel that occurs in *Kindred* (a convention that several other neo-slave narratives share). Whereas the scientific romances of the late nineteenth century up through the time travel adventure tales of the 1950s and 60s tended to dedicate at least some narrative focus on the actual time travel device itself (the machine, substance, or psychological state that allowed time travel to occur), neo-slave narratives accept as a given that time travel is possible, and focus little on why and how this is the case. The characters in neo-slave narratives innately possess the ability to time travel, largely, it is implied, because of their connection to slavery and the resulting trauma embedded in their histories that, while no longer immediate in the same ways it once was, is still keenly felt. Often times the ability acts as a sort of safeguard against historical amnesia, and the only prerequisite seems to be family histories rooted in pain and exploitation.

Ashraf Rushdy tells us that "Butler has spent a great deal of time in several interviews downplaying the significance of the 'time travel' in her novel, arguing that her use of time travel is closer in spirit to magical realism than it is to science fiction. 'Time travel,' she concludes, 'is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from'" (107). Robert Crossley echoes Rushdy's observation when he asserts that *Kindred* does not read **"**like the classic time-travel stories of science fiction. In *The Time Machine* (1895)," Crossley continues, "H.G. Wells has his traveler display the shiny vehicle on which he rode into the future to verify the strange truth of his journey; in *Kindred* the method of transport remains a fantastic given" (267). Because Dana travels back and forth with such ease (dizziness being the only unpleasant side effect), the extent to which the present is never severed from the past is made evident, once again foregrounding the presence of trauma in Dana's personal and historical narrative. Crossley makes a point similar to this when he writes that "in *Kindred* the most powerful metaphor is time travel itself. Traveling to the past is a dramatic means to make the past live, to get the reader to live imaginatively in the recreated past, to grasp it as a felt reality rather than merely a learned

abstraction" (274). If the mechanism of time travel were thoroughly detailed, the continuum of past and present that Crossley mentions would be compromised by its lack of seamlessness.

By refusing to locate the source of time travel in an external machine, Butler is able to link the power to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries to Dana herself, and more specifically to her connection to Rufus, her slave owning great, great grandfather. By insinuating that Dana and Rufus's complexly intertwined history is at least partially the cause of Dana's time travel, Butler has, in Crossley's words, "sacrificed the neat closure that a scientific—or even pseudo-scientific—explanation of time travel would have given her novel" (267-8). The fact that slavery caused and still causes messy allegiances and tangled genealogies is made explicit by the fact that Dana's time travel is instigated by Rufus, or, more specifically, something causes Dana to travel back in time when Rufus's life is in danger and needs saving. The reality that slavery relied upon ever-shifting and contextual dynamics of power lead to some of Butler's profoundest observations and the subtlety required to make these points would evaporate if we had a tidy description for how and why the time travel was happening.

As Benjamin Robertson points out, "even though history (Alice's rape, slavery in general) is not [Dana's] fault or responsibility in the conventional sense of those terms, she must sanction it—all of it" (374). Dana's predicament makes explicit the ways in which most people's existence is at least partially predicated on violence. Dana's predicament closely aligns with those of the other slave women who surround her: she must pacify, even aid someone she dislikes in order to ensure her own survival. She must make the seemingly unforgivable decision not to aid another woman in need in order to secure her own power, her own life. It is the kind of seemingly impossible decision, specific to slavery, which Dana would probably not fully grasp if time travel were not an option. It also mirrors the type of nearly-unlivable compromise that Butler expects

from all of her heroines, compromises that they are able to make because of a complex interweaving of specific experiences and identities.

By constantly having to ask herself why and how she has been given the ability to move through time, Dana is compelled to reflect on the ways the past and present are in constant dialogue with each other. "Is the power mine?" Dana asks herself, "or do I tap some power in him [Rufus]? All this started with him, after all. I don't know whether I need him or not. And I won't know until he's not around" (247). Dana's obvious yet troubling connection to Rufus, who serves as both a catalyst for time travel, and an agent of her very existence, mirrors the reluctant and often maddening dependence that many slaves had on their masters, dependence they neither chose nor could change. While Dana spends a good deal of time criticizing Rufus's cruelty, sometimes directly to his face, she realizes that she must protect his life if she wants to protect her own. "I looked over at the boy who would be Hagar's father," Dana tells us as she is trying to justify her reasons for siding with Rufus when he behaves heinously towards his slaves:

> There was nothing in him that reminded me of any of my relatives. Looking at
> him confused me. But he had to be the one. There had to be some kind of reason
> for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship
> could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then,
> neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that
> didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not
> have come from our being related. Still, now I had a special reason for being glad
> I had been able to save him. After all … after all, what would have happened to
> me, to my mother's family, if I hadn't saved him? Was that why I was here? Not
> only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my
> family's survival, my own birth. Again, what would have happened if the boy

had drowned? … His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived

descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I

could not exist. That made sense. But somehow, it didn't make enough sense to

give me any comfort. It didn't make enough sense for me to test it by ignoring

him if I found him in trouble again. (28-9)

The "matching strangeness" that Dana mentions at least partially refers to the biological and

emotional link that Dana and Rufus share, although Butler is quick to point out that these

connections do not entirely explain the affinity between the two characters. Rather, the "matching

strangeness" refers to the complexity of their fluctuating respect and mistrust for each other, the

shared dependence that neither of them are particularly happy about. The relationship that Rufus

and Dana develop over the course of the novel, a relationship that is always tinged by Dana's

disapproval of Rufus, as well as Rufus's notion that Dana is not entirely human (both because she

is black and because of her ability to seemingly appear and disappear at will), is meant to show

that human relationships, messy in the least complicated of circumstances, are made

exponentially so when they occur between master and slave. Dana is "chosen" to return to the

past, we are made to think, largely because she is capable of engaging with this messiness. Time

travel illustrates the negotiations and attachments that were part of a life of slavery. When Dana

finds herself both deeply attached to and patently horrified by Rufus—when she, by turns, teaches

him to read, attempts to escape his plantation, facilitates his rape of Alice, and comforts him

when Alice commits suicide—she is illustrating the extent to which simply resisting or

accommodating one's enslavers, either fully loving or fully hating them, are not helpful or

realistic ways of attempting to understand the historical realities of slavery.

Dana's time traveling does not end until Rufus, who has, at this point in the narrative,

already fathered Hagar, attempts to rape Dana and she kills him. Once Rufus is dead and Dana is

able to remain in present time permanently, she and Kevin travel to the town in Maryland where Dana believes Rufus's plantation was located. After poking around in local archives, Dana and Kevin confirm that Dana's hunch is correct but are distressed by the fact that they cannot find any records of what happened to Rufus's slaves after his death. "'He could have left a will,'" Kevin, whose feelings about Rufus are less complicated than Dana's, tells her, "'He could have freed those people at least when he had no more use for them'" (261).

"'But there was his mother to consider,'" Dana replies. "'And he was only twenty-five. He probably thought he had plenty of time to make a will'" (262).

"'Stop defending him,'" Kevin retorts, implying that Dana's feelings for Rufus are more generous than they ought to be. Dana considers Kevin's words and slowly replies, "'I wasn't. I guess in a way, I was defending myself. You see, I know why he wouldn't make that kind of will. I asked him, and he told me … Because of me. He was afraid I'd kill him afterwards'" (263). With Dana's admission, she makes clear that she is partially responsible for Rufus's absent will, a document that might have granted freedom to her fellow slaves. Dana's capabilities and privileges can therefore be directly correlated to the other slaves' mistreatment. Again, Butler is not using this fact to imply that Dana is morally inferior to her fellow slaves but rather to show the impossible compromises that are de rigeur in a life of slavery. Dana's guilt also points to the injustice of one's survival being directly proportional to, even reliant upon, the misfortune of others. Related to both Keira in *Clay's Ark* and Lauren in the *Parable* novels, Dana is forced to make a nearly impossible decision: she gives up a supportive alliance with her fellow slaves and gains her own life in the future. It's a compromise in which nobody—not even Rufus, who constantly fears that Dana will murder him—wins. However, those who can make such choices and learn to live with them are those who are able to survive.

By providing no contemporary records of the slaves that Dana worked and lived with, Butler is making explicit the many gaps and shortcomings of written history. Alice, Sarah, Tess, Isaac, and the other slaves we meet when Dana travels back in time are, in the world of the novel, fully developed people, and yet no trace of them exists. Their complete erasure from modern history not only illustrates historical incompleteness; it also shows what is to be gained from accessing history for the purposes of speculation. Through time travel, Dana can begin reconstructing a past that has been lost. The past is figured not as irretrievably gone and forgotten but as something that will continue to be written and rewritten, accessed and returned to, and in ways that reflect and hopefully benefit the present.

While Butler is certainly interested in showing that the past is something that can be constantly re-imagined by people living in the present, *Kindred* also uses time travel to teach Dana the extent to which the past still impacts nearly every aspect of her contemporary life and in ways that are not always readily apparent to her. Timothy Spaulding makes this point when he notes that "both literally and symbolically, Dana's movement in time illustrates the fact that the past asserts itself in the present in a material and a physical way" (29). Spaulding goes on to suggest that it is Dana's unwillingness or inability to see the past's impact upon her present perception of self that instigates her time travel. He writes: "Neither Butler nor Dana elaborate on the implications of Dana's troubles having begun long before her first movement through time. The fact that Butler leaves the origins and causality of Dana's time travel ambiguous opens the door to several possible interpretations as to the reasons why the past invades her life in such a disruptive and dangerous manner" (47). Like Butler's other heroines, Dana is likely "chosen" because of her marginality and lack of power.

Spaulding's provocative suggestion that Dana's time traveling is instigated by the fact that she ignores the impact of the past on her life is illustrated first and foremost through Dana's

marriage to Kevin, a relationship that, as the novel progresses, becomes more and more indistinguishable from her relationship with Rufus, particularly when Kevin travels back in time with her, is accidentally left in antebellum Maryland for five years, and acquires many of the mannerisms of speech and habit that Rufus has as well. Although Kevin is largely a loving and supportive husband to Dana, Butler subtly doubles Kevin and Rufus throughout the novel in order to compare patriarchy under slavery to patriarchy in the 1970s. By choosing to make Kevin white, Butler illustrates how the history of slavery has created legacies that interracial couples are still forced to face, a fact made doubly obvious by both Kevin and Dana's families' disapproval of their relationship.

"What makes Dana's situation even more difficult," writes Maria Troy, continuing to explore the role that Kevin plays in the novel, "is the overlap between master-slave relations and traditional gender roles and gendered prerogatives" (169). We see this overlap made especially blatant in the division of labor in Kevin and Dana's household. When the novel opens, the couple has just moved to a spacious new house in a nice neighborhood, a place that the publication of Kevin's most recent novel (they are both writers) has made possible. "We were still unpacking," Dana tells us, recalling the first time she was pulled back to the past, "or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order" (12). Dana's observation makes explicit that while she is performing labor for the benefit of both of them, Kevin's labor is performed solely for his own needs.

We see further evidence of the gendered hierarchies of their relationship, especially where labor is concerned, when, in the early days of their courtship, Kevin asks Dana to type his manuscripts for him, something she flatly refuses to do. Her refusal initially causes contention in their relationship, and although Kevin eventually agrees to stop asking Dana to do such clerical favors for him, it is only after several attempts on his part to talk Dana into essentially being his

secretary in lieu of focusing on her own writing. This request of Kevin's becomes even more insidious when, late in the novel, the poorly educated Rufus asks Dana to act as both his secretary and his business manager, a position she agrees to because of the power overseeing his correspondence and finances will give her. "'I gave her that husband to complicate her life,'" Butler has commented in more than one interview (Crossley 276) and certainly Kevin's presence forces the reader, if not Dana, to consider precisely how contemporary gendered relations may resemble those of the past, a comparison that wouldn't be as explicit without time travel.

Another aspect of Dana's modern life that forces her to compare the uses of power in the past and present is the aforementioned new house that Dana and Kevin move into at the novel's beginning. Troy writes that "the house in the twentieth century represents Dana's modern view of the world , but it also carries residual nineteenth-century meanings that make it function as a time machine" (150). Certainly the fact that the house was bought by Kevin contributes to Dana's unease at living there and raises questions for her regarding her own autonomy and financial independence. Perhaps even more unsettling is the fact that, over the course of the narrative, Dana spends a great deal more time at the Weylin plantation house (time is not congruous in both eras; a day in 1976 is often many weeks, months, or even years in the past) and even begins to take comfort in the sight of it. Clearly, none of the houses in the novel function either entirely as a site of safety and comfort or entirely as a source of threatening violence but as a confusing mixture of both. In her extended discussion of the function of the houses in *Kindred*, Troy writes that:

> for Dana, moving into the house does not mean a flight from slavery but, on the
>
> contrary, a way into it. From a 1976 perspective, what is implied is Dana's
>
> economic dependence on Kevin, which she has fought against since the
>
> beginning of their relationship. Secondly, and more palpably in the text, the
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> move into the house is literally a way into slavery, since it is when they move in

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that Dana is thrown back into the past where she is considered a slave. Thirdly,

she becomes afraid of leaving this house between her time travels, because she

does not know where she will come back otherwise. (158)

Similar to Spaulding, Troy asserts that Dana's refusal to fully note the connection between her

own situation and that of her ancestors is what instigates her time travel. Troy reads Dana's

willingness to move into a house that Kevin has bought as an acceptance of a different brand of

enslavement, utter economic dependence upon a white man, who is undeniably much more

humane than Rufus but nonetheless holds a greater degree of power in the relationship and in the

world than Dana does. Time travel, Troy implies, serves as a sort of wakeup call for Dana, for it

is only through experiencing the past firsthand that Dana can begin to see some of the ways in

which her contemporary life is subject to similar imbalances of power.

Not explicitly related to Kevin or the house Dana shares with him, but connected to it

nonetheless, is the timeframe in which the present portions of the novel are set. The first time

Dana time travels is on her birthday and the last time is July 4th, 1976, the bicentennial of the

adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Crossley explains that "in bringing the novel full

circle from the protagonist's birthday to the nation's birthday, Butler deftly connects individual

consciousness with social history and invites readers to meditate on the relationships between

personal and political identities" (276). Crossley's observation is astute, but it seems that Butler's

choice of dates also evokes Frederick Douglass's famous 1852 speech *What to the Slave is the

Fourth of July?* in which he tells his listeners that: "the blessings in which you, this day, rejoice,

are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence,

bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and

healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You

may rejoice, I must mourn" (370). Depicting Dana's escape from slavery, seemingly for good

since Rufus has died, and return to her present world on the day the nation celebrates its independence asks the reader to consider the limits and legacies of such claims to freedom. As Crossley points out, beginning the novel with Dana's birthday and ending it with the national birthday allows the reader to link personal milestones to larger national ones, the very act we are meant to think Dana was either incapable of or refused to do until her time travel forced her to do otherwise. Her survival, in fact, is largely dependent on her eventual ability to link her family's history to her modern day situation. Once more, we see compromise (Dana must question her own autonomy) coupled with both growth and pain (Dana's life will be forever enriched but also forever marred by her time traveling).

Marc Steinberg, another critic who has noted how Dana's time travel is used to challenge her assumptions that the past can be completely transcended, writes that "the blurring of temporal boundaries blurs the notion of slavery transcended … by zigzagging the time frame of the novel from past to present, Butler points to ways in which past and present become interchangeable … [and] critique[s] the notion that historical and psychological slavery can be overcome" (467). Certainly the lasting effects of slavery are something that Dana only begins to understand after traveling back in time, but perhaps even more indelible than her emotional and intellectual experiences are the effects the experience has on her body. In the eyes of some critics, Butler creates a problematic hierarchy in which embodied knowledge, history that is felt rather than studied, is somehow superior, or "truer" than that which is only read, thought, or written about. This privileging of the body as a site through which "real" knowledge can be attained is certainly not without its problems; however, I choose to read embodied knowledge in *Kindred* functioning less as a desired end in and of itself and more as the restoration of one type of forgotten or ignored knowledge that will, hopefully, lead Dana to a fuller understanding of the role history has

played in her life. Dana, after all, cannot really ignore her own physical pain, and this can therefore serve as a catalyst for a fuller understanding of the past.

"I lost an arm on my last trip home," Dana tells us at the beginning of the novel, before we understand the intricacies of her time travel. "My left arm. And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone" (9). Critics have found the loss of Dana's arm intriguing, and certainly there are a plethora of interpretations surrounding its absence. "Mary S. Weinkauf sees it as a kind of 'punishment'—presumably for tolerating Rufus as long as Dana does. Ruth Salvaggio reads it as … a grisly reminder of her connection to kindred, of her inability ever to escape a disfigured heritage … Janice Antczak states that 'Dana knows her sojourns to the past have altered her physically and spiritually. She bears the scars of slavery and has left a part of herself in the 1800s—part of her spirit and part of her arm—literally caught in slavery's grip as Rufus refuses to let go.' Karla F.C. Holloway ties the loss of Dana's arm to what she calls the 'fracturing' of her voice between the past and the present'" (Troy 171). Steinberg writes that "Dana has lost her arm in history; the hold of the past on the present is evident as Dana becomes a physical presence in both the past and the present" (474). I would add to these interpretations that, as a writer, the newly one-handed Dana will have to physically work much harder to express herself in her future career. This may mirror the difficultly she will have in returning to her pervious representational framework for understanding herself as a subject largely unaffected by racial and gendered hierarchies.

While only some critics view Dana's loss as punitive, a stark reminder that the past cannot be left behind or transcended, all seem to agree that the loss of Dana's arm makes literal the idea of a fractured or wounded history, a legacy that, while it may allow a subject to function, does not allow them to be fully whole. The scars that remain on the psyches of slavery's descendants become evident, less abstract, when they are inscribed directly upon the flesh. Butler

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emphasizes this idea when, in an interview, she says, "I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole … Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole" (Kenan 498). We've seen that Butler privileges fractured and conventionally disempowered heroines, largely because their backgrounds equip them to make the choices that her speculative realities demand. Dana eventually joins the ranks of women like Keira and Lauren, but *Kindred* is more about Dana's realization of her fractured vulnerability, as opposed to being a narrative about how she takes her pain and transforms humanity.

The loss of Dana's arm not only makes explicit her traumatic history; it also links to the loss of representational certainty. According to Liza Yaszek, from the loss of the arm "Butler suggests that Dana begins to construct a new narrative authority for herself precisely by recounting the ways her body has been marked" (*Outstanding* 84). In other words, the pain and loss Dana experiences forces her to assert herself in the world more fully, to begin to construct a selfhood autonomous and self-reflexive enough to no longer avoid the role the past plays in her life. By literally embodying the past, Dana is able to effectively exert greater power over her present, and hopefully her future.

As aforementioned, the novel ends with Kevin and Dana visiting the town in Maryland where they believe the Weylin plantation was located. As they stumble through farmland and page through historical records, they do not find closure, suggesting that there is none to be had, that history remains open, both a wound and a hopeful promise. "'It's over,'" Kevin tells Dana when he sees her distress at not knowing the fate of her ancestors. "'There's nothing you can do to change any of it now.'"

"'I know,'" Dana responds. "'I wonder whether the children were allowed to stay together—maybe stay with Sarah'" (262)

"'You've looked,'" Kevin reminds her. "'And you've found no records. You'll probably never know'" (263). Instead of answering Kevin directly, Dana addresses the reader, perhaps suggesting that there are parts of her experience that she isn't entirely able to vocalize to Kevin yet, perhaps because his association with Rufus is still fresh in her mind. "I touched the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on my face," she tells us, "touched my empty left sleeve." Sparked by the reality of her altered body, her only tangible proof of the past now that the Weylin house no longer remains, she finally asks Kevin, "'Why did I even want to come here? You'd think I would have had enough of the past'" (264).

'You probably needed to come for the same reason I did.'" Kevin tells her. "'To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you're sane'" (264). From this exchange it becomes clear that Kevin and Dana have begun to establish an equality of sorts in their relationship based on their shared experience of time travel, and this suggests that their future together will be a better one than they would have had if the time travel never occurred. Ernest Gaines writes that "there is a difference between living in the past and trying to escape it. If you do nothing but worship the past you are quite dead … but if you start running and trying to get away from the past … it will run you mad, or kill you in some way or another. So you really don't get away. It's there and you live it" (qtd. in Rushdy 127). This, above anything else, seems to be the lesson that Dana and Kevin have learned, and this knowledge gives them more control over how they navigate the space and time they share. Yaszek emphasizes this when she writes that, "Butler invokes … a generation supposedly without ties to the bad old past of racial discrimination and inequality—only to undercut it by showing how subjects who cut themselves off from history necessarily cut themselves off from their connections with others in the present as well" (*Outstanding* 83).

In order to avoid the historical amnesia that cuts subjects off from meaningful connection to others and meaningful understandings of themselves, Butler implies that a sort of hybrid subjectivity is needed, one that encompasses and embodies past, present, and future simultaneously. This more nuanced way of knowing relies upon both knowing and feeling history. Yaszek emphasizes this point when she writes that Butler "suggest[s] that the process of decolonizing one's identity and constructing a hybrid or cyborg one in its place is slow, painful, and always incomplete" (*Outstanding* 90), but, I would add, necessary. Although we will talk extensively about cyborg identities in chapter four, suffice it to say that time travel teaches Dana to piece together seemingly disconnected fragments of time in ways that allow her to think not just linearly but multilaterally about history and her role in it. What's more, she doesn't forget the physical and emotional costs that such rootedness requires.

In *Kindred* embodiment of the past provides the protagonist with an alternative way of knowing and is the catalyst in the formation of a hybrid identity that allows Dana to feel the effects of multiple time periods simultaneously. From this complex understanding of time comes a complex understanding of power, and from here stems compassion and wisdom. Just as slave narratives relied upon conventions of other popular genres to make their message palatable, so too do speculative neo-slave narratives play with postmodern notions of historical truth and objectivity and interrogate how one can know, represent, and account for the past while not becoming consumed by it. Embodiment, particularly pain, makes the past present while not necessarily making it any more comprehensible. It is this pain, along with the individual, familial, and communal bearing witness that allows Dana and Kevin to build an understanding of the past as they prepare for a future that will not be solely dictated by it.

Almost Human, Always Reaching: Octavia Butler's Cyborgs, Vampires, and Shape-shifters

"With the appearance of the play R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots) in 1921 by Czech author and playwright, Karel Capek, SF was forever attached to the notion of servitude. Capek's R.U.R. told the story of a company that created synthetic men to be used as slaves. Eventually these synthetic men revolted and set out to destroy the humans who enslaved them."

– Gregory Hampton

"Perhaps, ironically, we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos. From the point of view of pleasure in these potent and taboo fusions, made inevitable by the social relations of science and technology, there might indeed be a feminist science."

– Donna Haraway, A Manifesto for Cyborgs

This chapter will focus on how cyborgs and other hybrid, unstable, or transitional bodies are used in the fiction of Octavia Butler. As feminist attitudes about cyborgs have been largely influenced by feminist attitudes about technological progress writ large, it is worth briefly outlining how feminists have theorized technology over the past century before turning to Butler's work. Jennifer Gonzalez writes that despite the widespread technophobia of the second half of the nineteenth century (manifested most explicitly through public fear of railroads and film-making equipment) "by 1889 [the machine's] 'otherness' had waned, and … audience[s] tended to think of the machine as unqualifiedly good, strong, stupid and obedient … a giant slave, an untiring steel Negro, controlled by Reason in a world of infinite resources" (68). Whereas certainly there existed both art and social commentary focused on the dangers of assuming the

complete obedience of the machine (Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* and Dorothea Lange's popular photographs of workers injured in factories being two prime examples), the general belief that humans had successfully harnessed the power of industry to do their bidding was a common one throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only occasionally questioned by writers such as Isaac Asimov, whose *Robot Stories* began to be published in 1939. Asimov's stories, which include many variations on the theme of robot rebellion, arguably fathered this science fiction trope, which was further popularized by writers such as Philip K. Dick. Black women writers such as Nisi Shawl, Andrea Hairston, and Nalo Hopkinson have used such humanized mechanical figures to question the ethics of enslaving those thought, because of their corporeal makeups, to be not-quite-human.

Given the many ways that technology has been written about throughout the twentieth century, it is not surprising that today, there are several critical approaches to the technologically mediated body. Literary analyses such as David Porush's *The Soft Machine* (1985) and Sharona Ben-Tov's *The Artificial Paradise* (1995) examine how representations of advanced technologies function within well-established romantic and/or humanist paradigms. In doing so, they combat claims that advanced technologies represent a clean break from the past. At the same time, their emphasis on historical continuity often limits the ability of these critics to discuss how the technological mediation of bodies might provide authors with the opportunity to imagine new forms of both embodiment and subjectivity.

In fairness to these critics, and especially Ben-Tov, who worries that technological mediation might destroy that which is most valuable about humanity (and womanhood, in particular), expressing concern about mediated bodies is not synonymous with refusing to consider the different subject positions that said technological mediation might allow. Rather, what Ben-Tov seems to fear is a complete devaluation of the corporeal in favor of the

mechanized. She writes that "the ideology of the technological heterocosm says that what can't be defined in technical terms—such as emotion, cultural tradition, aesthetics, spirituality, and morality—isn't real" (144). Whereas a slew of science fiction refutes this notion, what with the many robots, cyborgs, and androids who develop emotional capacities, what Ben-Tov and her contemporaries are wary of is the replacement of nature, and particularly the female body, with scientific discovery. "What we're really intended to think is that technology is qualitatively the same as nature," Ben-Tov explains. "Making bombs is the same as making babies. The board inside your computer is the same thing as a mother. Using metaphors that equate technological power with nature's generativity, science fiction persuades us that we can replace nature with our technological selves" (132).

Whereas certainly Ben-Tov could be criticized for sustaining an overly simplistic distinction between nature and technology, a distinction that critics such as Donna Haraway are properly on guard against, Ben-Tov is one of the first in a line of feminist critics (among them Ann Balsamo and Rebecca Holden) who contemplate the many negative results of glorifying the technological over the corporeal. Ben-Tov's concerns are partially responsible for instigating discussions around how the body can usefully be altered and enhanced without cultivating scorn and derision for said body, which often figures as a symbol of weakness that needs to be replaced by something less breakable and easier to regulate. Therefore, although perhaps it was not her intent, Ben-Tov's work has catalyzed discussions about forms of embodiment that neither reject technological innovation out of hand nor seek to transcend or disavow humanness altogether. As we will see shortly, the value placed upon corporeality is a distinguishing characteristic in Butler's science fiction, and indeed, the role that the actual physical body is allowed to play in a cyborg's life is largely what deems the quality of that cyborg's existence.

Whereas some anthologies such as Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston's *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) and Chris Hables Gray's *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995) have attempted to show how different technologies have allowed us to increasingly explore and celebrate the complexity of both bodies and identities, much contemporary writing about technology operates under the assumption that the body is innately lacking and must, at the very least, be improved and ideally be traded in for something sturdier and more capable. This disdain for embodiment that so many feminist theorists critique was compounded by Ray Kurzweil's 2005 *The Singularity Is Near*, "which took up the now-familiar argument that Big Science is about to reach a state of accelerated exponentiality—a mathematical singularity—in which technology will design itself and merge with us in ways that challenge all our assumptions about human nature" (Schroeder 5). Whereas transcending the human form and replacing it with something deemed superior was for decades merely the stuff of science fiction, Kurzeil argues that at this point in time it is less a question of whether technology will continue to alter the human form and more a question of how and when. For this reason, it is worth contemplating how the mixing of humans and Others is conceptualized by authors, such as Butler, who have a clear stake in the relationship between technology, embodiment, power, and servitude.

The cyborg question is a tricky one to negotiate given past feminist discourses surrounding technology. Patricia Melzer explains that "technology has always been controversial in feminist theory and politics. In 1970 … Shulamith Firestone, in her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, called for the complete embrace of technology (especially in terms of reproduction) in order to achieve women's liberation. Later, ecofeminists and cultural feminists rejected any form of modern technology as an instrument of patriarchal control" (178). As Butler herself has noted, there is a distinguishing line to be drawn between technological progress centered on human betterment and technological progress that ignores or even holds the human in contempt. Michael

Zimmerman emphasizes this dilemma when he writes that "so long as technological innovation is driven by a revulsion against corporeality and mortality … those innovations will contain an unintegrated dark side that will threaten to undermine every achievement" (qtd. in Yanarella 302-3). Butler, however, who is generally not a fan of simple dichotomies, suggests that there should be significant anxiety regarding the difficulty of distinguishing "good" and "bad" ideological orientations from one another.

When thinking about cyborg bodies, gender is never not a factor. The artificial woman was a staple of film and literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with de L'Isle Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve* (1886) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) being two of the most famous examples. In the vast majority of texts that contain cyborgs, cyborg women are judged superior to human women because they have been created by and can thus be regulated by (usually male) scientists and because they lack biologically rooted weaknesses that have commonly been linked to the female body.

While there are many perfectly legitimate reasons to approach technological innovation with caution, there is also the troubling tendency in much feminist science fiction and accompanying scholarship to retreat into the realm of the pastoral, to deny the helpfulness of any type of scientific or technological progress, as a sort of safeguard against the ruination of the world. Peter Yanarella highlights the reasoning behind this attitude when he writes:

> in our time … the technological worldview and the institutions and values of late capitalism continue to fuel the machine's imperialistic invasion into ever wider gardens of the Third World and perhaps someday the garden of the cosmos. While it might therefore seem hazardous to read back to apply the socialist pastoral's creative solutions to our time and place, this is exactly what ought to be done. (118)

For Yanarella, the imperialism that scientific progress often relies upon, the use of resources and the exploitation of people, outweighs anything that such technology could achieve in expanding or complicating human subjectivity. If Yanarella's call to pastoralism seems extreme, Melzer notes that historically feminist viewpoints on technology have been similarly polarized, leaving little room for negotiation or nuance. "Feminist criticism of science and technology defines science and technology as either inherently patriarchal, and thus disempowering to women," Melzer explains, "or as a tool that, if used strategically, can be liberating to women and other oppressed social groups" (19).

One reason technological advancement, and cyborg imagery in particular, has been such a tough pill for many feminists to swallow—even those partial to irony, multiplicity, and the dissolution of binaries—is the overtly sexual way that cyborgs are often depicted. "Collapsing the boundary between what is human and what is technological is often represented as a sexual act in popular culture" (37) writes Claudia Springer, and it is these depictions of hypersexualized bodies that reaffirm both gender difference and objectified womanhood, as opposed to dissolving boundaries between human and machine (and thus men and women) in an ideologically productive way. Springer goes on to elaborate further on the pervasiveness of sexualized technology:

> Sexual images of technology are by no means new: modernist texts in the early twentieth century frequently eroticized technology … Sexual metaphor in the description of locomotives, automobiles, pistons, and turbines; machine cults and the Futurist movement, *Man with a Movie Camera*, and *Scorpio Rising*—these are some of the ways technophiliacs have expressed their passion for technology. For technophiliacs, technology provides an erotic thrill-control over massive power, which can itself be used to control others … the physical manifestations

of these machines—size, heft, shape, motions that thrust, pause and press

again—represent human sexual responses on a grand scale. (Springer 35-6)

Cyborgs are of course no exception to the sexualization that Springer mentions, but rather than their eroticism remaining in the realm of the metaphorical, as humanoid beings, their sexuality is cast in human terms, indeed, human terms that usually do very little to challenge notions of either the hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine body. Mary Ann Doane elaborates further on how technology usually reasserts rather than challenges conventional notions of gendered embodiment: "although it is certainly true that in the case of some science fiction—particularly feminist authors—technology makes possible the destabilization of sexual identity as a category, there has also been a curious but fairly insistent history of representations of technology which work to fortify—sometimes desperately—conventional understandings of the feminine" (qtd. in Janes 93). We need not look any further than the sexy cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004) or the Terminatrixes from the 2003 reboot of the *Terminator* franchise to understand what Doane is referring to. While it is inevitable that the cyborg, who is always already a transgressor, will sometimes be coded as a sexual figure, luckily enough, such depictions have not convinced all writers that this is the only way for cyborgs and other modified humans to function. At the same time, however, given the illicit fusions of human and Other that Cyborgs both symbolize and rely upon, sex can never be entirely absent from stories about cyborgs.

As the foremost scholar on how science and technology can be used to challenge patriarchy, racism, and imperialism, Donna Haraway writes that "taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skillful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all of our parts" (Manifesto 39). Judy Wajcman similarly asks us to "consider the cultural implications of the

destabilization of our entrenched Enlightenment distinctions between human, animal and machine" (88). Rounding out this call to reformulate rather than reject technology and the many effects it can have on embodiment is Patricia Melzer, who writes that:

> the most powerful narrative strategy has been the creation of alternative sciences, utopian technologies that do not dominate or exploit, but enrich and empower. Alternative sciences created by feminist writers are based on a utopian paradigm in that they promote women's participation in science as subjects not objects, revised definitions and discourse of science, inclusion in science of women's issues, treatment of science as an origin story that has been feminized, a conception of humans' relation to nature as partnership not domination, and an ideal of science as subjective, relational, holistic, and complex. (20)

In the feminist revisions of science alluded to by Haraway, Wacjman, and Melzer, no figure has been more widely used, both theoretically and artistically, than the cyborg.

In 1985 Donna Haraway wrote in her now hugely influential manifesto that "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (39). According to Haraway, cyborgs are the ideal vehicle through which to interrogate the harmful binaries between science and nature, rationality and irrationality, man and woman, and human and machine, largely because they unabashedly incorporate elements from both sides of nearly any dualism, thus rendering such binary systems of classification unhelpful, even obsolete. One of the reasons cyborgs are able to transcend diametric ways of knowing is that their allegiances are forever shifting, their stake in human salvation almost nil, and their default subject position is an ironic one. "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically," Harraway explains, "about the tension of holding incompatible things together because all are necessary and true" (Manifesto 7). It is this

playful irreverence, Haraway asserts, that allows cyborgs to redefine ontological and embodied difference.

Haraway's cyborgs are able to privilege irony largely because they take little stock in the things that most humans feel make them human, namely, an origin story, a coherent sense of self, and an accompanying history. "The cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense," Haraway explains, because "an origin story in the 'Western,' humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss" (Manifesto 9). The cyborg, according to Haraway, can serve as a tool for dismantling faulty notions about difference precisely because it is a hodgepodge of influences, ideologies, and forms of embodiment. This means that the cyborg is well suited to critique any mode of thinking or being that takes its "naturalness" for granted. Haraway believes that having stemmed from technoscience, with all its accompanying arrogance about the desirability of the cybernetic body over the fleshy one, does not mean that the cyborg is doomed to repeat these attitudes, but rather will serve as a figure "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (Manifesto 9). Like Earthseed members in the *Parable* novels, who wish to colonize space without recreating the violent hierarchies that originally drove them to the edges of society, Haraway believes that the cyborg's early situating within institutions of patriarchal techno-science puts the cyborg in a unique position to dismantle ideological hierarchies rooted in limiting dichotomies of knowledge, power, and embodiment.

Cyborgs are such effective tools in the dissolution of dichotomous being because of all the ways they manage to be messy. This messiness occurs through language, embodiment, allegiances, and origins. It exists in how cyborgs communicate, love, and understand themselves and others. Above all, this messiness is celebratory; it foregrounds the idea that complicated ways of being in the world cannot be described easily. Haraway writes that: "Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that

translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg

politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and

machine" (Manifesto 34). Part of what allows the cyborg to revel in confusion and multiplicity is

its status as neither entirely human nor entirely machine. It is this fusion that allows us to begin to

distinguish the vast and various webs that joyfully exist between humans, nature, and machines

and those forms of technology that merely reproduce the types of tired gendered representations

that Ann Balsamo and others are wary of.

Balsamo writes, correctly, that, "our popular/hegemonic cultural logic doesn't easily

allow for blurred distinctions. It polarizes cyborg identity into just or evil, male or female, human

or machine, victim or other" (*A Reader* 156). In light of this widespread tendency to read cyborgs

dualistically, Butler's cyborgs, whose survival depends upon gender, racial, and species hybridity,

reinvest cyborgs with some of their subversive potential. Butler's cyborgs, despite not being

entirely human, do not entirely dispense with those traits often associated with humanity:

empathy, jealousy, love, eroticism, and choice. They transform humanity, certainly, but in so

doing they strengthen it rather than disdaining or transcending it. As we will see with both

Butler's cyborgs and aliens, what begins as the self-interested survival of a few predisposed

individuals quickly expands into long-term survival and enhancement of the species. As we will

also see, this survival is only made possible through the aggressive acquisition of hybridity and

the acceptance of reproductive practices that render completely obsolete the history of predictably

gendered and overly sexualized cyborgs.

Despite Butler's clear assertions that hybridizing humanity might be the only way to save

it and Haraway's reassurances that such alliances are exciting rather than detrimental, critics such

as Ben-Tov have difficulty relinquishing the idea that any mediation of the human body is

automatically rooted in disdain for said body. "Haraway has tried to turn technology's mythic

project into feminism's mythic problem," writes Ben-Tov. "Unfortunately, her science fiction story cannot demolish the ideology on which it's built. That ideology is dualistic, only two ways about it. You cannot have a technological heterocosm without solid barriers between the man-made world and nature, masculine and feminine, mind and body, subject and object, and the rest of the familiar lineup" (144). While Ben-Tov is certainly correct that dualities remain stubbornly difficult to transcend, even in worlds like Butler's where multiple identities and modes of embodiment are constantly merging, her fears about how technology compromises humanity stem largely from the unstated assumption that humanity is worth preserving in its unmediated form, and that any alteration would be disastrous rather than beneficial. While the conviction that humanity is both singular and worth preserving in its present form is a compassionate one, it does contain embedded within it a fear of difference that many science fiction writers, Butler included, write against. That humanity might be a niche species, unable to adapt to changing environments without undergoing massive physiological and psychological changes themselves, is an idea that Butler is not afraid to explore.

For what it's worth, Ben-Tov and other theorists like her seem quite content in their assumption that the human body, and particularly the female body, as it exists in the mythic thing they call nature, is superior to anything technoscience could possibly produce. "Although Haraway encourages us to regard our connection to machines as a more intense aspect of embodiment, there's no getting around the disembodiment that technological mediation of consciousness always requires," Ben-Tov asserts. "Bodies are crippled or cheerfully ignored, while machines redefine consciousness away from mundane bodily life, toward the flesh's complete replacement" (147). While I am sympathetic to Ben-Tov's fears about the technologically altered body usurping and replacing the fleshy one, ultimately her vision is too narrow, her assumptions about difference under-examined, and her ideas about the machine's

dualistic separation from the human underdeveloped. In search of a more expansive vision, it is worth now turning to Butler's cyborg bodies and examining how they actually do manage to expand human possibility by embracing difference in its many forms and rethinking the boundaries that exist between humanity and Otherness. As with Butler's other works, we will also see how the cyborg body is used to reevaluate and complicate relationships of power and privilege those who are most receptive to both biological and psychological change.

Sick Cyborgs: Octavia Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night"

In Butler's "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987) we are presented with bodies that have been altered, through medical technology, by Duryea-Gode disease (DGD). DGD is caused by a drug called Hedeon, which Butler describes as "the magic bullet, the cure for a large percentage of the world's cancer and a number of serious viral diseases … If one of your parents was treated with Hedeon," Butler goes on to explain, "and you were conceived after the treatments, you had DGD. If you had kids, you passed it on to them" (46). As we quickly learn, people affected by DGD engage in involuntary and seemingly unmotivated acts of self-mutilation coupled with random acts of violence against others. Although the symptoms of DGD can remain dormant for nearly the entire lifetime of the carrier, and "not everyone [is] equally affected" (46), Butler writes that "they all mutilated themselves to some degree if they could. And they all drifted—went off into a world of their own and stopped responding to their surroundings" (46). Using DGD as a vehicle, Butler has created hybrid subjects who do not respect the boundaries of self and other and have little regard for the worth of the unscarred human body or the impenetrability of the mind.

Not unlike Dana's time travel, DGDs do not respect or adhere to the dictates of time. Lynn, the story's protagonist, notes that the death of her parents, both DGDs themselves, came about so suddenly that the possibility of shielding herself from a violent attack would have been nonexistent, had she been home at the time. Lynn explains:

> It was sudden … My father had killed my mother, then killed himself … I didn't find out until later exactly what had happened. I wish I'd never found out. Dad had killed Mom, then skinned her completely. At least that's how I hope it happened. I mean I hope he killed her first. He broke some of her ribs, damaged her heart. Digging. Then he began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died. (35)

Similar scenes of violence exist throughout the story, which begins with Lynn being forced by her parents to visit a DGD ward at the age of fifteen as punishment for "getting careless" (35) with her diet. "I won't describe the ward," Lynn tells the reader, "It's enough to say that when they brought me home, I cut my wrists" (35). Suicide attempts, we later learn, are not uncommon among DGDs, so frightening is the loss of bodily control that they will one day experience. Although we don't initially receive specific details about what sparks Lynn's teenage suicide attempt, later on in the story, Lynn elaborates on precisely why she finds DGD so horrifying: "Scars didn't bother me much. Disability didn't bother me. It was the act of self-mutilation that scared me. It was someone attacking her own arm as though it were a wild animal. It was someone who had torn at himself and been restrained or drugged off and on for so long that he barely had a recognizable human feature left, but he was still trying with what he did have to dig into his own flesh" (50). What frightens Lynn is the loss of self-recognition, the lack of coherence, of unity, of boundaries. DGD takes aim at the very things that define healthy human subjectivity.

The fact that DGDs are no longer able to recognize their bodies as part of themselves, nor are they able to see themselves as entirely human, equips them with a type of cyborg consciousness. As in Haraway's model, origins are cloudy, allegiances are fuzzy, and embodiment is unreliable, and, despite being clearly diseased bodies, it is this tenuous identity that puts them in a unique position to lead their society into a post-human age. First off, DGDs must learn to live with profound difference largely because their disease forces them to view their own bodies as Other. This struggle to accept foreignness from within is not an easy one, as Butler illustrates in one of many scenes that feature a DGD's self-mutilation as it is witnessed by Lynn: "She bit her own arm and … swallowed the flesh she'd bitten away … she tore at the wound she'd made with the nails of her other hand … Digging. They try so hard, fight so hard to get out" (53). Here, Butler is highlighting the human need to identify, isolate, and attempt to eliminate Otherness. Of course, for a DGD, this inclination results in self-annihilation. DGDs, more so than anyone else, have to learn to cope with, even embrace perceived Otherness; otherwise, they will perish.

As already discussed in my chapter on *Clay's Ark*, disease is a fruitful metaphor for difference, often because it leads to social alienation and political disempowerment, which then equips the dispossessed to comment upon and alter society. Lynn talks about how her father's sudden murder of her mother is the sort of act that leads to DGDs remaining marginal: "it was an especially bad example of the kind of thing that makes people afraid of us. It gets some of us into trouble for picking at a pimple or even for daydreaming. It has inspired restrictive laws, created problems with jobs, housing, schools" (36). While DGDs are not allowed full human status because of their illness, they are also, as Lynn points out, singularly gifted scientists. This dynamic of compromised humans gaining something in return for the risks they take should be familiar to us by now. We see Keira gaining strength from the Clay Ark invasion of her body,

Lauren gaining access to followers who share her goal of space exploration when she is willing to give up familial ties and beloved conventions, and Dana gaining an appreciation for embodied knowledge when she gives up, among other things, her arm. Butler demands freely chosen sacrifice from her heroines, but she also rewards them for it, suggesting that she is realistic about how selfless and benevolent people, especially when under duress, are able to be.

Following Butler's tendency of pairing sacrifice with reward, something as yet unidentified in DGD brain chemistry affords those afflicted with the disease increased focus, creativity, and problem-solving skills. DGDs are thus in an ideal position to expand human knowledge and potential, but only at tremendous risk and in the larger process of altering humanity as it is known. In any case, Butler has clearly, in her creation of DGDs, presented readers with a class of cyborg bodies that hold, simultaneously, a heinously violent apocalyptic possibility and the potential for unprecedented human betterment. Progress is not without risk, for Butler, and destruction is not without its silver lining.

Although Lynn initially views her illness as something wholly negative, as a weakness that victimizes her as opposed to equipping her with a unique sensibility, her assumptions are challenged when she and her fiancé, Alan, (another DGD whom she has fallen in love with while at college), travel to Dilg, an alternative DGD treatment facility where DGDs, in the director Beatrice's words, "work instead of tearing at themselves or staring into space" (48). "'Here we can help them channel their energies," Beatrice explains further. "They can create something beautiful'" (49). As Lynn and Alan walk through Dilg and see room after room of DGDs sculpting, painting, welding, conducting scientific experiments, writing, and composing music, Lynn begins to understand how DGDs, herself included, might one day transform society. What's more, she slowly begins to accept that it is because of their disease that DGDs are well situated to

usher in a new era of embodiment, and new era of progress, and a new era of social relations in which DGDs are not demonized because of their Otherness.

Despite Lynn's growing appreciation for the difference that lurks within DGDs, herself included, she initially finds it hard to part with her discomfort regarding the ways DGDs have been treated for the entirety of their existence. As a result, she responds to nearly everything Beatrice says about the inherent nature of DGDs defensively. "'No ordinary person can concentrate on work the way our people can,'" Beatrice tells Lynn.

"'What are you saying?'" Lynn asks, "'That the bigots are right? That we have some special gift?'"

'Yes,'" Beatrice replies, "'It's hardly a bad characteristic, is it?'

"'It's what people say whenever one of us does well at something,'" Lynn protests, "'It's their way of denying us credit for our work.'

'Yes,'" Lynn admits, "'but people occasionally come to the right conclusions for the wrong reasons'" (55). In order for DGDs to be afforded the opportunity to beneficially transform human existence, Lynn learns, it's not a matter of changing them, of finding a cure, but rather a matter of changing the social discourse surrounding DGDs, of recognizing their talents, of celebrating their cyborg identities, so that they can be given space to succeed rather than continue to be criminalized. As it turns out, the very diseased mental processes that make it impossible for DGDs to distinguish between self and other, to clearly delineate the boundaries of their own minds and bodies, also equip them with the abilities to uncover as yet unconceived of scientific, medical, and technological discoveries. DGDs are, because of their cyborg identities, agents of Blochian utopian dreaming. Or they will be, the implication is, once society outgrows its fear.

As is the case with all of Butler's cyborgs, mere social acceptance is not the end goal. The transformation of society by cyborgs is both threatening and hugely beneficial to humans,

and the challenge comes in making humans understand that they are better off with cyborg figures existing among them, even if this eventually leads to the transformation of humanity. As we've seen previously, Butler's messianic figures, the ones who must convince their societies that hybridity is preferable to homogeneity, that change is preferable to stagnation, tend to be young black women of limited means, even more limited power, and with some sort of bodily or mental dysfunction, be it leukemia, hyperempathy, or DGD. Butler implies that the message of social and biological transformation might be easier to bear when coming from someone who has often been associated with victimhood (although Keria, Lauren, and Lynn meet plenty of opposition despite their subject positions), and also that such figures are likely to be more receptive to cyborg identity themselves.

Lynn learns that she is one of these messianic figures as she and Alan tour Dilg with Beatrice. As the female children of two DGD parents, Lynn and Beatrice both produce a chemical that calms other DGDs and helps them focus. Beatrice explains: "'it's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked … We are very rare commodities, you and I'" (61). Lynn learns that she has the power to serve as a bridge between DGDs and the rest of humanity largely because she can keep DGDs calm and focused on their work. Over the course of the story, Lynn accepts this responsibility, but discovers, as nearly all of Butler's heroines do, that power can be isolating, and that having it often incurs hostility from all parties involved.

At first Lynn balks at the idea that she is somehow rare or special. Of particular distaste to her is that her exceptional abilities are rooted deeply in her body. Alan, who seems to understand the root of Lynn's discomfort, asks Beatrice why the pheromone has not been synthesized, no doubt thinking that Lynn would be pacified if the ability to calm other DGDs wasn't so heavily linked to her biology. In response to Alan's question, Beatrice confirms that there "have been people trying to synthesize it since [she] proved what [she] could do with it,'"

(62) but no attempts have yet proved successful. In Butler's story, power is inextricably linked to the female cyborg body. Despite Lynn's initial aversion to the scent she produces, when probed further, she is forced to admit that she is the one who keeps the household of DGDs she lives with peaceful and orderly (39-40). "'You put them at ease,'" Beatrice confirms. "'You're there. You … well, you leave your scent around the house. You speak to them individually. Without knowing why, they no doubt find that very comforting'" (63).

If Lynn is not completely thrilled with the new knowledge about her body's power to influence others, it is nothing compared to Alan's reaction. When Alan learns of Lynn's invisible and previously unknown influence over him, he immediately refers to himself as a "drone" (64) and a puppet (65), and tells Lynn that he "won't be controlled … by a goddamn smell'" (65). Although disheartening to Lynn, Alan's anger is consistent with the type of resistance that messianic cyborg characters like Lynn encounter in Butler's fiction, particularly from men who have more at stake in the status quo. Not only will Lynn encounter derision from the non-DGD community when she starts to advocate for DGDs' increased involvement in society, she also faces scorn from other DGDs who feel that her presence strips them of the little agency, the little power they had to begin with.

As we will see in other works by Butler, Lynn's capability and success as a cyborg rests largely on her ability to nurture, and one of the ways she does this is by creating a social framework where choice matters. Rather than depending on strength or force, Lynn's power is rooted in her ability to make both DGDs and non-DGDs feel respected, heard, and powerful. It is only when they feel valued, Lynn figures, that they will be receptive to the changes she embodies and proposes: DGDs will become less self-destructive and more invested in humanity, and non-DGDs will accept that by allowing DGDs access to the benefits and privileges of full citizenship, human knowledge will advance. It is not coincidental that as DGDs gain social acceptance and

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are able, through Lynn's help, to channel their self-destructive impulses towards productive work, their inability to distinguish their own mental and physical borders starts to diminish. It's not that they become less cyborg in nature, but merely less destructively so. Their difference benefits them as opposed to harming or annihilating them. Once more we see Butler balancing risk and reward without discarding either. What's more, the above balance is rooted in choice on each DGD's part, choice that, while influenced by the biological benefits of Lynn's presence, is not dictated by it.

We see Lynn coming to terms with the role that choice will play in the society she is helping create when she questions Beatrice about Alan's free will while Alan isn't listening. "'He never really had a chance, did he?'" she asks Beatrice, referring to Alan's almost immediate attraction to her.

"'That's up to you,'" Beatrice replies. "'You can keep him or drive him away. I assure you, you can drive him away,'

'How?'" Lynn asks

"'By imagining that he doesn't have a chance,'" Beatrice says (68). Although she is initially confused by Beatrice's dictates, Lynn eventually realizes that she can treat Alan like the "drone" or the "puppet" he fears becoming, or she can work with him in ways that respect his humanity. Lynn's decision to give Alan the space to cultivate choice stands in direct contrast to a conversation that occurs between them early in their relationship where Alan faults any DGD who would choose to reproduce. "'They should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us,'" he declares. "'The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation … but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats'" (42). Although Lynn does not want children, she balks at Alan's callous language and tells him,

"'I don't want kids, but I don't want someone else telling me I can't have any'" (42).

Alan's inability to understand Lynn's viewpoint and his belief that change comes through dominance and coercion illustrates why Lynn and not Alan is given the privileged position leading humanity through its transition. Lynn has the capability of channeling her marginality into choice, respect, and nurturance rather than falling back on kneejerk reactions that restrict and victimize. Because of Lynn's disease, she has experienced social marginalization and is thus in an ideal position to both nurture other diseased minds and bodies and accept difference in its many forms. What's more, as a woman, Lynn understands the dangers inherent in men deciding what women can and cannot do with their bodies and thus resists Alan's ultimatums abstractly if not individually. Lastly, by making Lynn and her species-saving pheromone the product of two DGDs following their "mindless urges," Butler points to the unpredictability of cyborg embodiment and subjectivity, showing that in utopian dreaming, outcomes are too uncertain, too untraceable, too unilineal to adhere to or benefit from straightforward mandates. Rather, choice, even heavily influenced choice, with all its lack of predictability and uncertain outcomes, is a non-negotiable aspect of Butler's cyborg identity, as we will see in another cyborg figure, the vampire.

History Bites: Octavia Butler's Vampires

Scholarship on vampires is legion, and, like a rapidly multiplying army of the undead, the last few decades have been a particularly prolific time for analyses of the roles vampires play in film, literature, and popular culture. Part of this is due to the vampire's ability to act as a sort of symbolic chameleon, to easily represent myriad types of fear, anxiety, and difference. The vampiric body has, for more than a century, featured as a sort of dumping ground that can absorb

whatever otherness is foisted upon it, what Miriam Jones terms 'a floating category' that encompasses a broad spectrum of all things that defy normative constructions" (416-7). As critics such as Judith Halberstam have pointed out, the vampire has been able to successfully symbolize the immigrant, the aristocrat, the Jew, the foreigner, the syphilitic, the insane, the homosexual, the dandy, the sexual deviant, the capitalist, the psychoanalyst, the psychoanalyzed, the racial other, the pervert, the lesbian, the pedophile, the decadent, and—late in the twentieth century—the carrier of HIV/AIDS.

The vampire is the ultimate hybrid. It exists somewhere between the human and the supernatural, the living and the dead. It has absolutely no respect for the physical or mental sovereignty of others, and it certainly doesn't bother distinguishing between love, sex, power, and violence. Its appetites hold little regard for markers of identity: it feeds regardless of the race, gender, age, ability, sexuality, or health of its victim. Although vampiric codes of morality differ greatly from text to text, its alliances are almost always strategic and ever-shifting. Given these traits, it is surprising that the vampire has not been classified as a cyborg more often than it has been. Like Haraway's figure, vampires revel in pollution and partiality. Their origins are often messy, and they are paradoxical creatures given their often passionate attachments to the very beings they must attack, beings that they are both completely dependent upon and infinitely more powerful than.

As receptacles for society's fears and anxieties, both vampires and cyborgs are often credited with being able to reflect society's repressed flaws back to it. Hence, both figures have been invested with subversive power in the past thirty years or so and are often depicted as entities that are able to "see truth" and question the morals of those who label then as other. Ingrid Thaler notes this phenomenon as it pertains to vampires when she asserts that "the vampire has been reclaimed as a trope that presents a dramatic change in cultural attitudes toward

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marginalized groups, primarily in terms of sexuality and gender" (53). Veronica Hollinger echoes this when she notes that the vampire "poses a real threat in any cultural moment and invests heavily in assumptions about stable reality, essential humanity, and clear-cut ideologies of good and evil" (149). The vampire has, as these critics show, become a sort of outlaw antihero, and the effect of this shift, as Ingrid Thaler notes, is "a change from narrative modes of alterity to modes of identification that offer introspection and tend to portray vampires who are sympathetic and attractive to the reader" (53). This is certainly the case with Butler's vampiric protagonist, Shori, a cyborg figure who is, once again, a young (by vampiric standards) black woman who is targeted by others because of her weakness, her liminality, and her marginalization from both vampiric and human worlds. It is this targeting that, characteristically in Butler's work, ends up cultivating her strength.

The opening pages of *Fledgling* (2005) portray Shori waking up from a coma near the smoldering wreckage of her newly murdered family's home. Although Shori suffers from amnesia, the reader eventually learns that Shori's family had been conducting genetic engineering experiments (of which Shori is an outcome) to darken vampiric skin, making it less susceptible to sunlight. Shori, we learn, is a hybrid not just because she is a vampire, but also because she is the first of her kind: a black vampire who does not need to sleep through the day and who has higher tolerance for sunlight. Like Haraway's classic cyborg, Shori's alterations stem from technological and biological sciences, and her abilities clearly threaten some members of the vampiric community, namely the extremely old and powerful ones who have a stake in things remaining as they have always been.

As previously noted, Butler's leaders are commonly "chosen" not only because of their hybrid status but also because of their lack of conventional power. Part of what makes them good leaders, it is implied, is not only their nuanced understanding of the complexities of power but

also their begrudging acceptance of said power. Shori's amnesia initially prevents her from remembering that she is a vampire. Eventually, the pull of blood is too strong for her to resist, and, by following her instincts, she comes to realize what she is, but not before the role of vampire is stripped of its predatory power. Shori assumes no dominance over Wright, the human she first feeds upon after waking from her coma. In fact, as her rescuer, and as an adult white man, Wright holds, in some ways at least, more social power than Shori, who appears to be a small black child around eleven years old despite the fact that she is actually a good deal older. Characteristically, neither Shori nor Wright's power is totalizing, and as we will see shortly, their alliance will transform both of them into something wholly Other than that which they were before coming into each other's presence.

Although she is not the only author to do this, one of the significant ways that Butler rewrites the vampire in *Fledgling* is by re-imagining the exchange between vampire and victim as something that benefits both parties. Marie-Louis Loeffler refers to such creatures as "'maternal vampire[s]' … who hold a substantial amount of power, and emphasize mutual exchange and maternal nurturance" (150). The presence of vampires that do not kill and view the exchange of blood as mutually beneficial transforms the vampire narrative from an exchange between victim and prey to one in which vampirism is portrayed, not "as an 'unnatural' posthuman experience" but as an opportunity to "live through connection with life, not death'" (Thaler 55). Given that Shori begins her narrative journey as prey, herself, shows Butler's deliberate attempt to complicate the power that exists between victim and victimizer.

In her analysis of *Fledgling*, Mildred Mickle notes other ways Butler has transformed the classic vampire narrative:

> Butler moves away from vampires being viewed as "interestingly sexy" or as
> demons and murderers … By taking the "supernatural" element away and giving

her vampires a name; a matriarchal culture; a language; a history; a religion …

and a societal structure with a moral code and rule of law, Butler, in conversation

with recent popular vampire literature, elevates the vampire from demon to a

different species of human, who share goals similar to humans—to find love,

raise and provide for their families, and be productive citizens. (70-1)

Certainly Mickle is right that Butler's vampires, or Ina as she names them, prioritize creation over

destruction. They also, like Lynn in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," engage

themes of free will, cyborg/human collaboration, and nurturance/dependence. The Ina cannot live

without several human symbionts, people who live in close proximity to them in what one Ina

explains as "about the closest thing I've seen to a workable group marriage" (127). Ina derive

emotional support and blood from their symbionts, who then become stronger and healthier and

live longer as a result of their exposure to vampire venom. What's more, the taking of blood is

extremely pleasurable for both the human and Ina involved. But, as is the case with all of Butler's

exchanges, such benefits are always countered with costs. As one Ina explains to Shori, "we

addict them to a substance in our saliva—in our venom—that floods our mouths when we feed.

I've heard it called a powerful hypnotic drug. It makes them highly suggestible and deeply

attached to the source of the substance. They come to need it" (73). The longer and healthier lives

that symbionts live, lives in which they are supported emotionally and financially by their Ina and

their fellow symbionts, come at the cost of a chemical dependency so severe, they could die if

their Ina refused to feed them.

Butler balances this situation by showing how the Ina are similarly dependent upon their

symbionts. "We need our symbionts more than most of them know," an Ina elder explains to

Shori. "We need not only their blood, but physical contact with them and emotional reassurance

from them. Companionship. I've never known even one of us to survive without symbionts. We

should be able to do it—survive through casual hunting. But the truth is that that only works for short periods. Then we sicken. We either weave ourselves a family of symbionts, or we die" (270). Despite the fact that Shori is a vampire, a figure conventionally depicted as a powerful loner, she must incorporate Otherness into her life long term in order to survive. The fact that she is on the racial vanguard of Ina society is not enough to save her—she still needs her human symbionts.

Despite the fact that they are mutually beneficial, human/Ina relationships in *Fledgling* are fraught with issues of coercion, consent, and compromise, illustrating that interactions with difference, while entirely necessary in the worlds Butler creates, are seldom easy. Once symbionts are "addicted" to their Ina, the partnerships will last for the duration of one of their lives, making some human characters feel, as Alan did in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," like mere puppets or pawns. "They take over our lives," Brook, one of Shori's symbionts, explains to Wright. "They don't even think about it, they just do it as though it were their right. And we let them because they give us so much satisfaction" (161). As we have seen, Butler always rewards her characters who sacrifice part of themselves to hybridity, but in *Fledgling,* as in *Clay's Ark,* the reward is rooted not just in physical strength and longevity but also in sexual pleasure. This renders more complicated questions of choice. While Butler does not explicitly say that humans are hardwired for pleasure and that the presence of sexual reward compromises choice to the point of making it all but obsolete, Butler does leave ambiguous the extent to which sexual pleasure informs choice. Rather, the satisfying of libido is one force of influence that impacts choice, as is chemical dependency, biological transformation, social position, and individual subjectivity. While all these factors inform choice, Butler tends to avoid commenting on ratios of impact.

Despite the rather murky mechanics of choice, Butler works hard to introduce it into the relationships between humans and Ina. Just as a large portion of Lynn's success relied upon her ability to respect and nurture the presence of choice other DGDs, so does Shori's power come from the trust of those she leads, and she comes to understand very quickly that part of being a successful leader is allowing her "children" to exercise agency. Shori encourages her symbionts to choose whether or not they want to become addicted to her venom before the transformation is complete. "'I think you can still walk away from me, Wright, if you want to,'" Shori tells him after she has fed from him only a few times. "If you do it now, you can still go'" (48). In response to Shori's offer, Wright feels a mixture of anger, relief, and overwhelming confusion, all of which he hurls at Shori, who explains to him that she "think[s] it would be wrong for [her] to keep [him] with [her] against [his] will'" (48). Like Lynn, Shori exerts her power through compromise rather than through coercion or dominance. She also creates space for choice and resistance, which assures Wright and the other symbionts that they retain aspects of humanity even as they are undergoing biological and psychological changes. They maintain choice, fraught and compromised though it may be.

Ina/symbiont power dynamics are further muddied by the economic relations between the two species. While the Ina, being essentially immortal, have had time to accumulate substantial wealth, this wealth is largely used to fund the education, art, or other pursuits of the symbionts, who then reinvest their earnings (if there are any—the fulfillment of curiosity and the happiness that comes from experimentation are larger priorities for the symbionts than material gain) back into their families and communities. Within an ideal Ina/Symbiont family, the material wealth of the Ina is neither used to dominate symbionts nor is it used to lure them into a life they do no genuinely want. Rather, Ina wealth allows symbionts to explore their interests, develop myriad skills, and feel safe doing so since their material needs are covered. The ability to develop their

inner and outer lives in nearly any way they see fit is an unspoken benefit of symbiont life, largely in recognition of the sacrifices symbionts have made by extracting themselves from human society. Shori, like Butler's other cyborgs, rules through establishing negotiated and negotiable frameworks rather than through strength or duplicity, and this applies to economic power as much as it applies to any other type of power.

"Treat your people well, Shori," an Ina elder tells her. "Let them see that you trust them and let them solve their own problems, make their own decisions. Do that and they will willingly commit their lives to you. Bully them, control them out of fear or malice or just for your own convenience, and after a while, you'll have to spend all your time thinking for them, controlling them, and stifling their resentment" (73). Although part of Shori's treatment of her symbionts is motivated by self-interest, a much larger part is rooted in her belief that, since the inter-connectedness of humans and cyborgs is inevitable, treating other species ethically is the best way to ensure lasting survival for all involved. Both human and cyborg must not merely accept the other's difference but incorporate it as fully as possible into their own lives, not only psychologically and emotionally, but bodily as well.

"'You need to touch us,'" Brook, one of Shori's symbionts, tells her when Shori has withheld her affection for too long, not realizing that she is not merely punishing herself when she does this. "We need to be touched. It pleases us just as it pleases you. We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That's the way an Ina-and-symbiont household works" (177). In *Fledgling*, Butler not only rewrites the script between victim and victimizer that is common in vampire fiction, but she creates situations that require each party to give something tremendous of themselves. Mutuality, of course, comes with many challenges, and, if it is going to function optimally, it must be engaged in cautiously and reflectively. It is through this reflection, more than in the revised mechanics of bloodletting, that Butler breathes new life into the vampire trope.

She has created a cyborg who is not merely an outsider, a receptacle of the anxieties of the society in which it dwells, but a figure who makes available new ways of conceiving interdependence. As a young black girl who has lost her family and been targeted by bigots, Shori's relationship to power is unorthodox at best. This equips her to lead her symbionts in a life that privileges independently (although circumscribed) chosen interdependence.

Despite the fact that cyborgs don't traditionally have or behave like mothers, Butler's cyborgs gain their power through their ability to soothe and to nurture. This behavior requires compromise and negotiation on their parts and on the parts of those they love. We see this with Lynn, who will serve as a bridge to both DGDs and non-DGDs, and we see this with Shori, who, despite her age and size, mothers her symbionts, not in a paternalistic way that stifles them, but in a way that guides and strengthens them and pushes them to reimagine the limits and potential of familial structure. We will now turn to a third maternal Butlerian cyborg, Anyanwu.

A Change for the Better: Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*

Shape shifting, whether it be in the form of a single body transforming into different entities or a single consciousness inhabiting multiple bodies consecutively, has long been a convention of science fiction, fantasy, and Gothic literature. As another form of cyborg, the shape shifter, engages questions about the stability of the body, the formation of consciousness, and the coherence of subjecthood. Also, like other cyborgs, stories about shape shifters engage issues of choice and autonomy. Just as some feminist theorists have distinguished between cyborgs that expand the possibilities of humanity and those that limit it, Butler has created two competing types of shapeshifting cyborgs in her novel, *Wild Seed* (2001). Anyanwu, an African mystic known for her reproductive prodigiousness, changes form in order to protect herself or her

children, and Doro, a tyrannical demon, jumps from body to body, killing each host as he does. Butler has essentially mirrored the beneficial and malevolent cyborgs theorized by Haraway and others through the characterizations of Anyanwu and Doro. Whereas Anyanwu draws her shapeshifting abilities from a complex understanding of Otherness (once she inhabits a new form, she understands that being on not just a psychological but a genetic level as well), Doro uses his shapeshifting abilities to attempt to engineer a race of supernatural beings whom he can lead and command.

In the opening pages of *Wild Seed*, Butler introduces us to Anyanwu, a woman living in fifteenth century Africa who has supernatural abilities, among them advanced longevity, healing prowess, and the ability to change her shape. We witness her first interaction with Doro, a sort of non-corporeal vampire who exists by killing his victims, wearing their bodies, and then discarding those bodies when it comes time to inhabit a new victim. Doro, who appears to be the sole member of whatever species he is, has established breeding colonies of people who possess supernatural abilities with the hopes that they will one day produce a companion for him. We witness Doro's "capturing" of Anyanwu, his transportation of her to north America, and his insistence that she marry Isaac, a man whose abilities, he thinks, when paired with Anyanwu's, will produce promising offspring.

Although he certainly functions as a slave owner (Doro systematically commits violence against the inhabitants of his colonies and regularly transports people to different colonies if he thinks it would be genetically advantageous for them to reproduce with someone there), we also see him as the sort of arrogant cyborg that Haraway warns against. Doro holds humanity in contempt, sees people as little more than breeding stock or convenient vessels for his own existence, and puts complete confidence in his advanced (for the time) scientific knowledge. Anyanwu, on the other hand, repeatedly attempts to convince Doro that human life has value and

that embodiment is a privilege not to be treated cavalierly. Sandra Govan notices this determination and resilience in Anyanwu when she writes that, "what Anyanwu resists with all her might is what she perceives as dehumanization … She insists upon her humanity" (*Afterword* 304), as well as the humanity of others. Doro, on the other hand, forces his hand-picked humans to conform to his will under threat of death. What's more, the fact that Doro is telepathic and can read his slaves' thoughts makes resistance on their part nearly impossible.

Despite the control that Doro holds over Anyanwu and the other people he enslaves, Anyanwu's ability to change her form is something that Doro cannot control or prevent and therefore something that allows her to maintain at least some of her autonomy. As is regularly the case with Butler's brand of cyborgs, Anyanwu's lack of allegiance to any particular identity, her willingness to transgress boundaries of being, are what empower her. The first time we see Anyanwu transform, it is on the ship from Africa to North America. Understandably, she finds the quarters cramped and unpleasant, and, after eating a fish, she is able to transform. "The flesh of the fish told her all she needed to know to take its shape and live as it did," Butler writes. "Within each bite the creature told her its story clearly thousands of times" (86). When Doro questions Anyanwu about how her transformations occur, Anyanwu describes the fish sending her "messages as clear and fine as those in your books" (87). Tellingly, Anyanwu's shapeshifting is posed as something that must be "translated" by Doro through a comparison to his books. Whereas Doro must guess how the bodies of different people will combine genetically, Anyanwu has, through mere physical contact, a guide of that body that is so intricate she can recreate it in her own body. Her eventual triumph over Doro is tied completely to her xenophilia, her ability to fully incorporate Otherness into herself biologically.

Throughout the course of *Wild Seed* Anyanwu transforms into not only a fish but an eagle and a leopard. Her transformations are all tied to her desire to protect herself and the ones she

loves from Doro. While the ability to shapeshift does not change the fact that Doro has claimed her as his property, it does allow her to assert her humanity in the face of his dehumanization. The extent to which her transformations grant her the power to temporarily escape Doro's tyranny become clearer to her once she realizes that, in animal form, Doro cannot access her thoughts or locate her physically, things he is able to do with all of his "children" when they are in human form. "Even when he could see her," Butler explains,

> his mind, his tracking sense, told him she was not there. But [after she
>
> transforms] It was as though she had died, as though he confronted a true
>
> animal—a creature beyond his reach. And if he could not reach her, he could not
>
> take her body while she was in animal form. In her human shape, she was as
>
> vulnerable to him as anyone else, but as an animal, she was beyond him. (97)

As Haraway has pointed out, much of the cyborg's power comes from its ability to remain at least partially illegible, and Anyanwu is powerful precisely because, in animal form, she becomes unchartable and uncontainable.

As we have seen with Lynn, Shori, and Anyanwu—a carrier of disease, a vampire, and a shape-shifter respectively, but all resolutely cyborg—Butler uses technology, often in the form of genetic engineering, to strengthen rather than weaken the binds that tie humans to one another and also to other beings. Butler's "answer" to some feminist concerns revolving around the cyborg is to create cyborgs that, along with challenging dichotomous forms of embodiment and ways of knowing, are also nurturers. What's more, they tend to nurture not just those who are similar to them but the human species as a whole—often when it is undergoing some sort of monumentally difficult but ultimately beneficial change. In their nurturing, these cyborg heroines dissolve boundaries and force collaborations in ways that obliterate dichotomous logic rather than perpetuating it.

Butler's cyborgs are successful largely because they avoid the sort of technologically-fueled tyranny that feminist theorists warn against. Lynn's success as a cyborg depends largely on her creating social frameworks in which choice and free will are options. The same is true of Shori, who, after giving her symbionts the choice of whether or not to join her, nurtures them while also giving them longer lives. As the first black vampire, Shori is also nurturing the Ina into acceptance of a new form of embodiment that will ultimately strengthen her people. Lastly, Anyanwu is able to retreat to a form of Otherness so profoundly different that Doro cannot victimize her or her children.

Butler's cyborgs, while all deeply indebted to the science of genetic engineering or medical technology, are able to see the dangers of monolithic technoculture that suppresses humanity as opposed to strengthening it. They embrace difference completely and to the point where their own embodiment is altered. They also create scenarios in which choice and identity fluidity are not merely celebrated, but necessary for survival. While their origins and allegiances are both hard to trace and constantly shifting, they are clearly nurturers, and often not just to those who surround them, but to larger societies that are undergoing some sort of seismic shift that the cyborgs themselves are helping usher in. Butler's cyborgs combine the partiality and irreverence of Haraway's vision with the nurturance and respect for difference so often lauded in black women's fiction to create a figure who is technologically advanced, celebratory of her corporeality, both visionary and grounded. Lastly, and, as should be no surprise by now, Butler's cyborgs are "chosen" because of their outsider status, their lack of full allegiance to any of the communities that can lay claim to them. In fact, it is this lack of social capital that often leads to them accepting cyborg identity in the first place. Although they are often castigated by all parties involved, their success is facilitated by their aggressively xenophiliac embracing of difference and also their knowledge that negotiation and choice are superior to tyrannical force. While their

power may originally be rooted in their weakness, their firsthand knowledge of oppression is what eventually allows them to create worlds in which people are heard rather than silenced and allowed to grow and change in ways that, without the cyborg's presence, could not have been imagined. With this human/Other collaboration fresh in our minds, let us turn to our final chapter, which will focus on Butler's use of the most pivotal of science fiction tropes, the alien.

The Future Is Now: Aliens and Other Alienated Bodies in Octavia Butler's Fiction

"In earlier science fiction there tended to be a lot of conquest: you land on another planet and you set up a colony and the natives have their quarters some place and they come in and work for you. There was a lot of that, and it was, you know, let's do Europe and Africa and South America all over again. And I thought no, no, if we do get to another world inhabited by intelligent beings, in the first place we're going to be at the end of a very, very, very, long transport line. It isn't likely that people are going to be coming and going, you know, not even the way they did between England and this country, for instance. It would be a matter of a lifetime or more, the coming and going. So you couldn't depend on help from home. Even if you had help coming, it wouldn't help you. It might help your kids, if you survived to have any, but on the other hand it might not. So you are going to have to make some kind of deal with the locals: in effect, you're going to have to pay the rent."

– Octavia Butler

The practice of presenting difference as alien is an old one that was embraced by science fiction writers in the 1930s and continues today, oftentimes with aliens functioning as thinly veiled depictions of communists, homosexuals, racial Others, or some other type of presence deemed threatening to the human population in the story. The frequency of these depictions began to change in the 1970s when two things happened simultaneously. First, more women and people of color began writing science fiction, and secondly, the science fiction world basically caught up to the high modernist assertion that alienation from both society and self is inevitable and often allows for previously inaccessible types of creativity and commentary. Commenting on the first of these two corresponding phenomena, Robert Crossley notes that "the alien in much

fiction by women has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien, sometimes more specifically—the black woman, the Chicana, the housewife, the lesbian, the woman in poverty, or the unmarried woman" (272).

Commenting on the second of these two phenomena, namely the societal shift towards recognizing one's own alienation and, correspondingly, the advent and popularization of sympathetic, even likeable aliens, Vivian Sobchak declares that:

> In a culture in which … subjectivity and affect are regularly decentered, dispersed, spatialized, and objectified … it is hardly surprising that the figure of the 'alien' no longer poses the political and social threat it did in the SF of the 1950s. In that decade, alienation of the postmodern kind was still new and shiny, and aliens were definitely and identifiably "other." Today's SF either posits that "aliens are like us" or that "aliens R US." Alien Others have become less other— be they extraterrestrial teddy bears, starmen, brothers from another planet, robots, androids, or replicants. They have become our familiars, our simulacra, embodied as literally alienated images of our alienated selves. Thus, contemporary SF generally embraces alien Others as "more human than human" or finds it can barely mark their "otherness" as other than our own. (136-7)

Largely, what both the inclusion of a wider variety of authors in the science fiction canon and the social shift toward likeable aliens (and less likable space explorers/colonizers) lead to are human/alien relationships that are too complicated and contextual to be classified as simple cases of good versus evil or victim versus victimizer. These sorts of fraught and shifting relationships of power are, as we have seen, a staple of Butler's fiction, and in this way, she is very much part of the vanguard of postmodern science fiction.

Butler explains that developing complexity was one of her main goals when creating the aliens in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy: "There are a lot of people … who seem to see things strictly in terms of good and evil," she laments in an interview with Ann McCaffery. "The aliens either come to help us get our poor heads straightened out or they come to destroy us. What I hope to wind up with in my work are a series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like 'good' and 'evil' enter into the real world—never absolute, always by degrees. In my novels, generally, everybody wins and loses something" (64). One of the means through which Butler achieves these "degrees" is by forcing her characters to exist in liminal spaces where they must function as hybrid figures. In her *Xenogenesis* series, Butler's human characters, who are attempting to gain their bearings after earth and most of the people on it have been destroyed by nuclear war, are neither clear-cut heroes, sympathetic victims, nor straightforward bigots when confronted with the Oankali, the alien species that has rescued them from Earth's destruction. They are, rather, a mixture of all of these things, and eventually, their biological/genetic makeup begins to shift to mirror this hybridity. Similarly, the Oankali are neither compassionate rescuers nor tyrannical destroyers of the human race, but they certainly embody elements of both of these characteristics (along with many others). Jim Miller addresses these complexities when he states that the *Xenogenesis* novels mix the typical science fiction space alien story with elements of the slave narrative, the Genesis story, the nature/culture debate, utopian/dystopian tales, captivity narratives, and more. Butler's aliens are both colonizers (of minds, bodies, and worlds) and a utopian collective, while the captured/saved humans are both admirable survivors and ugly xenophobes (339-40). By transcending the conventional alien invasion story, Butler has allowed herself to explore a plethora of themes not always made possible by the genre: human encounters with Otherness, altruism, grief, xenophobia, allegiance, and compromise, to name a few.

In their 2010 book about the use of postcolonial tropes in modern science fiction, Ericka

Hoagland and Reema Sarwal note that "the 'Other' is used to justify the exploitation and

annihilation of peoples, whether red, black, or green; it is used to explain how repulsion and

desire can exist concurrently; and it signifies an ever-looming threat of contamination (by sex or

disease) as well as violence" (10). Certainly, Butler constructs the Oankali as the prototypical

alien Other, a figure that inspires fear and curiosity, but a figure that, above all, is not, to use

James Berger's words, "the explicit description of the Other in terms of the same" (12). Despite

their intelligence, despite their gentleness, despite their ability to speak an array of languages,

English included, the Oankali's appearance inspires fear and revulsion in the humans who

encounter them, not least of all because they are covered with worm-like tentacles. What's more,

their means of processing the world through genetic "reading" and their extreme xenophilia make

them almost unfathomable to the human mind, at least initially. Butler describes her protagonist

Lilith's reaction upon first viewing one of the Oankali, who has rescued her from a post-

apocalyptic earth:

> it had no nose—no bulge, no nostrils—just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over—
>
> pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head that grew down around its eyes and
>
> ears and at its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered
>
> how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the
>
> ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind,
>
> it joined the head hair. The island of throat hair seemed to move slightly, and it
>
> occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed. (*Dawn* 11)

Lilith eventually discovers that this particular Oankali, Jadhya, was selected to interact with her

first because its tentacles happen to mimic human features, a characteristic that is not the case

with most Oankali. She also learns that Oankali do not have centrally located eyes, ears, noses,

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etc, but rather see, hear, feel, and smell through their many tentacles. She also learns that sensory perception is much less important to the Oankali than genetic perception, given their ability to read the genetic structures of the things they come into contact with. Further separating them from humanity, the Oankali come in three biological sexes: male, female, and ooloi.

While the Oankali appearance may seem overly reliant on decades' worth of slimy creepy science fiction aliens, their difference plays an important and atypical role in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Because of the Oankali's lack of humanity, their actual alienness that initially repulses Lilith, the sacrifices that Lilith must make in order to merge with them as a species, to truly become hybrid, are significant. Once more we see that profound difference must be encountered and eventually embraced in order for humanity to continue existing, given that the only way humans can survive is by biologically merging with the Oankali. Paul Youngquist writes that, in the *Xenogenesis* series, "difference is not the cozy alternative between one kind of human (say white) and another (maybe black). Difference is an abyss that divides primate from mollusk" (163). Certainly a good part of the first book in the trilogy features Lilith both berating herself for her xenophobia and slowly overcoming her fear. Likewise, all three novels showcase humans from a variety of backgrounds either accepting, rejecting, or generally feeling conflicted about the type of difference the Oankali represent.

Although Lilith does come to accept and eventually align herself with the Oankali, it is interesting to chart how her reactions change throughout the early pages of *Dawn* when she is first becoming acclimated to life with the Oankali. "She did not want to be any closer to him," we are told soon after she sees an Oankali for the first time. "She had not known what held her back before. Now she was certain it was his alienness, his difference, his literal unearthliness. She found herself still unable to take even one more step toward him" (*Dawn* 11). Lilith is open about her revulsion and also displays a heightened awareness of where this revulsion stems from, as

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well as a sense of self-reproach that grows as she becomes more at ease with the Oankali appearance. "She was not up to taking another bowl from his hand," she admits ten pages later. "The fingers had bones in them, at least; they weren't tentacles. And there were only two hands, two feet. He could have been so much uglier than he was, so much less … human. Why couldn't she just accept him? All he seemed to be asking was that she not panic at the sight of him or others like him. Why couldn't she do that?" (*Dawn* 21). Although Lilith is initially frustrated by what appears to be a mental and physical reaction that she has little control over, slowly she masters her reaction to the Oankali: "When she awoke, he [Jadyha] took his jacket off and let her see the tufts of sensory tentacles scattered over his body. To her surprise, she got used to these quickly. They were merely ugly" (*Dawn* 26).

In her representation of Otherness, Butler doesn't rely on a single default depiction. Rather, the aesthetic considerations she puts into depicting Otherness are diverse. In *Clay's Ark*, humans infected with the alien organism are slightly uglier than humans who are not, but the quadruped children that infected people produce are beautiful while also being unsettling. In *Fledgling* and *Wild Seed*, Shori and Anyanwu are physically attractive (or "cute" in Shori's case, considering that she is a child) and this attractiveness serves as a mask of their powers, a potentially capturing of lure. In "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," DGDs are not ugly until they drift and self-mutilate. In the *Parable* novels, Lauren's proposed future is more pleasing, aesthetically and otherwise, than the dystopia she inhabits, and little attention is paid to her appearance one way or another. Similarly, in *Kindred*, the past that Dana travels to is uglier—again, aesthetically and otherwise—than her present life (although as the story progresses she starts to see more parallels). It is only in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and the short story "Blood Child," which we will discuss at the end of this chapter, that difference is posited as unambiguously unattractive, at least until the benefits of this difference, benefits that cannot be

immediately seen, are introduced. What Butler directly posits in *Xenogenesis* and "Blood Child" and what she hints at in many of her other works is this: attraction and revulsion are both strongly rooted (biologically and socially) impulses within humans, impulses that impact the ways in which they are or are not able to successfully negotiate with Otherness. Like most human traits in Butler's fiction, however, impulses rooted in attraction and aversion are not unalterable. In fact, part of what makes Lilith a notable protagonist, as we will see shortly, is that she is able to overcome her initial aversion to the Oankali enough to eventually have children with them. She has to unlearn her aesthetic perceptions before this can happen, and must recognize the intelligence and compassion of the Oankali before she can see them as more than tentacled masses of slime, but she is, given time, able to do this. Aesthetic preferences, Butler asserts, are as reprogrammable as any other aspect of humanity that often gets framed as being hardwired. We see this even more clearly in "Blood Child," where Gan, the adolescent protagonist, has absolutely no aversion to T'Gatoi, the giant-squid like creature whom Gan has known since his birth.

Because Butler refuses to humanize her aliens but also fully insists that they interact with humans in order to survive, they can be classified as what Donna Haraway, borrowing from Trinh Minh-Ha, has called "the inappropriate/d other," a being that cannot be fully neutralized, appropriated, or subsumed, but that remains obstinately different. Haraway describes the figure thusly:

> Trinh's [Minh-Ha] phrase [inappropriate/d others] referred to the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either 'self' or 'other' offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics. To be 'inappropriate/d' does not mean 'not to be in relation with' … Rather to be an 'inappropriate/d other' means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality, in a

diffracting rather than reflecting (ratio)nationality—as the means of making

potent connection that exceeds domination. To be inappropriate/d is not to fit in

the taxon, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and

kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by difference. (*Monsters* 69-70)

Although perhaps "originally fixed by difference" in Lilith's imagination, the Oankali alliance

with humans, of which Lilith is on the vanguard, eventually becomes marked by the

"deconstructive relationality" mentioned by Haraway, and certainly their alliance leads to

"connections that exceed domination." Although most humans initially find the Oankali to be

aloof and superior, eventually both species benefit from their interactions (while also losing

something of themselves), a fact especially illustrated by the construct children humans and

Oankali produce, beings who, most of the time, exhibit the best qualities of each species without

replicating those characteristics that contributed to Oankali stagnation and human apocalypse.

Butler suggests that the rewards for learning to accommodate and cooperate with forms

of difference that refuse complete co-option are vast. Similar to what we saw in *Fledgling* and

Clay's Ark, humans who reproduce with Oankali become resistant to disease, live longer and

more robust lives, and have increased strength and agility. More importantly though, at least as

far as several of Butler's human characters are concerned, human/Oankali reproduction allows for

long term human survival, albeit in altered form. As Butler notes in the quotation that opened this

chapter, her human characters are asked to give up much of what they feel makes them human,

but not entirely without compensation. Isaiah Lavender has noted that, through her interactions

with the Oankali, "Lilith herself will come to be something 'other' with her strength and memory

enhancements, thus transcending humanity (71). What Lavender is hinting at is the now familiar

feature of all of Butler's novels in which incorporation of Otherness, even at the expense of the

coherent self, is the only path offered for future survival, and is not a path that all humans are able

or willing to take. Lilith, like Butler's other heroines, is young, black, female, physically ill, and was a mother before her son died. Lilith, like Keira, Lauren, Lynn, and Shori, has virtually no stake in humanity remaining as it is, having never been the beneficiary of significant power or privilege, and is thus an ideal and not unintentional choice as the mother of a new species.

Of course, as with all of Butler's heroines, the newfound power that Lilith's sudden hybridity affords her is both complicated and not without its drawbacks. Lilith must both reconcile her own fears that, by reproducing with the Oankali, she is contributing to the extinction of humanity, along with the many castigations from her fellow humans that she is a collaborator, a whore, the very embodiment of betrayal. Lilith, despite her compassion for the people who see her as a traitor, is able to glimpse what humanity stands to gain from an alliance with the Oankali and therefore remains steadfast in her cooperation. Butler illustrates one such moment of advanced perception that Lilith undergoes when she is physically probed by an Oankali thusly: "It [one of the Oankali] gave her … a new color. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or … tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelmingly compelling … a half known mystery beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise" (*Dawn* 225). In his book, *Alterities*, Thomas Docherty sees what he unabashedly calls love as requiring the active apprehension of difference. "There has to be the encounter with alterity," Docherty claims, "and it is such an encounter which is constitutive of a stronger—philosophical –version of love" (183-4). Lilith, because of the access to the previously undreamt of that the Oankali provide for her, experiences both profound love and Blochian utopian dreaming. While alienation from her human peers never stops being difficult, the promise of expanding human consciousness and embodiment ultimately outweighs the claims that she has "sold out."

A large part of Lilith's love for the Oankali stems from her eventual recognition that their xenophilic obsession with difference is ultimately superior to human xenophobia. This realization

is best illustrated when Lilith explains what she sees as the greatest difference between humans and Oankali to her son, Akin, who, as a construct, is both human and Oankali:

"'Human beings fear difference,'" Lilith tells him. "'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. If you don't understand this, you will. You'll probably find both tendencies surfacing in your own behavior … when you feel conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference'" (*Rites* 80). Although the Otherness that exists between humans and Oankali in *Xenogenesis* remains inappropriate/d, as we will continue to see, the love that each species learns to have for each other, enhances both species' wellbeing and eventually creates a third species that may be able to transcend the flaws that originally endangered all.

As has been established, in Butler's worlds the experience of marginalization equips people with the particular skills needed to usher humanity through transitional situations. Her heroines, therefore, spell both death of the human race as it currently exists and also allow it to build a livable future where none previously existed. Lilith is no exception. We learn fairly early on in the first novel that one of the key characteristics she has that makes her attractive to the Oankali as a breeding partner is what one Oankali calls a "talent for cancer" (20). Lilith confirms that several of her family members have died from cancer, and the Oankali who examines her genes explains that a similar thing would have happened to her while she was still relatively young. After studying her cancer the Oankali induce Lilith's body to reabsorb the cancer so that she will no longer be threatened by it. "Correcting genes have been inserted into your cells," an Oankali explains to Lilith, "and your cells have accepted and replicated them. Now you won't grow cancers by accident" (*Dawn* 30). This interaction illustrates how the Oankali process the world, namely, through the compulsory examination of genes. Lilith's ability to make cancer

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"accidentally" becomes her most recognizable feature for the Oankali and one that they learn and improve from.

When the Oankali inform Lilith about her predilection for cancer, they introduce both Lilith and the reading audience to their role as gene traders. Oankali, we learn, are constantly creating new species by mixing their genes with the many life forms they encounter on their journeys through many universes. They refer to what they do as gene trading, and indeed, they make sure that some type of mutually beneficial exchange occurs with the species they reproduce with. We will discuss the ways in which the Oankali believe humanity is benefitting from the gene trade shortly, as it requires some contextualizing, but suffice it to say that the Oankali, quite simply, choose humans as trade partners, and specifically humans like Lilith with a genetic predisposition to cancer because the ability to quickly regenerate cells allows the Oankali more physical strength and resilience. We see this when Lilith helps Nikanj, an Oankali who is injured during a human uprising, is able to probe Lilith's body and mimic its ability to regenerate cells so that it can re-grow a nearly severed limb. "Your body knows how to cause some of its cells to revert to an embryonic stage," Nikanj explains to Lilith after the uprising has been quelled. "It can awaken genes that most humans never use after birth. We have comparable genes that go dormant after metamorphosis. Your body showed mine how to awaken them, how to stimulate growth of cells that would not normally regenerate. The lesson was complex and painful, but very much worth learning" (*Dawn* 236). By trading genetic knowledge with Lilith and, through their children, actual genes, the Oankali are able to curb many of the physical limitations that their physical forms impose, and, to their line of thinking, benefit humans as well.

In order to understand how precisely the Oankali believe they are enhancing humanity through gene trading, it is important first to reiterate the extent to which the Oankali are biological determinists. "We know everything that can be learned about you from your genes,"

Jadyah tells Lilith almost immediately after meeting her. "[We] know your medical history and a great deal about the way you think" (*Dawn* 20). The Oankali's belief that they can fully understand another organism based solely on genetics has been rightly criticized by several scholars; however, what is often overlooked in criticism of the novels is that the Oankalis' perspective on genetics changes over the course of the trilogy and they eventually realize that human emotion and intellect often play out in ways they could not have predicted despite their vast genetic knowledge. Also overlooked is the fact that Butler's depiction of the Oankalis' genetic determinism is not the same as an endorsement of it.

Whereas the Oankali gain both increased mobility and the possibility of regenerating lost or injured limbs from their genetic trade with humans, what they believe they are giving humans in return is a little less straightforward. Throughout the trilogy, the Oankali regularly refer to "the human contradiction," which they see as being the mismatched traits of aggression and intelligence. "You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics," an Oankali tells Lilith. "Either alone would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you" (*Dawn* 36). "'You are intelligent,'" the Oankali continues. "'That's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics'" (*Dawn* 37).

When Lilith probes the Oankali as to the second human characteristic, the one that works against intelligence, she is told: "'you are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones'" (*Dawn* 37). According to most of the Oankali, it is unalterably inevitable that, left unchecked, human intelligence paired with hierarchical behavior will eventually destroy humanity. It is taken as a

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given by the Oankali that human intelligence must be preserved whereas hierarchical behavior, which they state repeatedly is more pronounced in human males than females, must be genetically weeded out and eventually obliterated entirely. The ideas that human behavior can be so clearly read in one's genes, that behaviors are hardwired rather than learned, and that men have a greater propensity for violence than women have, unsurprisingly, drawn much critical attention to the *Xenogenesis* series. Adam Johns has wryly noted that "Butler's work has been understood as variously endorsing, resisting, and qualifying biological essentialism" (383), and certainly the scholarship addressing genetic determinism in the *Xenogenesis* series varies greatly. What is clear is that Butler uses the novels to engage is debates about sociobiology, a sub-genre of the burgeoning genetic research field that was at its height in the 1980s when the novels were published.

The Genes Make the Man: A Brief History of Sociobiology

"We live with several unpleasant biological truths, death being the most undeniable and ineluctable. If genetic determinism is true, we will learn to live with it as well. But I reiterate my statement that no evidence exists to support it, that the crude versions of past centuries have been conclusively disproved, and that its continued popularity is a function of social prejudice among those who benefit most from the status quo."

– Stephen Jay Gould

Although "reading" the body for clues of character and possible behavior dates back to antiquity and has manifested itself through such ideologies as Victorian physiognomy and phrenology, the late twentieth century was in no way immune to discourses linking behavior and character to physical and biological traits. Like the manifestations that came before it,

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sociobiology claims objectivity and scientific rigor, and is often promoted by public opinion long before endorsement comes from the scientific community. Sociobiology, as it is demarcated in Harvard professor E.O. Wilson's book, *Sociobiology: A New Synthesis* (1975) poses "the existence of genes for aggression, territoriality, and intelligence" (Kaplan and Rogers 76-7). Wilson himself defined sociobiology as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior" (qtd. in Kitcher 113), and certainly Wilson seemed confident that biological science would eventually be able to locate, isolate, and study each gene and its corresponding behavior.

There were stirrings in the scientific community at the time Wilson's book was published, some in support of Wilson's work and a great many more critical of it, but sociobiology did not become part of widespread cultural consciousness until ten years later when Wilson, along with Harvard political scientist Richard Hernstein, published *Crime and Human Nature*, which argued that there was "a strong genetic component to criminal behavior and that 'bad families produce bad children'" (12). According to Gary Allen, Wilson and Hernstein cited "twin and adoption studies as well as research on biological correlates such as body shape and criminal behavior to back up their argument" (164). Written more for a general audience than Wilson's first book, *Crime and Human Nature* re-popularized old ideas about the over-determined connectedness of genetics and ability, intelligence, and character. Allen traces mainstream cultures' renewed obsession with this tenuous correlation:

> following Harvard's lead, in 1986 *The Wall Street Journal* carried a three-part series, "The Genetic Bases of Anti-Social Behavior" (their examples were alcoholism and criminality), and 1987 became a banner year for genetic determinist claims. In March, in a study widely publicized in newspapers and on TV, Daniela Gerhard of Washington University claimed to have found a genetic marker for manic depression on chromosome 11. In April 1987 *Newsweek*

magazine carried a cover story entitled "The Gene Factor—How Genes Shape Personality." (164-5)

Since its popularization, sociobiology has been criticized by biologists, social theorists, and political scientists for its reductionism, its lack of proper scientific backing, and its reluctance to consider the role that the social plays in the construction of identity. In their 1994 critique Gisela Kaplan and Lesley Rogers write that sociobiology "offers a genetic, and therefore, fixed, explanation for social difference and justifies the continued domination of one group by another" (76-7).

Over and above merely justifying dominance and hierarchy, sociobiology also ignores the roles that reason, emotion, agency, and choice play in human development and human interactions. At its most extreme, sociobiology "contend[s] that human genotypes preclude certain forms of behavior and that our actual behavior precludes certain social arrangements" (Kitcher 32). Kaplan and Rogers also note that in Wilson's work and the work it inspired:

> genes are seen as "replicator" units, which are adorned with the sole purpose of replicating and getting into the next generation. Gene replication is seen as the sole purpose of life, and genes are given personality characteristics, such as "selfishness." All the complexities of animal behavior, the richness of human achievement and endeavor, are mere trappings that spin off from the basic purpose of the replicator units. (77)

Over and above being questionable science, sociobiology has also had very real social and political repercussions, such as the forced sterilization of those whose genes are considered less than desirable. John and Mary Gribbin explain that "between 1924 and 1972 some 7500 Americans were sterilized by doctors acting on government orders, without the patients being told what was happening to them. The scandal … was based on a misconception of the nature of

intelligence and heredity that was unfounded in the 1920s, and had long been proved to be unfounded by the time this government approved 'breeding program' was halted" (100). While the scientific evidence supporting genetic determinism has always been thin, this did not prevent the rise and popularization of the eugenics movement and related currents of thought that, while perhaps not always supporting forced sterilization and other such policies overtly, did posit that there was an irrefutable link between genes and intelligence. "Eugenics" is a term coined originally by English biometrician Francis Galton in his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty* (1883), and according to Allen J. Moore, this text "served as the rallying point for a movement that reached considerable popularity in both England and the United States in the first four decades of the twentieth century" (168). Galton had many followers, among them, Charles B. Davenport, the intellectual leader of the eugenics movement in the United States, who defined eugenics as "the science of the improvement of the human race by better breeding" (Moore 168).

Eugenics popularized itself throughout the United States and Europe through propaganda campaigns that included public education, popular lectures, and lobbying in state legislatures and Congress. When attempting to explain why eugenics had the widespread popularity that it did, Moore notes the social, political, and economic upheaval and uncertainty that characterized the first decades of the twentieth century. Moore writes that "at times of social and economic crises, when people are experiencing cutbacks in employment, health care, and salaries hereditarian arguments serve a special social and political function. By suggesting a genetic cause for persistent or recurrent social dilemmas, hereditarian theories suggest that the victims, not the social system, are the cause of their own problems" (Allen 166). Both eugenics and sociobiology resist critiquing systemic causes of economic and social stratification and instead attribute unequal distributions of power and resources to genetic differences. It is not surprising that such

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explanations gain popularity during times of social upheaval when disenfranchised people are looking for easily identifiable causes of cultural, economic, and political shifts.

Historically, as Moore has noted, changes in industrialization and urbanization have increased crime, alcoholism, and prostitution. Capitalism has also led to great fluctuations in prices and wages, high unemployment, and increasing immigration (177). These changes brought many different types of people in close proximity with one another, and eugenics was a way, albeit a scientifically unsound way, of conceiving of difference while also assuring those with pre-existing power that this power was theirs through genetic superiority. Of course, with the idea that unequal distribution of wealth, talent, and power are genetically predetermined, it doesn't take long for imbalances of power to be seen as inevitable and unmoveable. Kitcher writes that eugenics "fosters the idea that class structures are socially inevitable, that aggressive impulses toward strangers are part of our evolutionary heritage" (435). Sociobiology also sanctions the idea that the human propensity for victimizing others is inextricably linked to human biology and thus cannot be undone.

Butler's main purpose in engaging popular discussions and misconceptions surrounding sociobiology is neither to endorse it nor disprove it but to question how biological propensities might be worked around. In the *Afterword* of her story "Bloodchild," Butler explains:

> I began the story wondering how much of what we do is encouraged, discouraged, or otherwise guided by what we are genetically. This is one of my favorite questions … it can be a dangerous question. All too often, when people ask it, they mean who has the biggest or the best or the most of whatever they see as desirable, or who has the smallest and the least of what is undesirable. Genetics as a board game, or worse, as an excuse for the social Darwinism that swings into popularity every few years. (69)

In an interview with Erica Mehaffy, Butler expresses a similar sentiment: "don't worry about real biological determinism," she encourages. "Worry about what people make of it. Worry about the social Darwinism. After all, if sociobiology, or anything like it … is true, then denying it is certainly not going to help. What we have to do is learn to work with it and to work against people who see it as a good reason to let the poor be poor, that kind of thing" (57). As we can see through her comments and her fiction, Butler is not willing to assert confidently that our genes have no impact on our behavior, but nor is she ever willing to overlook the power of social and environmental factors in the making of a person or a society. Considering that biology is part of what makes us who we are does not equate, in Butler's fiction, to suggesting that such genetic predispositions are the most powerful or predictive part of a person's (or alien's) make up.

The Alien Within: The Transformation of Humanity in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*

What makes Butler's interrogation of sociobiology both satisfying and worthwhile is that she is not willing to separate free will and biological determinism into separate and unrelated extremes but instead interrogates how they are linked. In so doing she creates a framework through which to explore the intricacies of power, compulsion, and coercion. Christophe Badcock writes that pop-sociobiology has mistakenly pitted free will and genetic determinism against each other and that this has led to very little inquiry as to how our genes can play a role in free will and how, alternately, free will impacts the ways we experience our particular biologically rooted proclivities and aversions. "On the issue of free will," Badcock writes, "the evolutionary considerations … depend … on just how the term 'free will' is understood. If we take an extreme view of it and regard the term as implying total emancipation from any kind of restraint, so that human behavior is regarded as totally unconstrained, uncaused, unpredictable, and so on, we

would obviously have to be skeptical (94). Badcock, like Butler, calls for a more subtle understanding of the interactions between genes and human agency, and actually suggests that free will is something that could be favored by evolution because it favors people better able to think quickly and adapt. "Indeed, we could predict that the greater the degree to which natural selection had allowed free will in the sense of self-determination to an organism, the greater the development of the nervous system or its equivalent" (97).

Although he suggests that an ability to assert free will makes evolutionary sense, Badcock does not state that the correlation between genes and free will need be an overly deterministic one. He writes:

> Just because genes and behavior may be correlated in some way … genes need
> not be rigidly and directly linked to human behavior in every instance, as simple
> biological determinism may suppose; but neither need they be totally unrelated,
> as simple cultural determinism would claim. An altogether more sensible
> conclusion seems to be that genes and behavior are correlated, rather as computer
> systems and the human beings who manipulate them are correlated. (276)

As Michelle Erica Green notes, Butler insists on confronting problems that have occurred so often in human communities that they seem almost an unavoidable part of human nature (339), such as greed, prejudice based on appearances, oppression of women, and might-makes-right ideologies. Rather than create utopias in which these problems have simply ceased to exist, Butler demonstrates time and again in her fiction that these issues will only start to be resolved through commitment to hybridity and a drive toward adaptability. Despite Butler's clear hope in the human ability to transform into something less destructive and more sustainable, Hoda Zaki has, more than any other critic, been unable to view Butler's human/alien alliances as anything other than a deep indictment of "human nature" and the resulting need to replace humans with

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something better. She, like Ben-Tov, sees Butler's post-human communities as being rooted in deep contempt for humanity, rather than in the belief that humanity can persevere and improve themselves and the worlds they inhabit. Zaki writes that in Butler's fiction:

> there is a pervasive human need to alienate from oneself those who appear to be different—i.e. to create Others. Even when she describes the diminution of racial antagonisms among humans upon encountering a new extraterrestrial Other, she foregrounds how we seize upon biological differences between the two species to reassert, yet again, notions of inferiority and discrimination. For her, the human propensity to create the Other can never be transcended: the end of racial discrimination must coincide with the rise of some kind of similar discrimination based upon biological differences, which accordingly continue to play a role in future social orders. (241)

Whereas Zaki is correct that many of Butler's human characters are inclined to create Others as swiftly and as aggressively as they can, it does not stand to reason that this propensity is any more biologically than socially rooted. Yes, the Oankali believe that human genes contain "the contradiction" that pairs intelligence with hierarchical behavior and that, as a result, transcending violent hierarchy can only happen with an alteration of the human body, but, as Jim Miller has pointed out, it is the Oankali who believe this, not Butler herself. Miller writes:

> The problem with Zaki's reading of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy is that, in an effort to make theoretical points against essentialism, she confuses Butler's position with that of the biologistic Oankali. While Butler clearly presents the Oankali in a positive light in regard to their non-hierarchical society and their respect for healing, diversity, and guilt-free pleasure, she does not endorse their determinist

views about humans. Indeed, characters throughout the series voice opposition to

the view that the 'human contradiction' in unalterable. (342)

Indeed, we see Zaki's conflation of Butler and the Oankali repeatedly throughout her claims. Zaki

writes, for instance, that "Butler generally adheres to the notion that men are intrinsically more

violent than women" (241). While it is true that when women commit acts of violence in the

Xenogenesis trilogy it is usually to protect themselves, their children, or the wider community, it

does not follow that Butler is making widespread generalizations about the connections between

gender and violence (even though the Oankali certainly do). In fact, Michelle Green has noted

that in Butler's fiction women make more personal sacrifices that often include acts of violence

not because they are wedded to predictable strictures of womanhood but because they refuse the

consequences of not being the ones to take action: the deaths of their children, and, by extension,

humanity's new future (343).

Despite the fact that both women and men in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy clearly choose when

and why to commit violence against both the Oankali and each other, Zaki sees Butler's apparent

idealization of women who are "naturally" willing to sacrifice more for the benefit of the

community as epitomizing the benevolent mother and suggesting that women are innately more

nurturing than men. Zaki writes: "Butler, in describing her heroines as nurturing freedom-loving

women who employ violence only for the sake of survival, shares with other feminist SF writers

the same truncated assumptions about women's and men's natures even though she does not

place gender concerns conspicuously at the center of her novels" (246). In her quickness to read

Butler's female characters as little more than well-worn stereotypes, Zaki seems to be missing

one of the most important points of the novels, which is that even the biologistic Oankali seem to

be susceptible to rhetoric and reason that stem from human intelligence and not just human genes.

The fact that the Oankali eventually allow humans to build a colony on Mars free of Oankali

influence suggests that they are not immune to persuasion and nor are they slaves to their biologistic convictions. Butler also shows respect for resistance in this way, and while she clearly prefers the human/Oankali construct families because of their nearly limitless transformative possibilities, she never implies that the human-only society on Mars is doomed to fail because of a biological predisposition to violence or for any other reason.

Miller is right to point out both the conflation that happens between Butler and the Oankali, and also the middle ground Butler takes, where she neither disavows biological propensities nor suggests that they are wholly constitutive of behavior. "The aliens in the *Xenogenesis* series say the humans have no way out, that they're programmed to self-destruct," explains Butler in an interview with Ann McCaffery. "The humans say, 'that's none of your business and probably not true.' The construct characters say that, whether the humans are self-destructive or not, they should be allowed to follow their own particular destiny" (67). Clearly, Butler is unyielding in her refusal to separate biology from culture, and this refusal is one more way her work combats duality. Rather, she illustrates groups of people who are always under construction, in the process of becoming, ands capable of change. For Butler, a failure to adapt to these necessary changes is almost always punished with death, either immediate or eventual, but even with this being the case, she resists implying that any one outcome is inevitable.

As we've seen in Butler's fiction before, adaptability is a sign of strength and the traits that would typically put a person at a social disadvantage are what allow for increased adaptability. Lilith's ability to negotiate both human and alien worlds crafts her, socially and biologically, into a hybrid, and as is the case with many hybrid figures, Lilith faces challenges from both of the worlds she traverses. Patricia Melzer notes that "at the end of *Dawn*, Butler has Lilith … pregnant with the child of five progenitors, who come from two species, at least three genders, and an indeterminate number of races" (61-2). Butler, herself, notes this multiplicity as

well when, in *Adulthood Rites,* the second book of the trilogy, Tino, a human resister who is considering aligning himself with Lilith's trade village (the name for spaces in which humans, Oankali, and their construct children live together peacefully), stumbles upon a family and makes the following observation: "the group, family and guests, was a menagerie … Human; nearly human with a few visible sensory tentacles; Oankali with Human features contrasting jarringly with their alienness; Oankali who might possibly be part Human; and Oankali like the ooloi who had spoken to him, who obviously had no Humanity at all" (36).

Although Lilith and the other women who agree to reproduce with the Oankali are often demeaned by resistors, Butler characteristically implies that such unwillingness to adapt will, while often posited as understandable, ultimately hurt rather than benefit humankind. As we have already seen in Butler's fiction, "to be identified as a hybrid … is, often times, synonymous with becoming a survivor and a signifier of the future" (Hampton 100). Lilith's difficult decision to help mother a new, more durable species ensures that both she, and humanity at large, will survive an uncertain future albeit in an altered form. "'Our children will be better than either of us,'" Nikanj tells Lilith after she has decided to reproduce with the Oankali. "'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.'" After considering Nikanj's words Lilith agrees with him, but adds the caveat: "'But they won't be human … That's what matters. You can't understand, but that *is* what matters'" (*Dawn* 247). Lilith's response speaks to the difficulty inherent in compromise, particularly when that compromise features one's own body, one's own identity, and one's own perception of self. It shows that the decision to collaborate, while often valid, can exact a sort of psychic torture on those who give up or destroy parts of themselves in order to exist in any form possible. Although she is willing to align herself

with the Oankali, Lilith understands, even sympathizes with human egocentrism, nor is she entirely willing to claim that the desire to remain human, to refuse profound Otherness, is wholly despicable. Her adaptability allows her to prosper, but it also fills her with profound self-doubt. The tropes of the traitorous woman or the non-conflicted hero, Butler suggests, are too simplistic to address power in a meaningful way.

As the mother of many construct children, Lilith not only runs the risk of being seen as a betrayer of the humans race but also as an originary mother/goddess, a trope common in both feminist utopia and some black fiction. While some critics have claimed that Lilith is merely an updated version of the super-mother trope, Kim Federmayer claims that "Lilith is not represented as the Mother of the Race … or a Mother Goddess, an originary wholeness, facilitating rebirth for the Humans to survive nuclear apocalypse. She is, rather, an originary mediator whose negotiations for survival take place in the margins of hegemonic discourses, crossing back and forth across boundaries/races/genders" (105). Although certainly Lilith's reproductive powers and, by extension, her body matter to the Oankali, she is ultimately favored because of her abilities to compromise and adapt, a point made repeatedly by the fact that the Oankali constantly remind her that she has a choice in whether or not she reproduces with them. Even given her "talent" for cellular regeneration, if Lilith had refused the role offered to her as mother of a new species, she would not have been forced, seeing as the Oankali, as a species, detest coercion and violence.

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the extent to which Lilith must relinquish large parts of herself in order to co-exist with the Oankali more than the actual mechanics of human/alien sex. Sexual intercourse occurs between five partners: one male and female Oankali, one male and female human, and an ooloi. Everyone other than the ooloi enters a passive state of semi-consciousness while the ooloi mixes genes. The female human and the female Oankali then both

become pregnant. The experience is described as intensely pleasurable for all involved, but is certainly a far cry from human notions of consent and active participation during sex. As we also saw in *Clay's Ark* and *Fledgling*, and as we will soon see in "Blood Child," Butler regularly uses sexual pleasure as one of the "payoffs" of collaborating with alien species. This pleasure, which is often coupled in some way with chemical dependency, further complicates, but does not entirely eliminate the presence of choice. While Butler certainly suggests that desire is hardwired in humans and can thus be a persuasive means of reward, as we saw with Eli in *Clay's Ark* and Wright in *Fledgling*, humans are given opportunities to deny their pleasure and refuse union with alien species. Desire, then, is a powerful motivator, but not singularly predictive of behavior.

Perhaps even more problematic than the trancelike state that is unavoidable in human/Oankali reproduction is the fact that the five-way sexual encounter is engineered in such a way as to make Lilith and the human male involved in the process biologically unable to reproduce on their own. (Neither are the male and female Oankali able to do so.) While this may be logical in the larger goal of building a new species, the fact that Lilith cannot reproduce with or even show physical tenderness towards the human male who fathers her construct children is experienced by her as a violation of her body and a restriction of her choice.

Butler describes Lilith's reaction the first time she tries to touch Joseph, the human male she had a sexual relationship with before having sex with the Oankali, as follows:

> She reached out and touched his face to make him turn toward her. Instead, he drew away. Worse, if he had not drawn away, she would have. His flesh felt wrong somehow, oddly repellant. It had not been this way when he came to her before Nikanj moved in between them. Joseph's touch had been more than welcome. He had been water after a very long drought. But then Nikanj had come to stay. It had created for them the powerful threefold unity that was one of

the most alien features of the Oankali life. Had that unity now become a

necessary feature of their human lives? If it had, what could they do? Would the

effect wear off? An ooloi needed a male and female pair to be able to play its part

in reproduction, but it neither needed nor wanted two-way contact between that

male and female. Oankali males and females never touched each other sexually.

That worked fine for them. It could not possibly work for human beings. (*Dawn*

219-20)

Clearly, Lilith's concept of human intimacy is being severely challenged and, initially at least,

she believes the loss to be irrecoverable.

The Oankali, either out of ignorance or indifference, do not see their actions as

oppressive but simply as a biological necessity. Nikanj explains to Lilith: "We couldn't let you

breed alongside us, coming to us only when you saw the value of what we offered … we couldn't

let your numbers grow. We couldn't let you begin to become what you were" (*Rites* 42). Despite

the fact that the Oankali believe they are acting benevolently, their act of limiting human contact

and forced sterilization evokes a host of unpleasant historical associations, not all from long ago.

Historian Paula Giddings documents evidence that "in the twentieth and early twenty-first

centuries, the practice of doctors performing tubal ligation on black women and women of color

without their informed consent, as well as the vilification of black motherhood in politics and the

media, has complicated the issue of reproductive choice" (qtd. Rogan 75-6). Although Lilith's

body is not the only one that the Oankali tamper with, her identity as a young black woman adds

extra associative weight to the changes she has undergone without prior knowledge or consent.

Even if we place ugly historical associations aside, the loss of physical intimacy with

other humans illustrates the extent to which, for Butler, embracing the Other is never a superficial

gesture but one that will lead to a significant negation of the self. Negotiation is not a hollow

concept for Butler; both the losses and gains are profound and totalizing. Paul Youngquist articulates Lilith's dilemma when he writes: "Lilith lives. The Oankali flourish. Species increase. Who is to say where, in this mutually beneficial exchange of flesh for knowledge, vitality ends and domination begins?" (174). The impossibility of perfectly delineating the Oankali as victimizers and the humans as victims validates Lilith's choice: in a world where simplicity helps no one and is largely what destroyed earthly society in the first place, Lilith's reasons for collaborating with the Oankali are complex, noble, self-interested, and still not something she can entirely be at peace with.

Given the loss of human reproductive choice that the Oankali demand, it is not surprising that a sizeable group of human resistors arise in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Although Butler implies that Lilith's way of mediation and negotiation is the most logical, albeit most difficult, course of action, she certainly empathizes with the resistors, and while she does not endorse their violence or xenophobia, it is clear that she understands the sadness and frustration they feel due to the fact that they can no longer have and raise their own entirely human children. Although the Oankali unshakably believe that the human genetic makeup will lead, inevitably, to self-destruction (and, likely, the destruction of other species as well), Butler and Lilith, with the construct Akin (Lilith's child who is kidnapped at an early age and raised in a resistor village), advocate for the return of reproductive capabilities to humans who wish to live separately from the Oankali. Ultimately, Butler asserts that even if the Oankali are right and humans are unalterably genetically programmed for violence and destruction, this does not justify their sterilization. The fact that, in the third book of the trilogy, humans, against Oankali wishes, are given the choice and the chance to rebuild their species in an unaltered form, does much to work against the sociobiologistic claims of scholars such as Zaki. Whereas the Oankali/human alliance offers clear social and biological advantages to humans, Butler, through Akin, attests to the fact that humanity is largely

defined through its relationship to choice, even if that choice runs the risk of resulting in catastrophe.

> After spending his childhood in a resister village, the adolescent Akin asks:

> > Who among the Oankali was speaking for the interests of resister Humans? Who had seriously considered that it might not be enough to let Humans choose either union with the Oankali or sterile lives free of the Oankali? Trade-village Humans said it, but they were so flawed, so genetically contradictory that they were often not listened to. He did not have their flaw. He had been assembled within the body of an ooloi. He was Oankali enough to be listened to by other Oankali and Human enough to know that resister Humans were being treated with cruelty and condescension. (*Rites* 159)

Like Lilith, Akin is an ideal cyborg figure, a liminal negotiator, a bridge between two seemingly irreconcilable sides, human enough to understand that, in his words, "all people who know what it is to end should be allowed to continue if they can" (*Rites* 229), but Oankali enough to understand concerns about the genetic contradiction. When Akin initially protests the placing of humans on Mars and suggests that they be given a less trying environment, he is told that placing humans on an unhospitable planet is actually doing them a kindness, since the environment will prolong their inevitable end by tempering and re-channeling human aggression. (This is similar to Lauren's hope in the *Parable* novels that space exploration will force humans to evolve into something better than there were previously.) The thought that humans might, this time around, avoid the type of elevated conflict that destroyed earth is never truly entertained as a possibility by the Oankali, despite the fact that they allow humans to reestablish their own societies.

What is important here is not whether the Oankali or the human resisters are "right" but rather that Butler prioritizes choice and chance over biological determinism. The Oankali who

refuse to reproduce with humans will eventually become extinct, as will, according to the Oankali, the humans who refuse to interbreed. The way of the future for Butler is always adaptation and hybridity, since these are what allow species the flexibility they need to exist in worlds that are constantly changing. Such negotiations in Butler's writing are never simple or straightforward, and they are also never devoid of power, coercion, and oppression. Rather, Butler's heroines make choices that neither entirely ennoble nor entirely victimize them and thus contribute to new worlds that could not have been foreseen but that may be the only possible paths to survival.

Aliens, a Love Story: Butler's "Bloodchild"

In Butler's short story "Bloodchild" (1984), we see similar themes of inter-species negotiation and reproduction and the accompanying sacrifices and benefits that come with this. In much science fiction, it is often the woman's body, particularly when pregnant, that is held up as a symbol of either resistance or collusion. Furthermore, the pregnant woman, who is often carrying a multi-species baby, is used to evoke moral judgments from both the readers and the other characters in the narrative. She is often viewed as either a noble figure who has ensured the continuation of humanity or, more often, viewed with derision and seen as a traitor who has aligned herself with the invading presence merely because they have the most power. She is hated both for her decision to privilege alien interests over human ones but also hated, perhaps unconsciously so, for her lack of power, a lack that usually means that the only choices available to her are related to her body. Thus, she is derided both for what she does and also for having her choices limited by patriarchy.

Given the above dynamic in which a woman's body speaks much louder than her voice, it is telling that in "Bloodchild" it is young boys and only young boys who are responsible for reproducing with an alien species known as the Tlic. Butler talks about her "pregnant man story," as she calls it, by stating that she "wanted to see whether [she] could write a dramatic story of a man becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties" (30). Butler not only manages to create young male characters who function as successful and nurturing gestators, but she also manages to question whether the same dynamics of blame and betrayal can as easily be attached to the body of a male who has decided to reproduce with aliens. Not surprisingly, it appears that they can't. While one feels sympathy, concern, and even grudging respect for Gan, the protagonist of the story, his pregnant body does not evoke the same associations of collusion with the enemy as Lilith's or Anyanwu's or Keira's, partially, no doubt, because he is a child, but largely because he is male.

To back up a little and introduce the story, Gan and his family are Terrans, the name given to a humanoid species living on a planet originally inhabited by many-tentacled beings known as Tlic. The Tlic were facing extinction when the Terrans arrived after fleeing persecution and destruction on their own planet. Threatened with extinction and desperate as a result, it does not take the Tlic long to learn that Terrans are the perfect incubators for their eggs, and they thus begin breeding with human males. Human females are left untouched so that they will be free to produce more human males. As is the case with all of Butler's human/alien alliances, humans give up something significant in the negotiation but also gain something in return. Similarly, the initially problematic spectacle of forced reproduction is quickly complicated by emotions of guilt, love, and shame, and also the presence of choice.

The process of gestating and giving birth to Tlic children is dangerous, even-life threatening to Terran males, but in return, Terrans who cooperate live longer, healthier, and more

pleasurable lives. Not unlike Shori's vampiric venom, unfertilized Tlic eggs, which are often

made available to humans, provide a calming, almost narcotic, bliss in the humans who consume

them. Gan narrates the opening scene in which he and his siblings are sharing Tlic eggs:

"T'Gatoi's sister had given us two sterile eggs. T'Gatoi gave one to my mother, brother, and

sisters. She insisted that I eat the other one alone. It didn't matter. There was still enough to leave

everyone feeling good. Almost everyone. My mother wouldn't take any. She sat, watching

everyone drifting and dreaming without her. Most of the time she watched me" (3). Like the

human resistors who refuse to procreate with the Oankali, Gan's mother refuses to fully align

herself with the Tlic, who used her husband and now use her sons as gestational vessels.

Although she does not have the capability of resisting on a grand scale since the Tlic are

physically and politically more powerful than her, refusing the egg and the pleasures inherent in

consuming it is a symbolic protest against the Tlic using her son as an incubator for their

offspring. Like the *Xenogenesis* resistors, Gan's mother believes that no matter what the benefits

of cooperating with the Tlic may be, they can never really outnumber the costs.

Gan, however, at least during the initial stages of the narrative, seems content to carry the

Tlic's offspring due to his profound love for T'Gatoi, the Tlic who will lay her eggs inside his

body when Gan comes of age. The opening passages of the story clearly illustrate this love, as it

shows Gan reclining against T'Gatoi's body, luxuriating in the eggs she has brought for him and

his family. We are also told that the relationship between Gan and T'Gatoi is one that has existed

since Gan's birth: "T'Gatoi liked the idea of choosing an infant and watching and taking part in

all the stages of development. I'm told I 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. I tell Terrans that when

they ask whether I was ever afraid of her" (3). Although Gan is clearly being used to achieve

T'Gatoi's ends of strengthening the Tlic species, genuine love and care exists between the two

characters. Like the relationship between the Oankali and humans, the difficulty of distinguishing where exploitation stops and love and compassion begin is foregrounded.

Trin Min-Ha's "inappropriate(d) other comes into play again in this story. T'Gatoi and Gan are radically different species and will remain so, despite being reproductive partners. T'Gatoi will use Gan's body to make Tlic children, and Gan's family will continue to produce human children. Their alliance, therefore, does not ameliorate or alter their difference, but it does cultivate intense love and care for the other. What's more, the fact that Gan has no averse physical or mental reaction to T'Gatoi's appearance, whereas Lilith must work to overcome her aversion to the Oankali, suggests that Butler believes that human reactions to difference are learned, rather than innate. Had Lilith been introduced to the Oankali from birth, as Gan was to the Tlic, she might have been as nonchalant about her tentacled co-conspirators as Gan is about his.

As we saw in *Xenogenesis, Clay's Ark,* and *Fledgling*, Butler rewards those humans who are willing to biologically comingle with alien species, usually by giving them longer, healthier lives and superior speed, strength, and mental capabilities. However, in return for these gifts the humans must often do that which for many humans would be unthinkable. In "Bloodchild" the difficulty begins when the Tlic begin to hatch while still inside their human carriers. Because the process is extremely painful, the Tlic must sedate the carriers and remove the eggs surgically. It is a bloody and highly dangerous process, and if the Tlic do not operate in a timely manner, or if they leave even one of their babies behind, the human will sicken and die. While we see human/alien interdependence in all of Butler's alien narratives, in "Bloodchild" the stakes are particularly high for humans, at least as far as their physical wellbeing is concerned.

The birthing procedure is framed as a highly intimate process carried out between a Tlic and a Terran, and no Terran is supposed to witness another giving birth. Despite this, Gan sees

just this when a heavily pregnant Terran, Lomas, wanders onto Gan's family's land in search of the Tlic who has impregnated him. (The Tlic is extremely ill and thus not available to participate in the birth.) Gan observes while T'Gatoi does the work that ideally should be done by Lomas's partner:

> She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his blood—both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother's. Left alone, it would have gone on excreting the poisons that had both sickened and alerted Lomas. Eventually it would have begun to eat. By the time it ate its way out of Lomas's flesh, Lomas would be dead or dying—and unable to take revenge on the thing that was killing him. (15-6)

As is the case with any narrative of pregnancy, but especially those that involve alien birth, we see issues of bodily autonomy evoked and perhaps made more grotesque seeing as it is a male body that is being stripped of its power. While certainly Butler is playing with gendered notions of bodily control, she is also using the grisly scene of birth to question where mutually beneficial relationships end and relationships based on coercion and enslavement begin. "I had been told all my life that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together," Gan says after he has witnessed Lomas's heinous ordeal. "A kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse. And I wasn't ready to see it. Maybe I never would be" (16-7).

After facing the reality of his future as T'Gatoi's gestator, Gan begins to wonder if the pleasure derived from the Tlic's eggs, the physical and political protection T'Gatoi provides Gan's family, and Gan's love for T'Gatoi are worth the certainty of pain and the possibility of death. When Gan begins to balk at the contract he agreed to before he was fully cognizant of what

he was doing, T'Gatoi gently reminds him of the history of violence between Terrans and Tlic and implies that although he may find the current arrangement less than palatable, it is better than what occurred before Tlic and Terrans began working with each other. "'The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived,'" T'Gatoi tells Gan. "'Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. And your ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them—they survived because of us'" (25).

When Gan accuses T'Gatoi of keeping the horrible intricacies of birth from him, T'Gatoi reminds him of all the things she has done to keep him and his fellow Terrans safe since their arrival in the unnamed world they now inhabit. "'T'Gatoi was hounded on the outside,'" Gan finally admits:

> 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. (5)

What we learn here is that though the Tlic use human bodies to carry their young and put those humans at risk in the process, they also see to it that family members are not separated and that Tlic cannot take and use any human they want without reprisal. Like the relationships between humans and the Oankali, the power balance is both imperfect and workable. There is paternalism,

interdependence, and a lack of complete autonomy, but there is also collaboration, and while it is sometimes frightening and coercive, not collaborating would likely spell an end of existence for both species. There is also the inconvenient, complicating, but realistic presence of love in Terran/Tlic relationships. Ultimately, the desire to survive, we see again, sometimes requires compromise that would not exist under different circumstances, and alliances arise out of these compromises that quickly render simplistic hierarchies incomplete, even obsolete, and generally unhelpful when trying to truthfully depict human experience.

Butler writes about how she tried to depict this compromise in "Bloodchild" thusly:

> I tried to write a story about paying the rent—a story about an isolated colony of human beings on an inhabited, extrasolar world. At best, they would be a lifetime away from reinforcements. It wouldn't be the British Empire in space, and it wouldn't be *Star Trek*. Sooner or later, the humans would have to make some kind of accommodation with their um … their hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation. 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? (31-2)

Butler is not interested in portraying absolute power within either species. As we saw in her *Parable* novels, she does not want to construct an imperial space story where humans enslave aliens, nor does she aim to write a story where humans are at the complete mercy of hostile aliens. Rather, she is interested in a kind of partnering that will produce undreamt-of results, that is steeped in Blochian utopian dreaming.

As is usually the case with Butler's fiction, in "Bloodchild" compromises are always evolving so that all parties remain satiated enough to keep participating in their side of the bargain. We see this happen in the establishment of the Mars colony of *Xenogenesis*, and we see this happening in the conversation that Gan's mother has with T-Gatoi about the illegality of

firearms on the Preserve where Terrans live, protected from constant Tlic contact. Whereas many of the Terrans would like to carry firearms to protect themselves from overzealous Tlic, we learn that this is illegal because

> There had been incidents right after the Preserve was established—Terrans shooting Tlic … This was before the joining of families began, before everyone had a personal stake in keeping the peace. No one had shot a Tlic in my lifetime or my mother's, but the law still stood—for our protection, we were told. There were stories of whole Terran families wiped out in reprisal back during the assassinations. (12)

Butler implies that earlier generations of Terrans accepted the no-gun policy when they saw that the Tlic were no longer interested in splitting up families and overtly abusing the young men who carried their eggs but still felt physically and politically vulnerable.

Given the complexity of the relationship between the Terrans and the Tlic, it is not surprising that Gan's mother, when seeing the effect that Lomas giving birth has on Gan, strives to protect her son from further torment. We learn that she has been harboring firearms for years despite the laws against them. When T-Gatoi discovers this and tries to take a gun from her, she protests, claiming, "'if we're not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner'" (26). Butler is not interested in difference coexisting politely side-by-side but rather in two radically Other species learning to trust each other entirely with all the risk but also all the potential that such alliances require. The fact that T'Gatoi does not ultimately take the gun from Gan's mother shows that she is, at least temporarily, willing to revisit the structures of the compromise and allow Terrans incrementally more power than they had before.

At "Bloodchild's" end, neither the Terrans nor the Tlic can be deemed more powerful than their partner species. The Tlic certainly run things politically, are physically stronger than the Terrans, and understand the history and geography of the planet more than the Terrans do. However, they cannot successfully perpetuate their species without Terran intervention. Likewise, the Terrans must remain living on a protected Preserve (although they might now be allowed firearms), they must continue carrying Tlic young (although this act is often tied, inconveniently, to feelings of love for the Tlic they are partnered with), and, were they to escape the Preserve, they would likely have a hard time surviving on a planet that they knew very little about. However, they are able to reproduce without outside help, so they are, perhaps, less threatened with utter extinction than are the Tlic. Clearly, an easy taxonomy of power is not available for either species, and they are both, overall, better in alliance than they would be on their own.

Butler uses aliens to interrogate difference in ways that seek not to neutralize or absorb that difference but to force humans to negotiate with it, even incorporate it into themselves in ways that are ultimately self-effacing, but also self-preserving. As we have seen in her other works, embracing hybridity is rewarded, and it tends to be those with less power and therefore less of a stake in human society, who are able to become hybrid with the most ease. This is not to say that the merging of humanity and alienness is ever depicted as easy by Butler, who always makes room for resistance, even when this resistance could possibly lead to extinction. Butler's privileging of hybridity should come as no surprise, seeing as she is a writer who dislikes absolutes. Power is always partial and can only be expressed in limited ways that often involve the body. Butler's heroines are riddled with self-doubt, and her resisters are often as heinously prejudiced as they are noble. Similarly, her aliens, while still Other enough to remain a threatening presence to humans, are not interested in the utter enslavement or complete

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obliteration of humanity but are rather interested in revitalizing both their own species and others through merging and negotiation. With her alien narratives, therefore, Butler has replaced war with compromise, human arrogance with cooperation, and hierarchy with collaboration.

Afterword: Black to the Future Part II: The Legacy of Octavia Butler's Oeuvre

"Do you understand why they chose you—someone who desperately doesn't want the responsibility, who doesn't want to lead, who is a woman?"

— Octavia Butler, *Dawn*

Octavia Butler's legacy has shaped and will continue to shape the future of both science fiction and black literature. Amidst the diversity of scholarly opinion on how to define the symbolic role the future plays in science fiction, the dominant insight seems to be that the future in most science fiction is little more than a continuation of the present. Gregory Hampton outlines two different but connected depictions of the future in science fiction texts when he writes that "narratives that take place in the future can be prophetic in intent and can use futuristic technologies to construct a contemporary plot with exotic elements, or can treat the future as a metaphor for the present by combining the two former alternatives to demonstrate the probable future that a continuation of current trends would create" (xviii). In Hampton's words, the very fact that the future hasn't happened yet renders it largely unimaginable, and, according to Ernest Bloch, a potent site of utopian possibilities. Douglas Kilgore echoes Hampton when he notes that the future in scifi "tends … to be ahistorical, assuming that the future will be much like the past and that an oppressive past must produce an oppressive future" (Queering 235).

In this same vein, Frederic Jameson has written that the future in science fiction is a potent symbol of our intellectual limitations, our frustrating inability to radically re-imagine that which we have always known. He writes that "the role of contemporary SF … is to demonstrate and to dramatise our incapacity to imagine the future, and its failure to represent the future becomes the means by which we are enabled to contemplate our own absolute limits" (10). If we

accept what Hampton, Kilgore, and Jameson say about the many ways the science fictional future is little more than a proxy for the present, Octavia Butler's accomplishments become that much more notable, seeing as in the futures she has constructed, human society as we know it has been largely reimagined and reconstructed. The future as the "logical" progression of the present is not an option in her fiction, and indeed, pretending otherwise is a recipe for catastrophe. Rather, Butler demands that her characters construct a future almost wholly different from what their pasts have prepared them for, and, if they refuse to do this, they will stagnate or die. Butler's characters, particularly her heroines, find that their formerly disempowered statuses have equipped them to slough off the values of their previous existences and prepare for a new frontier—one in which they will lose parts of themselves and gain new ones. Butler's heroine, unlike the traditional hero in science fiction, does not stay whole and intact, but rather triumphs because of her ability to merge with Otherness and become a hybrid figure. The intervention Butler has made in depiction of the conventional science fiction hero is nothing short of transformative.

Butler is also innovative in her constructions of power and identity, neither of which are absolute or immutable. We see this most clearly in the relationships that occur between human characters and Butler's many species of aliens, cyborgs, and monsters. Rather than showcasing characters who remain locked in a victim/victimizer dichotomy, Butler dissolves these oppositions by having multiple species merge and co-create, through symbiosis, through reproduction, or through advanced genetic engineering technologies, and this of course destabilizes assumptions about the static nature of identity categories. Isaiah Lavender writes that genetic engineering, such as the type practiced by the Oankali, "undermines conventional notions of race, among other identity issues, because it shows that race can be directly changed by human intervention" (152-3). This, in turn, "suggest[s] that races will be recombined in ways that will

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transform humanity" (154). We can expand Lavender's analysis and argue that Butler undermines not only the identity markers of race, gender, and sexuality but also establishes fluid and constantly mutating ideas about humanness itself. Butler's fiction isn't about separating into categories, racialized or other, in order to shore up one's allies and eliminate one's enemies; it is about questioning and even abolishing such categories when they reach a point where they are no longer useful. In dissolving such boundaries, differentiating between oneself and a clear Other becomes difficult. Rather than delineating differences and grouping themselves along lines of sameness, Butler's species are all moving toward a world of complete hybridity. While Trinh Min-Ha's "in-appropriated Other" is a concept that many scholars have found helpful with contextualizing difference that refuses assimilation, in Butler's world, that which cannot adapt, negotiate, and at least partially assimilate is doomed to extinction. An allegiance to human identity markers is, in Butler's fiction, a quaint relic of the past, albeit the social attitudes that grew out of such differential identities are not.

Just as Butler uses her fiction to rethink commonly held perceptions of human identity, so too has she re-envisioned the institution of motherhood. With this reimagining of future mothers, the family has also been reimaged. Sharona Ben-Tov has written extensively about the desire of much science fiction to completely dispense with actual human mothers and the messy processes of reproduction and birth that come with them. Rather, much conventional science fiction replaces human mothers with technology, which is seen as neater, more rational, and less subject to error. Agreeing largely with Ben-Tov, Andreas Huyssen agrees that "the ultimate technological fantasy is creation without the mother" (93), an attitude that exists in Shelley's *Frankenstein* but can actually be seen in many ancient cultures' myth systems as well. Some black literature as well features mothers who come to signify the "means of personal and national redemption" (Bergman 286). We see this in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, where Sethe is slow to realize that she

has value beyond her children. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* are three prime examples of novels that run the risk of reducing women's entire worth to their role as mothers, albeit they are certainly not the only novels that do so. Referring to the "African ethos" of children being worth, Sandra Govan has mentioned that Anyanwu, in Butler's *Wild Seed*, constantly prioritizes "the well being and safety of her kin" sometimes at the expense of herself (*Homage* 85).

Given science fiction's inclination to assert that, in an ideal world, mothers would not be a necessity and black fiction's tendency to equate feminine worth and motherhood, Butler is in a unique position to re-envision the symbolic potential of motherhood and, in the process, reshape the depictions of mothers that both genres tend to favor. Butler's mothers certainly derive power from their role of nurturers, and it is their willingness to nurture not just humans but a wide array of species that ensures the continued presence they will have in the future. Butler's mothers value life, but not merely human life, and it is this expansiveness of vision that makes them leaders. At the same time, though, Butler strongly resists the urge to idealize the mothers in her fiction. They are imperfect; are prone to anger, depression, and selfishness; and sometime prioritize the larger mission of species survival over the wellbeing of their individual children. We see this dynamic in *Parable of the Talents* and *Parable of the Sower* where Lauren is unable to sustain a relationship with her daughter, Larkin, while also working fulltime on her efforts to transport the human race into space. While Lauren's devotion to Earthseed is tireless and inspired and might end up being what ultimately saves humanity from itself, Butler does not balk at the reality that Lauren's energy toward mothering humanity into its next stage comes at a cost to her individual mothering of her daughter. Similarly, Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* is a passionately devoted mother to her many children, so much so that she keeps from fleeing Doro only so that she can watch over her children, something Doro knows and uses to exploit her. Although Anyanwu's devotion to

her children sometimes veers close to the trope of the all-knowing, all-protecting, race-saving mother figure of some African and African American fiction, she is not actually able to protect her children's from Doro's violence. Once more we see that Butler has created a mother figure who is powerful but far from the romantic ideal of perfection.

Whereas I would argue that Octavia Butler's fiction is singular in the way it constructs motherhood as an institution that requires sacrifice but also allows for the complete and powerful reconstruction of the future along lines largely chosen by mothers themselves, some feminist critics, such as Dorothy Allison, have complained about the limited role mothers play in Butler's fiction. "I love Octavia Butler's women even when they make me want to scream with frustration," Allison states. "What drives me crazy is their attitude: the decisions they make, the things they do in order to protect their children—and the assumption that children and family come first. Butler's nine books are exceptional … because she advocates motherhood as the humanizing element in society (not a notion I have ever taken too seriously)" (qtd. in Hairston "Octavia" 300). While Allison is certainly correct that Butler's mothers often make multifarious compromises with their bodies and their minds, be it reproducing with aliens, negotiating with monsters, or supposedly betraying their own people, it is these sacrifices that allow for humanity's continuation. Adaptation and hybridity cannot be decoupled from a break with the security and comfort of what has always been.

Of course, being able to give up this security and comfort doesn't happen coincidentally. Rather, Butler's maternal heroines are well suited to the task of transformation precisely because they lack racial, gendered, political, and socio-economic power and thus have few stakes in keeping the world the way it is. Be it Lilith in *Xenogenesis*, Lynn in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," or Keira in *Clay's Ark*, Butler's heroines are willing to make motherly sacrifices because, being disempowered, they have less power to lose and therefore more to gain

from society changing in ways where their previous weaknesses are counted as strengths. Hairston has written that Butler's "heroines reinvent family and create community as a way to rescue and redefine humanity" ("Octavia" 293). While this is perfectly true, we can expand Hairston's observations to not just heroines, but any character of any gender, as we see in *Bloodchild,* who is able to hold an expansive enough view of the future to see the benefits of change. Mothers in Butler's fiction are not merely nurturers and collaborators; they are visionary cyborgs.

With the re-envisioning of motherhood in Butler's fiction comes an inevitable re-envisioning of community. As numerous critics, Elizabeth Kella among them, have noted, "the 'search for and establishment of kinship is a recurrent Afro-American literary metaphor" (128). Other critics have noted science fiction's long history of singular heroes "who don't even feel their own pain" (Hairston, "Octavia" 295) and who focus solely on the mission at hand while growing increasingly alienated from those around them in the process. What the theorists of both genres allude to makes for interesting juxtaposition, the melding of two seemingly diametrically opposed types of heroes, one with a history of privileging strong communal ties and one with a history of aggressive individualism, Haraway's much maligned "man in space."

Certainly in all of Butler's fiction, community can be used to wound and to heal. In nearly all of her novels we are given heroines who are not allowed to succeed without first gaining the support and approval of the community. Butler mentions this tendency in an interview when she says "there is this notion in black women's fiction that people don't tend to operate singly. Our families are important. My work does not reinforce the whole notion of the science fiction hero who goes off by himself and saves the world … my protagonists tend to have to build community around them before they can do anything" (Watson-Aifah 168). Hairston echoes Butler's sentiment when she writes that "Butler's characters value community over individual

success. Or better, individual success is defined in terms of community" ("Octavia" 297).

Although Butler likes her lone messianic cyborg mothers, their success is not gauged by personal

glory but by how their actions benefit communal welfare. In this way, she rather seamlessly

combines the communal ethos of black literature with the celebration of the heroic in science

fiction.

Although De Witt Kilgore has argued that "Butler's tendency to separate her …

protagonists form their birth families, forcing them to make new homes among strangers, strains

the communalist intent of Afrofuturism" (Memorial 356), he is, I think, overlooking the power of

chosen community versus familial community in Butler's fiction. Yes, Butler's heroines from

Lynn to Lilith to Shori often have little to no access to their biological relatives, but their

intentionally constructed and multi-species families often make for stronger ties. Jim Miller

articulates this dynamic when he writes that the ideal for Butler seems to be that the "achievement

of the collective good should not require the neglect of individual autonomy, nor should the price

of freedom be the 'inevitable' deprivation of the weakest among us. Butler's ideal society, it

would seem, is one in which the relationship between the individual and the larger society is

reciprocal and mutually enriching" (347). Essentially, Butler merges science fiction's reliance

upon an individuated hero and black fiction's foregrounding of community in such a way where

neither is free of the other: the community benefits from the heroine's choices and actions, and

the heroine, in return, cannot be successful without the support of the community she has built

and been built by.

In reimagining how both motherhood and community could exist in future worlds, Butler

has clearly changed the face of ideal leadership. As Haraway has famously claimed, "hierarchy is

not power's only shape" (Primate 380), and the heroines we've seen do not deny themselves

power but rather become powerful because of the very behaviors or attributes that made them

relatively powerless under the hierarchies that marked their previous lives. As Sandra Govan has

pointed out, "In each of Butler's stories, a physical, psychic, or attitudinal difference associated

with the heroine sets her apart from society and often places her in jeopardy; each survives

because her difference brings with it a greater faculty for constructive change" (Connections 84).

In Butler's worlds women become heroic not because they are actively seeking power but

because that which originally rendered them powerless suddenly allows them access to power.

When this change happens, compromise, collaboration, hybridity, sacrifice—basically, what the

soon-to-be heroines had been doing all along—become the virtues that define heroism. Because it

is their perceived weaknesses that eventually become the traits that make them heroic, Butler's

heroines tend to be reluctant leaders who take on the jobs of leadership not because they want

them but because they fear what would happen if someone with a narrower vision was in charge.

One such reluctant heroine appears in the last work Butler wrote before she died, the

short story "The Book of Martha," in which Martha, a middle-aged, single, childless writer (more

of a proxy for Butler herself than any of her other heroines), finds herself transported to heaven,

where God tells her that she will, essentially, take his place for a limited amount of time. "'You'll

borrow some of my power,'" he tells her:

> 'You'll arrange it so that people treat one another better and treat their
>
> environment more sensibly. You'll give them a better chance to survive than
>
> they've given themselves. I'll lend you the power, and you'll do this … when
>
> you've finished your work, you'll go back and live among them again as one of
>
> their lowliest. You're the one who will decide what that will mean, but whatever
>
> you decide is to be the bottom level of society, the lowest class or caste or race,
>
> that's what you'll be.' (138)

As is the case in this story, Butler's heroines are often chosen by someone else and are reluctant to be leaders, largely because they feel the pain of those they are leading keenly enough to be wary of failure (Lauren's hyperempathy is the most overt example of this). Like Lynn, Lilith, Shori, and Lauren, Martha claims that she does not want the power that God is granting her, that such a position of authority is not attractive to her. When she finishes lodging her protests God responds by telling her "'that there are millions of human beings who would give anything to do this work.'" He then goes on to insinuate that most of these people, unlike Martha, would prioritize their own power over the good of humanity. Upon further reflection, Martha comes to the same conclusion as God. Butler depicts her point of realization thusly:

> instantly, she thought of some of these—people who would be happy to wipe out whole segments of the population whom they hated and feared, or people who would set up vast tyrannies that forced everyone into a single mold, no matter how much suffering that created. And what about those who would treat the world as fun—as nothing more than a good-guys-versus-bad-guys computer game, and damn the consequences. There were people like that. Martha knew people like that. (142)

We have, at this point, documented Butler's proclivity for constructing heroines whose pre-existing weaknesses eventually turn out to be strengths. Once more we see that the desire to remain on the sidelines, to avoid having responsibility thrust upon them ends up being one of the qualities that will lead to a heroine's thoughtfulness, sense of justice, and efficacy as a leader.

Be it post-apocalyptic, utopian, or more standard narratives of time travel, cyborgs, and alien invasions, Octavia Butler has critiqued and expanded the conventions of science fiction literature. Similarly, by infusing it with the technologically fantastical, she has broadened the scope of black literature. The innovations she has made, from her notions of hybridity to

interspecies negotiation to maternity and leadership, have begun to inspire a generation of black science fiction writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Grace Perry, Tananarive Due, and Dionne Brand to begin to work through possible futures that differ significantly from the worlds that mostly white-authored science fiction has created throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What is truly lasting about her work is her commitment to the idea that true social transformation will require both a loss of human boundaries as well as the expansion of humanity itself. What also stands out is her lack of allegiance to anything, human, alien, or otherwise that would threaten or impede what she sees as the progress of humanity's next leap into something better than it already is.

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