THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK TO OCTAVIA E. BUTLER
In memoriam
Dr. Gregory Jerome Hampton
6 November 1968 – 29 November 2019
All that he touched, he changed.
THE BLOOMSBURY HANDBOOK TO OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

Edited by Gregory J. Hampton and Kendra R. Parker
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**CONTRIBUTORS**

**Steven Barnes** is a *New York Times* best-selling author who has written more than thirty science fiction, fantasy, and horror novels. He is also a pioneering science fiction television writer. His “Stitch in Time” episode of *The Outer Limits* won an Emmy for star Amanda Plummer. The NAACP Image Award winner also has written for “The New Twilight Zone,” “StarGate SG-1,” and “Andromeda.” Octavia E. Butler called Barnes’s Endeavor Award-winning novel *Lion’s Blood* “imaginative, well researched, well written, and devastating.” He has been nominated for Hugo, Nebula, and Cable Ace awards. Barnes has lectured at UCLA, Mensa, Pasadena JPL, taught at Seattle University, hosted the “Hour 25” radio show on KPFK, been Kung Fu columnist for *Black Belt* magazine, been a “Starred Speaker” at the L.A. Screenwriting Expo, and profiled in countless magazines, newspapers, radio shows, and webzines.

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**Ellen C. Caldwell** is an art historian, writer, and professor at Mt. San Antonio College. She completed her master’s at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with an emphasis on contemporary West African art and visual culture. For the past decade, she has researched and written about visual artist Umar Rashid (Frohawk Two Feathers), who explores colonial pasts
as alternative framework to imagine different post-, neo-, and decolonial futures. Caldwell teaches and explores a variety of topics including the arts, identity, gender, and popular media for publications including JSTOR Daily, New American Paintings, KCET’s Artbound, Art History Teaching Resources, and Riot Material. In 2014 and 2016, she completed three international residencies including earning a Department of Cultural Affairs Cultural Exchange International arts writing grant at Yayasan Bali Purnati in Bali, Indonesia, and completing The Lemon Tree House Residency in Camporsevoli, Italy.

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**Gregory Hampton** was Professor of African American literature and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of English at Howard University. Hampton published articles in the *English Journal*, the
CLAJ (College Language Association Journal), Children’s Literature in Education: An International Quarterly, Obsidian III, and Callaloo. His book Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires (Lexington Books 2010) is the first monograph of literary criticism invested in examining the complete body of fiction produced by Octavia E. Butler. Hampton’s most recent monograph, Imagining Slaves and Robots in Literature, Film, and Popular Culture: Reinventing Yesterday’s Slave with Tomorrow’s Robot (Lexington Books 2015), is an interdisciplinary study that seeks to investigate and speculate about the relationship between technology and human nature. Dr. Hampton sadly passed away shortly after the completion of this book.

Joe Heidenescher is a first year PhD student at Howard University where he studies the intersections of identity politics, nationalism, and American literary traditions. Joe earned his MA and BA in English literature from the University of Toledo, OH. In addition to his academic life, Joe also works as an antimilitarist activist. In 2017, Joe worked as a peace activist with the Disciples Peace Fellowship where he taught peace and justice issues to high schoolers around the United States. As a future teacher, Joe hopes to challenge his students to think critically on topics of identity and nationalisms.

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neo-slave narratives, defined as postbellum narratives that trouble the time of slavery. Placing Bontemps’s historical novels *Black Thunder* (1936) and *Drums at Dusk* (1938) at the headwaters of a new transnational neo-slave canon, the book moves beyond restrictive models of neo-slave narratives that confine them by place (North America), writer (African American), and form (narrative).

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writers of speculative fiction reimagine the possibilities and limits of bodyminds, changing the way we read and interpret categories like (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality within the context of these non-realist texts.

Chris Sneed is a PhD candidate at the University of Connecticut and the recipient of a 2019–2020 J. William Fulbright Award. In their dissertation, Chris examines how black identity is constructed, negotiated, and utilized by black/Afro-descendant activists—especially those also working on issues related to black gender and sexual minorities—in the United States and Brazil. Chris spent the 2018–2019 academic year working on his dissertation and other manuscripts-in-progress as a visiting research associate at the Five College Women’s Studies Research Center. In the past, Chris served as student representative of Sociologists for Women in Society, visiting instructor of African American Studies at Wesleyan University, visiting scholar and adjunct at St. John’s University, and worked as an intern for the Trans Justice Funding Project. Outside of these activities, Chris is the founder and co-organizer of the interdisciplinary conference “Borderlands: A Critical Graduate Symposium,” held each year at the University of Connecticut.

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The first fiction by Octavia E. Butler that I encountered—the most spellbinding, mind-bending, heart-pounding novel that I had ever read in a lifetime of extensive reading—was *Kindred* (1979). Then again, perhaps “read” is not the right word. I devoured this book. It had come to my attention in the fall of 1980. That year, newly minted PhD in hand, I was heavily engaged in my first year of university teaching. It was mid-semester when I should have been preparing for an early morning literature class teaching Voltaire’s *Candide* at the University of Kentucky. Yet there I was held spellbound virtually motionless, unable to eat or sleep or even peep at *Candide* nor do naught else that night but continue reading. The first two sentences of *Kindred*’s prologue had hooked me, kept me propped up on my elbows on my bed reading with slight position shifts—until dawn. The novel begins: “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.”

Here was a black writer, a black woman writing compelling science fiction (SF), a writer creating a black heroine while simultaneously telling a fully accessible dramatic tale and re-presenting Black History to three distinct audiences (established SF fans, black readers, and feminists), thus building upon a multitiered fan base. All this despite the specious but popular allegation at that time that science fiction was a genre black people did not read.

Through *Kindred*, a time travel fantasy, with its geographic crossings, interracial strife, and racial meldings in both the present and the past, Butler put a magnifying lens on highly complex American racial and interracial mingling and barriers in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Butler used her characters, both primary protagonists and minor characters, to
reframe and reposition depictions of slavery in the popular imagination. Thus “house slaves” like Sarah, the Weylin plantation cook, were not denigrated comic characters but rather were drawn as complicated multilayered individuals with far greater complexity. Butler re-presented history and drew parallel love stories of interracial conflict and resolution from a perspective that juxtaposed or explored several different ideas simultaneously. Her complexity as artist is precisely the track that this collection of original essays draws upon to focus new attention on Butler and her works.

Yet as celebrated as Octavia E. Butler has become since the publication of Kindred—her highly engaging stand-alone historical fantasy which, as she informed me while we sat at her kitchen table, has never been out of print—and the cascade effect of her other novels and stories, Butler is still only beginning to receive from the academic literary establishment the kind of recognition she earned. From her novels to her short stories (she was far more comfortable crafting novels) Butler always skillfully presented characters, drew richly imagined and carefully honed plots, and exercised precision craftsmanship in working through any problems she faced with creating astonishing fiction. The proof of her success is the public presentations about her work at conference after conference, meeting upon meeting. This was a writer who early in her career won both Hugo and Nebula awards, respectively, the highest honors conferred by science fiction fans and science fiction writers. This was a writer whose topics and visionary fictional treatments were engaging enough to earn her the very well-funded and highly prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur “Genius” Award in 1995. This was a writer highly respected by her peers and beloved by her fans worldwide. Since the 1980s when a handful of scholars began presenting her work at academic conferences—I’m very pleased to say that I was one among that small number of African American critics who began introducing not only the writer but the popular culture genre to academic audiences—interest in her work has grown so that there is always a Butler panel, and most certainly a Butler paper, at almost every literary conference—from the Modern Language Association, to the College Language Association, to the Popular Culture Association and a host of other forums that writers, literary scholars, and cultural critics attend. Some online sources insist that Butler is now referred to as “the grand dame” of science fiction. To the three primary audiences that Butler attracts we must now add additional contingents—students and scholars of any color or racial/ethnic background studying her work; international students and fans; and graduate students from multiple universities the world over who have discovered her novels and short stories as suitable projects for graduate theses and dissertations.
There is an increasing sophistication of her fictions from the neo-slave narrative form adapted to tell the complex *Kindred* story of familial ties to the story of new possibilities shaping new kinds of life on Earth that has origins in a distant galaxy far, far away—see *Clay’s Ark* (1984) and other books in the *Patternist* series which stretch across millennia. Next, the two extant *Parable* novels—*Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)—demonstrate an apocalyptic nightmarish near-future scenario eerily akin to the current strained and stressful contemporary overtly racist/xenophobic self-serving violent political moments occurring across the globe. Arguably, past is present because as Butler once told me, many of the more horrific ideas underpinning the *Parables* regarding dividing people and/or demonizing others is extrapolated from her reading of Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925–1926). The research Butler conducted in composing the *Parable* books is akin to the research she undertook for all of her work. From systematically searching historical archives to produce a *Kindred* to exploring particular geographic terrain in search of a particular locale to set a particular scene, she was thorough. Let me also insert here that indeed Butler had planned a third *Parable* novel, a book which she had intended to set somewhere among the stars far from Earth. But, as she explained at a Chicago State University Black Writers Conference shortly before she died in 2006, she had experienced a deep and prolonged writer’s block. Try as she might, that third novel in the *Parable* series simply would not come.

But at this 2019 present moment, I draw the reader’s attention to the horrific spate of church, synagogue, and mosque murders happening both in the United States and also globally in this third year of the Donald J. Trump American Presidency. In fact, senseless violence, in this country seemingly too often more overtly connected to race or religion or perceptions of power, has been on the rise since 2011. I call attention not only to the attack on New York’s emblematic Twin Towers but also to the hidden prison camps being built or already operating in various nations around the globe. I ask you, as Butler asked more subtly, to *look* harder at immigrant detention centers and refugee camps around the world. Pause a moment to examine the violent racist and xenophobic attacks occurring globally as the world moves toward the third decade of the twenty-first century.

Since her untimely death on February 24, 2006, Butler has gained not only additional appreciation and literary recognition, but because of her keen political insights, she has also become the subject of additional focused study. Her diaries, notes, and notebooks contain root matter for her novels and short stories; these papers show her thinking as she wrote or tried to write. All of these materials have become available to scholars who can make the trek to the Huntington Library in Pasadena, California. She had
possessed the foresight and wisdom to donate all of her records and papers to the Huntington. After several years of sorting, cataloging, and organizing these rich materials showing the development, struggles, and growth of the artist, the Huntington has made these materials available to scholars studying her life and work. We can say now without hesitation that at last Butler has arrived!

Earlier in this section I indicated that Octavia E. Butler and I had a personal relationship—thus the reason, I suspect, that the editors of this book asked me to write the Foreword in the first place. As I glance back at that sentence, I smile to myself because I know that in general, Octavia objected to “Forewords” or lengthy introductions to her books. She did not like them; she felt they often gave away too much of the book itself leaving little for readers to discover. Her emphasis was always on the story and the story’s reader—not what the critic chose to interject. Our easygoing personal relationship was also the reason my name received some space on the cover of one of her novels. She called me one day while I was at home working in my study to ask whether I “would mind” if she gave my name to her editor at Warner Books. They needed someone to write an “Afterword” for Wild Seed. Yes, she actually asked me would I mind?!! It was all I could do not to shout and scream back into the phone. Fanning myself while maintaining my cool, I replied, “No. Of course not; I don’t mind at all. Have your editor call me.” And then we hung up. As I remember it now, a loud “Yes!!” then erupted from my throat and I found myself pounding the desk. That day, or maybe the next, I took the telephone call from Jaime Levine, then an Associate Editor at Time Warner Books, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But how we got to that point of Octavia E. Butler picking up the phone to call Sandra Y. Govan to ask for a favor of sorts came about through several years of bumping into each other at conferences and reading each other’s work. We had “history” as they say. Back in 1996, at the National Black Arts Festival held in Atlanta, a conference panel focused upon black people in science fiction. On the panel was Avery Brooks, who was then playing Commander Benjamin Sisko, a starship commander stationed on Deep Space Nine, a stationary “Federation outpost” in television’s Star Trek universe. A brief aside: DS9 aired for seven seasons, 1993–1999 with 176 episodes. Also, on the panel were widely respected, highly regarded SF writer Samuel R. “Chip” Delany and, of course, Octavia E. Butler. I served as both panel participant and the panel moderator. In that dual capacity, once again it was all I could do to maintain my cool, my aplomb, and professionalism while fielding comments and directing questions from the audience toward a major Hollywood presence and two, in my mind, literary giants. In asking Jamie Levine to contact me to write the Foreword for the 2001 reissue of Wild
Seed, Butler may have recalled our unique interaction on that very special cultural panel where actor, artists, and academician came together to speak to those assembled.

Of course, by 2001, I had read avidly each of Butler’s stories and novels first as fan then as a scholar. In turn, through our conversations she had let me know that she had read my reviews and critiques of those novels that I published and/or presented papers about at different conferences. Initially, her presence unnerved me just a trifle when she sat in an audience and listened to me introduce her or listened to my discussions of her work on a panel. But apparently, she liked the way I handled those presentations sufficiently well so that she had asked Jaime Levine to call me. I understood that she believed critics/scholars have a right to read her work and to see what they saw; but I came to understand that she appreciated my plainspoken style and the clarity of my assessments regarding what it was I saw happening in her work. And that is why I got the call to write the Wild Seed “Afterword.”

Butler and I had several things in common despite the differences in our chosen career paths. We were both “Boomer Babies” or post–Second World War babies. She came into the world in 1947; I arrived one year later. We had both been avid readers as children; visits to neighborhood public libraries through riding our bikes had been crucial to our existence. We both had been blessed with strong-willed independent Louisiana grandmothers, each of whom moved her family west from Louisiana to California during or just prior to the Second World War. We both had mothers who fed and encouraged our voracious reading habits. We were both raised in the church as children, felt some ambivalence toward it at some point in our lives, then turned back to reexamine it with distance and age. We were both children of the summer; her birthday fell in June; mine falls in July. We both kept journals and diaries—she far more diligently than I. Both of us were avid fans of National Public Radio (NPR) and other noncommercial news outlets. She visited my home when she came to speak in Charlotte; I visited her when she lived in Pasadena and then again after her move to Seattle where she preferred the cooler more temperate climate to the heat of California.

Along our journey through grade school or high school we both experienced compassionate, caring public school teachers who reached out to help us along the way. We both had also coped with being outsiders as children within our respective peer groups although for opposite reasons. She had grown too fast and too tall for the children in her age group and thus she was picked upon for that difference and functioned somewhat as a loner. By contrast, I was way too small and too incompetent physically for most of the activities or team sports girls my age played. I, too, was different and thus also largely isolated at school. Invariably, I was the last girl chosen
by my peers for any group or student-led physical activity. Thus, I often felt that I was something of a loner. When we were children, the physical limitations of our bodies definitely set us apart.

Where we differed—she was almost always painfully shy as a child unless she was with her family. To the consternation of my teachers who sometimes wanted to show off my reading skills when other adults visited our class, I was by turns gregarious, well-spoken, and outspoken; then without warning I could become withdrawn and shy, or an object of scorn for other children because I could not work verbal or on-the-blackboard math problems when called upon by a teacher. Neither of us particularly enjoyed elementary school as we each had our private, shall we say, complications with it. Coming from Chicago, mine was the more segregated experience, particularly after I left the special schools set aside for handicapped children in order to enter “normal” neighborhood public schools. Because she grew up in Pasadena, her educational background, although also isolating, was far more racially and culturally diverse, giving her a rich palette to paint from when it came time for her to create diverse characters.

Ultimately, of course, it was Butler’s characters that drew me into her work and held me there, generating my interest in writing about this woman who consciously chose to write black people into a genre which had largely ignored us. And make no mistake: Octavia E. Butler was well aware of the task she had chosen for herself. She was highly cognizant of the fact that before she began to make alterations to it, to challenge and broaden its horizons, SF had largely been the province of white male writers. In general its gods had been H.G. Wells and Jules Verne in the nineteenth century; then came Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, John W. Campbell, Jr., Arthur C. Clarke, Phillip K. Dick, Harlan Ellison, Theodore Sturgeon, Stanley G. Weinbaum, and Roger Zelazny among many, many others in the twentieth century. Of course, there were also some women (white) writing SF or Fantasy in the 1960s and inserting gender into the form—among them Ursula K. Le Guinn, Joanna Russ, and Marion Zimmer Bradley. Then, in the mid-1960s, Samuel Delany broke into the manor house writing SF with such quiet deftness that unless readers were alert and consciously looking for the indicators, they could miss the subtle telltale signs that Delany was skillfully inserting both race and non-heterosexual characters into his far-future worlds. Nearly twenty years later, from 1979 through the 1980s, Butler arrived on scene—having been a student at Clarion Writers SF workshops taught by both Ellison and Delany among dozens of others—determined to place African and African American cultural and historical experience into science fiction consciously and directly, in no uncertain terms. A reader is most keenly aware of Butler’s determination through an even cursory perusal of Kindred or Wild Seed.
The essays in this volume come to Butler’s work through a younger and different set of eyes—those of students born into and who most likely came of age in a new century altogether. A reader of this volume may be able to discern that the contributors to it, like Butler when she fought to get her fiction published and struck out on her own, are determined to bring their fresh critical perceptions of her work to the table. Some of these essays are highly original and illustrative of entirely new and distinctive approaches to Octavia E. Butler’s work. Works like the Bloomsbury Companion to Octavia E. Butler have a twofold purpose. The first goal is to offer information; the second is to provide new and distinctive insights. May all who read the essays herein gain positive and constructive perceptions from that reading. May all those readers who invest their energy and their time in examining this text reap the rich reward of that investment.

Sandra Y. Govan
Professor Emerita
UNC Charlotte
March 18, 2019
We would like to thank all the contributors who submitted essays to this project, including those who submitted essays that were not selected for the collection. The enthusiastic response to the call-for-papers ensured us that Octavia E. Butler’s influence on the imaginations of her readers is widespread and will continue to grow to influence multiple genres of literature and fields of study.
Octavia E. Butler, author of twelve novels and a book of short stories, received a MacArthur Fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as well as the Hugo and Nebula awards. Among many other honors and awards, Butler has also received a lifetime achievement award in writing from PEN. While there have been several collections of essays to include criticism involving the fiction of Octavia E. Butler, there has not been a collection of essays by various scholars dedicated solely to exploring major themes in her fiction. Gregory J. Hampton’s book Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires (2010)—the first monograph of literary criticism invested in examining the complete body of fiction produced by Butler—and Consuela Frances’s Conversations with Octavia Butler (2009)—the first collection of interviews with Butler—are both important introductory texts noting Butler’s position as a literary icon. Gerry Canavan’s Octavia E. Butler (2016) examines Butler’s entire professional writing career. Canavan uses the personal papers, drafts, and other archival sources to piece together a portrait of Butler’s journey as a science fiction writer and a dedicated artist. Moya Bailey and Ayana Jameison’s 2017 coedited special issue, Palimpsests in the Life and Work of Octavia E. Butler: A Palimpsest Special Issue, “examine[s] the threads and traces from Butler’s real life to their expression on the pages of her novels and other writings” (v).

It is thus that our single volume of literary criticism demonstrates Butler’s reach across literary genres and disciplines. The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler is a collection of literary criticism and theory by an international range of contemporary scholars exploring major themes across the full span of Butler’s writing. The Companion seeks to present scholarship that will encourage readers to continue to think critically about Butler’s fiction from various academic fields and approaches. As well as surveying
past and current scholarship on Butler, this collection of essays will also point forward to new directions and new agendas in Butler scholarship on both domestic and international levels.

The fiction of Octavia E. Butler changes the lives of its readers. “All that you touch you change, all that you change, changes you” (Butler Sower 3) is a curiously paradoxical phrase, but it is a perfectly worded description of the work that Butler’s fiction manifests. Her fiction has reached out and touched a plethora of readers across borders of difference and yielded various interpretations of theme and meaning. Butler’s first series, the Patternist series (1976–1984), is the location of her first genesis narrative. It is the creation story of a race of marginalized people with exceptional abilities. In the place of Adam and Eve, Butler posits Doro and Anyanwu—two immortals who wish to create a family filled with children who reflect and out live their parents. The Patternist series begins as a love story between two powerful shape-shifters, one who wears the bodies of others as if they were his clothing and the other who shifts her body’s form without limitation. The narrative of Doro and Anyanwu is ripe for interpretations of identity, race, gender, class, slavery, and American history. As the two characters move toward their goals, they produce children who far exceed their expectations. The novels of the Patternist series become a eugenic laboratory where godly work is done to build and dismantle worlds propelled by variables of difference and power struggle. The story lines span from the ancient terrestrial lands of Kush to extraterrestrial land populated by blue sasquatch-like beings. The Patternist series marks the beginning of Butler’s prognostications about the direction of humanity and its potential to thrive or meet its end.

The Xenogenesis trilogy (1987–1989) may resemble more traditional examples of mainstream science fiction from the “outside” (the perspective of the artwork on the book covers). However, the novels of the Xenogenesis Trilogy are just as uniquely concerned with issues of race, gender, and identity construction as is any of Butler’s fiction. The characters of the series represent the colonizers and colonized from humanity’s history. The Oankali and their human counterparts are located on spacecraft that are reminiscent of floating plantations more than high-tech starships. In the trilogy, Butler employs the gene traders to question definitions and values of human identity. Race and sex are consistently blurred by alien and human characters alike. The third sex of the ooloi and the human-Oankali constructs of the series all attempt to disrupt the validity of notions of identity categorized as normative.

The Parable series is Butler’s most terrifying because it contains the narratives that most clearly reflect twenty-first-century America. Drug addiction, walled communities, despotic political leaders, and a volatile
INTRODUCTION

A economy dependent on the equivalent of slave labor all speculate the frightening direction America has been moving toward in the last three decades. Although the Parable series was left incomplete with her untimely death, it continues to speak volumes about the trajectory of Butler’s entire oeuvre. The Earthseed document that appears in Parable of the Sower acts as the culmination of concerns about the Earth’s environment, shifting definitions of humanity and the employment of religion and other methods of policing power in American society. The Parable series defines god as change and difference as the fuel to create change. Any and all identities dependent on notions of purity and isolation are written as flawed and finite. Characters who embrace complicated identities and communal behaviors often thrive and at least survive in Butler’s speculative fiction. The power of change is evident, inevitable, and can be wielded by anyone with the foresight and desire to survive. The Parable series emphasizes the importance of individuals and communities maintaining flexibility and embracing difference in order to survive. Butler’s fiction is alive and invested in influencing the way we imagine the world in which we exist. In this way, reading Butler’s fiction is an existential experience, which assists audiences in the process of locating themselves in imagined worlds and real worlds.

When examining Butler’s opus, it is important to be aware that all of her fiction is connected by common thematic architecture, character development, as well as political and social concerns. The term “stand alone” in the context of Butler’s fiction does not apply. Kindred and Fledgling are novels that do not need the assistance of a series to establish their value and success. They are, however, well-written narratives that broach the issues of slavery, race, sex, gender, and identity construction in very similar ways to the novels that belong to the Patternist series and Xenogenesis trilogy. The same can be said for the collection of short stories, Bloodchild and Other Stories. Butler’s short stories often resemble starting points for the evolution of larger novel projects or the pairing down of larger projects to smaller gems. The short story “Bloodchild,” first published in 1984, shares several thematic similarities with the Xenogenesis trilogy including, but not limited to, gender fluidity and extraterrestrial-human relations. Likewise, the short story “The Book of Martha” shares themes present in both the Patternist series and the Parable series, notably god and religious construction.

PART ONE: DAWN

This collection is divided into three parts—Part One: Dawn, Part Two: Adulthood Rites, and Part Three: Imago—a tribute to Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy. Dawn (1987) is the first novel in the Xenogenesis series, and it
represents the awakening of its main character Lilith Iyapo to a new world. Lilith is required to reevaluate her worldview in order to ensure the survival of her humanity and what is left of an postapocalyptic earth. As with the beginning of a new day, “Dawn” signifies the beginning of the critical discussions of Butler’s fiction.

Opening Part One is Steven Barnes’s “What Octavia E. Butler Feared Most about Human Nature.” Barnes recalls his professional relationship with Butler, musing over what she would have made of Trump’s America. Barnes’s essay and his musings on what Butler would have made of Trump’s America is a fitting “dawn” or beginning for this collection. Following Barnes is Heather Thaxter’s “I want to live forever and breed people!’: The Legacy of a Fantasy.” Thaxter examines how the application of Patternist philosophy provides insight into how Butler’s adolescent mind began forming distinct literary patterns that help develop her entire life’s work. Thaxter considers the construction of the Patternist series along with its implications about Butler’s passionate interest with social power. In her discussion of each of the five novels of the series, Thaxter sheds new light on the implications of Butler’s employment of telepathic ability and hierarchal status in the real and fictional world. Thaxter acknowledges that Butler’s Patternists are close representations of human society struggling to understand and to identify the self.

Reprinted in Part One is Sami Schalk’s “Interpreting Disability Metaphor and Race in Octavia Butler’s ‘The Evening and the Morning and the Night.’” Currently one of few scholars looking at the treatment of race and disability in speculative fiction, Schalk presents an important, accessible, and exciting perspective to include in our collection. In her piece Schalk asks us to consider the Duryea-Gode disease as a disability metaphor which demonstrates how ableism and racism operate in frighteningly similar ways. Schalk’s essay asserts that disease, race, and disability are all variables of difference too often employed as excuses for oppression and dehumanization. Without suggesting that blackness is a disability, Schalk asserts that Butler’s fiction disrupts the disabled-nondisabled binary and asks its reader to reimagine the possibilities of disability and difference.

The final essay in Part One is Joseph Heidenescher’s exploration of consent in “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty.” Heidenescher asserts that possessing a critical view of consent is crucial in understanding the processes of oppression and subjugation in human populations. He considers the relationships of Gan and Noah to make the argument that the consent yielded in each short story contradicts contemporary theories of consent that are threatened by a posthuman transmutation of neoliberalism. Heidenescher convincingly ties the notion of consent to issues of political philosophy and the body as
capital. His observations about the similarities of the hive-like mind of the Communities in “Amnesty” and the neoliberal multinational corporations of today are both insightful and refreshing.

PART TWO: ADULTHOOD RITES

Adulthood rites have always been about a process of development. As in the Xenogenesis series it has been a process located in the middle or the between of extremes or binaries. It is a stage of development that is difficult and ambiguous, but one that leads to the completion or beginning of a cycle. Adulthood rites signify movement from the beginning or dawn toward a solidified trajectory. Thus, the essays in this part of the Companion reflect attempts to understand and question the trajectories of Butler’s fiction. This part speaks to the possibilities of Butler’s fiction. It considers several lens and directions that might be employed to understand and teach, as well as to expand the scope of Butler’s fiction.

Part Two begins with Kendra R. Parker’s “‘I’m not the vampire he is; I give in return for my taking’: Tracing Vampirism in Octavia E. Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy.” Parker considers Butler’s consistent use of the vampire motif throughout her body of fiction. She explains how Butler reimagines the Gothic vampire in spaces that are dominated by marginalized characters far removed from Eastern European settings or topics. Parker posits that the motif of the vampire is used by Butler to grapple with fears of miscegenation, invasion, and to explore identity loss. The motif of the vampire is shown to be more than a motif constructed solely for the Butler’s last novel. Parker’s essay reveals vampirism is a motif that Butler grappled with decades before the publication of Fledgling.

Kitty Dunkley’s “Becoming Posthuman: The Sexualized, Racialized, and Naturalized Others of Octavia E. Butler’s Lilith’s Brood” elucidates Butler’s engagement with the subjectivities marginalized under the reign of Humanism. More specifically Dunkley is concerned with uncovering how Butler imagines various forms of oppression that conflate and stim for the human condition. Biological determinism is an issue that Butler questions in all three novels of the Xenogenesis series. Humanity’s tendency to allow hieratical behavior to dominate human intelligence is a paradox that suggests that the various forms of oppression that is self-inflicted on the human race might be a result of DNA. More importantly, if such behavior is rooted in biology, it might be possible for eugenic manipulation to lead to the end of oppression.

In “Teaching the ‘Other’ of Colonialism: The Mimic (Wo)Men of Xenogenesis,” Aparajita Nanda examines the Xenogenesis trilogy for its
cache of moral and political complexity. Nanda’s essay explores colonialism in Butler’s trilogy and considers how Others created by the processes of colonization are imagined morally and politically. The Oankali-human constructs in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy asks its readers to reconsider domestic spaces, parenting, sexual morality, and the rearing of children. Butler’s science fictive post-colonial narratives construct a lens that shows how mundane personal spaces can be read as morally suspect and highly political.

Continuing with the subject of colonialism, Gregory J. Hampton discusses the value of using a lens of colonialism to read Butler’s fiction in “Octavia E. Butler’s Discourse on Colonialism and Identity: Dis/eased Identity in ‘Bloodchild,’ *Dawn*, and *Survivor.*” Hampton observes ties between Aime Cesaire’s and Butler’s writing and concludes with remarks that support the notion that colonization is a continuing process that does not end with the usurping of land or culture. Hampton asserts that the idea colonization is an unavoidable process of human evolution and that despite its cruelty and waste of human life, it is inseparable from notions of human identity and survival. Both colonizer and colonized are constantly changed by each other until the point where hybridity shifts toward normalcy.

**PART THREE: IMAGO**

An imago represents the completed images that have been formulated from the dawn and adulthood rites stages. Imago reflects the future as well as the present but does not suggest a conclusion. The essays in this part examine several possible endpoints found in Butler’s writing, but like Jodhas and Aaor, the construct ooloi in *Imago* who shift and change to mimic the needs of humans they encounter, the essays here offer a kaleidoscope of interpretations. From analyzing *Kindred*’s book covers, to exploring personhood, to considering Butler’s influence on fan fiction, essays in this part present mental images of what “Dawn” and the “Adulthood Rites” have been moving toward: readings that help us resee Butler’s work in a richer manner.

“Visualizing Dana and Transhistorical Time Travel on the Covers of Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*”—a long overdue piece of scholarship that investigates the relationship of Butler’s fiction to the artwork found on her book covers—opens Part Three. Christine Montgomery and Ellen C. Caldwell assert that what is on the outside of a book is just as important to the narrative and its reception and marketing success. The essay entails tying a visual analysis to the social and political themes of Butler’s *Kindred*. The essay discusses how Butler’s *Kindred* book covers help to read the legacy of slavery’s history and cultural memory.
Heather Osborne’s “The Pregnant Man Story: Echoes of Octavia E. Butler’s Themes of Reproductive Anxiety in Fan Writing” follows Montgomery and Caldwell in a piece that considers how Butler employs the male body to articulate trauma historically enacted upon the female body. According to Osborne, for women’s pain and emotional reality to become visible, it must first be written onto a visible male body. Just as Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark asserts that whiteness is the default racial identity in American literature, Osborne argues that male bodies offer the default which provides visibility in much the same way whiteness is perceived as normative in American literature. By linking Butler’s fiction with the ongoing production of pregnant man stories in fan communities, Osborne shows how Butler explores themes of reproductive anxiety by shifting the locus of anxiety onto male bodies.

Chriss Sneed’s “Afro-Futures and Theories of ‘the Living’ beyond Human Rights: Octavia E. Butler’s Parable Series” investigates Butler’s commentary on human rights, personhood, and ideas of progress in the Parable series. In Sneed’s examination of the Parable novels the very timely declaration “Black Lives Matter” is shifted to “Will Black Lives Matter?” According to Sneed, Butler undoes and rewrites histories of the apocalypse, the past, and the future. Lauren’s telling of her life offers a vision of struggle and the inevitability of liberation. Not only will Black Lives Matter in Butler’s speculative future, the lives of black women, particularly, will be inevitable. Through the pairing of a critical reading of human rights debates, Sneed asserts that Butler’s fiction facilitates a new articulation of livelihood, social justice, and future possibilities that lies outside of liberal human rights paradigms.

Ji Hyun Lee continues the discussion of the Parable series with the essay, “Trauma, Technology, and the Trickster: Reading Octavia E. Butler’s Unfinished Trilogy.” Lee examines the Parable books through the lens of trauma with the hope of better understanding its ambiguity and locality. Lee argues that Sower and Talents uniquely address and complicate the unknowability of trauma in a way that only Butler’s historically conscious science fiction can, through an examination of technology’s role in the repetition of history that ultimately reveals trauma’s technological depths. Lee ponders on how Butler’s unfinished Trickster drafts shed light on Butler’s grappling with the ambiguity of trauma. Lee asserts that by not completing the Trickster novel, Butler positioned trauma as essentially a problem of the future and defies the idea of trauma as humanity’s predetermined fate.

Aryn Bartley’s essay, “A Space for Discomfort: Octavia E. Butler and the Pedagogy of the Taboo,” considers how Butler’s fiction employs the notion of taboo to persuade readers to reevaluate their personal aesthetics
and worldview inside and outside of the classroom. The essay advocates for the importance of foregrounding the reading experience for students. It is concerned with the pedagogy involved in teaching Butler’s fiction. Bartley acknowledges the fact that the subject matter of Butler’s fiction may not initially be appealing to all audiences. By acknowledging the potential for discomfort, Bartley asserts that instructors can encourage students to engage intellectually with the text and its implications. According to Bartley, by encouraging students to reflect on rather than stifle their reactions to Butler’s texts, instructors can assist students in a process of self-reflective engagement.

The final essay in this collection, “Finding the Superhero in Damian Duffy’s and John Jennings’s Graphic Novel Adaptation of Octavia Butler’s Science-Fiction-Postmodern-Slave-Narrative, Kindred,” by Forrest Yerman, is an insightful reading of the Kindred graphic novel as a black neo-heroic comic narrative. Yerman converges classical definitions of comic book superheroes with what contemporary novelists, historians, and literary critics understand to be the characteristics of an extraordinary hero with the goal of reimagining the heroic status of Kindred’s Dana Franklin. The graphic novel version of Kindred asks its readers to reimagine the ex-slave/escaped-slave or survivor of slavery as a superhero worthy of all the accolades and superpowers of the most extraordinary heroes in American history. After considering the similarities found in Duffy’s and Jenning’s graphic novel version of Kindred and its original version, it is evident that Butler’s fiction is unbounded by genre and is ripe for successful transplantation into other mediums of popular culture beyond literature.

It is our hope that this collection of essays will make a significant contribution to the scholarship surrounding the work of Octavia E. Butler. As Butler’s fictions asks its readers to think beyond normative binaries, it is a task of this Handbook to challenge readers to continue thinking beyond simplistic binaries and across the boundaries of genres and different academic fields. One of the most evident lessons taught by Butler’s fiction is that when difference is approached with open mind and imagination, it can yield productive change and trigger the evolution of things to come. It is with this frame of mind that we invite you to ponder and enjoy the following meditations.

WORKS CITED

PART ONE

Dawn
I am not sure, but I might have been introduced to her by Harlan Ellison at Phoenix Worldcon (“Iguanacon”) in 1978. Just in passing. Over the years I would encounter her at science fiction conventions and book signings, but it wasn’t until I moved back to my childhood home near the Crenshaw District of Los Angeles that we really got to know each other. She lived on West Boulevard in the left half of a duplex, and it was walking distance from my late mother’s house, so we began to get together for dinner, and as she did not drive I would sometimes provide transportation to some of her functions: signings and research outings. We shared a special bond. At that time, the amazing Samuel R. Delaney (who I definitely met in 1978 at that convention) had retired from the science fiction field, so Octavia and I were the only people of color, certainly the only black Americans we knew of in the field. It was unspeakably lonely, and we found comfort in connection and shared experience.

On many, many evenings I sat in her living room with its crowded bookshelves and talked writing, research, life, politics, publishing, race, gender...every conceivable subject. I noticed that she tended to ground her opinions of humanity in her biological research. Did that make her a strict sociobiologist or biological determinist? Not at all. But she did see our
behavior on a continuum with animal and particularly Primate behavior. And because of that, there were two things about human beings that disturbed her:

1. That human beings tended to be hierarchical
2. That they tended to place themselves and their tribes higher on that hierarchy than others.

What does this mean? Well... there are two different basic ways human beings look at the world to understand it. They look at what is similar (water and oil are both wet) and what is different (water evaporates, oil does not). We take this and create hierarchies of pain and pleasure. This is necessary to survive in the natural world: a rattlesnake is dangerous, a coral snake more so. A mushroom is edible, an avocado is more nourishing. And so forth. Combine this with the natural tendency for children to think their mommy is the prettiest, their dog the smartest, their daddy the strongest... and you have the beginnings of tribalism.

We are different from you.
We are also better than you.
Therefore, we have the right to take what is yours, and/or control or exterminate you.

She talked about something called an “emergent” property, a small thing which, repeated over many actions, has large consequences. For instance, an ant might have a genetically encoded instruction to “remove a grain of sand from here and place it there.” Any individual ant doing this is meaningless. But a colony of ants doing this creates a complex and beautiful network of tunnels. Tiny individual tendencies multiplied across thousands or millions of interactions over lifetimes create the kind of dangerous, intractable sexism and racism that Octavia saw as the building blocks of Armageddon. Once you believe others are less than you, you can push them toward the Uncanny Valley, where they no longer seem wholly human:

“They don’t feel pain the way we do.”
“They don’t love their children as we do.”
“They don’t value human life the way we do.”

Excuses for murder. And what is even worse, justifications not merely to perform an action but to celebrate yourself for damaging others. “Manifest Destiny.” “White Man’s Burden” and so forth. Why, God wants us to kill/
rape/torture/steal… for the good of those poor sons of bitches we are actually screwing over. Conscience clear, you can do anything you want. Allelujah, allelujah.

She would watch the current rise of “Incels” and think that they were hierarchical males who are failing at climbing the hierarchy and blaming women who are beating them at their own game. They cannot adjust and are blaming the world for their own failings. Their anger diminishes their sense of a woman’s humanity, until she is an object to be used, not a “person” to be respected. I suspect she would watch the rise of Trump as a symptom of an entire culture tainted with the same moral bacterium one finds infecting Incels: a sense of entitlement, an inability to cope with a shifting cultural landscape, a fear of loss of control leading to a sense that “they” are destroying “the natural order” whether “they” are a different color, sexual orientation, or of another nationality.

Emergent social qualities, compounded over years and generations, fear mutating into anger, anger shutting down rational consideration of things like experience, courtesy, ethics, and social ties. I suspect she would have considered the election of Trump as the greatest political Hail Mary pass in American political history, a desperate move by people who see power slipping away from them, who set up a game to benefit their own children and are seething that it is benefitting others. I am sure that she would have a lot to say, and think about him, and where we are in America right now.

I wish I could have had that conversation with her. But…she left us her thoughts. And she taught us to see beyond surfaces, to embrace the humanity in the inhuman, to stand together against injustice, to create family and hold against the night. To surf on the chaos.

“All that you touch, you change. All that you Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change.”

The forces of evil, and weakness and fear, will lose. You cannot rail against the tide: it continues to come in. But…you can learn to surf on it. And in embracing that change, we are worshipping the divine. Octavia is with that divine now…and all we need to do is put our fears aside and embrace the chaos of existence, and we can hear her voice anew.
“I want to live forever and breed people!” (Kenan 499). This childhood fantasy expressed by Octavia Estelle Butler in the mid-twentieth century has a distinct currency in our contemporary technological environment. As is the case with many authors of science fiction, Butler’s narratives are portents of future realities, and her formative writing could serve as a blueprint for the work of artificial intelligence researcher and mathematician Ben Goertzel. His formulation of a Patternist treatise: the convergence of science, technology, mystic religion, and philosophy includes the somewhat controversial hypotheses of cybernetic telepathic communication and physiological immortality. However, it is the premise of Patternist philosophy that “a mind is thus a collection of patterns that is associated with a persistent dynamical process that achieves highly-patterned goals in highly-patterned environments” (Goertzel “Patternism”) that is particularly germane to offering an original interpretation of Butler’s work. The palimpsestic nature of Butler’s oeuvre reveals emergent patterns resulting from a core premise that intelligence and hierarchal behavior are the defining characteristics of humanity. Intuitively, we recognize these characteristics as part of the pattern of our daily lives, but Butler views this combination as contradictory and problematic. Butler’s consistent reworking of this theme demonstrates a highly choreographed attempt to change readers’ mind-sets, thereby
initiating her childhood fantasy of living forever and breeding people, albeit in a literary sense. The application of Patternist philosophy to Butler’s work of the same name, the *Patternist* series (1976–1984), reveals other commonalities which emerge from the endeavor to attain highly patterned goals in the highly patterned environment of the mind.

The highly patterned environments that Butler created were inspired by her passionate interest in social power (patterns of behavior) and biogenetics (patterns of genomes) and suggest a desire to repattern nonfictional environments. Butler recognizes that as patterns form the basis of what she refers to as “body knowledge” (genetics and biology), they also form the basis of sociological inference which engenders hierarchies (Francis 108). By deconstructing the agency of the body within cultural perceptions of hierarchy, Butler highlights such flawed deterministic reasoning thus provoking debate about the very nature of humanity. Considering the human inclination toward patternistic behavior, she presents what would seem to be the solution: hierarchies of cognitive superiority connected by a telepathic network. Advances in understanding the brain’s plasticity, as well as Carol Dweck’s psychological studies in growth mind-set, support the potentiality for reprogramming arbitrary hierarchies based on embodiment. The architecture of the mind employs different cognitive models that conceptually manipulate its external environment to produce any given reality (Gardner et al. 11). Therefore, if the external environment were to include literal access to other minds, the prospect of attaining an egalitarian society could be facilitated. In her first published series of novels, Butler uses the motif of telepathic ability as the determinant of hierarchal status to explore whether that would be the case.

The dystopic plot of the *Patternist* series (1976–1984) is driven by the evolution of humans with telepathic abilities who are eventually bound in a psychic network known as the “pattern” and controlled by a succession of Patternmasters. The ensuing power struggles extend to the telepaths’ interaction with and dominance over non-telepathic humans ultimately pushing humanity’s chances of survival to the brink. The series consists of five novels: *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay’s Ark* (1984). Significantly, the *Patternist* narratives were neither written nor published in the chronological order of the evolution of the Patternist race and also function as stand-alone novels. Butler progressively built back stories as she got to know each character more intimately in her mind. Rather than hinder the reader’s understanding of the Patternist universe, it reflects the structure of each individual narrative, whereby Butler employs analepsis as an effective form of pattern building. After being provided with digestible segments of the characters’ contexts,
the reader is then taken backwards into their biographies with incremental explanations as to how they arrived at their present situation. Particularly evident in *Survivor* and *Clay’s Ark*, this narrative strategy compels the reader to question their own perspectives and assumptions about the hierarchal power structures that influence decisions which can ultimately determine survival. Both protagonists, Alanna (*Survivor*) and Eli (*Clay’s Ark*), are faced with the unpalatable knowledge that their individual strategies for survival call into question their self-perception of their own humanity. In both novels, the protagonists reside as outsiders within communities that are separated from the general population further highlighting the complexities of hierarchies. By moving the focus away from the invisible cognitive changes which facilitate telepathy, the narratives of *Survivor* and *Clay’s Ark* present a subtext of the primarily religious indictment against outwardly observable physical alterations to the human body which, in these particular cases, result from encounters with extraterrestrials. Although these subplots of the Patternists’ history problematize the agency of physical embodiment as an indicator of humanity, a clear message emerges that when the unseen aspects of embodiment such as cognitive and sensory functions are altered they undermine the concept of humanity in a more sinister way. The attainment of superhuman abilities does little to eradicate the desire for power; those in a position of strength are powerful by default and power that is occultist in nature is decidedly more threatening.

*Wild Seed* provides an exposition of the emergence of Doro, a shape-shifting immortal ancient whose lifework is to perfect a race of selectively bred telepaths. His journey through the ages in different bodies draws attention to the power struggles that are evident across cultures. Doro and the female immortal Anyanwu, also called Emma, often use bodies from the hegemonic classes to serve their own agendas as they travel from country to country, thus identifying the role that physical embodiment plays even within a telepathic community. However, the real power struggles are played out within the internal network of the Pattern (for the sake of clarity, from here on in I will distinguish this pattern by capitalizing it). As this hierarchy is dependent upon mental ability (including the power of healing), non-telepaths, or “mutes,” are effectively enslaved without their knowledge and serve as the labor force. The idea of psychological mind control and voicelessness has obvious allusions to the African American experience historically and contemporaneously: Butler famously said, “I write about power because I have so little” (qtd. in Canavan 3). However, rather than removing the arbitrary power relations evident in all of human society in the narrative of a telepathic network, Butler seeks to dissect the underlying patterns of programming which produce the status quo. As such programming
is formulated in the mind, her exploration focuses on gaining insight into
the mechanics of this largely mysterious human control center, especially
through the hypothetical context of mind-to-mind communication.

It is noteworthy not only that Butler began writing the *Patternist* narrative
during adolescence, but that this period of transition plays a pivotal role
throughout the series’ narrative. During adolescence, ontological changes in
neurobiological sensitivity as well as social context greatly influence decision-
making and behavioral patterns, often with adverse outcomes (Schriber and
Guyer). Butler’s prescient focus on neural plasticity, articulated through
the context of transitioning adolescent telepaths in socially dysfunctional
environments, does more than highlight the heightened physiological and
emotional susceptibility of premature adults. The account of the onset of
Mary’s transition in *Mind of My Mind* provides an insight into how such
sensitivity is triggered by ontological changes:

Something in the girl’s expanding ability had changed. Suddenly she was
no longer passively absorbing the usual ambient mental noise. She was
unwittingly reaching out for it, drawing it to her. The last fragments
of what Doro called her childhood shield—the mental protection that
served young actives until they were old enough to stand transition—was
crumbling away. She was in transition. (45)

This description of Mary’s adolescent transition into an active telepath
resonates with the concept of transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS),
whereby electromagnetic currents affect electrical signals in the brain for
the purpose of manipulating physiological responses (OHBA “Transcranial
Magnetic Stimulation”). Similarly, the “childhood shield” works in the same
way a conductor reroutes lines of magnetic flux around a magnetic-sensitive
object, and once it is removed the magnetic fields terminate on the opposing
poles; the mental noise (thought patterns) of others is attracted by Mary’s
mental noise in the same way. This receptivity facilitates emotional changes
in Mary’s neural pathways as her husband Karl realizes during his mental
contact with her. She is exposed to “other people’s raw emotions. And now
he realized that when he let himself get caught up in those emotions, he was
standing in the middle of an open pathway” (*Survivor* 51). Interestingly,
Peter Enticott’s recent experimental research involving adolescents suffering
from brain disorders shows how emotional receptivity is enhanced when
TMS is employed which is essentially what is happening to Mary but without
the technology.

The parallels between Butler’s twentieth-century fiction and nascent
neuroscience are astonishing and can be read as analogous to the unique
anatomical structure of the adolescent brain. Galvan suggests this period of hyperactivation of the brain’s neural networks and associated hyperresponsivity to the environment be viewed as a window of opportunity to positively influence individual behavior (263). If there was an optimal time to reprogram hierarchal behavior then this would be it, when the brain acts like a cognitive magnet. Doro’s reference to the formation of a new shield during transition (Mind of My Mind 143) indicates a time of vulnerability wherein the protective childhood shield fragments, thereby temporarily opening a channel that exposes the individual to mental noise. The agony of going from one state to another: latent to active is relieved only when the transition ends and a new shield has formed. Although humans do not have literal cognitive shields, conceptually the protective guidance from caregivers, generally parents, is like a shield that is rejected during adolescence as individuals undergoing this transitory life-stage prefer to actively seek counsel from their peers and make decisions based on a risk-reward system (Galvan 262). When the period of adolescence ends, as the mature adult is no longer in the same state of vulnerability it could be likened to having a new shield in place. In their 2015 review of research supporting adolescent neurobiological susceptibility to social context, Shriber and Guyer posit that “several models of adolescent brain development have suggested that changes in brain-based social sensitivity during adolescence promote developmental trajectories that range from a successful transition to adulthood to those culminating in psychopathology or maladaptation” (2).

The transition experienced by the Patternists is also dependent upon social context and social sensitivity. Their developmental trajectories are contingent on the social support provided during this metaphorical rebirthing as evidenced in Wild Seed:

Power came the way a child came—with agony. People in transition were open to every thought, every emotion, every pleasure, every pain from the minds of others. Their heads were filled with a continuous screaming jumble of mental “noise”. There was no peace, little sleep, many nightmares—everyone’s nightmares. Some of Doro’s best people—too many of them—stopped at this stage. They could pass their potential on to their children if they lived long enough to have any, but they could not benefit from it themselves. They could never control it. (73)

Butler’s explication of the literal pain caused by mental intrusion emphasizes the need to temper the potentially destructive power of the mind. If the mind as a collection of patterns becomes part of a larger pattern due
to its interaction with other minds, then why is transition such a dangerous process? This can be answered by applying the Patternist hypothesis that two main forces govern such a system: self-organization and goal-oriented behavior (Goertzel “Patternism”). According to Christian Fuchs, “in a self-organizing system, new order emerges from the old system” operating on a number of diverse characteristics (863). By isolating just four of these characteristics—control parameters, critical values, selection, and inner conditionality (863)—it is possible to identify the reason for it being a difficult period. Attributing emotional and neurobiological development as control parameters, once these enter the critical values stage (maturity), structural changes occur throwing the system into a phase of instability and criticality (telepathic transition). At this point, bifurcation selection of development pathways is determined by inner conditionality (mental noise and neurobiological functions) and boundary conditions from the environment (social contact and conditions). Additionally, although cognitive mapping of the external environment enables problem-solving (Gardner et al. 16), and hence goal-orientated behavior, this would be highly problematic when elements of that environment are invading the mind itself. Once again the parallel with contemporary social conditions is startling as clinical psychologists are now concerned about the impact of preadolescents in particular being permanently “switched on” to social media and the World Wide Web. Elizabeth Kilbey argues that the way in which children are virtually connected is “impairing important developmental skills needed for adolescence and adult life” (BBC News “Breakfast”). While the phenomenon of virtual connectivity is already causing behavioral and cognitive changes in children, the long-term effect of which is yet unknown, it raises the important issue of socialization and its role in supporting successful adolescent transition. Although Butler was writing in a pre-digital era, she does address the importance of physical contact during the Patternists’ transitional phase in more than one of the novels in the Patternist series. Each transitioning Patternist is paired with a “second” but this does not always end well, especially if the second does not have the necessary strength to protect either party from the ensuing violent struggle involved in transition. The character of Anyanwu, the immortal shape-shifter who appears in Wild Seed and Mind of My Mind, has a particular gift for helping individuals through transition. Although not telepathic, she has the ability to read flesh-messages from “a small amount of raw flesh,” along with the physical and emotional strength to prevent them from hurting themselves while providing comfort and intimacy (Wild Seed 55, 102). Butler has essentially ascribed Anyanwu the ability of DNA fingerprinting, minus the technology, in a narrative that
was published four years before the scientific discovery of such by Alec Jeffries in 1984 (Moreau-Horwin “DNA Fingerprinting”). In Anyanwu’s context, the reading of patterns features not only as a highly patterned goal to understand and support those in transition but in order to clone bodies for herself to change her appearance, age, ethnicity, gender, or species at will. This is yet another example of Butler’s foresight as the following passage shows: “Anyanwu tore off her cloth and dived into the sea before her confidence deserted her entirely. There, she transformed herself as quickly as was comfortable. She became the dolphin she had eaten” (Wild Seed 57). The method Anyanwu uses, eating the flesh, resonates with cloning experiments undertaken in the 1990s whereby the somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT) method resulted in Dolly the sheep and other cloned mammals, and could technically enable the cloning of humans, if ethics protocols allowed (The Roslin Institute “Cloning FAQs” sec.12).

The disturbing social context and the complex psyches of the characters in the Patternist universe are particularly sinister scenarios for an adolescent mind to have imagined but seem to serve a purpose for Butler’s personal and professional survival. Admitting that by hiding out in a big pink notebook she could become whatever she pleased, including a telepath, and “be anywhere but here, any time but now with any people but these” (Butler “Positive Obsessions” 12), it would seem Butler was seeking to connect with alternative realities: both literal and fictional. Drawn to the concept of telepathy at a time when it was widely considered to be scientifically feasible, Butler’s journals indicate she expected to eventually develop these powers (Canavan 42). The appeal of telepathy may have been a response to the alienation she felt in her physical world. Her craving to connect is clear, and yet she chooses a medium that, if it were possible, is not dependent upon visuality or indeed spatio-temporality. Herein lies a significant psychological indicator of how Butler addresses the effect of othering. As an extremely tall (she reached six foot by age 15), androgynous-looking, black female, Butler was all too aware of how visuality engenders othering. By imagining the benefits of telepathy, nonvisual communication, Butler is seeking to bypass the hierarchies that, paradoxically, mean her visibility contributes to her invisibility in terms of power relationships.

Although the fad of extrasensory perception (ESP) was at its height in the 1970s, the decade in which the first books of the Patternist series were published, it had all but lost its psychological credence by the end of the twentieth century. Digital technology is providing a resurgence of the popularity of the concept, in theory at least, and although Butler’s fictional telepaths are specially bred, her vision may not be as speculative as first thought. Significant advances in neurobiology as well as the affordances of
digital technology present possibilities of mind-to-mind communication, albeit through the mediation of technology (Goertzel 23), rather than the physiological transmissions thought possible in the 1970s. So, although Butler was influenced by the parapsychology purported by J. B. Rhine (Francis 17), Goertzel’s Patternist vision of mind-to-mind communication grounded in cognitive science and cybernetics is significant to the analysis of Butler’s work because of his distinction between the various kinds of minds and communities and their subsequent impact upon communication and hierarchies.

Human minds are both singly embodied (physical) and body-centered (while associated with a physical system, the mind mostly consists of emergent patterns between that system and the environment); so, the mind is a set of patterns which connects and interacts with external patterns (Goertzel 19). Of particular interest is the concept of body-centered minds. When interacting with physical and communicative tools such as graphs and writing, they are defined as tool-dependent; alternatively, they become socially dependent when interacting with other mind-bearing systems (Goertzel 21). Both types of body-centered minds can be demonstrated in this analysis. Firstly, tool-dependent patterns are formed by Butler’s interaction with her readership through the medium of writing. This can be further understood as transformative literary telepathy. Taking up Derrida’s argument that the “medium is the maker or performative force,” Joseph Hillis Miller identifies the “Boomerang Effect”—the affordance of the medium to cause an action regardless of the message contained in it (162). In this way, the very existence of the medium itself transforms the pattern which it enters. This could be likened to the ripple caused by a pebble being thrown into a body of water. Similarly, the psychometric learning stones and history stones referred to in Patternmaster (59, 70) could also be included in a tool-dependent mind system. Embedded within these artifacts are fragments of everyone who has touched them, essentially “heterarchical networks” or the systems which retain the memory of previous pattern interactions (Goertzel “Patternism”). This is a compelling concept, especially in view of Hillis Miller’s assertion of the performative power of something embodied in the tekne of a medium (171). Her inclusion of psychometry clearly demonstrates Butler’s acknowledgment of the emergent patterns resulting from human interaction with media. This is particularly portentous given that her narrative was published half a century ago.

By describing herself as having “the kind of imagination that hears... radio imagination” (Mehaffy and Keating 45), Butler is outlining her role in a socially dependent mind system. Human interaction is based on a system of signals that requires sensory decoding. Butler’s emphasis on audibility
rather than visibility alludes to listening in to others’ thoughts, which is how telepathy operates. It is more intimate than observation as it facilitates access to an individual’s true self and intentions, which are often veiled or misread through the physicality of the body. While Butler could not communicate through telepathy, the analogy of a radio imagination highlights her perceptive ability to decode patterns of cultural biases without relying on the agency of the body. Similarly, Butler employs subversion of the hierarchy of the senses and embodiment as narrative devices. Mehaffy and Keating argue that just as in radio narration there is a displacement of the body of the speaker, in Butler’s fiction the reader is presented with the same predicament (Francis 100–101). By introducing the reader to the characters’ problems before revealing their physicality, Butler is hindering preconceived biases and facilitating an opportunity for potential change in the reader’s frame of reference. So, Butler is not intending to rewrite the bodily inscribed narratives of individual characters, but rather compelling the reader to read those narratives without ascribing their own subjective narrative.

In *Survivor*, the first two chapters describe protagonist Alanna’s escape from the Tehkohn, one of the alien races inhabiting the Earth-like planet to which non-telepathic human Missionaries have fled. It is not until the third chapter that Alanna’s parentage is divulged. Up until this point the reader has no preconceptions of what is initially a disembodied character in their mind until the “punch”—to use Butler’s term—the realization that Alanna is mixed race (qtd. in Francis 104). Butler deliberately disconnects the visual until she has contextualized the character’s situation. Although living among aliens, Alanna still discerns their humanity while her fellow colonizers view them as lower creatures (*Survivor* 5). This foregrounds the nature of humanity and questions the degree to which it is defined by embodiment. Afterall, the Kohn tribes do display human characteristics and are humanoid in shape; their inferior status is attributed to the more obvious differences in their appearance, namely a covering of thick and strangely colored fur that changes to reflect their emotional state (5, 7). The difference in perception therefore is due to Alanna’s having intimately, in both senses of the word, interacted with them thus emphasizing that perception is dependent upon distance. Distance is also significant in the timing of the introduction of Alanna’s ethnicity: Butler problematizes the degree of humanity of extraterrestrial beings rather than socially constructed racial hierarchies of humans. Survival for the Missionary colonizers is reliant upon their being able to change those patterns of perception to enable interspeciesist relationships. This is further problematized by the religious framework the Missionaries adhere to: any alteration to the human body that is made in God’s image is deemed blasphemous (5, 33).
Butler is hereby identifying the operation of the dynamical principle of “credit assignment”—habitual patterns in the system that are found valuable for goal-achievement are explicitly reinforced and made more habitual (Goertzel “Patternist”). By remaining within the habitualistic pattern of religious dogma Missionaries achieve their goal of staying faithful to the Sacred Image; however, this prevents adaptation to the new social context and the solution for survival. Conversely, Alanna’s actions demonstrate goal-oriented behavior based on a different principle, “pattern creation”—patterns that have been valuable for goal-achievement are mutated and combined with each other to yield new patterns (Goertzel “Patternist”). Alanna is able to readjust her patterns of reasoning to see the bigger, revised pattern of goal-achievement. These are clear indicators of why Butler considered the combination of intelligence and hierarchal behavior as a contradiction. Because minds—as systems of patterns—are goal-focused, they are associated with intelligent behavior; therefore, tension between goals will naturally generate hierarchies. In The Hidden Pattern: A Patternist Philosophy of Mind, Goertzel identifies the key goals of biological intelligence, as opposed to artificial intelligence, relating to the “tight association that exists between minds and particular embodiments”:

These include the survival of the organism embodying the mind and its DNA (the latter represented by the organism’s offspring and its relatives). These lead to sub-goals like reproductive success, status amongst one’s peers, etc., which lead to refined cultural sub-goals like career success, intellectual advancement, and so forth. The external goal of survival gets internalized into personal goals that are believed to enhance survivability, and in social animals, into societal goals that enhance the chances for group survival. (49)

Butler creates tension between this goal: the survival of the characteristics of specific DNA through its progeny and the goal of survival due to the compromise of specific DNA through symbiosis with alien DNA. In the Patternist series survival is always contingent upon the body becoming a site of recommunication through mutation, despite the physiological alteration of the human body being deemed as responsible for diminishing an individual’s humanity. Butler hereby exposes a significant difficulty: the mind produces a narrative of the self which is based on embodiment; therefore, any changes to embodiment will consequently affect the way that narrative is understood or retold. Tellingly, technological or surgical alteration of the body that enhances or repairs corporeal features such as prosthetic limbs, cochlea implants, or cosmetic enhancement does not seem to engender
the same discrimination as physiological genetic conditions which result in disfiguration and disability. Although such real-life differences are not a result of extraterrestrial interrelationships, Butler nonetheless alludes to this in her descriptions of the Clayyarks, “physically mutated mutes” resulting from the spread of an extraterrestrial microorganism: “Patternists and Clayyarks stared at each other across a gulf of disease and physical difference and comfortably told themselves the same lie about each other. The lie Teray’s Clayark had tried to get away with: ‘Not people’” (*Patternmaster* 107–108). Although both Patternists and Clayyarks are human mutations with enhanced powers, the physicality of the quadruped Clayyarks is too different to be acceptable (*Clay’s Ark* 166). As individual behavior is influenced by the social group an individual most strongly identifies with, be it ethnic, religious, gender, and so on (Leary 104), survival strategies will also be dependent upon how strongly the individual agrees with the goal-achievement of that group.

This is specifically demonstrated in the way in which the Pattern binds together the telepathic community. At face value, it could be understood as being the ideal pattern of socially dependent minds. However, during the formation of the Pattern, Mary, the protagonist of *Mind of My Mind*, reveals a significantly negative aspect of being connected in this way: “Their thoughts told me what they were, but I became aware of them—‘saw’ them—as bright points of light, like stars. They formed a shifting pattern of light and color. I had brought them together somehow. Now I was holding them together—and they didn’t want to be held” (54). Despite the beauty of this dynamic Pattern, returning to the magnet analogy objects that have been attracted to a magnetic-sensitive object have been displaced and are held by a force they are unable to repel; therefore, they have no freedom in this new spatial position. The language also resonates with the physical universe in which magnetic fields maintain order in what is also a highly patterned environment. The rich use of similes continues to express the ominous nature of Mary’s Pattern:

Their pattern went through kaleidoscopic changes in design as they tried to break free of me. They were bright, darting fragments of fear and surprise, like insects beating themselves against glass. Then they were long strands of fire, stretching away from me, but somehow never stretching far enough to escape. They were writhing, shapeless things, merging into each other, breaking apart, rolling together again as a tidal wave of light, as a single clawing hand. (54)

It is interesting the way in which Butler envisions this mental link: the description attributes an almost spiritual dynamic to the Pattern, despite
it being an instrument of entrapment. The emotional responses of those bound to Mary are presented quite beautifully as the refraction of movement and light. Mary, as both savior and jailer, continues to gather telepaths exponentially growing the Pattern into a covert community. Once more the importance of transition is foregrounded. Mary soon realizes that due to the Pattern she is also able to identify latents through their “slender threads, fragile, tentative…” and then she triggers their transition thus enabling them to become active telepaths (138). In this way, she is savior to ones who would otherwise suffer the effects of being caught in a state of telepathic limbo (140). As the Patternists come to accept their condition, they accept the unity that Mary facilitates as a “symbiont, a being living in partnership with her people” (213). It is this unity, goal-achievement agreement, which ultimately enables Mary to use the Pattern to destroy the despotic, vampiric Doro in a psychic battle which ends in his being “consumed slowly and pleasurably” by his usurper, Mary (215).

Notwithstanding the affordances of the Pattern, having direct access to another’s thoughts and feelings would clearly be unsettling mentally and emotionally for both parties. There is also the question of ethics in relation to individual privacy resulting from what is essentially a surveillance society. Two types of manipulation are evident in the world of the Patternists: mutes are unknowingly controlled, as even when in office they are not in positions of power (155), and although the Patternists can activate mental shields they cannot access other minds while these shields are operational, although these can still be penetrated by the Patternmaster.

The mental shields sound very much like digital network-based firewalls which provide a measure of protection from unauthorized access, conceptually at least, but can still be overridden by more sophisticated software. This phenomenon can be likened to the pervasive digital network that underpins contemporary society. We are now connected to a unified data infrastructure which anticipates our intentions and can influence our decisions (Cristianini 38). Recent revelations regarding the data mining of certain social networking sites to influence voters in supposedly democratic nations are not isolated, thus demonstrating the way in which connectivity does not only change individual behavior but has grave, far-reaching, societal implications. When Goertzel published his Patternist philosophy in 2006, he speculated that “one possible future for the human race is that it fuses with computer technology to become a ‘tele-EDA [Estimation of Distribution Algorithms]—mindplex’ which would be telepathic in nature” (23). Although we are not yet literally fused with technology, in this sense at least, our interconnectivity, dependence even, on AI systems is already changing our behavior. Of note is Cristianini’s claim that “subtle design choices” and
data collection methods can create the risk of discrimination against certain ethnicities (40), acknowledging, as Butler does, that hierarchies are evident in all types of relationships (patterns). Indeed, her depiction of Doro’s selective breeding program outlines just that.

As behavior is determined and influenced by data collection, the Pattern (a mental version of the Internet) has the capability to physically manipulate and control bodies as well as minds. The Patternists’ history culminates in a final showdown between Teray and his brother Coransee in *Patternmaster*. Teray engages his psychic power to physically destroy his opponent:

> With his last strength, Teray swept through the struggling Housemaster’s brain. Coransee had no defence now. He was completely occupied with his injury. Teray swept over him again and again, leaving himself no strength to keep his own body alive. He was killing both Coransee and himself, but his awareness had deteriorated to such a degree that he did not realise it. He realised only that he could not hold onto consciousness much longer. That he must do as much damage as he could while he could... He knew nothing until just before he lost consciousness completely. Only then did he realise that he had won. Coransee was dead. (166, 167)

Evidently, the direct relationship between the power of the mind and physical energy is destructive to both parties. The possibility of causing injury and death through telepathic engagement takes the concept of mindplexity to another frighteningly dystopic level. Defined in the following way by Goertzel, “a mindplex is a mind that is composed (at least in part) of a set of units that are, themselves, minds” regardless of the type of embodiment (21), and can therefore be read as a metaphor for contemporary digital connectivity which enjoins minds despite computer interfaces. The covert nature of the Internet certainly facilitates the manipulation of minds in almost unlimited ways, which can and do ultimately lead to abuse, injury, and death; underground networks of paedophiles, human traffickers, hate-groups, and suicide-self-help groups are just a few nefarious examples of how this invisible mindplex provides the conditions for power to be exercised in the most iniquitous way. Although physical energy is not directly involved in the way that it is with the Patternists, the result of mind control is the same: people engage in actions, forcibly or otherwise, which affect their physical and mental well-being. Power is also exercised through this network in purportedly less heinous methods, such as marketing and political and religious campaigning, with the highly patterned goal of changing highly patterned environments.

Without delving into the scientific intricacies of Goertzel’s logic of mindplexes, the idea that multiple minds within minds or indeed the most
complex environment—the universe—can be perceived as a mind is tantalizing in relation to Butler’s vision in the Patternist series. By extending the scope of connectivity to the physical universe, Butler once again emphasizes the difficulties encountered in attempting to change established patterns of behavior within highly patterned environments, even when motivated by the achievement of constructive goals. As the prequel to Survivor, Clay’s Ark provides a contextual backstory for how a colony of Christian Missionaries ends up on a planet that mirrors Earth in both terrain and behavioral hierarchies. In an attempt to become voyagers of the stars, the Patternists use their superhuman psionic abilities to build a spaceship powered by “an exotic combination of particle physics and psionics” (153–154). Notably, their agenda for leaving Earth is contextualized within a “feared turn-of-the-century irrationality—religious overzealousness on one side, destructive hedonism on the other, both heated by ideological intolerance and corporate greed” (154). In a covert government-funded program, the Patternists send a crew of mutes on what turns out to be an utterly catastrophic exploratory mission. Butler is hereby highlighting the hierarchal practice of sending primates and other animals into space to test their physiological and psychological well-being as the precursors for human space travel. Although in this case, the mutes are also human. The only surviving crew member, Asa Elias Doyle (known as Eli), crash-lands back on Earth and with his body having already been invaded by an extraterrestrial microorganism he inadvertently creates a new species, thereby altering the human geography of Earth (200). The Clayark plague not only decimates half the population but survivors now pass on a gene that causes mutation in any subsequent offspring (Survivor 32). Faced with the imminent threat of extinction the Patternists now attempt to leave Earth themselves. However, the Patternists’ telepathic abilities are a barrier to their freedom, as they are unable to break the mental ties they had with those remaining on Earth (34). This like-mindedness supports the suggestion of mindplexity and shows how failure, whether voluntarily or not, to break free from particular mind-sets is potentially destructive to humanity as a species. The subsequent seemingly altruistic attempt by the Patternists to save humanity by sending unaltered non-telepathic Missionaries into space also encounters the same difficulty. Butler’s consistency in posing variations on a theme with the same inevitable outcome emphasizes the influence of long-established patterns of thought.

The Patternists’ failure to survive beyond the parameters of the Earth can be read as humans being constrained to their “place” in the known universe. From the stance of religious ideology, it can further be understood in terms of validation by the ultimate Patternmaster, God. Missionaries—unaltered humans—have the ability to purposefully traverse the universe based on the
premise they are made and remain in God’s image and consequently their mission is not solely one of survival but to “spread the Sacred Image to one more world” (Survivor 32). Conversely, Patternists and Clayarks are confined to the lower realm of Earth because their altered embodiment does not support this: the Patternists because their superhuman powers allude to demonic power and the Clayarks because their appearance makes them too animal-like. By foregrounding Christian hegemony, Butler introduces a familiar pattern—a grand narrative—and then adopts a postmodern solution to enable pattern creation, as shown in the dialogue between Alanna and her adopted mother Neila Verrick in Survivor:

Some Missionaries say God has quarantined them on Earth in their city, their Forsyth. Chained them here for their own attempt at altering the Sacred Image.

I’ve heard that talk.

And you don’t believe it—just as you don’t really believe other more important things.

Alanna said nothing. (33)

Alanna, the adopted daughter of the leader of the Missionaries, is already positioned as subaltern due to her prior existence as an orphaned and subsequently feral child. It is this experience of living apart from any societal group that provides Alanna with the openness of mind to adapt her mindset to achieve the optimal chance of survival because her decisions are not influenced by the metanarratives which serve to legitimize the philosophical reality of the Missionaries. Instead, her temporary and superficial acceptance of their doctrine for personal gain which is reminiscent of rice Christians positions her as a postmodern subject, in that she legitimizes her own decentralized, localized narrative founded on the goal of survival. Another psycho-sociological factor that is relevant to Alanna’s situation is out-group homogeneity bias. The Missionaries demonstrate out-group homogeneity bias in their assumption the Kohn’s are more similar to each other thereby engendering stereotyping and creating an “us and them” scenario. Because Alanna does not exhibit bias toward the Kohn out-group, her assimilation is successful, in spite of initial conflicts of interest and inner turmoil.

What is particularly interesting in relation to Butler’s work is Goertzel’s argument that individuality—a marker of identity and thus humanity—may become less important than the emergence of a “larger posthuman intelligent dynamical-pattern system” (345). There are elements of the Patternist narrative that hint at this concept, although it is generally enveloped in pseudoscientific/parapsychological terminology. A
compelling example of the posthuman condition is found in *Survivor* when the Verrick Colony Mission Ship lands on a second Earth. A deformed corpse is discovered in the sealed engine compartment and Jules Verrick and Alanna conclude:

“Unless there’s equipment—a computer or something—aboard that we haven’t found, I’m going to assume that somehow, that man was our guidance system.”

“But how could he…?”

“He could be programmed to do whatever they wanted him to do. You know that. Programmed to control the drive, and propel the ship wherever his ability and his Implanted knowledge told him there might be a habitable world. Then, when his job was finished, programmed to die. He couldn’t have been a telepath or he would have died long ago, but he had useful abilities just the same.” (36)

The image produced here certainly fits Hayles’s definition of the posthuman as an indistinguishable coupling of biological organism and machine (Leitch 2174). Similarly, the unidentified corpse sealed within the engine is clearly part of an extended conceptual pattern with highly patterned goals, emergent from and directed by the telepathic Pattern. The Pattern itself could also be viewed as posthuman, due to it being a “shifting pattern of light and color” which essentially operates as a single entity achieving common goals (*Mind of My Mind* 54). While Butler undoubtedly used the physical universe as inspiration for her character’s description of the “mental universe” of the Pattern recorded in *Patternmaster*, it has allusions to the dynamical-pattern system outlined by Goertzel and gives an insight to how such a system would not necessitate embodiment:

Teray, seemingly bodiless, only a point of light himself in this mental universe, discovered he could change his point of view without seeming to move. He was suddenly able to see the members of the Pattern not as starlike points of light but as luminescent threads. He could see where the threads wound together into slender cords, into ropes, into great cables. He could see where they joined, where they coiled and twisted together to form a vast sphere of brilliance, a core of light that was like a sun formed of many suns. That core where all the people came together was Rayal…..the sphere of light was not a thing that he had to travel to, but a thing that he was part of. He could not travel along the thread of himself. He was that thread. Or at best, that thread was a kind of mental limb…. (155)
Although the core of the Pattern is identified as Rayal, the Patternmaster, the individuality of each member is subsumed into the system as working components. This image lends itself to how Goertzel perceives the self, “the largely heterogenous collection of patterns and subsystems” (342). The question of the self is significant, particularly in relation to the longevity of the Patternmaster, who, unless they are usurped by a close, more powerful relative, continues to live by drawing strength from the Pattern at the expense of individual Patternists.

Butler’s fantasy of living forever is not unusual as the desire to not die is generally shared by those in sound mind and health who will go to great lengths to survive, if physically and psychologically possible. Indeed, the foregoing analysis has provided examples from the Patternist narrative to demonstrate Butler’s exploration of such. The obvious barrier to living forever is the physiological deterioration of the body which Butler addresses with African trickster mythology used by Anyanwu who transforms the shape of her body and parasitic body-snatching used by Doro. Also, the formation of the Pattern enables longevity, if not immortality, for a line of Patternmasters. Goertzel argues that technological progress may eventually facilitate physiological immortality through pharmacology or nanomedicine, or it may come about as the result of uploading consciousness to computer systems (339). What is evident from Butler’s vision of this is that whatever type of intelligent pattern system we are part of, and however we perceive our humanity, it is based on what Thomas Metzinger terms the “phenomenal self… a construct that the human mind creates in order to better understand and control itself” (qtd. in Goertzel 342). This illusory construct and the narrative of being rely on embodiment to locate the self in reality and maintain characteristics of humanity. However, as the Patternists remain the strongest of the three branches of humanity in the Patternist universe, Butler is privileging invisible symbiont mental power over physical mutation as a means not only of survival but of immortality. The highly patterned environment of the mind is therefore the key, but once unlocked poses further perils.

Although the Patternist narrative presents the themes of living forever and breeding people as dystopic portents of a posthuman future, Butler achieves literary immortality through her dissection of the highly patterned environments in which humans interact with each other in their endeavor to achieve the highly patterned goal of survival. The application of Patternist philosophy to her formative work provides insight into how Butler’s adolescent mind began forming distinct literary patterns that would underpin her entire life’s work. The motifs of telepathy and adolescent transition in the Patternist series are particularly current today as metaphors for the psycho-sociological changes
emerging from digital connectivity and serve as a warning for what is a form of mind-to-mind communication. Just as Butler’s telepaths intrusively enter the minds of mutes and manipulate their behavior without their knowledge, there are parallels to the way in which individuals and organizations alike are able to engage in the same covert actions through the affordances of the Internet. The Pattern is an indestructible and inescapable entity that binds telepaths into a surveilled existence, and while their mental shields provide a measure of protection and privacy, they can still be caught unawares; the allusion to contemporary society is clear and disturbing. However, it is Butler’s cognizance of patternistic human behavior that really reveals her genius—her identification of what she terms the human contradiction: intelligence and hierarchal behavior are significant in understanding how and why humanity is locked into patterns of behavior that are reinforced by patterns of thought founded on narratives of the self. By exploring survival strategies that rely on corporeal alteration, Butler outlines the difficulty of changing the narrative of self which is so intrinsically tied to embodiment. Perhaps the question she is posing is not how do we perceive others, but how do we perceive ourselves?

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As one of the most successful and prolific black science fiction writers to date and as a writer who consistently represented a racially diverse range of characters, Octavia E. Butler is often read as a “race writer par excellence” (Lavender 67). Butler herself, however, repeatedly insisted in her writing, speeches, interviews, and personal papers that she and her work could not and should not be read primarily or exclusively through the lens of race. She expressed incredible frustration that stories about black people were perceived as always being about race and racism rather than about people for whom racism was just one of many things they dealt with in their lives. This sentiment is particularly clear in Butler’s letters to fellow authors as she solicited submissions for a never published anthology tentatively titled Black Futures. In a letter to a potential contributor, Butler writes, “Too many of the stories we’ve gone through are stories of racism rather than stories about Black people. Of course, racism is a facet of Black life, but it isn’t the whole. Our emphasis is on people” (“OEB 954”).

SAMI SCHALK
Throughout her career Butler sought to create—and encouraged others to create—complex representations of black people and other people of color with attention to gender, class, sexuality, disability, and more. As she wrote in the draft of an essay: “I want to portray human variety [...] and I want to do it without lecturing or resorting to stereotypes” (Butler “OEB 2390”). Butler’s commitment to diverse representations is evident throughout her body of work as well as in her personal papers at the Huntington Library, which contains extensive research files Butler kept under categories such as “Women,” “Black People,” “Latinos,” “Minorities,” “Handicaps,” and “Social Conditions” (Russell 372–375).

Butler’s short story “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” represents a rarity in her oeuvre because the majority of the characters are never racially identified.1 The story is narrated from the first-person perspective of Lynn Mortimer, a young woman with Duryea-Gode disease (DGD).2 DGD is a disease Butler created for the story which, for most people, leads to “drifting” where individuals feel trapped inside of their bodies and do self-harm by digging at their skin and eyes in their attempt to “get out.” Occasionally, while drifting, people with DGD also do harm to others. Lynn, the daughter of two parents with DGD, referred to as a double DGD, provides readers information about her experiences living with the disease and about her current life as a college student. The plot unfolds around Lynn’s visit with her boyfriend, Alan, to Dilg, a well-known, well-funded DGD retreat or care facility. While there, Lynn learns that as a double DGD female, she exudes a pheromone which allows people with DGD who have drifted to remain in relative control, free of self-destructive desires, and able to work, build, invent, and create. Seeing the possibility of life at Dilg, Lynn and Alan are both then faced with the most hope they’ve ever experienced for a future, yet it is not one either sees as completely desirable.

After its initial publication in Omni magazine in 1987, “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” henceforth “The Evening,” appeared in The Year’s Best Science Fiction: Fifth Annual Edition in 1988, in Callaloo in 1991, and in Butler’s short story collection Bloodchild and Other Stories in 1995.3 The story has since been reprinted in a number of anthologies. Despite its repeated publication, there are very few articles or book chapters focused on this short story, though several scholars have included brief to moderate length discussions of it within larger arguments about Butler’s work. Generally, scholars have focused their analyses of the story on issues of human agency, particularly in regard to biological predisposition,4 or on how Butler represents the possibility of hope in a seemingly dire or impossible situation.5 Recently, Isiah Lavender has argued for reading the representation of DGD “as a literalized metaphor for race” (65). He writes that while “there
is no specific textual detail, like a quotation, that bolsters the idea that DGD is a racial metaphor […] bits of tangential evidence indicate that we can read the story this way, even if these bits are inconclusive and speak to other kinds of oppression” (68; emphasis added). Lavender’s recent approach to the story reifies the tendency to interpret Butler primarily or exclusively through the lens of race even when multiple kinds of oppression are depicted or suggested. Such readings reduce and ignore not only the complexity of the work but also the complexity of oppression. In approaching work by black writers, it is important to consider both the intersectional identities of the writer—here Butler as a working class, black woman with dyslexia—and the mutually constitutive nature of oppressions.6

I argue that in “The Evening” DGD serves as a disability metaphor which demonstrates how ableism and antiblack racism operate in parallel and overlapping ways. In doing so, I am not claiming disability is the true singular analytic for the text, but rather insisting that we must understand disability as one of multiple major analytics through which we can interpret this story. Further, I use my analysis of “The Evening” to ground two larger arguments about nuancing approaches to disability metaphor and expanding the boundaries of the concept of disability, each of which supports the further development of black disability studies theories and methods. In what follows, I first explain each of these two larger interventions to provide theoretical frameworks before delving into my close reading of “The Evening” and its representation of DGD as a disability metaphor.

DISABILITY METAPHORS AND DEFINING DISABILITY IN BLACK DISABILITY STUDIES

Disability metaphors are representations of disability7 that can be interpreted as representing something other than the lived experiences of people with disabilities, such as loss or evil. In disability studies, there has been a tendency to be quite critical of disability metaphors, both in regard to creative texts that employ them and even more so in respect to scholarly work that fails to read representations of disability as anything other than metaphoric. Some disability studies scholars argue that disability metaphors reduce or erase the lives of people with disabilities.8 Lennard Davis argues that the preponderance of disability metaphors stems from an ableist culture which has conditioned people to be distracted by disability in a narrative not explicitly about disability, meaning that in narrative “disability can’t just be—it has to mean something. It has to signify” (37; original emphasis). A disabled character in a text not explicitly about disability, therefore, is often read as a metaphor for something unrelated to disability, such as Richard III’s hunchback being
read as symbolic of his evil interiority or of the fallen nation. While disabled characters are the most often discussed examples of disability metaphors, plot events, settings, language choices, and imagery in a text which utilize the concept of disability can also be interpreted as disability metaphors, such as the institutions which appear in “The Evening.” Disability metaphors are different from ableist metaphors—colloquial phrases which use disability as an inherently negative state of being, as in “turn a deaf ear”—as well as from oppression analogies—statements which compare and contrast experiences of oppression, as in “being black is like being disabled” or “marriage is a form a slavery.” I differentiate disability metaphors from these other terms because disability metaphors tend to be more extended and central to a text’s meaning than ableist metaphors and oppression analogies, which are more likely to be brief statements or phrases.

More recently, some disability studies scholars, particularly those studying disability in texts by writers of color and writers from postcolonial contexts, have argued for more nuanced approaches to disability metaphors, insisting that disability can take on both concrete and metaphoric meanings in a text. This approach to disability metaphors seeks to understand how these representations of disability can be symbolic of something other than disability while still being about disability. Clare Barker, for example, discusses how the representation of disabled children in postcolonial fiction can serve as a “straightforward symbol” of the damage of colonialism on the colony while also being representative of the material realities of disabled colonized people (2–3). Disability metaphors therefore allow us to explore the historical and material connections between disability and other social systems of privilege and oppression such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. It does not have to be either/or (i.e., this representation is either about race or about disability); in fact, it is often both/and specifically due to the mutually constitutive nature of oppressions.

This approach to the multiple symbolic resonances of disability metaphors is particularly useful in the context of work by African Americans. In this case it’s important to consider how histories of oppression have included both the production of disability through violence, such as the disabled bodies created in the context of slavery, and the use of discourses of disability to justify discrimination and exclusion, as in concepts like feeblemindedness or dysaesthesia aethiopica, a supposed African American-specific illness resulting in laziness. With African American writers and artists it is important for black disability studies scholarship to consider how disability’s intimate historical relationship to antiblack racism makes African American use of disability metaphors especially layered with multiple meanings. That is, because discourses of disability have been used in the name of antiblack
racism and because antiblack racism can produce disabling circumstances for black people, representations of disability in African American culture must be interpreted in conjunction with issues of blackness without being abstracted into symbols for the effects of racism alone. In the context of Butler’s “The Evening” DGD operates as a disability metaphor which alludes to the parallel and overlapping forms of discrimination which have occurred for both black and disabled people.

The second larger theoretical argument of this chapter is that a crip theoretical approach in black disability studies should expand the boundaries of the concept of disability as a material and discursive concept. Alison Kafer writes that disability studies has often focused on apparent physical and sensory disabilities rather than cognitive and mental disabilities or chronic illnesses and diseases. Kafer argues that this omission is particularly problematic when we consider how chronic illnesses and diseases like diabetes and asthma are more common among people of color and people in poverty. Kafer then proposes a crip theoretical approach which expands the work of disability studies to include “those who lack a ‘proper’ (read: medically acceptable, doctor-provided, and insurer-approved) diagnosis for their symptoms” as well as “people identifying with disability and lacking not only a diagnosis but any ‘symptoms’ of impairment” in order to explore how the disabled-nondisabled binary is created and maintained (12, 13). This crip theoretical approach which expands the boundaries and definitions of disability is essential for black disability studies because it allows for the inclusion of issues of disease and illness, of disabling secondary health effects of illness and disease, and the role of race and class in one’s access to medical care and treatment within the medical industrial complex. If, as Robert McRuer argues, “crip theory should continue to conjure up the disability to come,” then black disability studies can play a vital role in this theoretical task by considering how black people’s bodyminds are often particularly vulnerable to the many racist structures which, for example, put black people at higher risk for police violence and incarceration, subject black people to various forms of medical discrimination and abuse, and disproportionately place environmental hazards in poor black neighborhoods (200). A crip theory approach to black disability studies, therefore, must engage the concept of disability as being simultaneously material, historical, relational, and discursive in order to account for how disability and blackness are both intersectional and mutually constitutive.

I model this crip theoretical approach in my analysis of “The Evening” because DGD is a disease which can have disabling effects eventually, but not immediately. Butler developed this non-realistic disease by combining aspects of three real-world diseases, Huntington’s disease, phenylketonuria,
and Lesch-Nyhan disease, each of which can or will be disabling, but not necessarily inherently or immediately so (Butler *Bloodchild and Other Stories* 69). DGD is also explicitly compared to other eventually or potentially disabling diseases in the story including “leprosy,” in terms of how people are isolated, and diabetes, in terms of how diet is a form of disease management (Butler “The Evening” 37–39). DGD thus has no real-world equivalent; however, it was constructed with issues of disability and disease clearly in mind. In the story, the major characters, Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice, lack any current symptoms of impairment and could be read as temporarily nondisabled. It is understandable then how scholars might overlook disability in the text since, with the exception of Alan’s mother, Naomi, who is blind, the named characters are not explicitly marked as disabled. However, how the story engages with parallel or related contemporary and historical enactments of ableism and antiblack racism requires a crip theoretical approach to the boundaries and borders of disability in relationship to disease, illness, and health, especially among racialized populations.

**READING DGD AS DISABILITY METAPHOR**

“The Evening” narrates the many ways that people with DGD are oppressed and discriminated against structurally, socially, and internally. The story speaks simultaneously to issues of blackness and disability, demonstrating how ableism and antiblack racism have often colluded or have been enacted through similar methods of oppression. The multiple examples of discrimination and their effects in the text each relates to contemporary and historical expressions of ableism and antiblack racism. In discussing these examples, I demonstrate that interpreting disability metaphors does not require abstracting disability out of the analysis because the use of disability metaphor in African American texts is often directly connected to the mutually constitutive nature of disability and blackness. Further, while DGD is a disease, I refer to DGD as a disability metaphor as part of a crip black disability studies approach that expands the boundaries of disability as a material and discursive concept. Throughout this discussion I refer to experiences of black people and people with disabilities; however, this is not to suggest that these groups are distinct. These examples of ableism and antiblack racism are often more likely to occur in the lives of black disabled people who live at the nexus of these oppressions. Finally, several examples of discriminatory practices in the story could be applicable to other marginalized groups, such as nonblack people of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, working-class people, or
immigrants. Although my argument focuses on ableism and antiblack racism, I do not foreclose the possibility of reading discrimination against DGDs in relationship to other types of oppression as well.

One way people with DGD face oppression in “The Evening” involves structural discrimination via “restrictive laws” and institutions (Butler “The Evening” 36). Of the two, institutions are more explicitly and extensively represented. People with DGD are purposefully and systematically kept out of sight and out of mind for the sake of the public, under the guise of protection and care. Readers are introduced to this form of discrimination at the very start when Lynn explains how her parents took her to a DGD ward when she was fifteen to show her what would happen if she weren’t more careful about managing her disease. Looking back, however, Lynn grimly notes: “It was where I was headed no matter what. It was only a matter of when: now or later” (Butler “The Evening” 35). Wards and institutions are mentioned multiple times throughout the text as problematic methods for warehousing DGDs who have become uncontrolled or are suspected of beginning to drift. For example, Beatrice, the coordinator of Dilg, describes how Alan’s mother, Naomi, became blind after being allowed to tear at her own eyes at a neglectful state-run facility because her parents couldn’t afford better, private care. In facilities such as these, Beatrice explains that “sometimes if patients were really troublesome—especially the ones who kept breaking free—they’d put them in a bare room and let them finish themselves. The only things those places took good care of were the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats” (Butler “The Evening” 56). Institutions, therefore, are the major method of structural oppression in the text.

According to notes and drafts in her archive, Butler, a self-described “news-junkie” who regularly read both the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, worked on “The Evening” off and on between 1966 and 1985 (Butler “‘Devil Girl from Mars’: Why I Write Science Fiction”). Taking this information into consideration, it is absolutely necessary to read the representation of institutions in “The Evening,” including the creation of Dilg as an alternative to state institutions, as an engagement with the deinstitutionalization movement. Deinstitutionalization in the United States began in the late 1960s via the closure or downsizing of facilities for mentally and sometimes physically disabled people that were often the sites of vast neglect and abuse. Inspired by investigative journalism that exposed the horrors of these places as well as activism by family members of patients, the deinstitutionalization movement promoted allowing people with disabilities to receive support to live with their families and in their communities.

As research for her writing, Butler saved newspaper articles in “subject files” organized topically in manila folders with article titles and topics listed
on the outside. In a folder labeled “Mental Health,” Butler saved Barry Siegel’s article “Confined 15 Years for Being Different” from the *Los Angeles Times* on March 6, 1977, and noted three other articles she collectively labeled “Mental Health Care” (Butler “Box 274 Folder 1”; Siegel). In another folder labeled “Handicaps,” Butler included the article “Blind, Deaf Woman Confined 19 Years” from the *Los Angeles Times* on May 5, 1978 (Butler “Box 275 Folder 2”). In “The Evening,” Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice’s perspectives on DGD institutions resemble those who sought to close down or change the nature of large, government-run institutions. Further, the descriptions of the horrors of DGD wards seem directly inspired by the media’s depictions of mental institutions in the United States in the 1970s that Butler was clearly following.19

References to institutions, however, also have racial connotations which illuminate the intertwined relationship of ableism and antiblack racism in the history of the United States. Jonathan Metzl argues that “deinstitutionalization did not simply dictate which patients the state set free; it also decided which patients the state held onto” (16). Metzl writes that black patients, particularly men, were more likely to be kept in institutions during the deinstitutionalization movement. This retention of black people in institutions was due in part to changes in the *Diagnostic Statistics Manual* which redefined schizophrenia as a violent mental disability, often directly associated with black men, especially those involved in civil rights activism. This containment of black people considered violent and dangerous continues today in the prison industrial complex which disproportionately institutionalizes black people. Butler makes the connection between DGD institutions and prisons clear when Lynn notes the security surrounding Dilg and states that “a maximum security prison wouldn’t have been as potentially dangerous” (Butler “The Evening” 45). Lavender also notes that Lynn’s description of herself as marking time could be read as an allusion to serving a prison sentence (78). It is possible, therefore, to interpret institutions in “The Evening” as alluding to forms of structural discrimination against both people with disabilities and black people.

In addition to structural discrimination, people with DGD in “The Evening” are also oppressed informally or unofficially—that is through means other than the state—through social discrimination. One way this occurs through is judgment of food. People with DGD have a restricted diet to manage the disease. Lynn refuses to eat in public because people stare or make fun of her DGD food, calling it “dog biscuits” (Butler “The Evening” 38).20 The representation of having a restricted diet for health reasons provides an allusion to multiple kinds of disabilities including celiac disease and Crohn’s disease. While gluten-free, vegan, and related products
are becoming increasingly common, for a long time people with food restrictions were often left out of the social aspects of food such as eating out and dinner parties, or their presence was deemed an imposition on others. Although she had no formal diagnosis of a food-related disability, late in life as her health declined Butler herself was vegan (Butler “OEB 3772”). In addition to these disability-related aspects of discrimination because of diet, there are racialized and classist aspects of how foods associated with a certain group are marked as strange, unhealthy, or unappetizing. For African Americans, cultural association with and consumption of soul food can lead to social discrimination. For example, eating chitterlings/chitlins and cooking with ham hocks or salt pork each emerged in African American culinary history through conditions of slavery and poverty, but often have negative associations because these foods come from the less valued portions of the pig (Yentsch 85; Whit 48, 51). Further, in discussions of health and size scrutiny, of black people’s diets, especially poor black people in urban spaces, often has racist overtones. In these discussions black people are positioned as unable to make what is considered good and healthy choices either because of their culture, their ignorance, or their inability to access such foods, despite the fact that experts vary widely in beliefs on what actually constitutes good food or a healthy diet. In all of these instances, judgment of diet can become a form of social discrimination for disabled and black people.

Social discrimination further occurs in “The Evening” through stereotyping and social isolation. People move away from Lynn upon realizing, due to her food or her medical emblem, that she has DGD. DGDs wear medical emblems because in addition to needing a restrictive diet, they must also avoid many widely used drugs. The emblems mark people with DGD as having the disease for medical purposes and yet, at the same time, provide a means for social discrimination. The text refers to people with DGD as “being lepers” among the general population, an explicit disability comparison (Butler “The Evening” 39). Non-DGDs create this distance because people with DGD have been stereotyped as potentially becoming suddenly, unpredictably violent. This association of a group with violence connotes stereotypes of both people with mental disabilities and black people. Despite the fact that people with mental disabilities are far more likely to be the victims of violence rather than perpetrators of violence, they are stereotyped as more violent than the average person (Desmarais et al.). Similarly, black people, especially black men, have long been associated with violence and as threats to white people, especially white women. “The Evening” represents not only how these stereotypes affect non-DGDs’ reactions to people with DGD, but also how individual cases of violence,
like Lynn’s father, get the bulk of the media attention, while advocacy
groups—in the story, the Duryea-Gode Disease Foundation—spend millions
attempting to counter this dominant narrative.

In the story’s representation of social discrimination, structural and social
oppression cyclically reinforce one another. The interaction between these
forms of oppression muddies a strictly causal relationship. For instance, Lynn
mentions DGDs’ “problems with jobs, housing, schools” which stem from
negative news stories about DGDs who become uncontrollably violent once
they have drifted (Butler “The Evening” 36). Here structural discrimination
occurs informally even when laws don’t officially exist to restrict access or
opportunity, manifesting instead as social discrimination. Historically, both
black people and people with disabilities have been denied or passed over
for jobs, housing, and education due to social perceptions about them, even
when such denial, when explicitly based upon race or disability, is illegal.
Informal and indirect social discrimination further reinforces formal and
explicit structural discrimination as well. Lynn explains that Alan, despite
his intelligence, will likely not get into medical school as a person with
DGD. The lack of opportunity isolates and limits Alan according to the logic
that he, as a member of a marginalized group, is violent and in need of
containment. Stereotypes about DGDs as threats not only cause others to
keep their distance but also potentially form the groundwork for new and
more restrictive formal discriminatory structures.

Further exploring the relationship between forms of discrimination, “The
Evening” also depicts how structural and social discrimination can lead to
oppression manifesting internally. Internalized oppression is apparent in the
hopelessness and self-destructive behaviors of some DGDs, especially Alan
who is depicted as particularly morose and bitter. Alan tells Lynn that he
will kill himself when he realizes he has started to drift and says that his
parents, both DGDs, should have had him aborted. Alan then goes on to
assert, “Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us” (Butler “The
Evening” 42). When Lynn expresses surprise at this statement and asks Alan
if he would “want someone else telling you what to do with your body,” he
replies, “No need. […] I had that taken care of as soon as I was old enough”
(Butler “The Evening” 42). Alan’s statement that DGDs should not be
allowed to reproduce suggests that he does not think there is any benefit to
their existence in the world—or at least that the bad highly outweighs the
good in their lives. The story demonstrates, therefore, how external forms
of discrimination (structural and social) often lead to self-discrimination
and internalized oppression when marginalized people begin to believe the
stereotypes about themselves and believe they deserve the discriminatory
treatment they receive.
Lynn’s reactions to Alan’s statements further support reading this section of the story through the lens of internalized oppression. When Alan mentions his choice to get sterilized Lynn narrates: “This left me staring. I’d thought about sterilization. What DGD hasn’t?” (Butler “The Evening” 42). Lynn assumes that all DGDs have considered sterilization, demonstrating her own internalized oppression. The discussion of voluntary sterilization alludes to the histories of involuntary sterilization for black and disabled people. For many black women in the United States, coerced or secret sterilization and other forms of manipulative birth control have made reproductive choice and justice a non-option. There is similarly a history of sterilizing women with disabilities, especially those with cognitive and developmental disabilities, without their consent. People with disabilities also continue to be considered nonsexual, unable to have children, or unable to parent and as a result are often denied sexual education and parental rights. Lynn’s internalized oppression is also evident later in the story when she and Alan begin their relationship. She states, “Who else would have us?” and “We probably wouldn’t last very long, anyway” (Butler “The Evening” 43). Here Lynn assumes no non-DGD would want to be in a relationship with a DGD. This is suggestive of social romantic segregation for black and disabled people in which interracial relationships have been officially illegal and socially disapproved, and relationships between disabled and nondisabled people are assumed to be based on fetish or imbalanced in terms of care and support. This grim perspective on the world suggests how structural and social discrimination, in combination with the material impact of DGD, produces internalized oppression for Lynn. Together, Alan and Lynn’s views of people with DGD demonstrate how internalized oppression impacts self-perception, hope, relationships, and behavior.

Finally, the story represents passing as a conscious or subconscious behavior resulting from the combination of structural, social, and internalized discrimination. Lynn wears her medical emblem on a necklace chain tucked inside her blouse. She states, “Every now and then there are news stories about people who stopped carrying their emblems—probably trying to pass as normal. Then they have an accident. By the time anyone realizes there is anything wrong, it’s too late” (Butler “The Evening” 38). Lavender reads this discussion of hiding or forgoing medical emblems as symbolic of racial passing, stating that “many light-skinned blacks have disappeared within the white world—passed for white—in response to discrimination, at a heavy cost to their positive self-identity” (74). Passing, however, is not a phenomenon exclusive to black people or even people of color. Passing narratives also exist in regard to disability, gender, sexuality, class, and religion. The combination of structural, social, and internalized discrimination creates the forces which
make purposeful passing, for brief or extended periods of time, an alluring option for who are able to do so. However, as “The Evening” suggests, passing is not without risk and for people with DGD who do not merely hide, but actually dispense of their medical emblems, passing can result in death. Historically, violence and death have also resulted from those caught passing, particularly those passing across racial and gender lines. Passing in regard to disability can have long-term negative health effects when a person pushes their bodymind beyond its capacity in damaging ways in order to appear more nondisabled.

While the many ways in which people with DGD experience structural, social, and internalized discrimination in the text have direct connections to the histories of ableism and antiblack racism, the story also connects blackness and disability in more positive ways. “The Evening” represents the possibility of creativity, purpose, community, and other positive outcomes stemming directly from DGD, which can be read as symbolic of positive outcomes resulting from black and disabled identities and from experiences of ableism and antiblack racism. For the most part, “The Evening” is quite dark. In notes for the story, Butler wrote key words she wanted to keep in mind while shaping the narrative, such as “Doomed,” “Desperate,” “Empty,” and “Hopeless,” describing Lynn in particular as “Defensively Cynical” (Butler “OEB 505”). While these words definitely resonate with the overall tone of the bulk of the text, there is a clear shift in the story when Lynn and Alan visit Dilg and find out that not all DGDs necessarily meet the fate everyone assumes they must have. Elana Gomel argues that “Butler’s story ends with a strange semiutopian twist […] because it] appears to contain a promise of a better future” (420). This suggestion of a better future comes from the fact that DGDs at Dilg are able to live longer and quell their destructive tendencies in order to work in both scientific and artistic fields. Aline H. Kalbian and Lois Shepard argue that “Butler’s story appears to say that genetic conditions that are generally viewed negatively may enhance rather than detract from a person’s ability to make a meaningful contribution to the world” (19). In other words, “The Evening” suggests that achievement can occur not in spite of disability or blackness but through it. This representation is of critical importance because though DGDs face grim biological odds as well as many forms of discrimination, there is hope. “The Evening” uses DGD as a disability metaphor to allude to and connect multiple forms of oppression while also using Dilg as a symbol for ways to resist oppression and live on.

“The Evening” suggests that people with DGD can have meaningful lives even if those lives are more painful, less independent, or shorter than average. As Kalbian and Shepard note (and their ideas are worth quoting at length):
Clearly there is a difference between assigning meaning to the lives of others for our own purposes and recognizing the meaning they have found for themselves in their own lives. Butler’s story appears to avoid (but only narrowly and not as clearly as it might) the problem of justifying the existence of DGD for the benefit of people other than those with the disease. In the story the special gifts of the individuals with DGD seem to have significant benefit to them; and Lynn seems to find a place for herself in the world by viewing her own double dose of DGD as granting her a special ability that she can use to pursue a satisfying and meaningful (and meaningful to her) career. (17)

The story’s move to offer the possibility of a different but still meaningful life is critical to its intervention in terms of both disability and blackness as disabled people and black people have both been assumed to have less to contribute to society and to have inherently more difficult lives. For people with disabilities this sentiment is so severe that there is a pernicious cultural belief that people with certain kinds of disabilities are better off dead. I would add to Kalbian and Shepard’s arguments by noting that DGDs are able to do their work at Dilg only by living in community, under the influence of pheromones produced by double-DGD women like Lynn and Beatrice. The context in which DGDs are able to live more meaningful and productive lives does not negate or reduce the importance of their achievements; rather, it provides another method of resistance to oppression: community. Dilg is a community of people with DGD, a place of possibility in the midst of a seemingly hopeless narrative. Dilg is a chance at life for people who see no viable futures for themselves once their disease takes full effect. The community and life at Dilg are non-normative and interdependent in ways that some, such as Alan, find unacceptable. Dilg is therefore a form of self-segregation which some people find regressive or dangerous, but it is also a space where people with DGD who are otherwise oppressed in the wider world can exist apart from the kinds of discrimination depicted throughout the story. The representation of DGDs at Dilg is symbolic of not only how positive outcomes can arise from experiences of oppression and non-normativity, but also how those positive outcomes can be particularly fostered through communities rather than individuals alone. This is perhaps most evident in regard to disability in terms of independent living centers and educational institutions like Gallaudet and in regard to blackness in terms of black churches and historically black colleges and universities. In these spaces, shared identity and shared experiences of oppression become the basis of communities of support which often foster increased happiness, self-confidence, and feelings of belonging rather than isolation. Community then
can be a way of unlearning internalized oppression while also potentially working to change and dismantle social and structural oppressions. In the end, “The Evening” shows how people with DGD are oppressed structurally, socially, and internally, as well as the ways community and hope emerge in the face of such oppression.

EMBRACING COMPLEXITY

Octavia E. Butler’s short story “The Evening” alludes to multiple experiences of discrimination—structural, social, and internal—as well as hope and community which can arise in response to oppression. This representation of discrimination against DGDs cannot be easily interpreted as a straightforward stand-in for any single marginalized group. Instead, DGD operates as a disability metaphor which reveals how ableism and antiblack racism have been and continue to be enacted in similar fashions, suggesting more about the mutually constitutive nature of oppression than about blackness or disability alone. This reading of DGD models two approaches I believe are essential to black disability studies: reading disability metaphors as having multiple literal and figurative meanings and a crip theoretical expansion of the category of disability as a material and discursive concept.

First, the depiction of DGD in “The Evening” shows how representations of disability can work metaphorically without abstracting disability itself out of the text as a key political and social issue. The concern in disability studies has often been that reading disability as a metaphor for other concepts erases the materiality of disabled people’s lives and depoliticizes disability in the interpretation of a narrative. My reading of “The Evening,” however, demonstrates how reading disability metaphorically is incredibly important for black disability studies because disability metaphors often provide cogent allusions to the historical and contemporary intersectionality and mutually constitutive nature of blackness and disability in the United States. Rather than obscuring or erasing disability as a political concern in a text, therefore, disability metaphors can (but do not always) allow for coalitional understandings of the relationship between disability and other social categories.

Second, reading DGD as a disability is important for black disability studies because it encourages a crip theoretical expansion of the category and concept of disability. The main characters, Lynn, Alan, and Beatrice, have a disease that, at least at the moment, has no mental or physical effects—they are essentially temporarily able-bodied. However, they still experience ableism for having the disease and they know that disability is in their future. Discussing these characters and the text through the lens of disability is therefore essential. Following the lead of Alison Kafer and Robert
McRuer, I argue that black disability studies must push the boundaries of
the concept of disability to consider how the disabled-nondisabled binary is
created and maintained through the very methods of oppression explored in
Butler’s story. Incorporating issues of health, illness, and disease into black
disability studies is essential if we are to further parse and understand the
relationship of blackness and disability. We must, for example, develop ways
to acknowledge the disabling effects of racialized violence without making
disability a terrifying specter; to discuss race and disability without collapsing
the two or obscuring the experiences of disabled people of color; and to
trace how the discursive use of disability has been and continues to be used
as a justification for oppression—without insisting upon able-bodiedness and
able-mindedness as precursors for rights, respect, and freedom.

This reconsideration of what and how we read in black disability studies is
a critical part of embracing the messy complexity of diverse representations
in African American culture, like those for which Octavia E. Butler is so well
known. Reading “The Evening” as symbolic of the relationships between
and intersections of ableism and antiblack racism requires understanding
both how disability metaphors can be concretely connected to lived
experiences of disability and how black disability studies cannot be limited
to current medical and legal definitions of disability alone. Instead, black
disability studies must embrace an expansive crip theoretical understanding
of disability and ability as a system of privilege and oppression which defines
what constitutes acceptable bodyminds and behaviors, often in very racialized
ways.28 These nuanced and expansive approaches to disability metaphors
and the concept of disability will allow for an exciting and innovative future
for black disability studies.

NOTES

1. Only Lynn’s boyfriend Alan has his race identified via the information that his
father was Nigerian. It is important that the only racially identified character
is black.

2. For purposes of linguistic variety, I will alternate between “people with DGD”
and “DGDs” to refer to this group. In the story, Butler only uses DGDs to
refer to this group.

3. All citation page numbers of “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” in
this chapter come from the 2005 edition of Bloodchild and Other Stories.

4. See Kalbian and Shepard, Link, Hammer, or Bast.

5. See Green, Gomel, Hairston, or Fink.

6. Butler began disclosing her dyslexia in 1990 in interviews (Butler
Conversations with Octavia Butler 36, 39, 86).

7. I define disability as a socially constructed concept which deems certain
bodyminds and behaviors acceptable and others pathologically non-normative
and deviant, often through the discourses of medicine, psychology, cure, and rehabilitation.

8. The most often discussed version of this perspective on disability metaphor is Mitchell and Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*. See also Donaldson.

9. See Mitchell and Snyder, Chapter 4.

10. For critiques of ableist metaphors, see Schalk or May and Ferri. For discussions of oppression analogies, see Sherry, Ewart, or Samuels.

11. See Quayson or Barker.

12. See Boster.

13. See Baynton. For a discussion of the creation of disability in other contexts, see also Erevelles.

14. Crip theory is a strain of disability studies theory, inspired by queer theory, which expands the boundaries of the field. Robert McRuer writes that crip theory has “a similar contestatory relationship to disability studies and identity that queer theory has to LGBT studies and identity, [although] crip theory does not—perhaps paradoxically—seek to dematerialize disability identity” (35).

15. I use the term “bodymind” after Price who defines it as “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called ‘body’ and ‘mind’” (270).

16. Both Green and Hammer compare people with DGD to people living with HIV/AIDS (Green 179–180; Hammer 96). While neither discusses this connection extensively, the comparison is important to note given the tenuous position of HIV/AIDS within the field of disability studies and its increasing prevalence among black populations. For more on HIV/AIDS in disability studies, see Day.

17. In addition to Naomi, other unnamed disabled characters exist in the text’s background. As Lynn tours Dilg, she states, “Scars didn’t bother me much. Disability didn’t bother me,” describing how “some people had half their faces ruined or had only one hand or leg or had other obvious scars” (Butler “The Evening” 50, 51).

18. For more on the deinstitutionalization movement, see Grob.

19. In addition to the articles Butler saved in her personal papers, a search of the *Los Angeles Times* online archives reveals that there were thousands of articles and op-ed pieces on institutions published between 1966 and 1985 when Butler was writing the story. See, for example, Phillips, Nelson, Gillam, or Walden.

20. The dehumanizing association of one’s food with dog food also contains antiblack racist associations because black people have often been compared to animals and considered less evolved human beings than white people.

21. The relationship of structural and social oppression to internalized oppression is particularly evident in Alan’s remarks about choosing whether or not to have children. In the United States, eugenic practices emerged in the late nineteenth century in response to concerns about the increasing numbers of racial minorities, ethnic whites, and women in the public sphere and workforce. The eugenic term *feebleminded* was used loosely in regard to anyone whose behaviors were thought to be “inappropriate,” “threatening,” or otherwise deviating from social and sexual norms and became grounds
for institutionalization and involuntary sterilization (Kline 25). The story therefore alludes to forms of structural discrimination within the representation of internalized discrimination as well.

22. Lavender reads this moment in the story as an example of internalized racism, but interestingly, in a footnote to this argument, he writes that “Alan’s decision could also be interpreted in light of his awareness that all of his offspring would have DGD. Such a difficult decision may not be uncommon for people who are genetically predisposed to have severely disabled children” (80). This is the only place in Lavender’s two pieces on this story in which he suggests a nonracial interpretation, and he explicitly relates it to disability.

23. See Roberts.
24. See Wilkerson.
25. See Rainey.
26. It is important to note that passing is not always a conscious choice and that passing also sometimes occurs indirectly when others make assumptions about a person’s identity.
27. For more on disability and passing in various manifestations, see Brune and Wilson.
28. See Taylor.

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Octavia E. Butler’s oeuvre offers some of the most haunting and unsettling depictions of a future (not organized around technological innovation as much science fiction often is); is deeply obsessed with the instability of biological categories (human, alien, parasite, host, etc.); and organizes societies around supposed and naturalized biological hierarchies. Butler’s works, rife with imaginative renderings of bodily difference and the social markers that accompany biological difference (human, alien, other, etc.), serve as inquiries into understanding the limits of individual, subjective agency in the face of renewed interests in biological determinism. However, Butler’s fiction extends beyond theorizing the body and its agency, but by virtue of her investigations into biological determinism, her work also problematizes theories of consent (and thus free will) that undergird theories of liberal humanism and capitalism as she renders human characters powerless in the face of genetics, evolutionary symbiogenesis, and an ever approaching (and already present) posthumanism.
I read Butler’s “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty”—two short stories from Bloodchild and Other Stories (Butler)—as powerful meditations on the sexual, biopolitical, and hegemonic theories that undermine a theory of consent where individuals function as free agents in communities organized by economic, political, and social consent of the members. Functioning as the linchpins in Butler’s futuristic societies, consent is crucial to how we assess the relative level of oppression and subjugation human populations endure. When there is little or no consent, we witness the abject horrors of rape, slavery, poverty, and captivity—parasitic-host relationships. However, when consent is present and disparate groups live in relative symbiosis, Butler continually complicates consent through an emphasis on biologically determined means. Thus, Butler renders notions of consent murky and ever dependent upon biological functions. As evident in “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty,” Butler contests the place of individual agency in the domain of consent. Instead, she theorizes about the possibilities of consent within colonial paradigms wherein human subjects appear to consent to their subjugated status; however, that very same consent is troubled by the biological survival instincts of those subjects and the biopower exerted by the hegemonic alien species (the Tlic in “Bloodchild” and the Communities in “Amnesty”). Therefore, I argue that is it possible to read Gan and Noah’s capitulations (or consent) to alien hegemony as unsettling, defamiliarized demonstrations of consent that dangerously mirror and problematize contemporary theories of consent that are threatened by a posthuman (or alien, and thus defamiliarized) transmutation of neoliberalism.

I borrow from the discourse of political philosophy to help define consent as the process by which a subject willingly submits to an authority (civil government) and the process in which free agents consent to an exchange of goods, services, labor, and currency (liberal economy). In traditional political philosophy, consent is a theory wherein a subject becomes obligated to follow laws determined by the consent of the governed. As conceived by John Locke in 1690, “Every man, that hath any possessions, or enjoyment, of any part of the dominions of any government, cloth thereby give his tacit consent, and is as far forth obliged to obedience to the laws of that government… and in effect, it reaches as far as the very being of any one within the territories of that government” (Locke). Through this understanding, we might understand the Terran Preserve in “Bloodchild” as a perfect example of tacit consent given that the Terran peoples are obligated to obey Tlic laws that require males to carry and birth Tlic offspring. In exchange for Terran obedience, the Tlic provide territorial protection and material possession of life-prolonging drugs. In this instance, a social contract is drafted where consent functions as the bedrock of liberal societies to maintain illusions of relative peace, basic equality, and free will.
However, these Enlightenment era theories of consent and the social contract are rife with contradictions and caveats as pointed out by Marxist thinkers, including Friedrich Engels and Antonio Gramsci. In an 1845 essay, Engels demonstrates how consent between unequal parties (the bourgeoisie and proletariat) disrupts liberal notions of consent—or rather explains how one can consent to exploitation:

The proletarian is helpless; left to himself, he cannot live a single day. The bourgeoisie has gained a monopoly of all means of existence in the broadest sense of the word. What the proletarian needs, he can obtain only from this bourgeoisie, which is protected in its monopoly by the power of the state. The proletarian is, therefore, in law and in fact, the slave of the bourgeoisie, which can decree his life or death. It offers him the means of living, but only for an “equivalent,” for his work. It even lets him have the appearance of acting from a free choice, of making a contract with free, unconstrained consent, as a responsible agent who has attained his majority. (Engels)

In this classic Marxist relationship between proletariat and bourgeoisie, Engels mentions how a member of the proletariat appears to have the power of choice in liberal societies; however, underneath this appearance of choice is ultimately a master-slave dynamic that revolves around a hierarchy constructed by one’s proximity to the material means of production. In other words, consent is complicated by the transactional nature of selling one’s labor in order to furnish the “means of living.” However, it is important to note that in Butler’s short stories, the human characters do not find themselves enslaved directly (except for Noah’s early kidnapping), but rather they are enslaved to the fact they must sell their labor in order to survive, or else they might face starvation or coercion.

As a science fiction author, Butler employs the genre to examine these relationships in technologically and biologically advanced (posthuman) societies. Both “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty” depict human-alien contact where alien lifeforms are biologically and technologically superior to the human characters. Each story also alludes to a past contact that sparked violent colonial domination resulting in kidnapping and perhaps chattel slavery. Gan’s Terran ancestors lived through a period of time when the Tlic saw them “not much more than convenient, big, warm-blooded animals” who were caged together, fed eggs, and forced to reproduce in order to ensure the next generation (9). And Noah lived through a kidnapping by the Communities and the US government. However, in the present moment in each story, slavery and direct colonial rule are configurations of their past. Instead, these systems are abandoned for a more liberal rule of law that
features nationalisms of self-determination, neoliberal consolidations of wealth and capital, and what Gramsci calls the “predominance by consent”—cultural hegemony (Ramos). Butler uses the genre of science fiction to question if and how theories of consent will endure posthumanism. In the critical and philosophical sense, posthumanism “is the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (Nayar 11).

If posthumanism is characterized by human dependence on other species and technologies in order to live and thrive, then we have always lived under a myth about our own existence. Humans have functioned in symbiotic relationships with (and thus coevolved with) bacteria like *E. coli*, domesticated animals like dogs, plants used for agriculture, and even viruses like herpes. However, the *Anthropocene*, our period of time on Earth, is characterized by human dominance over most species on the planet based on supposed biological superiorities such as intelligence which clouds our ability to admit our own posthumanity. Yet, Butler brilliantly renders our own postmodern experience and our contemporary political and economic posthumanism in a veil of futuristic defamiliarization. Why? So readers might see more clearly how the bedrock of liberal humanist ideals, like the theory of consent, have already eroded under free-market capitalism, militaristic nationalism, and neoliberal corporate entities.

At the heart of both “Bloodchild” and “Amnesty” is the eventual evolution of the alien species to employ new formulations of power and the human characters’ consent to be exploited. However, as seen in T’Gatoi’s direct threat when Gan thinks of resisting, “Would you really rather die than bear my young, Gan?” (25), the human characters consent because their lives depend upon it. Therefore, survival ultimately compels humans to consent to a labor economy or neocolonial system because, as Butler suggest, aspects of biology (i.e., the drive to survive) organize life around the illusion of individual agency suggesting that human consent is more of a function of Foucauldian biopolitics. In *The History of Sexuality vol. 1*, Michel Foucault outlines his theoretical distinction of biopower and biopolitics as first the evolution of systems of power to render humans as machines optimized through discipline and integrated into economic systems. Second, Foucault defines biopolitics as primarily

focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision
was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed. (Foucault 139, italics in original)

For Foucault, biopolitics and biopower are the methods by which bodies are transformed into perfect laboring machines, the perfect citizens in disciplinary, capitalist societies, *and* the social controls devised by society that ensure a species’ survival. With this framework in mind, I read the Tlic and the Communities as the dominant apex species that secure their biopower first through direct colonialism and slavery and second through the use of human discourses of capitalism (paying wages for labor), cultural hegemony, and liberal consent.

“I’ll take care of you”: UTOPIAN POSSIBILITIES FOR CONSENT IN “BLOODCHILD”

“Bloodchild” naturally complicates the supposedly symbiotic relationship between an alien hegemony and human subjugation. In this story, humans escaped slavery and persecution from their homeworld by traveling to a distant planet inhabited by a nonhuman species known as the Tlic. While the base narrative resembles the process of colonization wherein white Europeans murdered and placed indigenous peoples in reservations, Butler naturally inverts the dynamic. Instead of humans centered as the colonizing force, they are positioned as a type of proletariat quartered off in a separate space known as “the Preserve” and protected by the Tlic government. The reason the diasporic humans (known as Terrans in the story) are not considered hostile and wiped out by the Tlic is because their bodies have use-value to Tlic reproduction. By virtue of their bodies, Tlic reproduce by laying eggs in warm-blooded animals, and it just so happens that humans provide the best chance for the larvae to survive to maturity; however, the process in which the larvae burrow and eat their way out of the Terran flesh is graphic and grotesque, yet not altogether unfamiliar to the graphic and grotesque birth that results from human sexual reproduction.

The relationship between Tlic and Terran appears to be one of parasite and host. In her article about parasitism and symbiosis in Butler, Maria Ferreira alternatively contends that “humans parasitize animals to use them as food and raw material for clothes and other consumer goods, in what he sees as an instance of the co dependence of host and parasite, a seemingly inescapable chain of symbiotic reliance on the other, and also
on nature, a chain which is recurrently thematized in Butler’s writings” (Ferreira 402). In other words, Ferreira demonstrates the hypocrisy of readings that label the relationship as parasitic because throughout human evolution and human society we have relied on parasitic relationships with other life forms in order to survive and thrive in societies. How is the Tlic-Terran relationship any different than how humans relate to each other, other species, differences in gender, race, and sexuality? What is key is that the Tlic have moved beyond forceful, hegemonic biopolitics that would enslave Terrans as mere chattel. Even Gan recognizes the movement and progression from a parasitic-host relationship in the past. He reveals, “Back when the Tlic saw us as not much more than convenient, big, warm-blooded animals, they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs… We were lucky that didn’t go on for long. A few generations of it and we would have been little more than convenient, big animals” (9–10). This sentiment of progress is mirrored too in “Amnesty” as the Communities have seemingly moved on from direct slavery and colonization to a more liberal, capitalist nation-state mimicking the modern hegemonic world powers like the United States.

However, this very progress from an initial stage of slavery, violent coercion, and colonial diaspora to modern depictions of liberal social-democratic nation-states does very little to alter the state of the subaltern/proletariat’s lack of agency and subsequent complicated consent. Yet, it is in the world of “Bloodchild”—where the Tlic maintain absolute hegemonic control over the Terrans—that consent is being reinforced and reconfigured as fundamental in symbiotic relationships. Multiple times in the narrative T’Gatoi reminds Gan that there is a choice in the matter. She tells Gan during his episode after witnessing Lomas give birth to Tlic larvae:

You know these things, Gan. Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. And your ancestors, fleeing from their home-world, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them—they survived because of us. We saw them as people and gave them Preserve when they still tried to kill us as worms. (25)

This moment reveals a supposed Tlic dedication to notions of consent and progress that attempt to regard Terrans as sentient equals despite their species difference. T’Gatoi refuses to regard humans as mere host animals despite the fact that some Terrans regard the Tlic as parasitic “worms.”

The cross-species relationship is clearly contentious as there is a clear uneven distribution of power derived from biologically determined superiority—the Tlic live three times as long, are able to “cage” Terrans in
their legs, and produce a pacifying venom/drug that eases Terran suffering like an opiate. Yet, it is very clear that the Tlic do not impose or reassert their dominance through one-sided parasitic-host relationships; they do not naturalize their biological superiority through their social roles because that would eliminate any ability for the Terran to truly consent. If the Tlic did not care about consent (or even the illusion of consent), then there would be little point to maintaining life in the Preserve because outside of the Preserve there is substantial pressure to regard the Terrans as mere chattel. Gan reveals, “T’Gatoi was hounded on the outside. Her people wanted more of us made available. Only she and her political faction stood between us and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve—why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafter, in some way made available to them” (5). There is substantial effort on the part of T’Gatoi and her biopolitical control to ensure consent and symbiosis between Tlic and Terran and that slavery remains squarely in the past.

Yet, despite all of T’Gatoi and Butler’s efforts to imagine and depict a cross-species symbiotic reproductive economy, critics tend to place the text in conversation with US slavery and colonization. Without a doubt, the echoes of chattel slavery exist in Butler’s work, but as a prior stage of a society organization. In her afterword to “Bloodchild,” Butler usurps control of the meaning behind her short story when she writes, “it amazes me that some people have seen ‘Bloodchild’ as a story of slavery. It isn’t… On one level, it’s a love story between two very different beings. On another, it’s a coming-of-age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life” (30). Without giving too much authority to Butler’s authorial intent, her short story mostly accomplishes these themes and extends beyond them to ask deeper questions about the place of consent in biologically determined societies. I agree with Butler’s assertion that “Bloodchild” is not a story of slavery but rather a story that is genealogically linked to a history of chattel slavery. Even Gan recognizes the agency provided to him via a need for his biological ability to sell his reproductive labor in exchange for the medicinal products created from Tlic biology (antiaging eggs, narcotic venom/opiates, and protection by virtue of sheer strength and size). Gan reflects early on, “Thus we were necessities, status symbols, and independent people” (5). The biology of the Terrans determined their use-value; however, their biology did not determine their social standing in biopolitical terms. Instead, Gan is able to successfully negotiate for a personal and political agency when he convinces T’Gatoi to let him keep the gun. He says, “If we’re not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner” (26). In other words, Gan negotiates an insurance policy that further actualizes
an individual agency in the sexual act. Gan transforms from lack to phallus where the phallus of T’Gatoi is met in equal power by Gan’s phallus. Now on more equal footing, the two must rely on mutual trust and consent before they enter the reproductive contract. In many ways, this story problematizes consent while also providing powerful claims to its significance in survival driven biopolitics.

Lastly, in “Bloodchild” it is important to also understand, in Marxist terms, how the relationship between Tlic and Terran might more closely resemble modern relationships between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The struggle between the two species is clearly a class (or racial/identity) struggle that appears exploitative of Terran reproductive labor by virtue of their biology. Similar to the gendered essentialisms and biological determinisms surrounding human birth, Terran man (like that of human woman) is relegated to a particular social labor based solely on their biological composition. This relegation, on the surface level, appears to damage the agency of Terran men like Gan, but in actuality it allows him to use his biology to his own advantage and thus survival. Even as Gan is able to use biology in order to fit into a beneficial symbiotic relationship that ensures survival, his participation and interpellation into the commodity structure reifies and naturalizes biologically determined social roles. In other words, the value of Gan’s labor via his reproductive potential is traded for the defensive means of survival (medicinal antiaging eggs, opiate-like venom, and even a gun) and relative liberty/independence in the Preserve. Depicting a human proletariat subservient to an alien bourgeoisie, Butler animates discussions of biological determinism as it relates to class and hierarchical structures present in today’s modern society.

Biological abilities such as birth, communication, and even pheromonal manipulation/control give humans unique skills to survive. And when contrasted with species that have different unique skills and lack fundamental skills to survive (i.e., efficient reproductivity), humans pick up the slack by selling their biological labor. Although, it is noted that even when humans consent to sell their reproductive or biological labor they still undergo the process of bodily and biological commodification. This theme is observed in Butler’s work by Kristen Lillvis:

Butler’s explorations of body commodification, forced reproduction, and disrupted kinship evoke the oppression Africans experienced under slavery in the United States, yet her insistence that “Bloodchild” be understood as a story of symbiosis rather than slavery highlights the transformative potential of mothering in the text. (Lillvis 9)
As Lillvis also observes, “Bloodchild” evokes narratives of US slavery only to demonstrate how the society of Tlic-Terran relations has supposedly evolved beyond its sordid history of chattel slavery. Therefore, in a particular way Butler defamiliarizes our current moment in modern history and the hegemonic attempts to erase past violence through narratives of progress. These narratives of progress are written through the theory of consent, yet time and time again, Butler interrupts a notion of consent. Within Marxist analysis of Butler’s short story, there is little room for consent when there is absolute biological determinism. In every aspect, one’s biology would determine their role not only socially but also economically—certain biological roles will become privileged and sold to the highest bidder. However, in the case of the Tlic-Terran relationship, room for consent is being made through notions of familial love and bonding in hybrid (alien and human) families. And while the Tlic have amassed significant power over life through state powers, these biopowers do not have to take on oppressive or repressive structures when there is consent based upon mutual love (a notion that Butler also troubles in her story “The Evening and the Morning and the Night”) as the relationship between T’Gatoi and Gan appears.

Therefore, T’Gatoi’s last words for Gan, “I’ll take care of you,” (29) point toward a utopian possibility for consenting symbiosis through love. In fact, there are many potential outs for Gan and his family. While the hegemonic biopower of the Tlic continues to dominate the discourse and economy of the Tlic-Terran relationship, notions of a parasitic-bourgeoisie and host-proletariat radically dissolve as a postcolonial dynamic of hybrid relationships built on shared understandings, consent, mutual trust, and symbiosis come into being. Despite the traces of commodification of bodies and biological reproductive labor remain present in “Bloodchild,” they do not conscript the characters to remain in hierarchical categories determined biologically—instead, these traces of bodily commodity fetishism root the distant world of “Bloodchild” squarely in a timeline where our present is Butler’s imagination’s past. In the end, Butler imagines a future not where biological determinism and its insidious tendency to sneak into society as naturalized social truths/hierarchies/organizations has been eliminated and is a lost to history, but Butler imagines a future where we continually must negotiate against our bodily biologies in order to consent to something that threatens biopolitical species autonomy—we work against biology to enhance biology. In other words, “Bloodchild” doesn’t abandon biological determinism because of its racist, speciesist assumptions, but embraces it as a method of establishing constructive colonial contact where both biological entities benefit from their symbiosis.
“AMNESTY”

Theories of symbiosis and consent are complicated further by Butler’s short story “Amnesty,” first published in 2003. This short story is told from the perspective of Noah, a young woman who has the unique ability to communicate with a nonhuman species that have landed and planted their headquarters in Earth’s large deserts. The nonhuman entities are known as “the Communities” because they consist of many small moss-like entities that operate as units that comprise of a collective hive minds. At first we find out that the Communities have employed Noah because she has figured out a way to communicate across the species line and she could teach future employees of the Communities how to do the same; however, we later discover that Noah was once kidnapped by the Communities. She explains to the room of potential human hires:

I was eleven when I was taken… I was part of the second wave… The people of the first wave suffered the most. The Communities didn’t know anything about us. They killed some of us with experiments and dietary deficiency diseases and they poisoned others. By the time they snatched me, they at least knew enough not to kill me by accident. (159–160)

Noah goes on to reassure the potential hires that the Communities have changed since then and no longer kidnap and experiment on humans; instead, they have adapted to the human methods of capitalism. While Noah explains to the hires that they will work as translators on a contractual basis, the readers never fully see what employment looks like except based upon how two different Communities treat Noah. When being subsumed and handled by a subcontracting Community, Noah is slightly sore, to which her main employer Community tells her, “You must tell me if that subcontractor tries to coerce you again. It knows better. I’ve told it that if it injures you, I will never allow you to work for it again” (154). With this interjection, it is clear to see that like the Tlic in “Bloodchild,” the Communities are either insistent upon human consent because they respect their agency or are desperate to maintain an illusion of consent and fair labor practices so that humans would still work for them (although there are very clear undertones that the Communities could coerce humans to work if they would like, just like the Tlic). Yet, Butler continues to inquire “is the relationship built upon consent when the threat of coercion or alternatively poverty still lingers?”

While I understand Butler to continue her theme of questioning consent in the posthuman moment, “Amnesty” also demonstrates how this happens in our current postmodern moment through the dual powers of the militaristic
nation-state and the neoliberal multinational corporation (MNC). In my reading of Butler’s short story, I cannot help but think of the Communities as representative of MNCs. First, the Communities are described as hive mind entities that mirror the hive mind mentality of large companies where employees are integrated under a single entity—the Corporate Personhood. Within US laws, corporations are afforded similar rights and protections as human citizens are, among these are the right to civil suit and the right to enter contracts. We see the Communities already acting within their rights as a Corporate Person by contracting humans to work for them. Additionally, MNCs are also characterized by their ability to move capital in a globalized context. A study conducted by Crotty, Epstein, and Kelly suggests “that increased capital mobility within the neo-liberal regimes is imposing increasingly severe constraints on workers, communities, and states. However, we do not agree with the extreme versions of neo-classical economics or the ‘globalization thesis’ that see these constraints as an inevitable outcome of technological change or as an irreversible juggernaut” (Crotty, Epstein, and Kelly 24). In other words, the mobility of capital by MNCs causes a “race to the bottom” effect in the nations that they seek out cheap labor in. Typically, in accordance with neoliberal trends in the last four decades, MNCs seek out nations in the developing world or in the Global South to build factories because of tax breaks offered by the governments and the relative cheap cost of labor. However, as Crotty, Epstein, and Kelly note, this mobility will only continue to concentrate power in the hands of MNCs and exploit the workers and environments they industrialize.

It is so poignant, then, that Butler chooses the United States as a country now “invaded” by a nonhuman species that resembles the power structures of MNCs. In the ironic manipulation and reversal of roles Butler again demonstrates for readers the erosion of consent via human inventions and discourses. Because Butler intentionally obfuscates the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat, or host-parasite, readers recognize a different dynamic that feels easily identifiable as oppressive when the dominant species isn’t human. In our current times, the beings that are exploiting and exerting power over life itself are discourses and conglomerate, multinational corporations. Thus, by making the “bad guys,” so to speak, biologically nonhuman, Butler paints a picture where the corporation succeeds individual humanity and becomes a posthuman entity that thrives from exploitation—coercion masked as consent. Therefore, the Tlic and the Communities may retain complete biological superiority over the humans, but they do not use it because they have adapted to human techniques of domination, consenting cultural hegemony, and neoliberalism.
In other words, Butler not only demonstrates how MNCs or hegemonic forces are just as parasitic as the aliens in her stories, but she also calls into question our humanity in the wake of these forces, as do the potential hires as they question Noah. Noah explains that when she was a captive she was put “through hell. They were like human scientists experiments with lab animals—not cruel, but very thorough” (161). One of the hires begins to ask why they would work for a species that saw them as animals, but Noah reassures them that that was then, not now (161). Once again, Noah demonstrates that the Communities have adapted to recognize the humans as more than cattle, but still perhaps of a lower class. Similar to the Tlic, the stratification of the societies resembles less of a master and slave dynamic (although both alien species went through a phase of enslaving humans) and a more of a class dynamic between the capitalist bourgeoisie and the laboring proletariat. However, what happens when the capitalist bourgeoisie is another species entirely? What happens to humanity? The hires are particularly concerned about whether they would be considered animals although the story reveals that the humans refer to the Communities as “alien weeds” (184). However, Noah is not only there to reassure the hires that their humanity will not be challenged, but she is also there to remind readers of their posthumanity. In essence, she has already come to terms with the realization that sovereign humans are not the center of power; instead, their institutions accumulate biopower and displace the power thought once to have resided in individual human subjects (these institutions include the militaristic nation-state, neoliberal MNCs, and cultural hegemony exerted through discourse).

However, lastly and most unsettlingly, Noah reveals why she ultimately capitulated (consented to possible exploitation) to the Communities’ model of neoliberal power—it is because the Communities also learned, absorbed, and exerted the militaristic power of a superstate. Noah tells the potential hires:

It seems that there was a coordinated nuclear strike at the aliens when it was clear where they were establishing their colonies... I have no idea how the attack was repelled, but I do know this, and my military captor confirmed it with their lines of questioning: the missiles fired at the bubbles never detonated... There was panic, confusion, fury. After that, though, the “invaders,” the “alien weeds” began to become in many languages, our “guests,” our “neighbors,” and even our “friends.” (183–184)

This moment reveals that the Communities received the incoming nuclear missiles and kept half of them undetonated, the other half were returned...
as displays of might (some were returned to the White House, inside the Oval Office). While this display of ultimate power demonstrates that the Communities are more technologically and biologically advanced than humans, it also serves to highlight another example where the aliens adapt posthuman strategies of biopower to suit their own survival. Here, the Communities demonstrate a rise to the international stage of nationhood via a nationalism of self-determination. By acquiring nuclear weapons, the Communities acquire equal strength as the global superpowers like the United States, Russia, the UK, China, and France. However, this by no means improves their relationship to political consent; it only worsens.

**CONCLUSION**

In a 1945 essay following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, George Orwell theorized that atomic weapons would only further estrange the hegemonic nation-state from its own people. He writes, “The atomic bomb may complete the process by robbing the exploited classes and peoples of all power to revolt, and at the same time putting the possessors of the bomb on a basis of military equality” (Orwell). This notion of military equality is very important to achieve global stability, as Orwell goes on to theorize:

But suppose...that the surviving great nations make a tacit agreement never to use the atomic bomb against one another? Suppose they only use it, or the threat of it, against people who are unable to retaliate? In that case we are back where we were before, the only difference being that power is concentrated in still fewer hands and that the outlook for subject peoples and oppressed classes is still more hopeless. (Orwell)

In this theoretical understanding of military equivalency, Orwell supposes that no nation will attack another nation with atomic weapons. It is assumed then that no nation would attack an alien race with abilities that supersede atomic weaponry or at least nullify it. It is clear that the Communities are not militarily equivalent; they are superior. However, their superiority does not instigate an attack on other nations, it instead forced them to consent to their self-determined nationhood and provide them the rights of Corporate Personhood. As this relates to consent, one might argue that the more power the bourgeoisie capitalists accumulate over the proletariat, the less room for consent there becomes. How does one lead a revolution against a superior alien species? How does one lead a revolution against a nation-state or MNC that exerts enough power in the form of military strength or economic capital to coerce subjects into full participation? Is there a way out of being
interpellated and integrated into these systems? Octavia E. Butler’s short stories tell us resoundingly that it is impossible.

Noah seems to articulate it best near the end of “Amnesty,” “It was a short, quiet war... We lost” (184). The war was not fought with weapons, but rather was fought through a race to superior technologies and biologies. One could say that the Tlic too fought a “short, quiet war” for dominance over the Terrans, but we do not get to see much of that accumulation and consolidation of power. Both the Tlic and the Communities demonstrate that achieving dominance over humanity does not require brute strength, violence, or slavery. Instead, it is possible to coerce them into a codependent (symbiosis) or an exploitative (parasite-host) relationship through a manipulation of their circumstances of survival. The alien species need not kill anyone because they have accumulated unrivaled power that even Gan’s gun or nuclear weapons cannot unseat. However, these technologies, the gun and the nuke, are deeply important to maintain the illusion of power and the illusion of a possibility of an uprising. Butler makes abundantly clear that humans (even when they are met with unrivaled forces of biological and technological power and determinism) want to believe they are in control. Butler’s use of science fiction and posthuman speculations only serves to further demonstrate that a liberal humanist narrative of progress is really just alien wool pulled over our posthuman eyes.

NOTES

1. Kristin Lillvis, Thibodeau, Gregory Jerome Hampton, and Kilgore and Samantrai all concede Butler’s work primarily centers around theoretical frameworks that read the material and biological body. See Lillvis 9; Thibodeau 266; Hampton “Memorium” 247; Kilgore and Samantrai 357.

2. A similar transaction happens in “Amnesty” where the Communities initially colonize and body-snatch humans like Noah, but over time learn and adapt to the Earthen systems of political economy and capitalism wherein they might hire humans for their labor and biological ability to communicate via language.

3. However, under identical colonial dynamics in “Amnesty,” Butler depicts a dystopian reality wherein humans and aliens cannot form symbiosis because of their failure to communicate and operate outside of capitalist frameworks and biological essentialisms. The potential employees of the Communities do not trust their relationship to their future employer (as described by Noah, who was kidnapped and hurt by the Communities) because they fear that their relationship will be characterized as a parasitic-host relationship or perhaps exist as a master-slave dynamic.
WORKS CITED


PART TWO

Adulthood Rites
An important moment in Octavia E. Butler’s *Mind of My Mind* (1977) arises when the protagonist Mary, during a discussion with her husband Karl, compares Doro, her father and lover, to a vampire. In the same breath, Mary recognizes her own vampiric tendencies. Although she recognizes herself as vampiric, Mary intones that she is different from Doro because she “gives” as well as “takes” from others. She states: “I am not the vampire he is; I give in return for my taking” (205). Those familiar with Butler’s fiction may find themselves surprised at such an association, considering that *Fledgling* (2005) is Butler’s only novel to engage actively in a vampire tale reminiscent of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).1 Perhaps still more surprising is my argument: the *Xenogenesis* trilogy uses the vampire as a metaphor and implements themes characteristic of vampire lore to grapple with fears of miscegenation, invasion, and unfamiliar sexual communities as ways to explore identity loss.
Notable critical attention to vampirism in *Fledgling* exists, but an absence remains in the critical commentary concerning vampirism as it appears throughout Butler’s other works. Gregory Hampton discusses the hybrid body of Shori, the protagonist in *Fledgling*, and Lauren J. Lacey and Melissa J. Strong discuss power relations and hybridity in *Fledgling*. Mildred Mickle discusses the transmission of disease in *Fledgling* and *Survivor*; Susana Morris explores *Fledgling* and Afrofuturism, and coauthors Marie-Luise Loffler and Florian Bast discuss *Fledgling* alongside Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*. Although Florian Bast, Ali Brox, and Shari Evans all suggest that *Fledgling* includes many thematic elements and cultural questions from Butler’s fiction, what goes largely uncommented on is the mutual dependence and familial-like bond Shori shares with her symbionts appear throughout Butler’s fiction under the guise of vampirism. Marty Fink is the notable exception; Fink uses HIV/AIDS and consent to explore *Fledgling*, and Fink hints at vampirism in Butler’s other fiction observing that *Clay’s Ark* “uses werewolf and vampire mythologies popularized in the nineteenth century” (422). Generally, Butler scholarship discusses these bonds as links, patterns, and symbiosis. Sandra Y. Govan discusses connections, patterns, and links in Butler’s fiction published before 1984, and Laurel Bollinger and Cathy Peppers discuss symbiosis in Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, “Bloodchild,” and *Fledgling*, but none read these metaphors of connectivity, patterns, linkages, or symbiosis as vampirism.

From the blood-sucking Tlic grubs in “Bloodchild” and the references to Mary and Doro as vampires in *Mind of My Mind*, Butler is deeply invested in vampirism as a trope, simultaneously challenging and reifying the notion of vampire as wholly predatory. With this focus in mind, my discussion of vampirism is not simply to depart from conventional readings of symbiosis or symbiogenesis. I have a vested interest in discussing vampirism throughout Butler’s trilogy in part because the language used to describe encounters between Oankali and human is vampiric (penetrate, bite, taste, and biting of the neck), and in *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites* the term “vampire” is used to describe one or more characters. Further, the vampirism in the trilogy represents more than a disruption; it is an invading force that threatens to both enhance and destabilize notions of humanity, of sexual identity, and of reproduction, much like Stoker’s Dracula. As I unpack vampirism in the trilogy, I focus on Butler’s ooloi and construct ooloi, who function as the primary vampire figures. In exploring Butler’s incorporation of the vampire myth/vampire trope, I argue that the vampire myth enables her to incorporate into her science fiction tale the characteristic fears of miscegenation, of alternative sexual communities and experiences, and of foreign invasion. I provide analyses of several adverse effects of the human-ooloi and human-
Oankali relationships that stem from the fears of invasion, miscegenation, alternative sexual experiences all of which are compounded into one main fear: a fear of identity loss.

Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy or *Lilith’s Brood*—comprised of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—tells the story of humans preserved by an alien species after a human-led nuclear war destroys Earth. *Dawn* provides narratives of a small group of human survivors of a nuclear war and are subsequently discovered by the Oankali—an alien species of three sexes: male, female, and ooloi (or third sex). The Oankali retrieve the humans, placing the humans in “suspended animation” or a state of deep sleep or unconsciousness. The Oankali are gene traders; they change themselves with the genetic material and cultural diversity of any species they encounter, including humans. As the humans remain in suspended animation, the Oankali alter the humans’ bodies: they improve memories, strength, and life span. Most importantly, for the Oankali, they correct the human genetic defect, what they refer to as the “Human Contradiction,” a combination of intelligence and hierarchal behavior that makes humans prone to destroying themselves. Additionally, the Oankali sterilize humans to make sure that any children born will be a product of human-Oankali breeding. The Oankali restore Earth and plan to allow humans to return; the expectation is that the humans will begin a new society and fend for themselves. To help the human survivor-captives accept interspecies breeding as the only way to conceive, the Oankali choose Lilith Iyapo to teach and convince the humans to accept the Oankali’s offer of hybridity, interdependence, and symbiosis. Most humans accept this “trade,” this genetic mixture, even though it means their ultimate dependence on another species; however, the resisters reject the offer and refuse to become birthers of human-Oankali children or “constructs.” While the Oankali recognize their gene trade with humans as the beginning of a utopian existence, most humans perceive it traumatically, as a form of colonization. For humans, the forced existence with the Oankali represents a loss of humanity. Butler presents the Oankali in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy as metaphor for difference that humans are invited to embrace—or risk extinction.

The second and third books of the trilogy explore the Oankali’s continued evolution. In *Adulthood Rites*, the second book, Butler introduces readers to Akin, the human-Oankali construct son of Lilith and her human partner, Joseph, and his life among human resisters. In *Adulthood Rites*, resisters to the Oankali lifestyle resort to stealing human-looking construct children, stealing and raping human women from neighboring resister villages, and building guns in hopes of preventing Oankali abductions. As an infant, Akin is captured by human resisters, and the narrative follows his transition to
adolescence in the home of Tate and Gabriel, a human couple who were first acquainted with Lilith in *Dawn*. After leaving the resister compound, Akin tries to convince the Oankali that humans need a world of their own. Akin realizes, even as a young child, that the forced relationship between the Oankali and humans, the sterility of resister humans at the expense of the Oankali, is a parasitic, adverse condition, almost a perverse punishment. Akin seeks to mollify this relationship, giving the humans a world of their own, restoring their fertility. *Imago* (1989), the final book of the trilogy, introduces Jodahs, its sibling, Aaor, and their discovery of a colony of fertile, Earth-born humans (628). Jodahs redefines and expands the Oankali species as it is the first construct ooloi—that is, the first of its kind to become a half-human, half ooloi or “third sex” being, and Aaor becomes the second.

Because the *Xenogenesis* trilogy represents vampiric relationships as ambivalent but necessary, some “vampire characters” in the trilogy are benevolent and others are predatory. Of course, a reader’s subject position determines just how he or she will read these characters. The vampire characters are often a combination of both benevolent and predatory. In general, the vampire in *Xenogenesis* concerns itself with a series of vampire-subject's intercourses that involve extraterrestrial-human *ménages a trois*, DNA exchanges, euphoric energy transfers, and, of course, blood exchanges. The vampires’ projected benevolence stems from their desire to cure terminal illnesses, reverse human infertility, increase human life span, accelerate humans’ physical and mental healing, and amplify humans’ sexual pleasure. Conversely, the vampires’ predatory behavior stems from their manipulation, coercion, drugging, sterilization, and sometimes killing of their subject-hosts. While it would seem that there are, for all intents and purposes, no “victims” of benevolent vampires, such an assumption fails to consider the issue of consent, an issue that in *Xenogenesis* results in a vampire subject’s participation in a hostile takeover/invasion, forced miscegenation/reproduction, or participation in unwanted sexual activities or communities.6

While I do not assume that vampirism is wholly negative, as Butler does seem to move away from the typical bloodsuckers of Bram Stoker’s and Joseph Sheridan LeFanu’s depictions, I cannot overlook the issue of consent (although several scholars discuss consent in regard to the *Xenogenesis* trilogy) nor can I ignore a subject’s addiction to the Oankali oooloi’s “substance” as the addiction suggests some element of control, a sort of master-slave dynamic. While the humans indeed benefit from Oankali existence, privileging such beneficence runs the risk of ignoring the long history that argues for the “beneficence” of the “dominant” over the “submissive.” American enslavers argue that the enslaved benefited from their care, and despite certain “benefits” (which might have included a trip to Baltimore for gainful employment,
provisions to write poetry and travel abroad, or opportunities to compose love poems for students in North Carolina), America’s “peculiar institution” was not mutually beneficial. It may be tempting to view the relationships in the Xenogenesis trilogy as ideal, utopian existences, but it is important to embrace the ambivalence of these relationships and explore the element of exploitation at work. These ideas of dominance/submission and resistance/complicity are much more complex in Butler’s works and are made much more complex through the lens of vampirism particularly as these texts are fraught with multiple ambivalences and anxieties with regard to invasion, miscegenation, and alternative sexual experiences.

My definition of the term “vampire” necessarily considers its multiple forms: the nineteenth-century notion of the vampire made popular by Stoker’s Dracula (1897), the American and African appropriations of Stoker’s vampires, the incubus and succubus of Medieval literature and culture, and the soucouyant (or soucriat) of Caribbean folklore. The “traditional” Americanized vampire, modeled largely on Stoker’s quintessential Count Dracula, is that of a white male seducing and penetrating (the neck of) a young white girl, a model which was met with little variation until the 1970s and 1980s with the arrival of explicitly homoerotic white male vampires and with the arrival of films’ first black vampires in Blacula (1972), Ganja and Hess (1973), and Scream, Blacula, Scream (1973). The other forms of the vampire—the soucouyant, the incubi, the succubi, and the wazimamoto—appear throughout Medieval, Caribbean, and African lore, and the shared characteristics they have with Western vampires are blood-sucking, a removal of life or life force, nocturnal visits, elements of disguise through shape-shifting and boundary crossing, and the sexual connotation of each. The consideration of each of these types of vampires is important for my discussion of what it means to be a vampire because Butler draws on these traditions.

Vampirism appears in Butler’s Dawn as both benevolent and predatory in the form of human and Oankali ooloi relationships, most notably evident in the exchanges between the Oankali and their human survivor-captives: Lilith, Joseph, and Peter. Nikanj, as a vampire, embodies the fear of miscegenation and reproductive co-opting for Lilith, and for Joseph, Nikanj is the embodiment of an unwanted outside invasion. For Peter, an unnamed ooloi becomes the symbol for his fear of alternative sexual experiences. In Adulthood Rites, vampirism appears as a benevolent, medicinal relationship in Akin’s relationship with Tate. In Imago, vampirism is both benevolent and predatory as Jodahs’s relationships simultaneously embody fears of foreign invasion and healing. Additionally, the presence of Jodahs signals a loss of or a radical shift in self-identification not for the humans but for the Oankali.
DAWN

In *Dawn*, the relationship between Nikanj and Lilith appears benevolent in its earliest stages; however, the relationship shifts from one of benevolence to predatory when Lilith learns that she will be forced to participate in a nontraditional sexual community to enjoy physical touch and that she has unknowingly been forced into motherhood. Nikanj, an ooloi, wants to “trade” with Lilith, but for this trade to take place, Nikanj must penetrate Lilith: “It will be like this. A touch. Then a... a small puncture. That’s all you’ll feel. When you wake up the change will be made” (Butler, *Dawn* 76).

Lilith’s first vampirizing experience by Nikanj comes only after Lilith wants to get the “change” over with: “On the back of her neck, she [Lilith] felt the promised touch, a harder pressure, then the puncture. It hurt more than she had expected, but the pain ended quickly. For a few seconds she drifted in painless semiconsciousness. Then there were confused memories, dreams, finally nothing” (79–80). The change is an “enhancement” of Lilith’s own abilities; Nikanj enables Lilith to heal faster (almost immediately), to open the walls of the Oankali ship, to speak and understand the Oankali language, and to subdue other humans with superhuman strength, speed, and skill.

In exchange for Lilith’s cellular biology, Nikanj provides her with sexual satisfaction: “Then she lay down, perversely eager for what it [Nikanj] could give her. She positioned herself against it, and was not content until she felt the deceptively light touch of the sensory hand and felt the ooloi body tremble against her” (191).8 Nikanj also provides Lilith with healing of minor and major issues:

Her throat hurt. Her first solitary sensation was pain—as though she had been shouting, screaming. She swallowed painfully and raised her hand to her throat, but Nikanj’s sensory arm was there ahead of her and brushed her hand away. It laid its exposed sensory hand across her throat. She felt it anchor itself, sensory fingers stretching, clasping. She did not feel the tendrils of its substance penetrate her flesh, but in a moment the pain in her throat was gone. (162–163)

The sensory fingers that Nikanj uses to give sexual pleasure are the same ones that eliminate pain. The initial uninformed consent is apparently mollified by the promise of sexual pleasure and healing of injuries.

The benefits Lilith receives—superhuman strength, sexual satisfaction, language, memory—are more acceptable to her than perpetual captivity; she learns to accept the trade and its physically enhancing benefits without question until she realizes that her vampirization has a higher price than she
was informed of. After the change, Lilith learns that because she has been penetrated by Nikanj that she will neither want to touch other humans, nor will she want to be around other Oankali. Lilith has unknowingly become addicted to Nikanj’s “substance,” and she learns her newfound aversion to human touch is a consequence of her vampirization. Although Lilith comes to terms with such information, the lack of information she receives from the Oankali becomes a repeated pattern, notably as Nikanj impregnates Lilith without her knowledge or consent; it only informs her of her pregnancy after the impregnation is complete (246). Nikanj’s forced impregnation negates not only consent but also women’s reproductive rights, which is especially worth noting since the reproductive justice movement began to proliferate in the late 1980s. *Dawn* was published during a particular moment in American history, and I am immediately reminded of African American women’s calls for reproductive justice, particularly as stories about the sterilization of women of color and poor women and the lack of access to reproductive healthcare emerged. Lilith is denied the choice to choose motherhood in two ways: she neither has the opportunity to decide whether or not she wants to be impregnated by Nikanj, nor does she have a choice to refuse “joining” with the Oankali. Any refusal on her part to be vampirized by Nikanj would result in her ultimate sterility (her choices are either interbreeding or remaining sterile). According to Aparajita Nanda, Lilith’s “surrogate motherhood” is a mechanism removing her from her “victimized position” as a “captive, a victim of a controlled society” (775–776); however, Nanda does not address that the surrogate motherhood is nonconsensual. Whatever value we may place on Lilith’s forced motherhood, it becomes difficult to deny that human choices remain limited when it comes to conception—a point Nanda indeed discusses. Thus, the insemination and impregnation are already problematic particularly since readers (and Lilith) remain unaware of when the insemination took place. But, the insemination and impregnation become increasingly troubling when read alongside their late twentieth-century context.

Humans may choose to coexist with the Oankali and endure species miscegenation through forced insemination or resist the Oankali and endure a life of sterility. Nikanj tells Lilith, “[Humans] need us now. They won’t have children without us. Human sperm and egg will not unite without us” (245). For once, Oankali logic is mis-stated. In *Imago*, a colony of fertile resister humans is discovered. They reproduce with one another, birthing physiologically healthy children with appearance impairments. Regardless of the discovery of fertile resister humans in *Imago*, the implications of Nikanj’s cavalier attitude—Nikanj’s vampirism—are striking. How does this sterilization benefit the humans? They will still die, and their human
species will die out. How is the extinction of one species and the survival of another a fair trade? There are certainly limitations to this particular reading, because I am ignoring the fact that we could really just read the Oankali as another race (as in skin color) of people. But, such terms and conditions are very much analogous to American enslavement as well as global imperialism. In *Dawn*, the relationship between Lilith and Nikanj, between human and Oankali, is often read as being predicated on mutual symbiosis, but like Steven Shaviro, I agree that Nikanj’s manipulation ultimately makes *Dawn* “the story of Lilith’s complicity, of the way that she unavoidably agrees, in spite of herself, to do the Oankali’s bidding” (Shaviro 223). Lilith’s participation in a forced breeding project is indeed “like Nazism and slavery in the American South” (Shaviro 224) although the Oankali may do it “out of entirely different motives” (Shaviro 224). Thus, Lilith may indeed benefit from Nikanj’s “touch,” but she is also a victim of Nikanj’s predatory behavior.

Although Lilith does not resist the Nikanj’s “vampirization,” some humans do resist the vampiric sexual encounters with Oankali; the Oankali drug these humans and force them to participate in alternative sexual communities, which amplifies the humans’ fears of and anger at the Oankali and culminates in violent retaliation against the Oankali. The most notable example is that of Peter, a human survivor-captive of the Oankali, who is drugged, along with several other humans, to guarantee his complicity and docility:

> Ooloi-produced drugs could be potent. Under their influence, Peter might have laughed at anything. Under their influence, he accepted union and pleasure. When that influence was allowed to wane and Peter began to think, he apparently decided he had been humiliated and enslaved. The drug seemed to him to be not a less painful way of getting used to frightening nonhumans, but a way of turning him against himself, causing him to demean himself in alien perversions. His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away. (Butler, *Dawn* 192; emphasis added)

My emphasis on Peter’s thought process and the absence of his ability to control his own decisions points to the coercive, manipulative, and predatory nature of the ooloi. As readers, we witness and observe the ooloi’s manipulation of Peter. Peter, we infer, is reduced from an angry, defiant state to a placid, docile tranquility. The ooloi, in a calculated move similar to that of Southern slave owners, force cooperation and contentment through drug-induced stupors.

Although one interpretation of Peter’s drug-induced consent indeed points to the predatory nature of the ooloi, another interpretation may
also point to a larger fear of same-sex encounters if we consider the time during which Dawn was published. A major characteristic of the 1980s was the association of gay men with HIV/AIDS and gay men as a threat to the “health” of the American nation. In Monsters in America, W. Scott Poole reminds us that “the AIDS epidemic seemed to especially resonate with the mythology of the vampire given the immune disorder’s blood-borne disease vector. This comported with a homophobic tendency to imagine gays and lesbians as a kind of vampire…. conservative critics often focused on gay men as a source of moral and physical corruption…” (206). Poole’s assertion, combined with Lilith’s remarks that all the male humans consider the ooloi as male even though they are sexless, suggests that Peter shares this viewpoint of the ooloi as male, which further compounds his fear of the ooloi and explains why he considers himself being robbed of his manhood. If there is a larger social conversation occurring in the United States in the 1980s about gay men and HIV/AIDS (however problematic this conversation may be), perhaps we can read Peter’s reaction to the ooloi within that same context. Such a reading would suggest, then, that just as conservative critics (Scott refers to Anita Bryant in particular) sought to pinpoint gay men as threats to corporeality and masculinity, Peter, too, views the Oankali in a similar manner.

Peter’s drugging and the absence of his sober consent to “union and pleasure” demeans and resists in the only way he knows how: violence. Peter, alone in his room with his ooloi, attacked it and

triggered the ooloi’s defensive reflexes. It gave him a lethal sting before it could regain control of itself and he collapsed in convulsions. His own contracting muscles broke several of his bones, then he went into shock.

The ooloi tried to help him once it had recovered from the worst of its own pain, but it was too late. He was dead. The ooloi sat down beside his body…it seemed to be as dead as the human it was apparently mourning. (193)

Peter’s reaction seems natural and human, and the results of drugging and inebriated “consent” are twofold as they result in Peter’s death and the “death” of the ooloi. Peter’s apparent humiliation at his participation in and enjoyment of unfamiliar sexual activities or communities points to his lack of self-control; Peter no longer knows “who he is” because his body and his desires have been co-opted and manipulated by the Oankali. His unwilling participation in sexual activity, much like that of Joseph’s initial unwillingness, “caus[ed] him to demean himself in alien perversions” (192). Peter’s death, however, can be interpreted in two ways. First, his death
suggests that death is preferable to living in an “enslaved” or “perverse” condition. It is key that such a choice is one taken by a white male. Consider the history of enslaved African American women. If all had chosen death to living as an enslaved, none would have survived. Peter’s choice to take his life is key to Butler’s story and her protagonists’ choices. Alternately, his death also suggests that a fear of difference or a fear of change results in death. However, given my earlier association—of Peter’s reaction to his ooloi as similar to conservative homophobia—the likely interpretation is the latter—a refusal to embrace change leads to one’s demise. If, as Anita Bryant suggests, that “homosexuals...must recruit, must freshen their ranks” (Bryant qtd. in Scott 206), and if the men in *Dawn* do view the ooloi as male as opposed to sexless, then Peter’s response amounts to homophobia, a fear that proves deadly for him and detrimental to his ooloi. Peter’s death suggests that the benefits of the relationship may be preferable over death because the death also causes harm to the ooloi. Peter’s fear and revulsion at being forced to participating in an alternative sexual community incites him to action. He feels “less than a man” because he enjoyed a foreign stimulus that he interprets as being a masculine behavior.

Throughout the trilogy, humans who offer resistance to sexual encounters with Oankali, but who are intrigued by their presence, are forced into participating in alternative sexual communities and thereby required to accept and live with the bodily invasion that is part and parcel with that sexual community. The most successful example is in *Dawn* during Joseph’s first encounter with Nikanj. By “successful,” I mean that Joseph, while initially repulsed at the idea, does not incite himself to violence and death like Peter does. Joseph keeps his life and the ooloi gets what it wants: a new body to co-opt, colonize, and invade. Nikanj tells Joseph, Lilith’s lover, that Oankali do not deliberately hurt humans: “We’re careful to avoid damaging new partner-species,” Nikanj begins, but Joseph remains unconvinced: ‘You don’t need us!’ Joseph said. ‘You’ve created your own human beings [through print copies of human DNA]. Poor bastards. Make them your [sexual] partners” (153). Nikanj responds, “We...do need you.’ Nikanj spoke so softly that Joseph leaned forward to hear. ‘A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a very real way, you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape’” (153). “Damage” is up for scrutiny. Nikanj means to say that the Oankali are careful to avoid inflicting pain on those with whom they have chosen to mate. Nikanj goes on to say, “But you’re more than only the composition and the workings of your bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We’re interested in those too. That’s why we saved as many of you as we could” (153–154). The Oankali’s
interest in culture and bodies is just like Dracula; he created a new species and was very interested in English culture as he sought to invade London. Nikanj posits its vampirism as benevolent, but it becomes just as invasive and horrific as Dracula’s invasion of London; the “damage” Nikanj claims to avoid is subjective, and it rapes Joseph based on implied consent, forcing him to experience an alien sexual encounter. Joseph remarks, “You said I could choose! I’ve made my choice,” as he snatches his arm free from Nikanj, but “It [Nikanj] opened his jacket with its many-fingered true hands and stripped the garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed with him without seeming to force him down” (189, emphasis added). In effect, Nikanj rapes Joseph; it ignores his pleas and his resistance, saying: “You see. Your body has made a different choice” (189). While the “damage” Nikanj speaks of during its conversation with Joseph is not physical, it is damaging to Joseph’s psyche. Just because Joseph’s body responds to a sexual stimulant does not mean that he or his mind has condoned such a response. Nikanj’s first encounter with Joseph’s is wholly predatory; it, much like a vampire, coerces a response from its victim, invades Joseph’s “space,” forces Joseph to accept its presence and arrival, and justifies its predatory activity with Joseph’s uncontrollable biological response to stimulus.

The sexual inversion inherent in Joseph’s rape is amplified when placed in conversation with Stoker’s Dracula. Just as Nikanj penetrates Joseph, a similar penetration occurs to Jonathan Harker by the three weird sisters in Dracula’s castle as they approach him, seduce him, and nearly penetrate him:

I lay quiet, looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me.... There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see... the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the sharp white teeth.... I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart. (Stoker 42–43)

The vampires’ literal position above Harker is a visual image of his feminization, and the teeth, “just touching and pausing there,” make the female vampires the aggressors and the male recipient the victim. Thus, there are a series of role reversals: the male as penetrator and the female as penetrated is null and void; it is Harker who is the open, yonic space, and
the vampire sisters who possess the phallic penetrator. In both cases—with Harker and with Joseph—the promise of pleasure is intertwined with the threats of humiliation and powerlessness.

The stark contrast between Lilith, Peter, and Joseph’s encounters with Nikanj highlights Butler’s ambiguity; it is unclear whether or not she endorses the Oankali way, but she certainly provides readers with evidence to decide for themselves. It is here that a reader’s personal history comes into play. The rape survivor, surely, will read the Oankali as wholly predatory, regardless of their benevolent intentions.

**ADULTHOOD RITES**

While vampirism in *Dawn* primarily functions as predatory and parasitic for Lilith, Joseph, and Peter, vampirism, in many ways, becomes more tolerable for some resisters in *Adulthood Rites*. In *Adulthood Rites*, there are two notable humorous references to vampirism as they relate to Akin, a hybrid human-Oankali infant captured by human resisters because of his mostly human-looking appearance. The first refers to Galt, one of Akin’s captors, who admonishes his comrade: “[Akin] claims to be poison. . . . So you go on holding him next to your neck. You do that” (342). The jab “so you go on holding him next to your neck” is humorous, but more intriguing is the association between vampirism and poison, diseases, or scourges. In late Victorian England, vampires, as metaphors for racial, ethnic, and sexual difference, were considered threats to the national purity of England; the very existence of these non-English or non-heteronormative bodies threatened to taint or poison English national identity and were thus to be avoided.

The second instance centers on Tate, wife of Gabe and an old friend of Lilith’s, as she calls young Akin a “regular little vampire” before he “was lost in the taste of her” as he worked to discover her Huntington’s disease (*Adulthood Rites* 362). As a child, Akin’s long, grey tongue is his only marker of alien difference; he uses his tongue to taste plants, animals, and humans to learn more about them. As an adolescent, Akin heals Tate of her disease, and Butler’s description of the healing process is very much like a vampiric bite: “Carefully, he settled himself between her and the wall. ‘I still have only my tongue to work with,’ he said. ‘That means this will look like I’m biting you on the neck’” (490–491). Tate responds, “You used to do that whenever I’d let you,” and Akin remarks, “I know. Apparently, though, it looks more threatening or more suspicious now” (491). There is a sinister humor in Akin’s final response. The invocation of vampirism is here, but this bite is a healing one:
He put one arm around her to keep her in position when she lost consciousness, then put his mouth to the side of her neck. From then on, he was aware only of her body—its injured organs and poorly healed fractures… and its activation of her old illness, her Huntington’s disease. Did she know? Had the disease caused her to fall? It could have. Or she could have fallen deliberately in the hope of escaping the disease…

Akin lost himself in the work—the pleasure—of finding injuries and stimulating her body’s own healing ability. (491)

More important than Akin’s humorous references, however, is Tate’s expressed consent to being healed. Unlike Joseph and Peter, who were forced to either lie down or exist in a drug-induced stupor, and unlike Lilith who did not ask Nikanj to impregnate her (the first time), Tate permits Akin to vampirize her, and he obliges. Tate’s consent is important because it legitimizes Akin’s healing ability and his benevolence; instead of functioning as a colonial ruler, like the other Oankali who harvest and colonize human bodies, or a predator, Tate’s consent allows Akin to exercise his power without guilt or fear of retaliation.

**IMAGO**

The first two books of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy are reminiscent of vampire-human encounters, but Butler’s incorporation of the vampire myth is perhaps most evident in *Imago*. My tracing of vampirism in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy ends with *Imago*; however, to avoid a repetition of previous discussions on consent and rape, it centers on four points of comparison between Jodahs and Dracula. *Imago* introduces Jodahs, its sibling, Aaor, and their discovery of a colony of fertile, Earth-born humans (628). The third book of the trilogy follows Jodahs and Aaor, both of whom represent a new species for the Oankali: construct ooloi. *Imago* combines all the fears—fear of foreign invasion, fear of identity loss, fear of alternative sexual experiences, and fear of miscegenation/reproduction—where *Dawn* and *Adulthood Rites* only incorporate one or two. Jodahs redefines and expands the Oankali species as it is the first construct ooloi—a half-human, half “third sex” being—and Aaor becomes the second. Although “vampire” is not mentioned in *Imago*, Jodahs is the archetypal vampire figure at least in the context of *Dracula* for several reasons. Jodahs and Count Dracula both threaten to destroy a particular genetic or racial makeup and embody a fear of change, a fear of the unknown, and what amounts to a fear of miscegenation. They also embody disease and become the focus of quarantine or sterilization. Also, both Jodahs and Dracula are shape-shifters, able to blend or transform as a
way to mollify others or to elude their pursuers. Finally, both are potential colonizers, threatening to take over bodies for their own survival.

The first point of similarity between Jodahs and Dracula is that they embody the fear of miscegenation: both destroy the genetic makeup of a dominant group, and their tendency toward destruction compels the dominant groups’ fears of the unknown. The unplanned and accidental metamorphosis of Jodahs into a construct ooloi damages the “perfect” genetic makeup the Oankali worked hard to create and even harder to preserve, much like Dracula threatens to disrupt pure bloodlines and notions of humanity of the English. The possibility of a “flawed” ooloi (542) or “one who could distort or destroy with a touch” (542) was greatly feared by the Oankali because construct ooloi were nonexistent prior to Jodahs, and there was no history on how to cope with such difference. From *Dawn* to *Imago*, the Oankali evolve from a group that thrives on difference to a group that embraces differences that they have become accustomed to.

However, at the first indication of a difference that has no explanation or no precedent, the Oankali become intolerant; Jodahs is regarded as an immediate danger, and its ooloi parent, Nikanj, is regarded with suspicion for its lack of awareness and its mistake. Dracula, too, is a hazard, and for the safety and preservation of traditional Oankali and British ways of life, both Dracula and Jodahs must be quarantined. Just as *Dracula* reveals that the British were fearful of Jewish and Irish immigrants, *Imago* reveals the Oankali’s fear of human construct ooloi—the first of its kind. Something that, before it even existed, was predetermined to be a threat. The Oankali’s fear of miscegenation here harkens back to Lilith and Peter’s fears in *Dawn*. Lilith does not want to birth “a thing—not human” (246); she wants to retain some sort of humanity, and Peter does not want to remain in a drug-induced state accepting the “sexual perversions” of the Oankali (*Dawn* 192) because they threaten his identity of who he is as a human, as a man. With the Oankali’s shift from being tolerant of differences they are comfortable and familiar with to intolerant of differences for which they have no explanation, Butler seems to critique the Oankali for the same thing the Oankali critique the humans for—their hierarchical tendencies; their intolerance. The Oankali’s treatment of Jodahs suggests that they, as a species, have become stagnant and unable to evolve. In their fear of Jodahs the Oankali reveal their very human-like characteristics; just as they chided humans in *Dawn* for their inability to adapt (or sent them back into suspended animation or refused to allow Lilith outside her initial captive space until she became “comfortable” with looking upon the Oankali), they too possess a discomfort of the unknown.
Second, both Jodahs and Dracula are exemplars of scourges or diseases, diseases that their respective communities actively seek to quarantine or cure. Nikanj, Jodahs’s ooloi parent, tells Jodahs: “‘You could give Humans back their cancers,’ it said, rousing me from my thoughts. ‘Or you could affect them genetically. You could damage their immune systems, cause neurological disorders, glandular problems…. You could give them diseases they don’t have names for’” (552). Nikanj’s warning remains forefront in Jodahs’s mind, and soon, it realizes that the Oankali community fears it:

Everyone’s fear was that I would make changes in the plant and animal life. These changes could spread like diseases—could actually be diseases. The adults in the family did not know whether they could detect and disarm every change. Sooner or later other people would have to deal with some of them. …

I had apparently caused [my sibling’s] unsexed, immature body to try to grow sensory arms. Instead, it was growing potentially dangerous tumors. (568)

Jodahs has the potential to be predatory/parasitic, even if its intention is not to be, causing the Oankali to carefully watch Jodahs “with a terrible mixture of suspicion and hope, fear and need” (557). Finally reaching a consensus, the Oankali decide to exile Jodahs and its family to maintain their disease-free community. Similarly, Dracula’s infectious transformation of women and potentially men into vampires is indicative of his disease-carrying properties. As Dracula feeds on Lucy—the best friend of Mina—her body slowly wastes away in spite of the blood transfusions she receives from the Crew of Light who hope to reverse the deterioration of her immune system. If Jodahs’s presence is similar to that of Dracula’s, then Jodahs’s exile is similar to the Crew of Light’s “sterilization” of Dracula as a way to preserve the London community. Dr. Van Helsing tells the Crew: “We must trace each of these boxes [of Dracula’s sacred earth]; and when we are ready, we must either capture or kill this monster in his lair; or we must, so to speak, sterilize the earth, so that no more he can seek safety in it” (Stoker 213). The “sterilization” of Dracula’s sacred dirt works to prevent Dracula from making use of his powers so that the Crew of Light may kill him more easily. The Oankali concede to exile Jodahs to preserve the sterility, to preserve the relative uniformity of Lo12 (their colony), and to preserve the relative homogeneity and predictability of their existence and their offspring. In both cases, the threat of “disease” is etched out through sterilization or exile.
A third parallel between Jodahs and Dracula is their ability to assimilate or mimic dominant culture so their true nature goes undetected or presents them as nonthreatening. Jodahs, who before its metamorphosis always thought of itself as male and physically appeared male, learns that it has the ability to transform its appearance to please the person or peoples to whom it is most attracted; that is, it can transform itself into an attractive man or woman. Jodahs is able to “create new forms, new shells for camouflage” (547) and has the power “to look male” (549) even though it “wouldn’t be able to make a male contribution to reproduction” (549). Jodahs is able to pass, much like Count Dracula, who not only assumes multiple nonhuman forms, but he also travels in the daylight and assumes an English persona and remains well acquainted with London news so as to blend in and be as human, as English as possible (Stoker 25). The elasticity of these seemingly impenetrable or undetectable identity markers is emblematic of the very traversability of the oft proclaimed “hard and fast” ideologies of identity and community.

What, then, does rendering the seemingly impenetrable as dissoluble suggest? The fluidity of Jodahs and Dracula seems to suggest that a rethinking of boundaries or perhaps an elimination of boundaries altogether is an integral and necessary step for (ad)dressing the wounds created by inevitable rifts, shifts, and tears in presumptive ideological constructions of identity. Just as Dracula appeals to men and women, shape-shifts “appear[s] at will when, and where, and in any of the forms that are to him” (Stoker 209), and embodies a threat to the supposed stability of European culture, so does Jodahs. Jodahs’s ability to fluidly traverse these boundaries indicates that they are socially constructed; that is, these boundaries to do not actually exist. These boundaries, which are constructed by the Oankali to provide structure, order, and markers for sameness, actually allow for disorder and highlight modes of difference making these boundaries dangerous.

A final resemblance in both Imago and Dracula is the fear of foreign invasion. Jodahs is a new entity, a foreign element that will either infect Lo if it is not exiled or lead the Oankali to a colony of fertile, Earth-born humans. In fact, the central narrative of Imago centers on Jodahs’s discovery of two physically disfigured but fertile humans, Tomas and Jesusa, and later their settlement of disfigured, tumor-ridden, fertile humans. Jodahs needs physical contact with Tomas and Jesusa to satiate its hunger and to survive, but it burdens itself with the knowledge that it will also “have to betray them to [its] family” (628):

Worse their people would have to be found. I would have to betray them to my family, and my family would have to tell others. The settlement of fertile Humans would be allowed to choose Mars or union with us.
or sterility here on Earth. They could not be allowed to continue to reproduce here, then to die when we separated and left an uninhabitable rock behind. (628)

The implications of Jodahs’s discovery of the colony and the inevitable takeover of the colony suggest that Jodahs, like an imperialist, will invade the fertile human space, and this spatial invasion is complicated by its resemblance, however oblique, to Count Dracula’s invasion of London. Like Dracula, Jodahs (and later Jodahs’s people) consumes the resources and blots out the identities of the indigenous inhabitants, and just as Dracula invades London, Jodahs and the rest of the Oankali infiltrate the human village, assume the role of colonizer, and subject the colony of independent, fertile humans to one of three options: either mate with the Oankali, remain on Earth but be rendered infertile, or emigrate to a human colony on Mars. Though Jodahs laments the choices it will inevitably enact on the humans, its lamentations do not negate its role as invader, particularly as it threatens to disrupt the social, economic, and ideological stability that humans are accustomed to for the sake of Jodahs’s own survival.

However, Jodahs and Aaor’s invasion of this colony is complicated as readers learn that the fertile humans are coerced into producing children with appearance impairments for the sake of maintaining human purity. Although the humans are independent and fertile without Oankali intervention, the human colony participates in a breeding program very similar to the one the Oankali initiate in Dawn. The situation in the human colony is certainly not ideal; a faction of the humans want to be healed of their appearance impairments and mate with the Oankali and others want to maintain their independence. Through this human-controlled breeding program, Butler highlights the ironies of the human resisters who seek to avoid the predatory grip of the Oankali but consciously enact a predatory breeding program in order to maintain their biological humanity and purity. The same humans who considered themselves victims of a technologically superior species now appropriate and reify the same tactics they sought to escape. At this point in the trilogy, the line between human and humane, human and vampire, predatory and benevolent, is either reversed or arbitrary depending on one’s perspective. I am reminded of Thomas Foster’s assertion that “the category of the ‘human’ has historically been used to justify slavery through the denial of humanity to whole populations” (151). Foster’s reminder reveals that the category of “human” and the desire to preserve that category by any means necessary allow the human resisters to justify forced interbreeding by denying choices to humans who may want to live a life free apart from other humans and with the Oankali.
XENOGENESIS: A BEAUTIFULLY HORRIFIC AND HORRIFICALLY BEAUTIFUL ARRANGEMENT

If, as I have suggested, Butler’s trilogy invokes the trope vampirism because it has a series of fears of invasion, miscegenation, alternative sexual communities, and a loss of identity, then it is not surprising that Butler’s “only vampire novel” *Fledgling* encompasses these same ideals, fears, and themes. Vampires in *Fledgling* call themselves Ina, and they are a separate species, and they are all white-skinned. When another group of Ina vampires genetically engineer Shori, the first black human-vampire hybrid, Shori, her family, and her lovers are victims of attacks, and Shori is criminalized because of one vampire family’s prejudice, fear of miscegenation, and insecurities concerning their identities as white vampires. My brief synopsis of *Fledgling* reveals that the anxieties related to vampirism appear much earlier in Butler’s fiction—notably in *Clay’s Ark*, “Bloodchild,” and as the title of this chapter suggests, in *Mind of My Mind*. “Bloodchild” (1984), for example, explores anxieties of humans being “turned” into a monster’s playground as their human bodies are harvested and primed for use as incubators for blood-sucking grubs. *Clay’s Ark* tells the origin story of the Clayark disease and the Clayark race, and it details how Eli, a voyager on a space shuttle, returns from an alien planet with the disease and conflicting desires to both spread it and keep it contained. The tension of *Clay’s Ark* centers on the Clayark disease spreading to the American public, causing an epidemic that will ravage the nation (and ostensibly the world) with the survivors of the Clayark disease compelled to transfer their disease to others and birth half animal, half human children. “Bloodchild” and *Clay’s Ark* both echo many sentiments of *Dracula* in particular and Western vampire lore in general.

Readers familiar with *Xenogenesis* and *Fledgling* will recognize that what these texts have in common, in addition to the fears of invasion, miscegenation, loss of identity, and alternative sexual experiences, is survival. The Oankali possess a need to impregnate or genetically alter humans or drug or coerce to ensure the survival of their species—as does Lilith even if it means to the detriment of herself or others—just as some Ina experiment with human DNA to evolve and enhance their own species. What, then, are we to make of such feedings, such infections, such vampirisms? Are Butler’s vampires inherently evil in their intentions to be fruitful and multiply, or do they have choices in the matter? Consequences and reminders of the peculiarity of the vampiric relationship are articulated in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Lilith, without the Oankali, will die, and the Oankali, without the chemicals humans provide, will no longer exist. As gene traders, the Oankali have a genetic impulse or compulsion to find new species. While there is no overt suggestion that
without humans the Oankali will die, there are several instances in *Imago* that suggest that death for an Oankali is almost inevitable without human contact. Jodahs narrates the experience of its sibling, Aaor, whose body began to deteriorate, waste away, and die because of the lack of human partners:

[Aaor] kept slipping away from me—simplifying its body. It had no control of itself, but like a rock rolling downhill, it had inertia. Its body ‘wanted’ to be less and less complex.... In a way, Aaor’s body was trying to commit suicide. I had never heard of any carrier of the Oankali organism doing such a thing. We treasured life. In my worst moments before I found Jesusa and Tomas, such dissolution had not occurred to me. I didn’t doubt that it would have happened eventually—not as something desirable, but as something inescapable, inevitable. We called our need for contact with others and our needs for mates *hunger*. The word had not been chosen frivolously. One who could hunger could starve. (682)

No matter the type of vampirism, one thing remains clear: without the vampirism and without differences that bind and marry these “couples,” both human and Oankali would surely die or, as evidenced by the fertile human colony in *Imago*, live a life plagued with physical deformities, incestuous relationships, and forced breeding programs. The problems associated with vampirism (or the absence thereof) jumpstart the exploration of difference and how one should adapt to these differences. In the trilogy, fears associated with the Oankali’s vampirism and the possibilities of vampirism with regard to consent and power present a paradox that is par for the course throughout Butler’s body of work, as the fears register what Nikanj calls “horror and beauty in rare combination” (*Dawn* 153). The characteristics that mark the benevolent and predatory vampire bodies as valuable, powerful, and potentially life-prolonging to humans are also at the root of their vulnerability and susceptibility to the humans. The interdependent vampiric relationship is a beautifully horrific and horrifically beautiful arrangement; the Oankali’s biological need for humans casts the humans as the predators, not the prey: “In a very real way, you’ve captured us, and we can’t escape” (*Dawn* 153).

**NOTES**

1. In *Mind of My Mind*, Mary uses the term “vampire” to describe her ancestors (105) and to describe Doro (206), but there is no explicit textual reference to Stoker’s *Dracula* like there is in *Fledgling*.
2. I use “symbionts” here because it is the term that the critics, Butler, and characters use to denote the relationship.
3. In “Connections, Links, and Extended Network Patterns in Octavia Butler’s Science Fiction” (1984), Govan mentions that Doro is a vampire (as Mary calls him), but that Mary’s “difference is that she is [a] symbiont, not [a] vampire” (84).

4. In 2000, Grand Central Publishing republished the Xenogenesis trilogy into a single compilation entitled Lilith’s Brood. The quotations throughout this chapter come from the Lilith’s Brood compilation; however, for in-text citation purposes, I cite each text individually.

5. “Symbionts” is often used to describe the relationships between human characters and their nonhuman partners. I use the term “subject” to characterize species encounters because the term is laden with implications of hierarchy.

6. Current scholarship on Xenogenesis (specifically Dawn) focuses on the issue of consent, but using the term “vampire” makes the consent, the coercion, and the ambivalence more apparent. The vampire, by nature, is manipulative, coercive, seductive.

7. Here I refer to Frederick Douglass’s “employment” at the Baltimore Harbor that he describes in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, to Phillis Wheatley, and to George Moses Horton.

8. The pronoun “it” is repeatedly used in reference to Nikanj and other ooloi. Nikanj is part of the nonhuman Oankali species. The Oankali are male, female, and ooloi. The ooloi are neither male nor female, they are the third sex, and when pronouns are used to describe the ooloi in the text, “it” is the pronoun of choice.

9. For readings of the relationships between human and Oankali as mutualistic symbiosis, see Bollinger; Peppers; Vint and Melzer Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, and Science Fiction; and Patricia Melzer, Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought.

10. Douglass, in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave, describes the way alcohol was used to exploit and to stupefy enslaved blacks (429). Alcohol also provided a “double edged sword” against white slave owners, as Kenneth Edward Marshall reveals (121). Marshall suggests that alcohol was a way for slave owners to “demonstrate their benevolence,” but alcohol could also cause enslaved blacks to violently resist their masters (121).

11. A similar coercion occurs in Imago, as Jodahs, a human-born construct ooloi, transforms its physical shape to be pleasing to two human siblings, Jesusa and her brother, Tomas. Jodahs’s ability to change its shape to appear male or female at will compels both Jesusa and Tomas to receive Jodahs’s sexual pleasure, and then they, too, realize like Lilith that they have become addicted, an addiction of which they were not informed (Imago 690–691).

12. Lo is the Oankali space ship. When the Oankali transplanted themselves on Earth, they arrived via Lo, an organic, living ship. As the series progresses, Lo adapts and grows to its inhabitants’ needs.

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“Human beings fear difference,” Lilith had told him once. “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 behaviour.” And she had put her hand on his hair. “When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference.”

(Adulthood Rites 329)

From the onset of Lilith’s Brood, Octavia E. Butler establishes her science fiction trilogy as deeply invested in the question of the Self and the Other—how such a binary is indexed and the implications of gauging oneself
against a spectral figure of alterity. In the above passage, from the second novel of the series, *Adulthood Rites* (1988), Butler articulates the violence of our quest for self-definition as capital-H Humans. In her authorial eyes, the figure of the Human is percolated through imperial aggression and the quashing of difference. As is made evident in this paragraph, however, her fictive alien species, the Oankali, are ostensibly constructed so as to invert our Humanistic egocentrism—not only is difference not considered the source of fear for the Oankali, but they are physiologically engineered to hunger for it. Butler, in this way, utilizes her narrative and the figures of the Oankali to imagine a posthuman future in which our most injurious flaws may be eradicated. Simultaneously, however, her narrative questions, how might such an inversion of Humanism impact our interpersonal, social, and environmental relations? Who and what is implicated when the boundaries that separate mind from body, Human from animal, and male from female are dissolved? What does such a posthuman becoming-Other look like? Examining the three novels—*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989)—that constitute the trilogy, Butler’s interrogation of the Humanist subject and its relationship with the Other will be explored. Employing posthumanist theory as a guiding framework, I refer to Rosi Braidotti’s definitions—as provided in *The Posthuman* (2013)—of the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized Others, in order to elucidate Butler’s engagement with the subjectivities marginalized under the reign of Humanism. In doing so, I hope to investigate the ways in which Butler confronts these differing forms of oppression as intersecting issues, stemming from a common location (prescriptive Humanism) and requiring similar remediation (the destabilization of the hegemonic monolith that constitutes “Humanness”); indeed, I am convinced that such an enterprise is close to her heart, as a working class, chronically ill, African American woman, whose own sexuality has been the source of contention. Science fiction hereby becomes a subversive mode through which Butler reimagines the myriad of diverse embodiments that might be emancipated if we free ourselves from our ideological shackles to Humanism.

In order to argue for the installation of posthumanity through the annihilation of humanity, it is first necessary to determine the extent to which Humanism, as an ethos, functions to stifle the inherently exploratory vigor of life. Establishing the parameters of such a protean branch of philosophy, however, poses an onerous task; after all, the hallmarks of Humanism have always been contentious. Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Humanist doctrine has been, in part, upheld by the same Cartesian logic that maintains a belief in the hermetic separation of mind and body and human from machine. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in reference to Rene
Descartes, declares, “At the centre of ‘mind’ he placed the individual subject, constituted by its capacity to reason and think. ‘Cogito, ergo, sum’ was Descartes’ watchword… Ever since, this conception of the rational, cogitative and conscious subject at the centre of knowledge has been known as ‘the Cartesian subject’” (282). Cartesian dualism, as follows, has been co-opted and expanded to impose a dichotomous hierarchy upon the metaphysics of natural sciences—an ontology that has enabled its exploitation for the subjugation of the hierarchically underprivileged. On the most fundamental level, Humanism functions to mythologize a set of assumptions regarding the quintessence and universality of the nature and condition of being “Human”—a blueprint that not only inadequately captures but actively excludes the Other against which humanity is extrinsically measured. In his 1996 overview, Humanism, Tony Davies insists:

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance, tyranny and superstition […] On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalization and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable ‘dialectic of enlightenment’, for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war. (5)

While the precise criteria for inclusion in such a category remains elastic, Humanism functions on the apotheosis of the anthropos and a belief in its inherent worth, autonomy, rationality, and capabilities—qualities intended to affirm our status at the pinnacle of the Cartesian hierarchy, above animals, machines, and the Other. Yet, agreeing upon what precisely constitutes a Human is a slippery enterprise that continues to confound categorization; as Davies attests, it is “precisely this protean adaptability and serviceable vagueness that gives the word its rhetorical power and range” (24). The ultimate plasticity of life is troublesome to Humanism, in this way, for troubling the singular frame within which the multiplicity of human subjectivity is to be reconciled. An archetype of the Human subject is thusly fabricated, in order to maintain the exclusiveness of the category and impose order around the blurry parameters of the anthropos. As Rosi Braidotti, in The Posthuman (2013), claims, “The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability—of Sameness—by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location” (26).
Within this framework of hegemonic normativity, the Human is discursively produced against its antithetical Other. Who and what qualifies as this Other, however, is socioculturally ordained and shaped according to hegemonic ideology. In this way, the Western prototype of the Human subject is informed by prevailing rhetoric regarding gender, sexuality, race, and species. As Braidotti continues:

The dialectics of otherness is the inner engine of humanist Man’s power, who assigns difference on a hierarchical scale as a tool of governance. All other modes of embodiment are cast out of the subject position and they include anthropomorphic others: non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples. They also cover more ontological categorical divides between Man and zoo-morphic, organic or earth others. All these “others” are rendered as pejoration, pathologized and cast out of normality, on the side of anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality. This process is inherently anthropocentric, gendered and racialized in that it upholds aesthetic and moral ideals based on white, masculine, heterosexual European civilization. (68)

Bodies that fail to epitomize these universalized touchstones—cisgender masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness, just to name a few—are therefore declassified from Human status and do not sufficiently qualify for a claim to subjectified selfhood. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, in their introduction to the posthuman companion *Queering the Non/Human*, hereby assert the authoritative sanctions of Humanist boundary keeping; they argue, “the Human, invoked as it is through a web of discourses and norms, operates not just descriptively but also prescriptively and proscriptively” (7). Access to this denomination is thusly not presumed and may only be earned through vigilant self-policing in displays of gender, sexuality, and race. As the specular inverse of the anthropos, the marginalized Other is not necessarily considered the “figure to whom rights and citizenship are granted” (Luciano and Chen 190)—potentially rendering them inhuman, nonhuman, subhuman. Desubjectified, the subordination of these Others is not deemed apropos, then, considering their nonhuman status. As Davies, arguing for the structural interdependence of imperialism and Humanism, notes, “It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (131). The nebulousness of Humanism, in this way, has the capacity to be co-opted as justification for endless acts of violence, alienation, and dehumanization. Indeed, many acts of atrocity—ranging from colonialism, slavery, disenfranchisement to hate crimes and rape—may partially derive motive from the Humanist compulsion to expel the Other.
As Davies maintains, our “humanness is mortgaged to the suffering and labour of the innumerable ‘Other’” (132). Accordingly, the Other—in all of its manifold iterations—becomes the specter against which the anthropos is produced via repudiation.

With the onset of the Women’s Liberation, Black Civil Rights, and Gay Rights movements of the latter half of the twentieth century, Humanism began to be challenged in the streets by forces exposing the duplicity of the “Human” order. This growing recognition that Humanism’s claim to universality proves fallacious, therefore, has culminated in the theoretical turn toward posthumanism within the academy. As with the doctrine of Humanism, the boundaries and definitions of posthumanism are amorphous and many-sided. On the most fundamental level, however, we can affirm that an anti-Humanist posthumanism objects to the limits of traditional Humanism and advocates for an expansion of subjectivity beyond Cartesian guidelines. With such parameters in mind, we may start our exploration into Butler’s trilogy and its investment in the posthuman Other. While the series as a whole is interwoven with threads of these discourses, for logistical purposes, each novel will be discussed alongside each of Braidotti’s posthuman Others—Dawn and the sexualized Other, Adulthood Rites and the racialized Other, and Imago and the naturalized Other. Nevertheless, Butler continues to remind us that such othering must be understood as inherently interlocked structures of oppression. Although brief in overview—considering the conceptual richness of Butler’s narratives—by delving into the trilogy in such a way, we may start to grasp the extent of Butler’s intersubjective aspirations. Referring to the traditional exclusiveness of the Human subject, cyborg theorist Donna Haraway famously queries, “Who counts as ‘us’ in this rhetoric? Which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called ‘us’, and what could motivate enlistment in this collectivity?” (155)—a question I regard as at the heart of Lilith’s Brood and one I hereby hope to illuminate.

**DAWN AND THE SEXUALIZED OTHER**

Throughout Dawn, Butler configures the ooloi so as to play a quarrelsome figure in the lives of the awakened Human men—occupying an ontologically ambiguous role on the outskirts of intelligible binaries while also performing significantly in the men’s sexual and romantic relationships. In such alien surroundings, once awakened to the sight of the Oankali, the Humans defensively gravitate toward the familiar: the familiarity which Butler aligns with the ideology of Humanism and the Cartesian dualisms it apotheosizes. In this way, the gender binary is reflexively turned to as a familiar means
by which to render the Oankali coherent; very early in her first encounter with an Oankali, Lilith “glanced at the humanoid body, wondering how humanlike it really was. ‘I don’t mean any offense,’ she said, ‘but are you male or female?’” (*Dawn* 13). Blueprints of familiarity, however, have lost their pertinence in this posthuman future and limit, rather than enable, the Humans’ conceptualization of the Oankali and their ship. Throughout the novel, their grappling with the ooloi, and the intermediacy of their borderland gender, remains a vital hindrance in their acceptance of the Oankali and their mission. Indeed, their inability to conform to a (specifically Western) two-sex model so far exceeds the horizons of imagination that the Humans find it too inconceivable, even for an alien species—what Butler refers to as “a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance” (*Dawn* 89). In fact, the ontological danger that the ooloi pose to the system of Humanism is most acutely felt by the men, for whom the ooloi come to represent rival figures. After all, the ooloi are regarded as neither male enough for the men to perform allyship with nor female enough to conceptualize as potential sexual partners. Rather, the ooloi, as a gender unto themselves, threaten to usurp the men’s position at the pinnacle of a gendered hierarchy, usurpation that is especially calamitous given the ooloi’s role as sexual penetrator—an ideologically loaded function, connoting uniquely masculine traits of power, virility, and strength. Queer posthumanist Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston assert that “the Other is… the matrix against which the self is made to appear and from which it can never be extricated” (5); as follows, the ooloi are particularly perilous because the Human men are hereby implicated within them, as they are forced to see their specular selves reflected through these alien figures. In regard to the notion of sexuality and gender formation, sociologist Michael Kimmel explains that “women and gay men become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities, against whom they stack the decks so as to compete in a situation in which they will always win, so that by suppressing them, men can stake a claim for their own manhood” (66). Within our institutionalized heteropatriarchy, these sexual Others have remained easy targets, forcefully rendered prostrate in their subordination. In this narrative, therefore, the ooloi are constructed so as to disrupt this hegemonic reign, with their posthuman queerness dramatizing incoherencies and focusing on apparent mismatches of desire (*Jagose* 3). This is particularly quarrelsome because the ooloi, in fact, possess an inexplicable carnal allure to the men—a feminized attraction that is alarming because it does not necessarily follow molar lines of heterosexuality. In this way, the Human men foster a sort of reluctant fascination with the ooloi, quashing outward displays of sexual fondness and homophobically internalizing this attraction as a perversion
undermining the authority of their heterosexual identification. For this reason, the men resort to relying on other, more aggressive means by which to bolster their own sense of gender—and sexual—identity. The Oankali are thusly implicated in the men’s image of themselves and become the object of their violent vitriol as the men attempt to suppress the aspects of their identity that the Oankali expose.

The discomfort surrounding the ooloi’s gender ambiguity is made manifest through routine dehumanization of their status as Other to the rigidly gendered Humanist self—a dehumanization exhibited linguistically. Early on in Dawn, Lilith senses an aura of masculinity from the Oankali Jdayah, which renders him intelligible to her; despite his foreignness, she has at her disposal one lens through which to classify him—a blueprint of human maleness. In this way, learning of his conceivably “male” identity, she finds comfort in resorting to the binarized rhetoric of masculine pronouns—“Good. ‘It’ could become ‘he’ again. Less awkward” (Dawn 13). Conversely, as an ooloi, Kahguacht’s gender presentation is ephemeral to Lilith, thus planting her in a psychic knot. Lilith, when confronted with the monstrosity of otherness that she perceives Kahguacht as, gravitates toward dehumanization—“she took pleasure in the knowledge that the Oankali themselves used the neuter pronoun when referring to the ooloi. Some things deserved to be called ‘it’” (Dawn 49). The implication of such is that, within the vector of otherness that the Oankali represent to humans, the ooloi are superlative in their alterity.

At this stage, Lilith is reticent in accepting concepts that deviate from her instinct toward Humanism—an ontology contingent on binary classifications, such as those between human-nonhuman and male-female. Kahguacht and the other ooloi, as follows, represent a queer destabilization of identity politics in their failure to be captured by these hallmarks of humanity. Thus, the ooloi’s incoherency within this gendered dogma renders it ultimately inhuman. In “Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” (182–207), Dana Luciano and Mel Chen argue that “the form of the ‘human’ remains with us partly as a means of disciplinary dehumanization and regulation, exclusion, and/or marginalization… The mattering of the body is not, then, inherently a posthuman condition, insofar as humanness and its constitutive parts remain a material as well as ideological force” (191). Lilith’s reflexive instinct toward dehumanizing the sexualized Other, in this way, is a very literal manifestation of the Humanist abjection of difference—a concept Julia Kristeva discusses in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1982). Therefore, Lilith initially deems the connotations of desubjectification associated with the pronoun “it” as suited to the inhumanity of the abject ooloi. While Jdayah remains recognizable enough to be regarded worthy of
a more agentive pronoun (he), Kahguyacht diverges too greatly from her facsimile of human subjectivity to warrant such.

Pronouns become a barometer of acceptance of the Oankali Other—a phenomenological reality for many transgender nonconforming individuals; such resonates for Susan Stryker’s (237–254) experience navigating her trans body. She expresses, “as in the case of being called ‘it,’ being called a ‘creature’ suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood” (240), and “like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment” (Stryker 238). Indeed, this line of flight emerges significantly in posthuman cyborg theory too. Notably, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Donna Haraway equates the cyborg, as creatures of mixity, with the monstrosity of sexual otherness. She argues, “Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define the quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman” (Haraway 180). Furthermore, Luciano and Chen regard the placement of queerness within humanity thusly as flux. They argue, “We might see the “yes/no” humanity of the queer less as an ambivalence about the human as status than as a queer transversal of the category. The queer, we could say, runs across or athwart the human” (188–189). Although Lilith’s conception of gender expands to accommodate the multiplicities of the Oankali, her instinctual response to invalidate Kahguyacht demonstrates the ways in which boundary figures hold a tenuous place within cis/heteronormative frameworks; after all, “monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations” (Haraway 180). Indeed, Butler ensures that Lilith’s vilification ultimately exemplifies how the prescriptiveness of Humanism is invested in quashing diversity and variation that exceeds neat categorization.

**ADULTHOOD RITES AND THE RACIALIZED OTHER**

The Bhabhian notion of mimicry comes to the fore throughout *Adulthood Rites*, especially in the extent to which some Oankali-human constructs are simultaneously venerated and distrusted for their performance of Humanness. In “Of Mimicry and Man” (125–133), postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha explicates the colonial phenomenon of mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). As he argues, mimicry can occur when a colonized group are interpellated by hegemonic culture to enact performative assimilation into the dominant culture. Rather than merely replicating these signifiers with identical exactitude, however, colonial mimesis involves a degree of disjuncture between the mime and its object. Bhabha elaborates, “As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression
of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically” (131). In this way, colonial mimicry is enforced due to the colonizer’s belief in its incontrovertible capacity to better the culture of the colonized while desiring to maintain a distinction against its Other. The notion of Bhabhian mimicry hereby aligns neatly with the depiction of the ways in which Humans negotiate dynamics with the Oankali-human constructs throughout the novel. As the premise of *Adulthood Rites*, the Humans—although without the same access to authority as a colonizer, yet nevertheless possessing the urge for the supremacy of the anthropos—have significantly greater preference for constructs who, primarily in phenotype but also in behavior, resemble them. Indeed, most Humans glean a degree of comfort in discovering construct spawn who emulate Humanness in conceding perceived affirmation of their supremacy over the Oankali. Most notably, this predilection is exemplified in the apotheosis of Akin as a paragon of idealized hybridization for the Humans; in fact, Aparajita Nanda, in her article “Rewriting the Bhabhian Mimic” (2010), argues that Akin is founded upon a postcolonial image of a mimic man (115). His intensely policed concealment of the more Oankali facets of identity, alongside his overwhelmingly Human appearance, however, proves him almost too skilled at mimesis; indeed, his performance of Humanness is convincing enough to seamlessly “pass” as such in many interactions. Akin after all hones his ability to minimize superficial signifiers of otherness, thusly reducing his immediate phenotypic displays of difference. Upon discovering aspects of his nonhuman identity, however, Akin incites anger among some Humans, who are vitriolic at his perceived deception. Indeed, his tongue is the feature that gives him away to the Humans—many of whom feel resentment at being fooled by his outward appearance; this is a threat that Akin is cautious to monitor. Meeting his captors, Akin frets over how his appearance might enable his “passing” as fully Human. He wonders:

Did they know how intelligent he was? Did they know he could talk? If not, how would they react when they found out? Humans reacted badly to surprise. He would be careful, of course, but what did he know of angry, frightened, frustrated Humans? He had never been near even one person who might hate him, who might even hurt him when they discovered that he was not as Human as he looked. (316)

Mimicry, or the mimesis of “passing,” therefore, becomes a double-edged sword in the hands of hegemonic powers; one is expected to performatively enunciate the valued qualities of the dominant group, but without eliding the essential differences that forbids their membership. This concept of racialized
passing hereby parallels the ways in which Butler demonstrates how the phenomenon functions within queer—and specifically trans — narratives, as explored in the last chapter; the overlap between these two forms of passing, in this way, exemplifies the pressures placed onto marginal identities to co-opt dominant culture or risk castigation by hegemonic forces. Nevertheless, the Humans in the novel thusly esteem the constructs who affirm their sense of supremacy while still being recognizably distinct from their in-group; after all, they will never quite be Human according to the essentialistic maxims of Humanist thought. Bhabha refers to this ambivalence of colonial mimicry as “not quite/not white” (132) in its ability to replicate the colonial power, yet never fully embody it. He explains, “Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (126). Just as Kate Davy, in “Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project” (1997), asserts is the case within the interstices of race and class, for the Humans, the Human-like constructs are “assigned a status that is always, already, only honorary, contingent, itinerant, and temporary” (217). Acceptance, therefore, is determined by the credibility of the performance of mimesis and still does not guarantee absolute approval. Although this phenomenon consolidates the authority of the hegemonic power (read: colonizer), the slippage of this ambivalence also has the capacity to be harnessed for transgression and subversion by its actors.

Throughout the novel, the construct ooloi (or constructs)—like Akin—occupy an ontologically knotty place within Humanist matrixes of essentialist identities. As third-space hybrids of human and Oankali parentage, the constructs possess a certain double consciousness. As with Bhabhian thirdness, this access to multiple points of view has an ultimately unifying power for Akin—particularly propitious for his specific mission. Yet, the sole nature of such liminality, in and of itself, is fundamentally incendiary to the bedrock of binary categorization which scaffolds Humanism. The mere act of existing outside of these dichotomies—with or without an overarching peace mission—assists in crumbling these feeble foundations, living proof of the instabilities of Humanist ontology. To a certain extent, this is a concept that recalls twentieth-century cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s exploration of liminal stages in rites of passage:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there;
they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (95)

Butler, herself on the margins as a racialized Other, esteems this expansiveness of Turner’s liminality. The dominant narratives within canonical science fiction, of course, being overwhelmingly masculine and Eurocentric, Butler’s celebration of a multiplicity of novel subject positions is vanguard; indeed, it is an explicit refusal to participate in a literary tradition that routinely reduces diversity down to its lowest common denominators by consciously eliding the overlap of racialized/sexualized blindness in science fiction. In building Akin as inhabiting these two distinct worlds, Butler engenders the divisions between Human and Oankali as negligible; effectively, he cannot be othered by either group when, instead, he nomadically weaves between both. Negotiating multiple fluid subject positions, Akin, as with his fellow constructs, embodies Gloria Anzaldua’s term *mestiza*—a “mixture of races, [that] rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species … a consciousness of the Borderlands” (77).

As a lesbian Chicana feminist, Anzaldua is familiar with peripheral existence—traversing the terrains of dominant culture and her own phenomenological experience of otherness in the literal and metaphorical borderlands that grant their name to her book; these contestations with construct liminality, as represented by Butler, are, after all, quotidian circumstances for Chicanx individuals on the border between Mexico and the United States. Anzaldua’s *mestiza* consciousness hereby becomes an apt analogy for the Oankali pursuit of a more expansive and intersubjective people; she argues:

> By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject/object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. (80)

In this way, for Anzaldua, as for Butler, subjects of mixed-heritage hereby occupy a powerful threshold in the matrix of Humanism—with both actively working to denaturalize the myth of a simplistically essentializable
identity; Rather, their mestiza hybrids must constantly renegotiate the limits of identity politics, forging space to accommodate the multiplicities within themselves. Having blended lineage, therefore, does not dilute one’s allegiance to either line. Instead of quantifying their parentage, Anzaldua and Akin both inhabit their composite identities wholly—not as either/or but as and/and. The threshold, as follows, is reimagined not as a phase or passage toward a singular localizable destination but as a choate zone—valid and powerful in and of itself.

The Oankali reverence for diversity is arguably one of the most crucial overarching motifs of the series, and their reverence for diversity is paralleled against narratives of race throughout Adulthood Rites. For Butler, otherness, rather than being an external measure to gauge selfhood, sometimes recalls the Deleuzian notion, as argued in Difference and Repetition (1994), of difference-in-itself—that is, difference as internal and self-actualized, as opposed to existing between and with reference to a comparative exterior; difference as prior to identity. If life is enacted and made because of difference, then the binaristic ontology of a Self-Other divide is ultimately redundant. Political theorist Hannah Arendt adopts a similar position in her posthumous The Life of the Mind (1978). Arendt argues that “wherever there is a plurality—of living beings, of things, of ideas—there is a difference and this difference does not arise from the outside but is inherent in every entity in the form of duality, from which comes unity as unification” (184). Both Deleuze and Arendt’s deconstruction of the politics of difference, however, poses a troublesome dilemma for Humanist ontology. Indeed, as Braidotti argues, “central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of ‘difference’ as pejoration” (15). The Humans of Butler’s series, as follows, find the prospect of diversifying Humankind wholly unfavorable, threatened by the unfamiliarity of their potential Oankali cohorts. After all, as Halberstam and Livingston posit in their introduction to Posthuman Bodies (1995), as a category, “the human functions to domesticate and hierarchize difference within the human (whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and the nonhuman” (10). Lilith, despite her Human parentage, understands and critiques their fear of the Other and that “Humans were most dangerous, most unpredictable when they were afraid” (Adulthood Rites 482). In fact, Lilith warns Akin:

Human beings fear difference...Oankali crave difference. Humans persecute their different ones, yet they need them to give themselves definition and status. Oankali seek difference and collect it. They need it to keep themselves from stagnation and overspecialization...When you feel a conflict, try to go the Oankali way. Embrace difference. (Adulthood Rites 329)
While the Humans of *Adulthood Rites* are resistant to embrace the abject otherness represented by the Oankali and the constructs, the Oankali are enticed precisely by the Humans’ difference; after all, their biological foreignness seduces the Oankali, intrigued by what this diversity will mean for their gene trade. Ultimately, through the Oankali, Butler rejects the Humanist myth of a monolithic subject, in favor for an intersubjective embrace of being as inherently imbued with variation.

The web that connects Butler to intersectional writers is made abundantly clear by Catherine S. Ramirez in “Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa” (374–402). Ramirez suggests that Butler’s celebration of difference is demonstrative of an ethical commitment to a women-of-color feminism—a philosophy neglected by many waves of social justice that still exclude an outsider. Drawing upon Haraway’s image of the cyborg, Ramirez assembles parallels between Butler and Anzaldúa’s investment in deconstructing the singular subject position—specifically for its tendency to brazenly overlook the perspectives of femmes of color. She contests:

For Butler, the cyborg is the raced and gendered subject; for Anzaldúa s/he is also queer. Occupying a multiplicity of social locations, the queer woman of color is able to forge alliances across differences. However, at the same time, she is unable to escape history and, as I argue below, essence. Butler’s black heroines are located within specific African American narratives of slavery, resistance, and migration (to and through the New World), while Anzaldúa’s queer mestiza subject is located in the history of struggle along and over the U.S.-Mexico border, between racist Americans and the racialized others who inhabit the United States, and within the Chicano-Mexican culture. Indeed, their subjects are cyborgs because they interrogate the stability of social categories, such as “woman,” “American,” and “human,” and because they exemplify the construction of coalitions based on position and affinity, as opposed to identity and essence. (394)

For this branch of feminist thought, difference-in-itself is foundational in firstly conceiving of the plurality of perspectives encapsulated within an intersectional intersubjectivity; as follows, this stance is required to understand that inherently, being is difference. The implication of such is that any social movement that recuperates the Humanist subject is thereby invested in perpetuating an ontology of difference as abject. Indeed, Ramirez asserts the unique embrace of women-of-color feminism, arguing that “in general, feminism for, by, and about women of color emphasizes position, plurality, constructedness, and coalition. At the same time, it is grounded
in difference and specificity (e.g., the specificity of a particular time, place, body, community, or narrative)” (394). Within this frame of feminist thought, seemingly endorsed in Butler’s narratives, one limited standpoint (read: white, cisgender, heterosexual) cannot be naturalized or neutralized; rather, difference is considered a condition of being, with or without external referents of normality. With life regarded as intrinsically heterogeneous, Butler’s Oankali treasure difference as the vitality of interconnection and growth. When Akin ventures into new Oankali realms, his Human contrast is readily welcomed—“They could see themselves in him and see his alien humanity. The latter fascinated them, and they chose to take the time to perceive themselves through his senses” (Adulthood Rites 449). The Oankali, in this way, come to embody a certain utopian ideal of panhuman (or, for that matter, panposthuman) intersectional feminist politics—an image of potential social dynamics that disengages from the hierarchically inclined politics of imperialism and colonialism. Rather than perceiving the Other as a threat to established ideology, the Oankali nurture difference for motivating potential expansion and growth of subjectivity and selfhood. These contested zones of difference hereby become fruitful territory for Butler to explore and excavate, in order to synthesize the notion of a volatile heterogeneity into a unified celebration of multiplicity.

**IMAGO AND THE NATURALIZED OTHER**

For Braidotti, the concept of zoe, “the non-human, vital force of Life” (60), functions as an inclusive umbrella term, embracing the diversity of matter on the planet. The capaciousness of this definition—expanding the limits of subjectivity to “life beyond the ego-bound human” (131)—hereby provides an interesting lens through which to read Butler’s celebration of an enlarged intersubjectivity in *Imago*. Throughout the series, Butler expends significant narrative energy in establishing the Oankali’s ethos of oneness; this is made most evident in *Imago* through Jodahs’s narration, granting unparalleled access to this novel’s interiority. Throughout the narrative Oankali individuals possess the inherent capacity to progress beyond the solipsism of the Humans’ worldview, widening their horizons of belonging to encompass a multitude of ways of being. While Butler sets up the Humans as having an almost hyperbolically narrow conceptualization of affinity with other nonhuman life, the Oankali are presented as fostering an aggregate union with all interplanetary inhabitants. When prompted by the character Tomas, after all, Ahajas declares the Oankali relationship with spirituality: “We believe in life […] When I’m dead […] I will nourish other life” (*Imago* 662). She continues:
If I died on a lifeless world, a world that could sustain some form of life if it were tenacious enough, organelles within each cell of my body would survive and evolve. In perhaps a thousand million years, that world would be as full of life as this one […] Our ancestors have seeded a great many barren worlds that way. Nothing is more tenacious than the life we are made of. A world of life from apparent death, from dissolution. That’s what we believe in. (Imago 662–663)

By mere virtue of existing—whether currently, historically, or potentially—all organic matter is granted equitable clout in the Oankali definition of intersubjectivity. Not bound by the molar blueprint of life as belonging solely to the anthropos, the Oankali have a more expansive understanding of the plurality of being. Zoe, in this way, applies pertinently to Butler’s narrative in evoking the Oankali’s belief in the vital force of life, transcendent of individual being. The parameters Braidotti establishes with regard to zoe herein vividly recall Jodahs’s description of intersubjectivity:

In my vitalist materialist view, Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: zoe in all its powers […] Zoe is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects. The human is a step down for pure intensity, or the force of the virtual. It is a constant challenge for us to rise to the occasion, to be “worthy of our times”, while resisting them, and thus to practise amor fati affirmatively […] Death is the ultimate transposition, though it is not final, as zoe carries on, relentlessly. (131)

With her focus on materialism, Braidotti understands life as an assemblage of heterogeneity. Similarly, unlike Butler’s Human characters—for whom the primary objective is egocentric self-preservation—the Oankali cultivate a symbiotic devotion to their natural landscape as a whole. For Jodahs, its ship Lo is not solely land, or, in postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, the “silent and passive backdrop to their historical narratives” (204); rather, according to Jodahs, it is “parent, sibling, home. It was the world I had been born into […] woven into its genetic structure and my own was the unmistakable Lo kin group signature” (Imago 554). While the Humans are preoccupied with forging distance from the Oankali on the basis of difference as abject, the Oankali fixate on the common bond of all inhabiting the universe. The embrace of the Oankali “we” hereby reaches cosmic proportions, as they conceptualize the myriad of potential connections that could be made with various life-forms; within these terms,
the naturalized Other cannot truly exist when the Oankali believe them to be fated for future kinship.

The expansiveness of the Oankali’s worldview also parallels what Braidotti coins “not-Oneness” (100)—the notion of unification because of difference, as opposed to in spite of difference. As an ontology, Humanism has always advocated for a repressive and prescriptive universal for who and what qualifies as Human—a norm that routinely bolsters itself against the specter of a naturalized Other. Both Butler and Braidotti, on the other hand, dismantle these dogmatic conventions in *Lilith’s Brood* and *The Posthuman*, respectively, by celebrating a posthuman ethos of heterogeneity and flux. Braidotti conceives of the plurality of Human/nonhuman/bacterial/animal/insect/plant matter as demonstrative of the sheer vitality of a *zoe*-centered universe and ultimately unifying for this reason. She argues;

This humbling experience of not-Oneness, which is constitutive of the non-unitary subject, anchors the subject in an ethical bond to alterity, to the multiple and external others that are constitutive of that entity which, out of laziness and habit, we call the “self.” Posthuman nomadic vital political theory stresses the productive aspects of the condition of notOne, that is to say a generative notion of complexity. (100)

As opposed to imagining difference—and, by extension, otherness—as inherently negative, rupturing the uniformity of the whole, Braidotti esteems it for offering vitality, fluidity, heterogeneity. Implicit in this message is that the integrity of humanity is not contingent on stasis and uniformity. Rather, advocating for a Deleuzian interpretation, she argues, “my position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on the ethics of becoming” (49); and, after all, “becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself” (Deleuze and Guattari 238). Braidotti, once again, paints a picture of intersubjectivity astoundingly akin to that provided by Butler’s Oankali—roaming the universe, expanding their sense of self through connection to other multiplicities of life. With their temporally transcendent collective memories, the Oankali are capable of bridging time in order to summon an image of difference in kinship. Having received genetic memories from its ooloi parent, Nikanj, Jodahs is intoxicated by the infinitude of life’s variation. Yearningly, it notes, “there was immense newness. Life in more varieties than I could possibly have imagined—unique units of life, most never seen on Earth. Generations of memory to be examined, memorized” (*Imago* 693). For the Oankali, the Humans’ exclusive and unitarian politics are startlingly myopic—severing potential bonds of kinship and safety with them in order to reify the supremacy of the unadulterated anthropos. As
follows, the subject is deterritorialized from the narrow Humanist bounds that deny agency to nonhuman matter. By contrast, the Oankali transform the subject into a Deleuzian and nomadic assemblage of zoetic alterity—the interconnection of notOne. The physically and psychically nomadic Oankali, in this way, epitomize Braidotti’s posthuman ethos of a porous intersubjectivity; the Oankali are thusly what posthumanist Robert Pepperell might refer to as “a ‘fuzzy edged’ entity [...] profoundly dependent into its surrounding” (20), always in the process of becoming-animal/plant/Other.

Within this scopic expansion of subjectivity to all zoetic life-forms, the Oankali nurture a deep symbiotic relationship with their natural environment—an ontology that instills within them a greater sense of ethical accountability regarding their treatment of the land. Most prominently throughout *Imago*, the Oankali “ship,” Lo, is lovingly nurtured and tended to, and regarded within their broadened sense of kin. Referred to by Jodahs as a “living platform” (*Imago* 554), Lo is the ship via which the Earth-dwelling Oankali transplanted themselves on the planet. A plant-like sentient organism, Lo grows into a town and morphs according to its inhabitants’ needs—prompted to generate huts, food, and plants from its own substance and trained to reabsorb the waste produced; microcosmically emblematic of Earth itself, Lo is hereby the source of new Oankali life while it resides on this planet. Unlike the Humans who exploit Earth as a passive receptacle, the Oankali regard Lo as agentive and thusly revere its altruism in caring for them in such a way. When Jodahs considers inadvertently inflicting pain upon Lo, it is inconsolable—

And all that I did to Lo, I also did to myself. But it was Lo that I felt guilty about. Lo was parent, sibling, home. It was the world I had been born into. As an oooloi, I would have to leave it when I mated. But woven into its genetic structure and my own was the unmistakable Lo kin group signature. I would have done anything to avoid giving Lo pain. (*Imago* 554)

In this way, Jodahs and its Oankali peers understand the reciprocity involved in living within a natural environment; while Lo—and Earth as a whole—supplies it with nutrients, shelter, and amenities, they are, therefore, morally obligated to ensure its ongoing welfare. Such veneration for the environment, as espoused by Butler, in this way recalls the ideology of eco-belonging presented by environmental scientist—and controversial cultural theorist—James Lovelock, in his Gaia hypothesis (*Gaia*). Lovelock contends, “The concept of Gaia, a living planet, is for me the essential basis of a coherent and practical environmentalism; it counters the persistent belief
that the Earth is a property, an estate, there to be exploited for the benefit of humankind” (135). Accordingly, like many involved in ecocriticism, Lovelock advocates for a recalibration of our understanding of symbiotic and synergistic interdependence and a destabilizing of anthropocentric egoism. He thusly urges readers to regard Earth as an animate and generative being—eccentrically coined Gaia—and our position within it as situated within a vital network of mutual support. Indeed, Lovelock implores, “Unless we see the Earth as a planet that behaves as if it were alive, at least to the extent of regulating its climate and chemistry, we will lack the will to change our way of life and to understand that we have made it our greatest enemy” (Lovelock 17). Tending toward anthropomorphizing Earth, Lovelock, in this way, demonstrates the compensatory, “two-faced” Humanist agenda that Braidotti warns us abounds within some ecological theory (86); nevertheless, the urgency with which he reminds readers of their culpability regarding environmental degradation still resonates poignantly with Butler’s cautioning message regardless. After all, this myth of our entitlement, as Humans, to the planet is also explored by Butler early in *Imago*; Human raiders are discovered to have ransacked the outskirts of Lo, and in a vitriolic frenzy, pillage the vegetable garden Lilith had cultivated and tended to—for both Oankali ally and resister consumption. Jodahs describes the indiscriminate violence of their plunder, noting:

This time almost everything that had not been stolen had been destroyed. Melons had been stomped or smashed against the ground and trees. The line of papaya trees in the center of the garden had been broken down. Beans, peas, corn, yams, cassava, and pineapple plants had been uprooted and trampled. Nearby nut, fig, and breadfruit trees that were nearly a century old had been hacked and burned, though the fire had not destroyed most of them. Banana trees had been hacked down. (*Imago* 560–561)

The portrayal of such mindless destruction of living matter is a disconcerting image, in reminding readers both of the arbitrary, quotidian abuse of our natural landscapes and in paralleling the gratuitous violence enacted in recent colonial history. Humanism, as follows, is depicted as solipsistically revolving around the anthropos, with minimal regard for how this self-aggrandizement profits from the abuse of the natural environment. Braidotti elaborates upon the inextricability of anthropocentrism from such systems of subordination; she explains:

If the crisis of Humanism inaugurates the posthuman by empowering the sexualized and racialized human “others” to emancipate themselves from
the dialectics of master-slave relations, the crisis of anthropos relinquishes the demonic forces of the naturalized others. Animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play. (66)

Acknowledging the answerability Humans must shoulder in order to ameliorate our mistreatment of Earth, Braidotti then asserts, “This places a different burden of responsibility on our species, which is the primary cause for the mess. The fact that our geological era is known as the ‘anthropocene’ stresses both the technologically mediated power acquired by anthropos and its potentially lethal consequences for everyone else” (66). This sentiment mirrors the social remorse that Butler evidently bears in regard to looming environmental decline and deliberately brings to her narrative. The starkness of these two ontologies, as presented by Oankali and Humans respectively, is explicitly didactic on Butler’s behalf. The message is that, once more, the Humanist ego has bolstered its own supremacy through the relentless subjugation of an Other and that the planet will continue to pay for our anthropocentric narcissism.

CONCLUSION

For Octavia E. Butler, the rhetoric of Humanism is too easily adopted as a mechanism of othering. As evident throughout the series, while categorical distinctions are a means by which we make sense of the world, when they are not also bridged by an understanding of our shared experiences of existence, they are readily transmuted into tools of hatred and exclusion. It is hereby easy to identify, in Butler’s narratives, her resounding critique of the neoliberal tribalism that hereby reifies such divisive fragmentation of “Us” versus “Them.” Indeed, the implication is that without substantial mining and restructuring of the foundations of Cartesian Humanism, the chasm segregating the Self and the Other will remain bifurcated.

Butler’s solution? Expansion of selfhood. Binary oppositions, she argues, offer a reductive and myopic lens through which to view the plurality of the universe; such tiny categorical boxes were never intended to be capacious enough to house the immensity of life, but rather to curtail its wayward heterogeneity. Unlike her inflexible and obstinate Humans, Butler’s Oankali, instead of expelling the Other, see the Other within themselves and actively choose to accommodate this disparity. Accordingly, her narratives foster a posthuman cosmology of inclusive mosaic belonging—necessitating acknowledgment and exaltation, not elision, of difference. *Lilith’s Brood* prompts us to question how our relationships and sense of kinship with
the racialized, sexualized, and naturalized Other might look, if, like the Oankali, we chose to “embrace difference” (Adulthood Rites 329); might we, as a result, now recognize the Other within us? The posthuman, therefore, comes to represent a reverence for intersubjectivity that consummately resonates with Butler’s eschewal of the unitarian Human subject. Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago hereby beckon in the downfall of the Cartesian anthropos. For those, like Butler, subordinated under the image of the Human subject, such atrophy is not to be mourned, but celebrated. Only now—almost twenty years after the trilogy’s publication and ten years after her tragic death—might we observe our epiphanic moment of intersectional awakening and see traditional Humanism finally receiving its comeuppance. Only now, might we discover that, perhaps, we are finally ready for Octavia E. Butler. With our ears and minds open, let us listen and learn.

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As with any great work of literature, there are two ways to read Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Discursively, it is a story pitting the alien Oankali race against humanity in a bid to take over an Earth clawing its way back to life after nuclear war. But less simplistically, it is a narrative replete with nuanced deconstructions of power structures, especially those based on the tropes of master-slave and captor-captive. Certainly, Butler’s writings deal with control, bondage, and the desire for freedom. Within the *Xenogenesis* framework, however, Butler puts these issues into service of a much wider spectrum of concerns, exploring (among other things) deviant forms of sexuality, genetic mutations, and the ramifications and complications that these pose to the dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed, the Self and the Other. As my students and I move through the trilogy, insidious forms of force, subtle mental conditioning, and the triad of compulsion, attraction, and repulsion lock the Self and the Other in fascinatingly interlinked forms of desire. My teaching seeks to unpack this...
Other that hails from colonial discourse even as it carves out a niche as the negotiator between the colonizer and the colonized. In this chapter, I share some of my techniques for helping undergraduate students read past the discursive level and uncover the treasury of moral and political complexity that Butler has built into this trilogy.

Yet despite its riches, and despite the importance of colonialism as a historical context for the genre of science fiction, *Xenogenesis* is rarely taught in courses on colonialism or on science fiction. It is interesting to note that the Other of colonialism, despite its linguistic binary segregation, is born in the realm of the Self. The various Others, categorized colonialism as “types of others,” included the natives and the mixed-birth children of the colonizers. To uphold and justify the conceit of order and well-being at the heart of colonial rule, maintenance of civic boundaries of citizenship—differentiating the colonizer not only from the colonized but also from the hybrid citizens (“types of others”)—was a major goal of imperialist rule. This was not an easy task with the proliferating category of bastard children begotten by the colonizers’ callous, almost incidental sexual habits. This category also included European children who had become virtual natives themselves in their preference for local food and their affinity with native culture (Stoler *Carnal Knowledge* 2). Mestizos and nativized Europeans, with a foot in each world, could maintain a veneer of loyalty but were potential conduits of subversion. Ethnic vigilance on the national scale—the stuff of securing borders—gave way to racial vigilance on the domestic scale. The anxiety caused by the latent subversion associated with these Janus-like Others turned formerly mundane matters—management of domestic space, parenting, sexual morality, rearing of children—into central topics of colonial interest and made everyday personal spaces highly political.

Based upon their familiarity with American history, most students understand slavery of the modern Atlantic world as an extension of colonialism. The trilogy, comprising of *Dawn, Adulthood Rites, and Imago*, demonstrates this link really well; and that is why I chose it to form the cornerstone of my senior seminar on colonialism at the University of California, Berkeley. Students often ask me why I did not choose more popular Butler texts to teach this material, such as *Kindred* or the story “Bloodchild.” *Kindred* is, after all, primarily concerned with slavery. And while many people consider her Hugo Award-winning short story “Bloodchild” to focus on slavery as well, Butler, in her afterword to “Bloodchild” writes, “It amazes me that some people have seen ‘Bloodchild’ as a story of slavery. It isn’t” (30). She adds that this is a story about “an unusual accommodation” between human beings stranded on an “extrasolar world” and their “hosts” (alien beings). Butler goes on to muse, “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?” (Bloodchild 31–32). The Xenogenesis trilogy brings all these themes together in one well-wrought package.

As we deliberate on her commentary, I point out to the class that she locates her narratives, whether “Bloodchild” or Xenogenesis, deliberately in the science fiction genre, as this genre provides an unfamiliar context, one exempted from historical baggage. Most of Butler’s works are in this genre, Kindred being an exception. Her speculative treatment, not beholden to any historical era, facilitates discussion of abstract concepts and opens up interdisciplinary approaches. In our class discussions, we admit that theory often tends to polarize or oversimplify, while literature, especially the novel, tends to work more on the level of self-contradiction and ambiguity. Butler’s Xenogenesis is a parable of postcolonialism that picks up concepts of colonial maltreatment and subjugation and presents us with a set of aporias found in inextricably linked discourses of power, genetics, and evolution. By revealing the limitations of these treatises and exposing the double entendre at the heart of the colonial project, we admit, Butler disrupts the tract of postcoloniality.

In fact, Butler seems to suggest a different foundation for governance that is neither colonialism nor “not colonialism.” Butler was thinking seriously about this different form of colonialism in the 1980s, in the wake of Ronald Reagan’s arms race with the Soviet Union: the colonization by nuclear weapons and the potential self-destruction of humanity.2 For the students, Butler’s form of colonialism becomes a fascinating topic for further investigation. Reading Butler’s interviews online and in print (McCaffery, Francis), they conclude that Butler’s text deconstructs the rigid binary of oppressive, colonizing aliens and victimized, colonized humans. The students recognize the ambivalences within these categories that suggest that the alien Oankali may be propagators of diversity and healers with an altruistic purpose and humans erratic and violent. It is not so easy to brand the Oankali as historical colonizers, and their arguments about the benefits to the colonized are not so readily exposed as rationalizations. However, students demonize the Oankali, despite the defensibility of their original motives and acts, as they do usurp the culture of the humans. Students set aside the question of the practical justifications for colonization, to analyze the structure of colonialism in a theoretical way, concluding that, even in a hypothetical instance of a bloodless coup, no colonial takeover can be justified from the standpoint of human solidarity and individual freedom.

Dawn, the first book of the Xenogenesis series, opens in the wake of an apocalypse in which the human race nearly brings about its own demise by means of nuclear war. The Oankali, a nomadic, gene-trading alien species,
rescue the few surviving humans, intending to interbreed with them. As alien traders, the Oankali evoke European traders in their initial forays into establishing a colonial empire. The aliens skillfully pursue their imperial desires, enforcing reproduction restrictions on humans, camouflaging their intentions in the rhetoric of altruistic salvation. They justify their gene trade with the need to produce a hybrid species, a superior breed of human-Oankali constructs in whom the genetic pairing of intelligence and hierarchical reasoning—what the Oankali refer to as the “Human Contradiction”—would be mutated to eliminate the hierarchical streak (Butler *Xenogenesis* 40–41). To implement their plan, the Oankali abduct Lilith Iyapo, an African American woman, change her brain chemistry somewhat to set her up as a virtual mother figure, and make her responsible for convincing human survivors to join the Oankali fold. They claim that the new breed of constructs, rid of their violent trait, will put an end to the genetically determined history of their human ancestors when they return to Earth. Along with Lilith, the Oankali deploy her son Akin, the first human-Oankali construct, to the human camp.

Akin first appears in *Adulthood Rites*, a coming-of-age story that delves into his life as he struggles with his bifurcated cultural belonging and follows the physiological changes that accompany his growth. At one point, human resisters abduct him and sell him to the resister village of Phoenix. In his sojourn there, despite his maltreatment at the hands of the human abductors, Akin develops affective ties with others. As he begins to connect with his human side, Akin becomes the spokesperson for lifting the Oankali restrictions on human reproduction. He takes advantage of his unique position as human and Oankali to intercede between the two species and convinces the Oankali to give the humans a chance to go to Mars, to continue as a genetically untampered human species.

*Imago*, the last book of the series, introduces us to Lilith’s oooloi son, Jodahs, an accidental oooloi—accidental because Jodahs is the first unpremeditated construct child, with genes from both species, to become an oooloi. Its flawed genome confers on it the ability to do massive genetic damage to anything it touches during its metamorphosis, as it transitions into adulthood. As a result, Lilith and her family move away from Jodahs, who awaits possible exile on the Oankali ship. Jodahs in its isolation begins to lose its sense of self and its closest sibling, the virtual twin Aaor, follows suit. On one of its wanderings in the forest, Jodahs discovers a settlement and a human brother and sister. Despite their being diseased, Jodahs heals and seduces the pair and later returns with Aaor to find Aaor a mate. Like Lilith and Akin, Jodahs becomes the intermediary between humans and Oankali.

I begin the seminar by explaining Edward Said’s concept of the Self and the Other, where the Self or the Occident is the voice of the privileged,
of unchallenged authority, that defines the marginalized, voiceless Other. I encourage students to respond to Butler’s Oankali and humans—whether they think the Oankali are representations of the Self, oppressive colonizers, and the human Others, colonized victims, and to share their intellectual responses with their peers. As more and more students understand the ambiguity at the heart of Butler’s narrative that refuses easy categorizations of the Self and the Other, we move on to discuss Homi Bhabha’s concepts of hybridization, ambivalence, and mimicry. Taking his cue directly from Said’s work, Bhabha deconstructs the binaries of the Self and the Other as interrelated constructs. Through hybridization, the Other claims the intruding presence of colonial history in defining itself, and thus owes its presence to the original, authoritative colonial Self that is permanently marred by its repetitive articulation of difference in the Other. This ambivalence is often projected in the colonist’s desire to create a “mimic man” in the colonized Other. However, this mimic man is not a simple reflection of the colonizer. As Bhabha points out, the mimic man becomes a projection of double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. And it is a double vision that is a result of what he has described as the partial representation/recognition of the colonial object...the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as “inappropriate” colonial subjects. (88)

As my students and I relate postcolonial theory to Butler’s texts, we discuss Lilith Iyapo’s role as the hybridized Other (a human with a mutated brain chemistry), where clearly an ambivalence defines her complicated existence as she straddles between abiding by the Oankali agenda and her desire to save her human wards. Does Lilith go along with the Oankali mission in order to escape the predicament reserved for those who dare to dissent, or, despite her victimized status, does she at some point begin to believe in Oankali ideology? The students naturally read Lilith as a type of the Bhabhian mimic man—albeit one in the making, her human birth and therefore her allegiance to the humans as stumbling blocks to any quick comparison. However, as they read on they quickly capitulate to the complexities of Lilith and begin to question her role as a potential traitor—who could betray both the Oankali and her human interns. Her son, the hybrid Akin, holds a genetic allegiance to both humans and Oankali alike. Abducted by human resisters, Akin’s forced exile in the human camp encourages him to learn
from his human side. Students once again easily identify Akin as a mimic man groomed by the Oankali—a finished product and not “in the making” like his mother. Jodahs, however, takes the concept of the mimic man to another level altogether. The mimicry in Jodahs is intensely performative and malleable. Seduction of its mate is much easier, as Jodahs can mimic or become exactly its counterpart, concealing any alien features. Thus Jodahs, as a mediator, is far more lethal, as the outcome of his interspecies negotiations shows. Though human resisters willingly join the Oankali fold, any sense of equality in this reconciliation of species remains a ruse. The title of the text (*Imago*) refers to the last stage of insect development, possibly indicating that adulthood, promised in *Adulthood Rites*, has finally been achieved. In Latin, “imago” is an image or simulation, again suggesting a ruse. My students ponder the possibility of a mimic man who rewrites the role ordained by his creators. Jodahs and its twin Aaor, reminiscent of Romulus and Remus as twins and in their aspirations, seem to be founding another civilization based on seduction. My students ask, “Can we read this as a subtle, more manipulative form of rape?” After all, Nikanj, an oooli, impregnates Lilith as *Dawn* ends. *Adulthood Rites* brings this up again when Tino, the human resister who crosses over from the resister camp, asks Lilith whether the Oankali forced her to have children. Lilith’s answer spells out a story of subtle exploitation reminiscent of human breeding programs and the fathering of bastard children by the colonizers. Jodahs takes this discourse of rape to another level, as we discuss after reading Patricia Melzer who posits: “Butler explores outcomes of power relations beyond one-dimensional concepts of winning and losing” (85). Butler, we conclude, proposes a complex trajectory that plays with, but denies easy answers, as we move from the Bhabhian mimic man, Lilith, who undermines the colonial agenda, to the consummate mimic, Jodahs, who reworks and usurps the agenda itself.

A plot point that students find baffling is the all-knowing Oankali’s abandonment of Akin, their virtual son, in the human camp. I draw their attention to a typical trait of colonial narratives. Ruth McElroy points out that an “enduring feature of [colonial] surrogacy narratives [was that] men as fathers disappear[ed] as prime actors from the scene of surrogacy,” leaving nation-states to “police the composition of the nation through legislative powers over women’s reproduction” and the children born to them (325–326). This theory of abandonment brings up discussions of illegitimacy and deliberate callousness on the part of colonial fathers. However, students go on to ask—are Oankali then just a type of the colonizers? What about their altruistic traits that could qualify them as benevolent saviors? The students have a growing recognition of the complexity of the Oankali—the
possibility that they are father figures who could easily betray their progeny for their own selfish purposes. Akin’s abandonment furthers the Oankali goal of using him as an informer who would capitalize on his sojourn in the enemy camp by gleaning genetic information, which he can easily get as he touches the humans with his tongue and pass it on to the Oankali. However, the narrative tells us another story, for instead of an ideal informer, Akin becomes a spokesperson for the humans, who takes up their cause and asks for a restitution of their reproductive rights. The students are puzzled by this turn of events, given that the human abductors brutally mistreat Akin. Why then would he become their spokesperson? But in the human camp there are other humans with whom Akin develops affective ties that birth in him the desire to stand up for their denied rights. I point out that Akin, almost despite himself, is possibly the ideal Bhabhian mimic man, a projection of the “double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 88). Akin’s name can simply be defined as “of similar character; related by blood.” However, whereas, in the case of hybrid subjects, divided loyalties may suggest a competition between one loyalty and another, in Akin’s case the loyalties, not divided, become “uncertain,” not subject to competitive equations. Jodahs, whose name recalls the iconic traitor, Judas, has no patriarchal history to narrate; all it has is only “its-own-story.” Speaking in a first-person narrative voice, Jodahs quickly conducts the reader into its story, a story that builds on inter-species cross-breeding, plays with its own boundaries, and turns dissolution, abandonment, and loss into a narrative of redistribution of power. This multilayered subjectivity, this ability to manipulate boundaries, Melzer notes, “is the basis for Butler’s explorations of political resistance” (98).

Explorations of the mimic man take interesting turns in class discussions as the students differentiate between the mimic (wo)men: Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs. I call Lilith the contextual mimic man, where her situation dictates her role. Akin’s, on the other hand, is a relational one, his role determined by his relationship to humans and the Oankali. Jodahs, I point out, is the referential mimic man, always in process, its positions constantly ascertained by the other. Therefore, Lilith is the beginning of a narrative of colonial mimicry that voices its concern about the Self (the colonizer/Oankali). She launches her story of resistance, her concern for her human wards, when she advises them to “learn and run.” I point out that Akin’s situation recalls that of hybridized colonial citizens who may have wandered into segregated habitats in colonized countries to find answers to questions haunting them. Given their divided allegiance, it is very difficult to predict where their loyalty would lie. These mimic men often resorted to political dissidence, albeit within the contained area of the nation-state. Thus, Akin’s becoming
a rebel with a cause looms large as *Adulthood Rites* progresses. The situation stands aggravated as the students realize that the Oankali, intent on gleaning information about human DNA, have abandoned their virtual son, Akin. However, as he tries to convince the Oankali to allow the humans to live and procreate independently on Mars, Akin never voices any sense of betrayal, displacement, or loss he may have felt in his abandonment. Jodahs repairs and reverses the abandonment narrative. As the Oankali shuttle arrives in the human resister camp, Jodahs first grabs and hugs Tino, its human father, and then proceeds to hug Nikanj, its ooloi parent. In fact, a narrative of filial embracement replaces the abandonment narrative. A picture-perfect study of family reunion follows as Nikanj accuses Jodahs, “Lelka, if you will introduce us to your mates, we may even begin to forgive you for staying here and not letting us know you were all right” (*Xenogenesis* 718). Lilith, its human mother, smilingly complains that she is not sure she will forgive Jodahs at all.

Lilith and Akin, mother and son as they are, straddle the human-Oankali divide (one by way of genetic mutation and the other by way of birth) and thereby qualify as the hybrid citizens of colonial rule. Like the latter, they are complicit in the Oankali plan and have the potential to betray the humans. On the other hand, this mother-son duo, defined by affective ties acquired within their lived spheres, can also foment political aberrations and possibilities of dissent against any kind of autocratic rule. Jodahs takes this discourse to another level—like its mother and brother, it also qualifies as a mixed-breed child—but in it, the Self and the Other stand melded together. Jodahs opens up possibilities for change, a change that thrives on exciting open-ended possibilities—a layered identity, whose “[infinite] layers [in] totality forms ‘I’” (Trinh 96). My point is that these layers, infinite in range, play with transgressional possibilities; they not only threaten to destabilize the power structure but also tend to usurp it.

In its usurpation of power, Jodahs symbolizes the mimic man who is situated “within the system, but outside its power structures” (Melzer 102). At every step Jodahs is Gloria Anzaldua’s “mestiza,” the mixed-race (read mixed-species) progeny who lives the act of resistance by mimicking the Self and the Other, becoming the Self and the Other. As Jodahs moves through the mountainous terrain, as it seeks out the humans, it combines both the tracker and the fugitive. “I followed them silently,” it confesses. “Sometimes they became aware that they were being followed, though they never saw me” (*Xenogenesis* 595). Camouflage is easy for Jodahs, as its coloring darkens, hiding it easily in the forest growth. It seems like a planned military maneuver as Jodahs moves through the forest and retracts into the hills. When it reaches out to the two humans, the narrative moves from an intense
discourse of hide and seek to an admission of proximity as the human “heartbeats increase” (*Xenogenesis* 597). They are simultaneously startled and excited, and yet remain hidden, possibly unable to understand and respond to Jodahs, in whom the human and the alien/Oankali have merged.

Through Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs, my students come to view the domestic, a traditionally safe space, as a site of radical disruption, possibly an overlooked source of revolutionary energy. We first meet Lilith as a captive, a victim of a controlled society whose administrators have a definite plan for her. The Oankali are keen on strategies for organizing that society, recalling the creation and maintenance of civilized order within the precincts of colonial rule. They pick up and groom Lilith to be a surrogate mother to the humans; her primary task is to convince them to procreate with the Oankali. As she penetrates the domestic or “home” space of the human survivors and virtually raises them on Oankali teachings, she recalls colonial concerns regarding the bearing and rearing of children, confirming, in the words of Sidney Webb, that “the empire was rooted in the home” (qtd. in Davin 97). However, the situation becomes tricky. Institutionalized surrogacy demands fulfillment of orders that have been given; it admits, whether it cares to or not, the possibility of covert disobedience or dissent if the surrogate mother refuses to abide by the given tenets of colonial rule, confirming thereby that control is most frequently and hysterically implemented when it is almost impossible to maintain. In the event that the surrogate mother rebels, the relatively safe space of, say, the home, conveniently contained within the parameters of regulation and control, becomes a veritable arena of dynamism and disruption. Lilith strategically uses the privileges granted to her by the Oankali as she surreptitiously carries out her own agenda that her human wards make the best of their victimized situation: that they learn from the Oankali and escape. By allowing her subconscious repressions to morph into desires of resistance to the Oankali plan, she partially satisfies her anger and feelings of denial that she has felt at the hands of the Oankali.

In addition, Lilith is no ideal mother from the colonialist’s perspective, either—one who submissively abides by the colonizer’s tenets. Lilith emerges as a nymphomaniac, sexualized to the point that her intense desire for the alien subadult Oankali leaves her craving sexual stimulation and later satiation only for herself. Edward Said in *Orientalism* refers to the construction of the Orient as “an exclusively male province…viewed with sexist blinders…[where] women are usually creatures of a male power-fantasy…to be solved or confined or…taken over” and are thereby relegated to a subservient status (207). Lilith defies any inferior status when of her own accord she has sex with aliens and even inducts her human male counterpart into it. She, the first human to have sex with an ooloi (Nikanj, a gender-neutral alien seducer),
needs no drug to make her helpless. The text reads, “Human beings liked to touch one another—needed to. But once they mated through an ooloi, they could not mate with each other in the Human way—could not even stroke or handle one another in the Human way” (Butler 297). Lilith spells out her dominant sexuality: “She did not pretend outwardly or to herself that she would resist Nikanj’s invitation—or that she wanted to resist it.” In fact, she concludes, “Nikanj could give her an intimacy with Joseph that was beyond ordinary experience” (161). Her maternal status is complicated in her desire for this contact and underscores the fact that she is no longer very human, given that she can no longer desire Joseph without her ooloi’s presence. It shows how Lilith is forever changed through contact with the ooloi/Oankali, embracing what Erin Ackerman calls “a molecular subjectivity” where “sexuality becomes an integral part of becoming”⁴ or what Nolan Belk describes as “the ability to become more than the limitations of their societies… chang[ing] in ways that make them unrecognizable posthumans” (379, 386). When Lilith enjoys sex with the ooloi, she introduces a contraband desire that rebukes Cold War domesticity and procreative sex by reveling in infamous forms of pleasure. Ensconced in the role of a powerful seductress and colluding with the Oankali, Lilith detracts greatly from the image of an idealized mother figure (for instance, that of Eve).

Lilith’s sexuality harkens back to the rabbinic Lilith, whom Adam thought should submit to him sexually, when he instructed her to “lie below him.” Almost like her ancestral namesake, Butler’s Lilith defies traditional notions of sexual relationships and their unwritten text of hierarchy and male domination.⁵ She has sex with her human lover Joseph through the ooloi, as she “sandwiche[s] Nikanj’s body between her own and Joseph’s, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position between two humans” (161). Joseph is completely alarmed, almost dumbfounded, after the experience; he is definitely skeptical and refuses to “take food from her hands” (168). The text juxtaposes his reaction to that of Lilith, who confesses:

“I liked it,” she said softly. “Didn’t you?”
That thing will never touch me again if I have anything to say about it.
She did not challenge this. (Xenogenesis 166)

While Lilith totally enjoys the sexual experience, it terrifies Joseph. The irony of the situation is manifold. Men usually experience greater sexual desire than women do, and therefore one assumes that Joseph would have enjoyed the experience more than Lilith would. Butler reverses the situation here, as she prioritizes a woman who derives intense pleasure from and seems to be totally at ease with the situation. It also brings to the fore a different
sexual alignment that puts all genders on a par in the act itself and so gives the lie to sexuality as a loaded metaphor for male domination. Lilith’s position in the sexual configuration presents an interesting overturning of that trope. For one thing, in this asymmetrical alignment there are three, not two, participants. Nikanj, the ooloi, forms an essential part of the triad. The ooloi invites a reversal in the traditional sexual position of a woman lying under a man by saying, “Lie here with us... Why should you be down there by yourself?” (Xenogenesis 157). Lilith “thought there could be nothing more seductive than an ooloi... making that particular suggestion” (Xenogenesis 157). She gives in to the seduction; she is the one who chooses to do so. It is Lilith who “[tears] off her jacket and seize[s] the ugly elephant’s trunk of an organ, letting it coil around her as she climbed onto the bed. She sandwiches Nikanj’s body between her own and Joseph’s, placing it for the first time in the ooloi position, between two humans” (Xenogenesis 158, emphasis added). In fact, she feels no compunction in admitting to Joseph the pleasure she has derived from the sexual act. As an empowered sexual trope, Lilith becomes a political epicenter of power that, like her namesake, destroys any regulatory comfort embedded in a trope of domesticity by instilling chaos into an ordered form of the sacred.

Once we move from the mutant Lilith to the construct ooloi, Jodahs, the human component of whose character is blurred, power relations dependent on the expectations of sex and gender stand further challenged. If Lilith is Butler’s shift away from the traditional treatise on sexuality and power, particularly within the heterosexual discourse of colonial rule, Jodahs puts forth what Patricia Melzer calls, “[Butler’s] deconstruction of normative heterosexuality and desire” (83). Butler destabilizes the male-female power structure by creating a more complex and complicated liaison between desire and power represented by Jodahs. Jodahs symbolizes the “power of the erotic,” as Nolan Belk points out, “the trust in the body’s deep desires for propagation, love, and connection”; “the erotic [as] nurturer of our deepest knowledge” (373, 375). With Jodahs, the moment it moves into Nikanj’s embrace, it admits:

I felt myself held and penetrated.... All my senses turned inward as Nikanj used both sensory arms to inject a rush of individual cells, each one a plan by which a whole living entity could be constructed. The cells went straight to my newly mature yashi. The organ seemed to gulp and suckle the way I had once at my mother’s breast. (Xenogenesis 672)

The intimate and intense embrace, the momentum of “individual cells” that overwhelm its being, and the implications of “gulp[ing]” down the
sensation speak of a sexually charged achievement of a birthright. It brings to the fore the question of a legacy to be passed on, a legacy drenched in deviant sexuality (for Nikanj is the same-sex parent of Jodahs and they are both ooloi). Oankali sex is not necessarily for procreation; it is for “every exchange of information, all sharing emotions, and as final arbiter for all decisions” (Belk 381). In class discussions, we conclude—it is about power. This conclusion comes as no surprise to us teachers, of course, but it is often the first time undergraduates have come face to face with this theory. Thus when Lilith sees Jodahs tricking a pair of human siblings to become its sexual mates, her doubts override her trust of her progeny, as she muses, “one more betrayal of her own Human kind for people who were not Human, or not altogether Human” (Xenogenesis 650). On another occasion, though Lilith advises Jodahs’s mate to listen to it, she forewarns him, “Once you’ve heard what it has to say, get away from it…. Do your thinking there [out of the house] about what it’s told you, and decide what questions you still need answers to” (650). Lilith clearly understands the lethal potential of oooli-driven sex and therefore advises a freethinking zone of deliberation. Butler intricately enmeshes the politics of desire and power in the text: when Nikanj, having impregnated Lilith against her wishes, placates an irate Lilith that her body wanted it, one is tempted to read Nikanj as a colonial master talking to his mistress/slave. However, the ambiguity at the heart of Butler’s narrative denies any easy categorization. In fact, when Nikanj, at his rhetorical best, concludes, “Our children will be better than us,” the students analyze the innocuous adjective “better” that qualifies the child (243). That child, they say, is Jodahs, born of colonial shortsightedness, the ultimate mimic man, who destabilizes all categories of species and gender. It remains a virtual rhizome with infinite possibilities, almost impossible to contain or curtail.

Jodahs is the ultimate mimic man whose object of desire defines his mimicry. There is a total merger of polarized identities, of the Self and the Other, in any sexual contact, as Jodahs points out: “She discovered that if she touched me now with her hand, she felt the touch as though on her own skin, felt pleasure or discomfort just as she made me feel” (Xenogenesis 111). Both the woman and Jodahs, triggered by transgressive desire and sensual exchange between species, instantly share pain and pleasure. Shape-shifter as Jodahs is, the performative quality of its body adapts to the object of its desire irrespective of the typical male-female binary. Jodahs, in the compulsive throes of its desired Other, almost without noticing, becomes a female in response to a male counterpart. It admits, “I wasn’t surprised this time. My body wanted him. My body sought to please him. What would happen to me when I had two or more mates? Would I be like the sky, constantly changing,
clouded, clear, clouded, and clear?” (76). In fact, without the defining Other, the Self (read Jodahs on both counts) almost ceases to exist. Having sexual intimacy with its mate is paramount. And Jodahs is not alone in its need; without a mate, Jodah’s closest sibling (its twin) Aaor reverts to “a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime. It could not speak or breath air or make any sound at all” (654–655).

With Jodahs, desire becomes the basis of an interactive merger—the Other no longer the Other stands redefined as a primary need of the body. This is Butler’s terminal destabilization of heteronormative power; the disruptive process is continuous and consistent, fed by the unpredictability and ambiguity at its core that threatens any and all bipartite discourse of gender and sexuality. Jodahs savors “the smell and taste of Jesusa, the rhythm of her heartbeat, the rush of her blood, the texture of her flesh…her cells, the smallest organelles within her cells” and momentarily even suspends its healing powers to sexually enjoy “the complex harmonies of [Jesusa]” (*Xenogenesis* 657). So immersed is Jodahs in its sexual play with Jesusa that the “built-in danger” of her genetic conflict, the Human Contradiction, fails to threaten it, as it admits, “To me the conflict was spice” (658).

These and other exciting possibilities opened up in our analysis of the novel, provoking intellectually challenging discussions that exemplify diverse ways in which literary texts can fictionalize history by historicizing the future. Students agree that reading *Xenogenesis* through the lens of colonialism brings up thought-provoking questions; Butler leaves us to figure out the answers. This open-ended discussion is what I find most interesting as I end my teaching with more questions: Would you have identified with Lilith or Akin if you had been in their situation? By way of their analysis of the text, I want students to examine themselves, to think about the human psyche that preconditions one to enslave and colonize. I want them to deliberate over how one may escape a future that prognosticates a warning of history’s repeating itself. Students are most excited about Jodahs. As we proceed through the three books, the unfamiliar alien becomes familiar, its first-person narrative voice more attractive and seductive. Students, now ingrained into the text, initially taken aback by the contraband sex of Lilith, seem more comfortable with the destabilized gender discourse of Jodahs. On the one hand, they admit the lethal potential of Jodahs as a political resister with its deconstructive powers of gender. What impresses them most are the possibilities of a consummate mimic man, whose “osmotic assimilation” of the Other embraces to usurp and ultimately rewrite the narrative of racial miscegenation (Schwab 144). Students acknowledge that the late 1980s,
when the trilogy had first been published, was another story but the new millennium loves the gender nonconformist, Jodahs.

NOTES

1. Notable critics such as Darko Suvin, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, and John Rieder have recognized the importance of colonialism as a historical context for the genre of science fiction. Rieder suggests that the Other of colonialism, defined by its core ambivalence, often forms the essence of science fiction narratives.

2. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Butler states: “Ronald Reagan inspired Xenogenesis. When his first term was beginning, his people were talking about a ‘winnable’ nuclear war, a ‘limited’ nuclear war, the idea that more and more nuclear ‘weapons’ would make us safer” (McCaffery 97).

3. Though Jodahs is Lilith’s son as it associates more with Nikanj, an ooloi, a neuter gender Oankali, I refer to Jodahs as “it” and also call him an accidental ooloi.

4. Erin Ackerman refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s molecular subjectivities, with regard to which they cite sexuality as the space of becoming, of “ multiplicities [defined by] the explicitly sexual relationship between wasp and orchid, in which the wasp becomes-orchid ( pollinating one orchid with another’s pollen) and orchid becomes-wasp (attracting the wasp through its botanical waspishness)” (40).

5. In their respective articles, both Michelle Osherow and Sarah Wood cite the comparison of Butler’s Lilith to the rabbinic Lilith. While in “The Dawn of a New Lilith” Osherow argues for a birth of the New Woman, in “Subversion through Inclusion” Wood argues that Butler subverts the Judeo-Christian, negative connotations of Lilith by deliberately naming her fictional character Lilith, only “to subvert, revise, and quer[y] the hegemony of Judeo-Christian mythology, by amalgamation” (96–97).

6. In her essay “Mothering Medusa,” Kristina Busse references a scene of seduction—Joseph’s seduction by the ooloi Nikanj—that Lilith watches. Busse emphasizes the overturning of the power structure as the human male is forced to take on the typically feminine position of sexual and emotional submission—a reversal that Lilith enjoys. Busse’s reading contributes a slightly different perspective to my own reading of the destabilizing of gender boundaries.

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In his brief but seminal text *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955), Aimé Césaire notes that “no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased” (Césaire 39). Césaire’s words are bitter and passionate, but true, especially when the term “imperialism” is employed as an inextricable partner to colonization. North America was colonized because of various economic reasons. Spain needed gold and silver, and the North American Aztec and Inca Empires met those needs. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European nations needed labor, land, and raw material and the African continent became the unfortunate supplier of Europe’s desires. Along with colonization and imperialist aggression there is usually an increase in trade and consumption along with technological advancements that benefit the colonizing nation. Regardless of the wealth gained and advancements made, the colonizing nation is always left morally
bankrupt to justify its deeds and inhumanity with mythologies and false histories. Colonization leaves societies drained of their essence, tramples cultures underfoot, undermines already established institutions, destroys artistic creations, sullies religion, and wipes out extraordinary possibilities (43). But what if humanity was forced to flee Earth and colonize a space outside of our terrestrial imaginations? What if the process of colonization was considered as a biological imperative instead of just a manifestation of greed and cruelty? The fiction of Octavia E. Butler asks us to reconsider the complexity of colonization’s ancient practice and its relationship to identity construction for both the colonized and the colonizer. Where Césaire’s ideas of Négritude and anticolonialism helped shape thought in the Caribbean world and literature as well as in America during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), Butler was heavily influenced by the artistic and political products of the 1960s. Her short story “Bloodchild” and her novels *Dawn* and *Survivor* make very poignant statements about the process and result of colonialism that Césaire’s work alludes to but does not fully develop. It is my assertion that through the lens of science fiction the works of Césaire might be interpreted with a broader and more inclusive scope.

Colonization of other planets is one of science and science fiction’s most prevalent themes. Concerns about the Earth’s changing environment and humanity’s continued existence on the planet have allowed the idea of space colonization as a worthwhile goal to gain momentum. The discovery of lunar water deposits in 1978 and 2008 has renewed interest in colonizing the Moon. Given research that suggests Mars is arguably the most hospitable planet in our solar system besides Earth (Tomblin 1), both private and public entities have committed research dollars to support the viability of long-term human colonization of Mars. What is interesting about the public and private discourse surrounding colonization in outer space is the absence of moral questions that should be considered given humanity’s history with colonization and imperialism. The policy or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation by territorial acquisitions or by obtaining control over political or economic life of extraterrestrial areas does not seem to come into focus when the space being considered for colonization is not occupied by what humans define as life. If the land is not occupied by people who look and think like the colonizers, the space is defined as open/free frontier, a space destined to be taken by those who want or need the space most.1 Of course, need and want are defined by those with the most advanced technology and the willingness to employ the most lethal military force.

Whereas science fiction is concerned with the colonization of other planets, Caribbean literature has necessarily been a genre attached to the responsibility of telling the stories of people who were systematically
dispersed, enslaved, raped, robbed, kidnapped, and tortured, but who have somehow managed to persevere the cultural and military force of the colonizer. Caribbean literature is inextricably linked to the notions of African diaspora and the “Other” as well as ambiguity. Interestingly, science fiction has always been a genre invested in the study and the imagining of the “Other.” In the works of Aimé Césaire the thingification/othering of humans is demystified as the result of European Imperialism. In brief, Césaire’s work is very much invested in considering the roles of the colonizer and the colonized. His interests may be most evident in his three-act drama _A Tempest_ (1969) and what Robin Kelley calls the “third world manifesto” (Kelley 7) in _Discourse on Colonialism_ (1955). Césaire’s revision of William Shakespeare’s classic play _The Tempest_ (1611) can be imagined as a science fiction horror story of an exiled foreigner, named Prospero, who is bent on the genocide of an indigenous people and the destruction of their homeland. _Discourse on Colonialism_ can be interpreted as a treatise on the systematic dehumanization of imperialism but also on the paternalistic views of an alien race of beings out to conquer all life on the planet Earth. This discussion considers the cross-cultural conversation that occurs with Aimé Césaire’s _A Tempest_ (1969) and Butler’s3 “Bloodchild” (1984), _Dawn_ (1987), and _Survivor_ (1978) with the hope of developing a better understanding of how marginalized bodies and their identities are constructed and imagined in the context of imperialism and colonization.

The scholarly discourse that surrounds Césaire’s revision of Shakespeare’s _The Tempest_ is vast but lacking with regard to discussions of race and gender in the context of science fiction. In his “A Call for Freedom: Aime Césaire’s _A Tempest_,” Liang Fei notes that while Césaire reimagines Shakespeare’s narrative, Césaire’s intent to make a bold political statement with the drama is clear. Césaire’s conception of Négritude is the essence of his version of the play. Fei invests in understanding how Césaire articulates the relationships among the colonizer and colonized. According to Fei, “_A Tempest_ is Césaire’s call for freedom and his ponderings on feasible ways laying ahead, which are interwoven in Caliban and Ariel’s struggle for freedom” (Fei 118). It is the cautionary nature of Césaire’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s classic tale that I find so timely and appropriate for the genre of science fiction. _A Tempest_ can easily be read as speculative fiction in many of the same ways that Butler’s fiction is now being interpreted. To go a step further, Roxanna Curto’s article, “The Science of Illusion-Making in Aimé Césaire’s _The Tragedy of King Christophe_ and _A Tempest_,” makes note of Césaire’s subversive commentary about the technology of the Western world as yet another devise employed to deceive indigenous populations: “Ultimately, the frequent representation of illusion-making as a scientific or technical practice reflects Césaire’s views
about the transfer of Western cultural elements—including both theater and modern technologies—to the former colonies in the era of decolonization” (Curto 154). Curto’s observation places Césaire’s work very much within the bounds of discourse surrounding science fiction, a genre invested in the study of the other and the demystifying of illusive technologies of the past, present, and future. Where Curto is interested in illusion-making on the stage and its relationship to science and technologies of the Western world, I would like to focus on how and why certain illusions are employed in the works of Césaire and Butler to construct cautionary tales about bodies that participate in the processes of colonization. In addressing utopianism in Shakespeare’s drama, Karen Flagstad notes:

_The Tempest_ is rich with references to the New World… To read through the travel literature of the Renaissance is to discover a hemisphere populated with monsters of every description: a veritable menagerie of such monsters invoked the voyagers were the native people themselves, historical counterparts—on one level—of Caliban. (Flagstad 218)

It is through Fei, Curto, and Flagstad’s references that I justify the need for a reading of Césaire’s work alongside the works of Butler and discussions of colonization of new worlds and alien bodies.

Butler’s short story “Bloodchild” takes its readers to a “new world” inhabited by Tlic, which are multi-limbed caterpillar-people anywhere from 10 to 13 feet long. In “Bloodchild,” a population of human refugees (Terrans) flee Earth “from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them” to become colonizers who are colonized by the Tlic (Bloodchild 25). Like Caliban and Prospero, the Tlic and the Terrans are forced into a symbiotic relationship that borders on the parasitic. The first novel in Butler’s _Xenogenesis_ series, _Dawn_, asks its readers to consider the perspective of the colonized in much the same way that Césaire asks his audiences to consider what it must be like to have one’s homeland invaded. _Dawn_ tells of a post-apocalyptic Earth that is colonized by the Oankali gene traders—“a species of Medusa-like beings, with smooth, grey flesh covered in moving tentacles that double as sensory organs and lethal stingers” (Cherniavsky 104). The novel _Survivor_ serves to further complicate the discussion of colonizer and colonized by developing the experience of a group of colonizers/missionaries who become refugees on an alien planet and who are forced to assimilate and miscegenate with the native Kohn people. The Kohn are a color sensitive race of blue sasquatch-like life-forms divided into two factions, the Tehkohn and the Garkohn. The Afro-Asian-American protagonist, Alanna, must navigate her identity as a human and a refugee in an extremely hostile environment.
The notion of monster is placed at the center of all of these narratives in that each questions the definition of monster, alien, native, and colonizer. In each narrative readers are asked to consider the complex and often blurred boundaries that too often fail to divide the colonizers from the colonized.

**A TEMPEST AND “BLOODCHILD”**

The term “Négritude” is not mentioned in *A Tempest* nor does it appear in “Bloodchild,” yet it is extremely important if one is attempting to develop a critical understanding of either narrative. Fei notes that “Négritude, according to Césaire, is not only to struggle for a political emancipation but also to ‘decolonize’ the blacks’ minds and inner life assimilated by Western civilization, which Europeans take as superior by defining Africa as the barbarian world” (Fei 119). Césaire’s Prospero considers Caliban and his mother, Sycorax, to be nothing short of barbaric monsters. The dishonest equations “Christianity=civilization and paganism=savagery” (*Discourse* 33) are readily applied to the natives that Prospero encounters on the island upon which he and his daughter have been displaced. Prospero rejects any notion of a worldview that does not exist from the perspective of the Western world. In short, his failure as a character and human being is rooted in his inability to consider an aesthetic other than that of the West. Upon arriving on a new world, the Terrans also find it very difficult to see the Tlic as anything other than grotesque oversized worms with stingers. Prospero might as well be on another planet for his irrational fear of Caliban is almost identical to the fear of the “Other” shared by Gan’s brother, Qui. If Négritude represents an aesthetic that seeks to maintain and uphold traditional African culture and sensibilities, to the Western world, it is equivalent to accepting an alien perspective. My point here is that Négritude necessarily transcends terrestrial notions of difference—Négritude must be understood beyond the continent of Africa.

The Caribbean scholar Doris Garraway notes: “Césaire’s négritude is not a fixed object but a process through which Césaire comes to problematize both black essentialism and the very idea of racial particularism itself” (Garraway 71). Garraway asserts that theoretically Césaire’s Négritude transcends the discourse of racial essentialism and subjectivity and moves toward a discussion of universal humanity where multicultural and political particularism is both a negation and a fundamental condition of possibility. Garraway suggests that Negritude is not dependent upon the culture of colonization nor is it dependent upon static locations of origin. Instead, I would suggest that Césaire’s Négritude is more concerned with a shared history of oppression than a continent of origin. Diaspora is a notion
that transcends race and geographic location; it is necessarily an abstract yet tangible concept. Négritude is a concept that has been truncated and perhaps diluted in the quest of black men with inferiority complexes to reinvent a worthy origin story and identifiable national identity. However, if Négritude can be considered beyond the connotations attached to its name, it is a concept that is more universal than essentialist. It is a term that can be applied to situations beyond black people and dark continents. Négritude is a concept that is appropriately applied to societies beyond terrestrial boundaries. Butler’s fiction serves as evidence of this assertion. Thus, a lens of science fiction may broaden the scope and understanding of a term that has been associated with an ineffectual ideology of the mid to late twentieth century.

Négritude is a diasporic quest for freedom, not necessarily blackness. It is about freedom from oppression for both the oppressed and the oppressor. This is made evident in the last lines of Césaire’s A Tempest when Prospero says, “Well, Caliban, old fellow, it’s just us two now, here on the island… only you and me. You and me. You-me… me-you!” (Tempest 68). Prospero the colonizer is beginning to understand the inextricable bond that he and Caliban, the colonized, share. The two exist in a symbiotic relationship that represents a process of Négritude. Césaire evokes the East African proverb “I am because we are, we are because I am.” Prospero has been transformed by Caliban and Caliban by Prospero. Thus, Caliban’s need for freedom is dependent upon Prospero’s freedom from the very system of oppression that he has subjugated Caliban with while on the island. Although “Bloodchild” does not speak directly of a tempest, it is a tempest of racial and social oppression that brings the characters of Butler’s science fiction narrative together. The Terrans (exiled humans) were forced to colonize a planet already inhabited by an intelligent but dying group of indigenous people called the Tlic. The native Tlic welcomed the humans and gave them land on the Preserve despite the hostility that was demonstrated by the colonizing humans. In exchange for the Preserve and sterile Tlic eggs, the Tlic asked the humans to enter into a symbiotic relationship with them in order to preserve their dying race. The Terran families are asked to encourage one of their male children to coexist with a fertile female Tlic with the hopes that the male child will become a host for Tlic offspring. In short, the human host carry the Tlic eggs in their abdomen until the eggs are ready to hatch. If all goes well, when the eggs hatch the female Tlic then removes the larva from the body of the young male Terran. If the female Tlic is not present when the eggs are ready to hatch the larvae will eat their way through the human host. On its surface “Bloodchild” is the story of a “delivery” of Tlic grubs that has some complications. On a more symbolic level the short story
is invested in examining the relationship between T’Gatoi (female Tlic) and Gan (adolescent human boy). Gan has been promised to T’Gatoi as a host for her eggs since his birth. “T’Gatoi is the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve” (*Bloodchild* 3). Their relationship is ambiguous at best, but also analogous to the peculiar relationship of the colonizer and the colonized or slave-master, oppressor-oppressed, mother-child.

Butler rejects many of the binaries employed in the traditional colonization narrative. She rightly forces the colonizer to play the role of the marginalized character subject to the authority of the more informed and powerful indigenous native. Thus, the one natural resource on this new world that would be exploited by the colonizer is the source of the colonizer’s compromised position. The sterile Tlic “eggs prolonged life and vigor” (“Bloodchild” 3). They allowed Gan’s father to “live more than twice as long as he should have” (3) despite the fact that he served as a host for Tlic eggs “three times in his long life...three times being opened up and sewed up” (22). In no uncertain terms the sterile Tlic eggs are viewed as a commodity by Terrans (colonizers) inside and outside of the Preserve. If the magical language of Prospero and its effect on both Caliban and Ariel can be compared to the numbing effects of the Tlic eggs, then comparing the relationship of Prospero and Caliban with that of T’Gatoi and Gan seems more than plausible. Caliban’s mother Sycorax and Gan’s mother Lien both fall short in their duties as mothers in the wake of the dominant hegemony. Neither mother is able to protect their son from the processes of colonization. Such a maternal failure is symbolic of the inability of a motherland to protect its sons from those who would disregard boundaries of origin and identity. Mothers cannot protect the purity of their children’s identity in a world so steeped in ambiguity and changing boundaries—for the process of colonization in any genre is a process of separating mother from child and synthesizing a new and strange familial bond that moves forward with change.

**DISCOURSE ON COLONIALISM IN DAWN**

In Robin Kelley’s introduction to *Discourse on Colonialism* (1959, 2000), he adroitly located Césaire’s “declaration of war” (7) among other manifestos of the period such as Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Richard Wright’s *White Man Listen!* (1957), and Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus” as being literature that rejects the process of colonization but also emphasizes the fact that colonization is a game that requires at least two players. Thus, any critical discussion of colonization necessarily involves a discussion of what this process does to the colonizer as well as the colonized.
According to Kelley, “In the finest Hegelian fashion, Césaire demonstrates how colonialism works to ‘decivilize’ the colonizer: torture, violence, race hatred, and immorality constitute a dead weight on the so-called civilized, pulling the master class deeper into the abyss of barbarism” (8–9). *Dawn* goes to great lengths to understand the process of “decivilizing” both the colonizer and the colonized. The main character, Lilith Iyapo, is chosen by the Oankali to serve as the liaison between a postapocalyptic human population and an alien race bent on creating Oankali-human constructs. Lilith Iyapo, very much like Adam’s first wife in Genesis, Lilith (of Hebrew mythology), is put in a position to betray the laws and solidarity of mankind with the hopes of saving at least a portion of human civility and identity. In her quest to survive and advocate for the survival of humanity, Lilith is forced to face the barbarity of her fellow humans as they view her as an outsider and betrayer of humanity. In many regards Lilith resembles the role played by Ariel in Césaire’s *Tempest*. Like Ariel, Lilith is often times perceived as an “Uncle Tom/Sell Out,” loving her masters and/or colonizers more than she loves her own land and people. Lilith’s relationship to her colonizers, however, is far more complicated, and she constantly struggles to ensure the survival of humanity. At the same time, the supposedly objective and altruistic Oankali are revealed to be just as condescending and paternalistic as European colonizers of the “New World” in the fifteenth century. The Oankali desire the paradox that is humanity, a mixture of intelligence and the desire to construct social hierarchies. The Oankali view this paradox as a valuable commodity unique to humanity and worth the trouble and time necessary to acquire the trait.

Very much like Caliban, Lilith represents the “exceptional common man”—the individual who is willing to defy those with power in order to protect that which they hold dear. For Lilith values Earth and humanity, what they were and what they both will become. Caliban values Earth as well, but his Earth takes the shape of his motherland, which is represented by the omnipresence of his mother Sycorax. Caliban says:

> Dead or alive, she was my mother, and I won’t deny her! Anyhow, you only think she’s dead because you think the earth itself is dead…It’s so much simpler that way! Dead, you can walk on it, pollute it, you can tread upon it with the steps of a conqueror. I respect the earth, because I know that it is alive, and I know that Sycorax is alive. (*A Tempest* 12)

The Oankali believe beyond doubt that Earth is not dead but will soon be and thus have “rescued” human survivors from a post nuclear war-devastated planet Earth. As the Aliens fix the planet that humanity has misused and
underappreciated, the fortunate few have been housed in an organic spaceship orbiting the planet. The humans are kept in a chemically induced coma until the Oankali deem them worthy to be awakened. As the Oankali repair the damaged Earth with genetic mutations and manipulation they also allow their spaceships to feed on the planet. Butler writes the Oankali as saviors and as paternalistic colonizers bent shouldering the burden of the paradoxically sexy but self-destructive human race. What is most significant about Butler’s ambiguous portrayal of the Oankali colonizers is that their encounter with the survivors of Earth has changed them in an irrevocable fashion. The Oankali have succeeded in producing genetic hybrids but have also become linked to Earth and its natives in ways that at least lessen their alien status in the imaginations of human survivors as well as themselves. There is a point in the process of colonization where the indigenous people, on both cultural and biological levels, necessarily and unavoidably colonize the colonizer. This is all to say that the barbarism that is employed and yielded by the processes of colonization, however complex and involved, leaves at least two parties in a sort of hybrid cesspool that can only be escaped with the assistance of the Other.

Only through an acknowledged historical awareness of each party’s struggles for freedom and validity can the cesspool begin to be sanitized. America is the greatest example of this truth. As Césaire notes in his *Discourse*, “I make no secret of my opinion that at the present time the barbarism of Western Europe has reached an incredibly high level, being only surpassed—far surpassed, it is true—by the barbarism of the United States” (*Discourse* 47). It was the exceedingly high level of barbarism in the United States in the 1960s that led activists and artists to the essentialist elements of Césaire’s Négritude. In times of urgent crisis essentialism may seem necessary for survival in the short run, but in the long run, essentialism proves to be counterproductive and exclusionary. Garraway observes that Césaire’s Négritude is “predicated on an attitude of continuous solidarity, openness, and engagement with all others as its condition of possibility. At times Césaire’s Négritude even admits of the need to be freed, through reciprocal relations with others, from constraining particularisms of all kinds” (83). It is my belief that Butler’s fiction reflects an understanding of the need and application for a “universal Négritude”—an understanding that the relationships between colonizers and colonized, masters/slaves, and dominant/marginalized are ambiguous, relative, and dependent upon one another. To be sure, the term “universal” may be problematic in this context, but perhaps it is the connotation of the term more than its denotation that is problematic. In the real world the universal can be employed without excluding individual and marginalized identities.
Despite its sorted history, in theory, America acts as evidence that the latter is possible, if not completely likely.

**SURVIVING AS A REFUGEE**

In Butler’s fiction the colonizer is often transformed into the refugee. The United Nations Refugee Agency defines a refugee as someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal, and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. More than half of all refugees worldwide come from just three countries: Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan. Joseph Conrad chose the Congo River circa 1890 to discuss the immoral behavior of white people in Africa. His *Heart of Darkness* was a political and psychological novel designed to give its readers a thrill (Murfin 101). Butler’s setting in *Survivor* might be read as metaphor for the Congo or any African nation populated with bodies that appear to be different than the European body dominant in the Western imagination.

Alanna Verrick is a refugee from an Earth that has been infected with a Clayark plague. The Clayark plague is an extraterrestrial disease that has destroyed half of the Earth’s population, either by killing them or by mutating them and their children into the bestial “Clayarks.” The Clayark is a sphinx-like creature created by human and alien DNA. Like one of science fiction’s most notable refugees, Superman, Alanna has been adopted by a family of missionaries preparing to flee their equivalent of planetary destruction. Where Clark Kent “gets to live the refugee’s dream, being totally accepted into a prosperous new world—plus he’s physically and mentally superior to everyone else around him” (Anders), Alanna must struggle as the outsider to both humanity and Kohn alike. When her foster father is asked about the chances for her fitting into a missionary community and lifestyle, he optimistically responds, “This one’s a future Missionary. She’ll learn. She’ll become one of us” (*Survivor* 2). Fortunately, Alanna never completely assimilates into the missionary community nor does she completely give in to the moorings of her “civilized” human family. A refugee must never completely assimilate into any culture for fear of being displaced from that culture in the future. Alanna is a survivor who has been raised to exist in a Clayark-infested world where she has had to hunt or be hunted in order to survive. Although she does not possess the advantages of a Clark Kent, Alanna employs her extraordinary ability to adapt to difference in the most
hostile of situations. As in many of Butler’s narratives, the reader is asked to consider the relativity of a character’s situation. As a wild human on Earth Alanna is caught stealing from the missionary food supply and is shot, but is saved from death by her future foster father, Jules Verrick. On a new planet, Butler locates Alanna in a very similar situation with Diut and the Tehkohn. Diut like Verrick saves Alanna’s life from the addiction and deception of the Garkohn. The reader is then asked to consider the trade of oppression that colonizing another planet has dealt Alanna and the other missionaries.

As a woman of color, Alanna is written as a character who is familiar with being at the bottom of the socioeconomic latter or worse. As a refugee Alanna seems to understand the roles of the powerful and the powerless. She is able to survive two years of captivity by the Tehkohn because “she could look at her situation clearly and realize how much trouble she was in” (Survivor 3). Alanna is able to see beyond the worldview of her human counterparts. She is able to see the world she is existing in from the perspective of the powerful as well as the powerless and employ this vision to her advantage. She is not hindered by religion or cultural moorings that might prevent her from doing whatever is necessary to survive including sacrificing socially constructed notions of humanity. Alanna, like most refugees, lives on the edge of life and death until they have found a way to temporarily assimilate into an environment that provides a modicum of peace and coexistence. Just as Alanna was captured/rescued by the missionaries for two years on Earth from a feral existence amid the Clayark plague, the Tehkohn kidnapped Alanna and a group of humans from their settlement and the “protection” of their Garkohn allies. Ogaili notes in “Mutinous Colonialism: Navigating Self-Other Dichotomy in Octavia Butler’s Survivor,” “[Edward] Said formulates two cultural kinds i.e., ‘familiar’ and ‘alien’ as the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’” (Ogaili 167). I assert that Alanna resists fixed dichotomies. Her ability to adapt and survive in various alien and familiar environments depends on her maintaining a flexibility when negotiating various concepts of difference. Therefore, “alien” does not necessarily equate to “bad” and “familiar” does not always mean “good.” Both terms are in a constant state of flux and must be perceived as volatile and at least potentially dangerous at best.

The Survivor narrative clearly lays out the idea that power is deceptive and does not operate on morality. The Garkohn assisted the human colonists in developing their settlement but also facilitates their addiction to a local fruit, meklah, in order to employ human technology in their feud with the Tehkohn. During her two-year captivity Alanna befriends the Tehkohn leader Diut and ultimately gives birth to the first Kohn/human hybrid. Alanna’s daughter acts as a symbol for her ability to move beyond human
limitations and value systems along with an unprecedented desire to survive and embrace change. Unfortunately, Alanna’s daughter, Tien, is killed in a raid of the Tehkohn village by the Garkohn. The text reveals:

Her daughter Tien had not been the bright golden-green of most Kohn infants. But the child’s darker strangely shaded green was not beyond the Kohn spectrum—especially not beyond the Tehkohn spectrum. It might have meant no more than that Tien was destined for higher rank than the children who had more yellow in their coloring. And Tien had looked Tehkohn—almost. Her eyes were rounder than Kohn eyes, and her hands and feet promised to be too large, too long for a Kohn. Small things, especially in such a young child. Natahk’s people would almost have had to be looking for such a child. And even having found Tien, they could not have been sure. (Survivor 7)

In the above passage the loss of Alanna’s daughter represents what Césaire references as “extraordinary possibilities wiped out” (Césaire 43) by the processes of colonization. Although Lien represented Alanna’s bond with Diut and her partial assimilation into the Tehkohn culture, her existence also represented an abomination to Alanna’s human foster family and serves as leverage to be used by the Garkohn to further alienate her from other human settlers. The fact that Alanna would willingly “crossbred” with a member of the Kohn (an alien race) marks her human identity as suspect. Despite her familiar and familial relationship with the settlers, Alanna’s displaced body has always been Other. “As displaced bodies move, the identities they inhabit also move” (Powell 299). This is to say that in the imaginations of the missionaries Alanna has always been an outsider and a potential threat to the group. Despite her obvious human identity, her markings as a wild human, Afro-Asian woman, and survivor of the Clayark plague and Tehkohn captivity made her different in a way that leaves her with a mark of dis-ease in the eyes of her fellow colonists.

CONCLUSIONS

The fiction of Octavia E. Butler is consistently invested in the interrogation of identity construction and employment. The themes of colonization, imperialism, and refugees are all inextricably tied to the identities of most, if not all, of the main characters in her fiction. Butler’s narratives often sit on the fences of several genres but always include discussions of the past and the future; slaves and their masters; the ordinary and the extraordinary. It must also be noted that all of Butler’s novels involve characters that are
consistently relocated, displaced, or migrate as a function of their identity construction and survival:

Identity construction within relocation involves literal starting and ending positions, yet bodies end up inhabiting a figurative “third space” or “hybrid identity” to which the displaced move because they cannot fully inhabit the ending position. Because there is no fixed identity, and identity formation is a process rather than an outcome, identities are constantly being formed, implying a constant, active state. (Powell 300)

Powell’s assertion dictates that identity construction never truly resolves. It is a process that continues as long as an individual or group continues to move and change regardless of their environment. Moving from continent to continent or from planet to planet seems to be a necessary process of human evolution. Furthermore, it is evident from the analysis of Butler and Césaire that colonization is not a one-sided experience with clear or consistent outcomes. Butler and the genre of science fiction suggest that the colonizer, the colonized, and the refugee are all involved in a process of identity construction that has the potential to destroy and build nations.

Reading Aimé Césaire through a lens of science fiction allows readers to consider the scope of colonization. The process of colonization has not ended. Notions of imperialism and empire building have not dissipated with the advent of advanced technology or the evolution of human civility. On the contrary, colonization has simply morphed into systems and processes less visible to those not looking. After all, slavery was a technology of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and Christianity and its Bible were used to justify and propagate its value. Science fiction suggests that colonization and all of its by-products will continue to multiply as humanity continues to thrive on this planet and any other planet unfortunate enough to be “discovered” by the Prosperos of the future. Science fiction might also suggest that if humanity commits to employing a universal form of Négritude, the process of encountering and navigating difference in the future might become more humanitarian.

NOTES

1. Several historical references come to mind when discussing the issue of open frontier. America is the most obvious with regard to its acquisition of the North American continent from the Native American Indians, but the formulation of Israel is also pertinent in discussions of the myth of a land without people. See Roger Garaudy, “The Myth of ‘A Land without People for a People without Land.’” http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v18/v18n5p38_Garaudy.html
2. Aime Césaire was born in Martinique in 1913. He traveled to Paris to attend school on an educational scholarship. In Paris in 1935, Césaire, along with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas, founded the literary review *The Black Student*. In 1936, Césaire began work on his long poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, a vivid and powerful depiction of the ambiguities of Caribbean life and culture in the New World. Along with Senghor, Césaire is acknowledged as one of the creators of Négritude—the propagation of African sensibility and aesthetics through art. In 1947, his book-length poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, which had first appeared in the Parisian periodical in 1939 but was rejected by a French book publisher, was published. The book mixes poetry and prose to express his thoughts on the cultural identity of black Africans in a colonial setting.

3. Butler was born and raised in Pasadena, California. Since the death of her father, Butler was raised by her grandmother and her mother (Octavia M. Butler) who worked as a maid in order to support the family. Butler grew up in a struggling, racially mixed neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s. She began to write her brand of science fiction in the midst of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the Black Womanist movement of the 1970s. After getting an associate’s degree from Pasadena City College in 1968, she took writing classes through UCLA extension. From 1969 to 1970 Butler participated in the Screenwriters’ Guild of America and in 1970 she participated in the Clarion Science Fiction Writing Workshop.

4. It is interesting to note that almost a decade before *A Tempest* (1969) was brought to stages, a science fiction film entitled *Forbidden Planet* (1956) was distributed by MGM and directed by Fred Wilcox. *Forbidden Planet* was a reimaging of *The Tempest* as a postcolonial space narrative, where Prospero is played by a master linguist and superintellect, Dr. Morbius (a magician of the word much like Prospero), and Miranda is played by his naive space daughter Altaira. Ferdinand and Caliban are substituted with a handsome male lead and an invisible space alien/native manifested by Dr. Morbius’s imagination respectively. More interestingly, the role of Ariel is taken up by a robot (also a creation of Dr. Morbius). This robot was Hollywood’s first to be more than just a mechanical “tin can” on legs; Robby Robot displays a distinct personality and was a complete supporting character in the film. I mention this bit of film trivia because it supports a dominant premise of this discussion as well as the prophetic nature of *The Tempest* narrative and its derivatives. Notions of colonization are constantly being engaged in varying mediums and time periods because colonization and its products are forever present where humanity thrives. The production and reproduction of bodies for labor or service are staples in the discourse of colonialism.

5. Sterile Tlic eggs provide humans with longevity, virility, as well as an opiate-like sensation.

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In Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Edana Franklin (called Dana) feels inexplicably dizzy while unpacking her books during a move into her new home in Altadena, California, in 1976. Her familiar surroundings disappear, and she finds herself in an open field next to a wide river where she
immediately spots a drowning child. After pulling him from the river and resuscitating him, the boy recovers. But his father, who has rushed to the scene with his wife, aims a shotgun at Dana’s head. As Dana tries to explain that she was saving their son, she returns to her home, just as inexplicably as she came, before the click of the gun’s trigger. Though the setting and scenario feel disjointed to Dana, it is not until her next visit that she learns that the young boy she rescued is her white great-grandfather several times removed, Rufus Weylin. She has traveled back in time to 1815 to the Weylin plantation in Maryland for the purpose, she believes, of ensuring Rufus’s survival and therefore her lineage. How Dana time travels, from 1976 to the nineteenth century, and across space, from California to Maryland, is not as important as the fact that this spatiotemporal juxtaposition allows Dana to experience the past even though she believes herself to be far removed from slave history. Butler privileges the “socially dead,” to use Orlando Patterson’s phrase, as Dana is literally transported back to her ancestors. And, it is only when Dana believes she will die that she returns to her present time. In fact, she quite literally cuts her fifth trip to slavery short by slitting her wrists to get back to 1976.

With *Kindred*, Butler tells a haunting story of both the past and the present—one that brings history alive, conjuring images that stay with readers long after finishing the book. As Butler’s most commercially successful novel, *Kindred* and the images used on its covers seem necessarily tied to the text itself. This chapter visually analyzes the strikingly different imagery used on Butler’s book covers over the past four decades, beginning with Larry Schwinger’s 1979 painted cover and leading to the most recent 2018 release of the novel. Everyone knows the age-old adage that one cannot judge a book by its cover, but at the same time, everyone does. Covers contribute to and add meaning to the novel—before, during, and after reading. Covers can detract from the narrative, or they can offer and enhance visual interpretations of the texts.

Designed for marketing, name recognition, and promotion, book covers have less than ten seconds to make an impact on the buyer. An author’s name might not be enough to draw the audience, so graphic designers, artists, and publishers work together to construct and elicit certain emotions from the viewer, using a combination of imagery, typeface, and layout. These design elements and illustrations are what Gérard Genette refers to as “paratexts” (1). If the literature itself is the text, then the additional graphics, designs, layout, cover, and illustrations are the “paratexts.” Genette explains:

> We do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it, precisely in order to
present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. (1)

In other words, these paratexts are important, whether they technically belong to the main text of the book or not. They are part of how the text is presented, marketed, and consumed. Tying a visual analysis to the social and political themes of the book, we compare Butler’s book covers and discuss how we can read the legacy of slavery’s history and cultural memory through not only these covers but also Dana’s body and portraiture.

**TRANSCULTURAL AND TRANSGENERATIONAL DOUBLING**

The contrast between time, space, and location (antebellum Maryland and California during the nation’s bicentennial celebrations) foregrounds *Kindred* as a transcultural, transgenerational, and transhistorical novel. Underscoring these “trans” concepts, Larry Schwinger’s cover features Nefertiti-like silhouetted busts of a feminized black woman. She stands back to back with her apparent body double, looking in opposite directions from one another (Figure 9.1). The words “a novel” bisect the cover, separating the title and author from the imagery below. The large, all-caps, rounded serif font of “Kindred” competes with Octavia E. Butler’s name written above it in a smaller font. Overlaid with paint and colored pencils, the woman pictured on the cover was a friend of Schwinger. He photographed her using different lighting and angles in order to secure an image of the woman caught between two times. In his own words, he says: “That’s why I just changed the light… it was the same character in a different time…I put a lace collar on one…to make one seem more period and one more contemporary. The jewelry was on the contemporary one and so my thinking was that it was basically the same woman in two different times” (Schwinger).

Beginning his career as a romance novel cover art designer, Schwinger was an interesting pick for Butler’s *Kindred* (Schwinger and World of Wonder Art Gallery). At the time Doubleday commissioned him to make the art for the debut hardback of *Kindred*, he had been working almost exclusively designing romance paperbacks for Ballantine. He said that Doubleday usually used in-house designers to make more text-heavy hardcover designs since paperbacks were bringing in more money (Schwinger). But he had already done a lot of covers for Doubleday prior to this so when they asked, Schwinger said he felt a loyalty to them (Schwinger). Of course Doubleday likely wanted a compelling image that would help sell the novel, but that
they chose an artist who was focused on romance novels is strangely fitting, as Butler had pitched *Kindred* as a meditation on the love story. Some of Butler’s notes for *Guardian*, an earlier, modified version of *Kindred*, showcase her handwritten and emphatic proclamations about Dana and Rufus’s turbulent ties: “This is the story of a Love affair. The Emotional Fluctuation Are Those of Lovers. The Final Act Is an act of Love” (OEB 1187).

Underscoring the fantastical elements of the novel, specifically Dana’s inexplicable time travel, Schwinger lodged an hourglass between their heads. He added pastels to the painted image in order to underscore the fanciful nature. This hourglass physically connecting them through time appears both seamless and uncomfortable. While the shape also reinforces femininity—an hourglass figure—there is a certain visual trickery in the silhouetted images:
is the white in the foreground and the black in the negative space? Are the bodies or the hourglass in the foreground? Boundaries are blurred on many levels.

Butler indeed liked this original cover artwork by Schwinger, as referenced in numerous documents in the Octavia E. Butler Archive at the Huntington Library. In a letter to her friend Marjorie Rae Nadler from March of 1979, Butler describes the cover art:

I have on my mantle a photo of the cover with KINDRED in 72 point type across the front… In KINDRED, two women (in reality, two versions of the same woman) are back to back, separated [sic] by an hourglass and joined by what I suppose is hair. It doesn’t look like hair—and in spite of that oddity, I like the cover. Having a book go mainstream apparently means they put a little work into the cover art. All my other Doubleday covers were godawful.” (OEB 4179)

Schwinger’s cover represents a Janus-faced temporality, the doubling image visually illuminates and illustrates how slavery is still deeply connected to and rooted in the people in the present. And yet, the women on the cover create a reverse mirroring that reads more like a continuum that shifts through time or maybe back and forth through a kind of trans-temporal time.

We may read these women on this cover as a doubling of Dana, as Schwinger does—one from 1976 and the other trapped in 1815, connected through the sands of time or stuck between the present and the past. However, the slight differences between these busts could suggest that one is Dana and the other her ancestor Alice, who as a girl is free and living with her mother on the Weylin plantation. Because of this, Alice and Rufus are childhood friends. Once adults, Rufus’s love for Alice is strong but unrequited. When Alice marries the enslaved Isaac, Rufus attempts to rape her. Isaac beats up Rufus severely, and Dana is called back in time for her fourth visit to help Rufus recover as Isaac and Alice run North. After their failed attempt, Isaac and Alice are captured by patrollers and brutally attacked by dogs. Alice is so badly injured that she undergoes temporary, partial amnesia. Isaac is sold immediately, and Rufus buys and then enslaves Alice. In turn, Dana conspires against Alice, convincing her to become Rufus’s slave concubine, to please Rufus as well as to protect herself and her family’s lineage.

The cover’s somber feeling is visible in the pensive looks on both women’s faces, corresponding to the bleak, raw development of the two characters. Moreover, the depiction of the women as they stand back-to-back and head-to-head, while looking away from one another in deep reflection, seems to tell us that they will not only be bound by time and blood but also by
involved in some sort of journey of self-discovery. Both readings—Dana past and present and Dana and Alice—underscore transcultural dimensions of the novel, particularly how Dana and Alice develop conflicting forces of transcultural subjectivities through their often-fiery interactions.

This imagery is visually fitting, for within *Kindred*, Butler constructs Dana and Alice as doubles. One night when a drunk Rufus comes home and sees them sitting together, he says, ‘‘Behold the woman’’… And he looked from one to the other of us. ‘‘You really are one woman’’” (Butler 228). Rufus loves them both—Alice as his concubine and Dana as his surrogate mother and confidant. In Alice’s words, “He likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike if you can believe what people say… Anyway, all that means we’re two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head” (Butler 229). Though Rufus sees Dana and Alice as one, this doubling allows Butler to contrast them. Indeed, Alice and Dana represent the two sides of the “unreconciled strivings [and the] warring ideals” (5) of Du Boisian double consciousness. Alice is the Negress; Dana the American. Alice is the enslaved; Dana the time traveling “free” woman. Alice is the object of Rufus’s sexual desire, Dana the object of his emotional desire. And over time, Alice sees herself through the “revelations” of Dana’s actions and through Dana’s transhistorical view of their situation in slavery. For instance, when Dana attempts to talk Alice out of running North, Alice bitterly responds, “‘He’ll never let any of us go […] The more you give him, the more he wants… I got to go while I still can—before I turn into just what people call me… I got to go before I turn into what you are!’” (Butler 251). Alice, the enslaved ancestor, is more rebellious than Dana and continually tries to run to freedom, no matter the consequence. Moreover, Alice constantly critiques the modern-day black woman as a “white-nigger” (Butler 165). That Butler italicizes and hyphenates this oxymoronic phrase calls extra attention to it, and that an enslaved black woman would have the audacity and the grounds to call a black woman from the future a “white-nigger” highlights Dana as a race traitor.

Dana’s morals and ethics are continually compromised because she thinks she must persuade Alice to become Rufus’s slave mistress. Dana goes way beyond what she believes to be her call of duty (to simply keep Rufus alive on her return trips) because she fears that if she does not help in this process, she will not exist in her present time. Dana says, “‘Goddamnit, Alice, will you slow down! Look, you keep working on him the way you have been, and you can get whatever you want and live to enjoy it’” (Butler 235). While Alice is continually raped, Dana selfishly waits for the birth of Hagar, of whom she is a direct descendant. The wait is long but once Hagar is born, Dana’s tragic flaw is that she does not try to help Alice, nor does she come up with a plan to free Alice. Instead, she is subsumed with aligning herself with Rufus and thus with a slave master mentality. Gerry Canavan argues
that when Dana invests herself in preserving her lineage, “this only serves to draw her into deeper and deeper complicity with the horrible past of slavery that created her future” (62).

The original 1979 cover foregrounds the importance of Alice and Dana’s misinterpretation of the reason she goes back to her ancestors. She is not there to save Rufus only; she goes back for Alice too. During her second return to slavery, Dana first helps Rufus put out a fire he had set in protest of his father’s beating him. But shortly after, Rufus is not in the picture: Dana watches Alice’s enslaved father being whipped on the Weylin plantation and she thinks she may be able to help the young Alice. During Dana’s last return, Rufus is fine, but Alice is “hanging by the neck” (Butler 248). Alice’s final “escape” comes after Rufus spuriously tells her he sold their children. Her revolt is tragic. She hangs herself because she has no reason to live—her mother deceased, Isaac and her children sold. This is one of the many ways that Butler, as Gregory Hampton rightly argues, “gives Dana license to reveal all of the unspeakable sins of slavery that her ancestors were unable to pass down” (115).

Schwinger’s cover, the only cover that features the faces of two women, highlights how Dana is called back to slavery for Alice and not solely for Rufus. The master narrative of American history tells us that Dana is returning to “save” Rufus because of the power, possession, and ownership the white slave master has on the black woman’s enslaved body. We watch how the violence enacted upon Dana’s body turns her into a slave as she thinks “see how easily slaves are made?” (Butler 177). We also witness Rufus become an “erratic, alternately generous and vicious” slave master (Butler 260). This relates to how slavery allows us to get to (or understand) freedom, as Angela Y. Davis, Saidiya V. Hartman, Fred Moten, among others, have argued. In Orlando Patterson’s influential formulation: “Freedom began its career as a social value in the desperate yearning of the slave to negate what, for him or her…was a peculiarly inhuman condition” (Freedom, vol.1). Through this first cover, we see Butler’s disruption of and Alice’s insertion into the master narrative.

SLAVERY IN THE MIND’S EYE: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BECOMING A SLAVE

On the 1981 edition of Kindred, a superlative from speculative fiction writer Harlan Ellison graces the top quarter, while the title and author take up another quarter, and the imagery takes up the lower half (Figure 9.2). The cover continues with a silhouetted portrait theme, though this time, it only shows one head, looking soberly to the right. Through this silhouette, we see a suggestion of the past, as it features a distant pastel-toned landscape of a field—the Maryland plantation of Dana’s ancestors. A sky-toned blue
fills the top third of her head, with warm yellow and light orange hues—suggestive of light—running through her mouth and chin area, and the dark gray outline of the plantation home bisects the base of her head and neck. Here, the single fascinating close-cropped head acts as a lens through which we view the past, while also functioning as a doubling, suggesting the head and presence of both Alice and Dana in one.

What does it mean that the landscape of slavery and the narrative of *Kindred* are drawn, illustrated, and written inside of the lone figure’s head, slender neck, and shoulders? Within the silhouette, the plantation is aglow
ambiguously, perhaps caught on fire or indicating the liminal hours of dusk or dawn. Toward the nape of the figure’s neck, there is a black suggestion of a structure, loosely resembling the bones of a house, though not a grandiose, columned plantation mansion we would expect to see in the South. Is the fire suggestive of the fire from which Dana saves Rufus on her second visit? Or perhaps more visually aligned with the imagery, is it foreshadowing the fire which ultimately burns the Weylin plantation house down after Dana’s final visit and Rufus’s death?

The silhouette is androgynous, simply showing a head with a short buzz cut. This is appropriate, for *Kindred* plays with contemporary constructions of gender that readers today take for granted but would be considered absurd in slavery. For example, from the beginning, both black and white characters are confused by Dana because she is transported back to slavery wearing her clothing of 1976: a blouse, corduroy or denim pants, and hiking boots—anachronistic clothing for enslaved women to wear in the highly gendered constructs of the nineteenth century. They cannot figure out why she wears “pants like a man” (Butler 22). In fact, when Rufus first sees her, he thinks she is a man.

Dana’s disruption of how enslaved women dress is telling for at least two reasons. First, as Angela Y. Davis argues: “Expediency governed the slaveholders’ posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished, repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles” (6). While Dana is often questioned for “dressing like a man” (Butler 71), she strives to perform the role of a female slave. This is especially true on her fourth visit, when her white husband Kevin is taken back with her to antebellum slavery, and they set out to perform racialized and gendered antebellum roles as a pretense: Kevin as master and Dana as his slave concubine. However, she is treated as genderless when she defies Rufus—sent to work in the field alongside other black men and women—and is also subject to and survives the same violence that the rest of the enslaved community endures.

Second, when Butler was writing *Kindred*, she first attempted to send a black man into slavery before she created the character of Dana, but she could not manage to keep him alive.

My time traveler was to have been a Black man drawn back into slavery. My problem when I began to write was that I could not keep my male character alive. Even his body language betrayed him—the way he walked, the way he looked at people when he spoke to them, the way he looked at people when he did not speak to them—would immediately mark him as different, arrogant, uppity, dangerous… A woman, on the other hand, would be perceived as less dangerous. She might be killed, but it’s more
likely that she would have been kept alive for work and breeding. Sexism would actually work in favor of keeping her alive. (OEB 2927)\textsuperscript{14}

In a strange twist, however, it may be more Dana’s sex than antebellum sexism that keeps her alive in slavery. During her second trip, after Dana witnesses Alice’s father’s beating, one of the patrollers sees Dana. In his attempt to rape her, she fears for her life and thus is sent back to 1976.\textsuperscript{15} However, Dana’s female body is kept relatively safe throughout the novel because of Alice’s role as Rufus’s concubine.

Whereas Schwinger’s \textit{Kindred} cover creates an image of feminine black women as an already raced subject before we open the text, in the 1981 cover, it is unclear if the androgynous silhouetted subject is black or white. This is significant because in \textit{Kindred} Dana and the narrator do not mention race until she is called back to slavery. When Rufus’s mother refers to her as “just some nigger” (Butler 24), Dana declares, “I am a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it” (Butler 25). This is the only time Dana declares herself as such or that the reader hears an account of Dana’s dealing with a racist encounter. In fact, we hardly receive any background information about her. However, we can deduce that she was born in 1950, raised in segregation, and was a teenager during the 1960s. Yet, she is not a black nationalist nor does she have an Afrocentric perspective.\textsuperscript{16}

Returning to the cover, this silhouetted image of the figure can also be read as a rememory. Toni Morrison constructs a literary manifesto for rememory. In \textit{Beloved} (1987), Sethe has a conversation with her youngest daughter Denver about not returning to the plantation, ironically called Sweet Home, where Sethe was enslaved. Sethe warns Denver of this because even though it is 1873 and slavery is “over and done with” Sethe believes Denver could still be captured into slavery, thus a rememory of slavery. Bumping into a rememory is a critical term to describe how slavery is still discernible in the landscape. In fact, it is more than a picture, more than a personal memory. The material vestiges, the visual “picture” is collective, affecting the slaves, slave masters, and their descendants who come into contact with a rememory from slavery. Because of the past’s unceasing hold on the present, Sethe questions “time.” She says that time is “so hard for me to believe in. Some things go. Some things just stay” (43). And yet, unlike Morrison’s construction of rememory that “stays” with the person or in the landscape, Dana must first travel back in time to experience slavery in order to consciously acknowledge how slavery—and the rememory of slavery—haunts her psyche. In this sense, the 1981 cover art illustrates the persistent rememory of slavery as a haunting landscape, just under the psychological surface or perhaps in the mind’s eye. And if we consider the possibility that this cover depicts Alice, rather than Dana, or if we consider the possibility
that it is in fact a visual depiction of Alice’s and Dana’s doubling, we can explore the ways in which they experience slavery simultaneously in the 1800s, but in very different temporal mind-sets and under very different sociocultural mentalities. Could this image meld together their kindred lineage, separated across time and space, but united in and under both the memory and rememory of slavery?

PHANTOM LIMBS: THE HAUNTING RESONANCE AND PERMANENCE OF SLAVERY

Unlike the 1979 and 1981 covers in which Butler’s protagonist Dana and her past counterpart Alice are foregrounded front and center, the other covers tend to focus solely on Dana and her body. In the 1998 Beacon Press paperback cover (Figure 9.3), it focuses only on one person, showing a

FIGURE 9.3 First release under Beacon’s new paperback line Bluestreak (1998, Bluestreak, an imprint of Beacon Press). Cover design: Stark Design; Cover photography: Jana Leon; Model: Chastity Jackson.
young, black woman with short cropped hair standing in a long white cotton dress in the middle of a field (OEB 3622). Her arms hang by her side. Her expression is difficult to decipher. She is waiting. She looks sideways, perhaps off into the distance, as a nod to the future, or possibly looking about her surroundings to gain her bearings or to ensure her safety. Her facial expression evokes a calm calculated fear.

Front and center, Dana’s body signals the slave narrative tradition of the dignified portraiture of ex-slaves and free blacks who as Jasmine Nichole Cobbs argues “picture freedom, to image and imagine people of African descent as self-possessed and divorced from slavery” (3). We may think that this is Dana from the future, but in actuality, this is Dana who has become the slave. Here Dana’s free black body is restaged as enslaved. The violence of slavery makes Dana reflect on her subject position and she is surprised to find that she is no longer acting but rather has morphed into a slave: “Once—God knows how long ago—I had worried that I was keeping too much distance between myself and this alien time. Now, there was no distance at all. When did I stop acting? Why did I stop?” (Butler 221). Whereas Judith Butler looks at performativity through the lens of gender and sexuality and how each is prescribed by heteronormative values that become public manifestations of identity, Saidiya Hartman reminds us that applying the concept of performativity, or what she terms “performing blackness,” to the black enslaved body is not a simple equation. “Blackness,” she argues, “incorporates subjects normatively defined as black, the relations among blacks, white, and others, and the practices that produce racial difference” (57). Taking care not to romanticize slave agency, when subjection and terror were the main tools of oppression against the black body, Hartman contends that “performances of blackness are in no way the ‘possession’ of the enslaved; they are enactments of social struggle and contending articulations of racial meaning (57). Thus, slavery produces necessarily inauthentic experiences, agencies, actions, and social identities. Performing blackness, for Hartman, is not liberatory and will not gain the slave subject agency. Rather, it moves from Judith Butler’s claim that performance is a singular “repetition and a ritual” to the multifarious and complex relations of race that are continually restaged. In slavery, performing blackness is a relational-schema as the slave body remains subject to the torturous system of slavery.

Although within the novel Dana is usually dressed in corduroy pants or jeans, on the 1998 cover, she stands in a long crisp white cotton dress in the middle of what looks like a sugarcane crop—another transcultural and transhistorical image that spans from Maryland to Louisiana and extends to Caribbean slavery. In her white dress, Dana appears as a ghost on the 1998 cover (whose image is also later reused on the twenty-fifth anniversary, 2004
The boxiness of the dress, the starkness of the colorless, white sheath, and her far-off look make Dana appear timeless and haunting, as if a ghost in another time—which, of course, she is. The cover photograph is shown in a dark purple grayscale hue, while the corners and edges of the cover fade dramatically to black, reinforcing both a somber melancholy and supernatural haunting.

The font placement and design of this cover also foreshadow and emphasize underlying themes and events of the book. The split of the word—the “d” sits on the far right, middle of the cover—visually displaying that the past is broken apart from the present, that family “kindred” is broken apart both in slavery and in 1976. With the final “d” separated from the single-word title of the novel, there is a subtle suggestion of a past tense, like adding an “ed” or “d” to the end of a word. Since the entire narrative complexly conjures the past, this is a fitting play on and with words. If we insert an “A” into the empty white space (where Dana’s body seems to even stand in as the letter itself), the title becomes “KiN dread.” This dread, apparent throughout the novel, is most visible after Alice commits suicide and Dana no longer functions as Alice’s double. Rufus wants Dana to stay in slavery with him. Dana actually considers his proposition, thinking: “I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this… But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times.” Finally, Dana decides to reclaim her 1976 sensibility and thus her autonomy over her own body, telling herself, “A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her… I could accept [Rufus] as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, not as my lover” (Butler 260).

Just as Dana comes to terms with her decision and acknowledges that Rufus’s erratic desire could cause him to rape her, he advances toward her: an action she was dreading and yet also anticipating. To escape from Rufus, Dana stabs and kills him, freeing herself back to 1976 for good. Here, Dana’s fight against her ancestor is more difficult than Frederick Douglass’s fight against the overseer, Mr. Covey. There is no “revived sense” of womanhood (as Douglass’s manhood is restored) and even more ironically, Dana does not think about freedom. Rather, she revolts because she realizes that “anything” could be done to the black woman’s body. And, though she is complicit in Rufus’s rape of Alice, Dana ultimately chooses to protect her own body.

The consequence for Dana’s decision to permanently flee both slavery and Rufus is the amputation of her arm. She describes this with the same inexplicability as the time traveling itself:

I was back… in my own time. But I was still somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From
the elbow to the end of the fingers, my left arm had become part of the wall. I looked at the spot where the flesh joined with the plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the same exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped. (Butler 261)

This suggests that Dana’s existence in the present day is assured only after the act of dismemberment and that, as Valérie Loichot notes, the “past and the present are [...] stuck in a simultaneous relationship where memory continues to grow from the scars, from the amputation of slavery” (45). And although the 1998 cover image presents both of her arms, it also hints at this amputation. In splicing the title “Kindred” with Dana’s body, by physically inserting her body (specifically her arm), into the word “Kindred,” while also suggesting the ever present “dread” of slavery, readers in the know can visually read the book title as foreshadowing the eventual and permanent severance of her arm. The horror and the dread quite literally lie in her kinship, lineage, and survival.

Dana’s phantom limb still feels present, although it is no longer there, thus acting as both her testament to and lasting scar from bearing witness to slavery. Furthermore, Dana’s inability to separate herself from the past, to remain an outside observer to the conflicts and events of slavery, is literally carried out on a physical, bodily level. This amputation, as well as Dana’s permanent scars on her back from whippings, implies that without the actual pain and trauma of slavery, we cannot fully understand or connect with slavery or our slave past. Dana’s body becomes the site of historical markings or a cultural text on which she can feel, if not completely understand, her origins. As Hortense Spillers foundationally writes, the “undecipherable markings” left on the captive body “render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (260). Dana’s flesh becomes a text through which she can literally read, and more fully feel, the pain inflicted on her ancestors. Until she suffers the branding of her own flesh, she is not privy to this historical experience.

In the 1998 and subsequent 2004 cover, Dana is visually pictured as whole although textually, she is badly beaten and eventually amputated. Kindred explores the elaborate nature of history and historicity, as both real and yet unexplainable, human and yet fragmented. Through Dana’s experience, Butler embodies contradictory qualities of time, stressing both the fragmented and incomplete shape of the past as well as the haunting and physical reality of the presence of the past. Moreover, Butler manifests her idea of diachronicity through Dana’s flesh and blood. In a 2000 explanation of Kindred’s outcome, Butler answers the question “Why did Dana’s arm
get stuck in the wall?” with the following explanation: “Within the story, this happened because of the connection between Dana and Rufus. Rufus was the reason for Dana’s time trips, after all. When he died clutching her arm, it was as though he kept part of her with him, or as though a mechanism had lost part of itself and gone out of control” (OEB 4153). Dana’s dismemberment is a literal representation of Butler’s time-traveling concept, which illustrates Spiller’s suggestion that the “transferability” of epidermal trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next, though not completely (67).24

ROMANCING SLAVERY

The 2003 cover of Kindred is eerily romantic (Figure 9.5). The photograph of the young woman featured here has a plump, childlike face. This cover also harks back to the 1981 edition featuring a lone silhouette of a woman’s head. The white top she wears hangs like a curtain, evoking the white cloth dress worn by women on past covers. Her eyes are closed and she has a softness about her. The cover feels serene, as Dana looks downward peacefully from the top right corner, without any indication that she will struggle. Her photograph looms over about two-thirds of the cover. Beneath her is a collage of images, including a black and white rendering of a dark tree hanging over a muted, grayscale photo of anonymous almost pastoral slave quarters.25 A number of people, depicted as black figures, appear at the bottom right corner. They are miniscule, as if suggestions or apparitions of those who are barely there, particularly in comparison to the monumental Dana who presides above.

This cover is troubling for a number of reasons. First, it is incongruent with the story’s narrative. It suggests a sort of romance novel to be found within Kindred’s story and the time of slavery itself—neither of which is fitting. And although Butler considered Kindred a love story of sorts, it is not a traditional love story. She jotted down handwritten notes in various manuscript drafts of Kindred referring to “love.” In one note about Guardian, an earlier version of Kindred, Butler writes, “Rufus and Dana were born at cross purposes. Their struggle, like their love is continuous. He must try to manipulate her through Subterfuge and Deception—Or he must break her with the whip. She must resist his manipulation—Or betray herself and her people” (OEB 1187). In this sense, Kindred is a story of love across time, but that love is painful, tortuous, and traumatic—at times, it is unrequited, forced, sadistic, and love that is torn apart (as with Dana and Rufus, Alice and Rufus, Alice and Isaac, Alice and her children, and with Kevin and Dana over the five years they are separated across time).
In some ways, this romantic version of the cover seems to embody Butler’s fears that her novel would be marketed as a romance novel. In her personal letters to and from friends and editors, Butler tells of the ongoing disputes she had with her first editor about the title of the book. During the five years or so that Butler worked on what became *Kindred*, she had named earlier versions *Canaan*, *Guardian*, and *To Keep Thee in All Thy Ways*, settling on the latter as her top choice. The editor, Sherry Knox at Doubleday and Company, Inc., did not like either option and wanted to simply call the book *Dana*. Butler was terrified that this name would suggest and perhaps misconstrue her book as some sort of romance novel. In a lengthy letter to
Knox from September 27, 1978, Butler expresses this as she addresses some of Knox’s concerns and questions about the manuscript. She argues, “You said you wanted to call the novel DANA. No. (God, no!) I can see a title like DANA attracting the ladies’ romance readers, though I wonder how many of them would read past the cover copy. On the other hand, a ladies’ romance title like DANA might well keep the more general reader from ever picking up the book” (OEB 3912).

Interestingly, Damian Duffy and John Jennings, the writer and illustrator for Kindred’s 2017 graphic novel adaptation, had similar conversations and feelings in evaluating this 2003 cover as well as the earlier 1998 edition:

> Of these the photographic covers, such as the woman’s face over the house and the woman in the white dress, were always our least favorite. The photo covers always seemed to both John and myself as somehow beside the point of the novel. Certainly there are African American woman in rural areas in the narrative, but both seemed to have a certain wistful or Romantic quality that contrasted with our understanding of the story. (Duffy)

They shared similar reactions to the 1981 silhouette as well: “Similarly, the cover with a foggy nature scene inside a profile seems to have a similar tone…of the world of the antebellum South as both cruel and ‘sensual’ likewise seems discordant from the actual story” (Duffy).

Second, the 2003 cover seems to visually proclaim that Kindred is above all Dana’s story, that she somehow presides over the Weylin plantation in 1815, when that is certainly anything but the case. Her photograph is shown in hierarchical scale, compared to both the architecture of the plantation and the outlines of the people below. This image implies that it is Dana’s story alone, as opposed to another featured character’s having a comparatively equal (or even important) role in the story’s significance. This also goes against Butler’s construction not only of Kindred but of her other novels and short stories, as confirmed in a note to herself from 1976, buried amid her research notes on early drafts of Kindred: “Your stories are best when they are intimate personal dramas. They are not quiet or small, but they hug close to a small number of characters, and bring those characters to life as members of the reader’s (and writer’s) fictional family” (OEB 1183). Here, we see in Butler’s own words how much she valued the other handful of characters that she creates in a narrative and how they become not just her family but ours as well.

Third, the 2003 cover also suggests that slavery is something to be looked upon or perhaps even looked down upon instead of harkening to its terror.
Dana looks content, or at least comfortable, elevated somehow above slavery or the plantation. This creates a problematic dichotomy, portraying the houses and people below in a muted and less realistic grayscale while Dana rests serenely in color—again, suggesting quite the opposite message of both the book and Butler. While there are moments in the book when Dana might seem *too patient*, related to Rufus in particular, like when he calls her “nigger” on her second visit (Butler 25), this cover paints Dana as both bashful and diffident, romantic and removed. The composite image betrays the intent of the novel with its peaceful serenity, as it seems not at all in touch with the past but appears peacefully distanced from it. By contrast, in her 1976 notes about *Kindred*, Butler writes about her desire to write a horror story. In much smaller writing in the margins of this same page, Butler reminds herself, “No sliced bodies. Living is more terrifying than dying if properly handled” (OEB 1183). With *Kindred*, Butler helps readers to realize and remember the many ways in which living through slavery is in fact more terrifying than dying in it, which is why both Alice and Dana attempt suicide at various points in the book. In another note, Butler writes, “The purpose of Chapter One is to Rip Dana loose from the familiar, Frighten her, Confuse her, And promise her Horror!!” (OEB 1189). In other notes about the book, Butler describes Dana’s trips back to Maryland as “being shifted into hell” (OEB 1183). This cover does nothing to conjure imagery of the true terror of history that lies at the heart of *Kindred*.

In an often-cited story about the motivation for *Kindred*, Butler recounts in numerous written and spoken interviews the moment she credits as planting the seed for this survival story (Brown, Burton-Rose, and Rowell). For example, in a draft for a 1986 speech entitled “Why did I write *Kindred*?,” Butler tells this story. “People who had no real understanding of what their ancestors had gone through criticized those ancestors viciously. I remember in particular a man who said this: ‘I wish I could kill off all of these old people who’ve been holding us back, but I can’t because I’d have to start with my parents’” (OEB 2927). She continues:

> Now that man knew the facts of Black history. At the time, he knew them better than I did. But he didn’t understand them. He didn’t feel them. He professed Black pride, but he was ashamed of his ancestors. They had survived experiences that might have destroyed him. He had heros [sic] right there in his own family, and he scorned them. This man was my first model for the main character of *Kindred*. (OEB 2927)

Gerry Canavan notes how this *Kindred* origin story shaped and influenced Butler in all of her work: “This insight into the nature of survival—survival as
the only choice, survival as itself a kind of resistance, a triumph—structures much of Butler’s work” (60). In sum, Canavan notes that Butler uses her characters in *Kindred* to show how well greased the machinery of slavery was and how hard it was to fight. He explains:

> Times could be so bad that the only thing that seemed right was to hurl oneself on the fears of the machine in resistance, or withdraw into misery, or commit suicide—but the living body of African Americans had derived from those who had found a way to survive within the machine that was crushing them, doing whatever it took to (somehow) stay alive. (Canavan 59)

In this sense, *Kindred* is a testament to and celebration of the survivors of our horrific and grim past. With this romantic cover showing Dana and a mere suggestion of the antebellum South beneath her, the theme of Butler’s celebrated first cover has all but evaporated.

Book covers are usually meant to attract readers while also portraying certain meanings that relate to the story. The multiple published cover changes of *Kindred* throughout the decades serve as a unique iteration for each generation, while also shifting understandings of marketing, history, and the literature within the book itself, as that changes with the time too.

In May of 2018, a new cover of *Kindred* was released.²⁸ It is colorful and playful, more suggestive of a fairy tale or *Into the Woods* than of a science fiction slave epic (Figure 9.6). This new cover shows silhouettes of smaller images of Dana, children, and the Weylin plantation house with a bold trifecta of colors (red, yellow, and black) as if made from a woodblock print or even an old-timey embroidery sample. Butler’s name sits at the top of the cover, with “Butler” in all caps. The Weylin house presides over the top center of the book, blood red in color. Underneath, six black figures are tied together at their necks as if on a chain gang. If we have not read the novel, it could signify a children’s game, one arm on the shoulder on the next child. Or these could be adults in the distance, but more likely, they are children on the plantation who are playing an auction block game—something Dana witnesses with horror on one of her trips back:

> We approached them from one side so that neither the children on the tree stump nor those on the ground were facing us. They went on with their play as we watched and listened.
“Now here a likely wench,” called the boy on the stump. He gestures toward the girl who stood slightly behind him. “She cook and wash and iron. Come here, gal. Let the folks see you.” He drew the girl up beside him. “She young and strong,” he continued. “She worth plenty of money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?”

The little girl turned to frown at him. “I’m worth more than two hundred dollars, Sammy!” she protested. “You sold Martha for five hundred dollars!”

“You shut your mouth,” said the boy. “You ain’t supposed to say nothing. When Marse Tom bought Mama and me, we didn’t say nothing.” (Butler 99)
This is a self-conscious rehearsal, a learned performativity. The play auction recasts the gravity of the actual auction block. The ideology of slavery is so entrenched that the slave master or even overseer is not necessarily needed. In addition, this scene is didactic—the boy passes on the instructions that his mother told him so that she might avoid getting physically punished or possibly separated for speaking out. The girl’s concern with her own monetary value shows how this younger generation of slaves is also acclimatizing to the perverse logic of slavery.

Underneath the children, an accolade from Junot Díaz labels Butler “one of the most significant literary artists of the twentieth century.” And underneath the quote is a black imprint of Dana’s silhouette. She wears a bun at the top of her head and a dress that is cinched at the waist with a suggestion of a white belt (made from the negative space of the background) and she stands tall on her tiptoes. In this dress and stance, she appears more like a fantasy of a 1950s housewife or animated princess than a slave. Her wrists are bound by red sashes, perhaps her familial bloodline, indicating her kin and literal ties to the past, or possibly suggesting the blood she shed when she slit her wrists to return home, or even foreshadowing her arm’s amputation. Under her, a fiery blood red “Kindred” is sprawled in a seemingly hand-painted serif font in all caps. Surrounding both sides of cover are dark tree branches, almost completely bare of leaves. There are a few leaves present surrounding Dana, as if in the fall; however, a closer look suggests that these leaves are actually flames—that also menacingly resemble teardrops and blood.

The most recent cover differs from the 2003 cover in that it showcases some of the violence: the children “playing” slavery, a hint of Dana’s desperate suicide attempt in order to return to 1976, with the suggestion of her eventual amputation, flames suggestive of the eventual demise of both Rufus and the Weylin plantation, and of course the scarlet red lettering and sashes that bind Dana—to her lineage, her history, and perhaps even her complicity. However, all of this violence is presented in a playful manner—it appears to be distant and harmless, more like a Grimm’s Fairy Tale which of course is full of horrific material that is not very well suited for children, but instead is packaged as a palatable treat.

Returning to Gérard Genette’s idea of “paratexts,” it is important that we consider all of the imagery contributing to and defining the many covers of Kindred. Although not part of Butler’s original conception of the plot, characters, nor story, these covers and the many versions of Dana (and perhaps Alice) have served as the literal face(s) of Kindred, influencing readers and viewers over the past near-forty years. All of these images keep Dana trapped, frozen, a display and spectacle—but are the cover artists also trying
to convey some sort of metamorphoses? Ultimately, through the cover art and through the figuration that Butler gives us in the novel, *Kindred*'s images shift us intellectually. Much like Dana as a transcultural time traveler, we, as readers of both imagery and text, are shifted multiple places and times through the past four decades of covers. Originally Butler moves us there verbally, and now tangentially, she provokes all of these artists—as well as us—to grapple with the spectacle of Dana and Dana’s body yet again.

NOTES

1. Robert Crossley explains how Dana’s time traveling between 1976 and antebellum slavery evokes “the terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, involuntary voyage of her ancestors” (286).

2. Gerry Canavan notes that *Kindred* is “her book with the widest and most persistent mainstream success and for which she is still best known” (61).

3. Although outside of the scope of this chapter, in the larger project, we visually analyze Damian Duffy and John Jennings’s 2017 graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred*.

4. We would like to thank Professor Hellen Lee (former graphic designer) for pointing this out to us.

5. Genette defines these “paratexts,” explaining that a “literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal and other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations” (1).


7. *Kindred* is a cross-cultural miscegenated love story between Dana and Kevin, Alice and Isaac, Rufus and Alice, and even Rufus and Dana. See Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.”

8. Butler’s handwritten notes and typed letters from the Octavia E. Butler Archives at the Huntington Library often feature insistent underlines and uppercase or all-caps letters. These are repeated, true to the originals, in our quotations from such documents. Regarding the earlier draft of *Kindred* in the form of *Guardian*, while the two story arcs are much different, the characters of Dana and Rufus are the same, as are some of the recurrent themes. Gerry Canavan calls *Guardian* “an ill-advised version of *Kindred*... in which Dana and Rufus become many-generations-removed incestuous ‘lovers’” (66). He continues to say that this incestuous love is “a possibility only teased, and ultimately rejected, in the published novel” (66). However, we argue that this possibility for incestuous love is explored (and not rejected) in the published novel. While Dana claims to love Rufus as a brother and ancestor, there is an eerie moment that shows an attraction to Rufus as a lover. When Rufus asks
Dana to stay with him in antebellum slavery, Dana actually thinks: “He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently me—for me? His red hair was neatly combed and a little damp. I would never be to him what Tess had been to his father—a thing passed around like the whiskey jug at a husking” (260).

9. In a letter from May 1, 1979, Butler wrote her friend Vonda N. McIntyre saying, “I have a photograph of the cover now, and it looks good—fits the book, pleases me, seems to please everyone I have shown it to” (OEB 4105). And in January of 1980, the year after *Kindred*’s publication, she also mentions her approval of the cover to Pat Lobrutto, her *Wild Seed* editor at Doubleday, as she suggests that they find an equally striking image to that of *Kindred*’s first cover. “In your letter,” she starts, “you mentioned not having a cover yet. I hope the one you get eventually is as striking as the cover of KINDRED. Any chance of having it illustrated by Larry Schwinger who did the KINDRED cover? It’s surprising how many potential readers can be turned off by a bad cover” (OEB 3932).

10. In fact, Sarah Eden Schiff deems the neo-slave narrative a “Janus-faced genre: as factual truth to be recovered or (collective) memory to be constructed” (107).

11. In *Guardian*, an earlier version of *Kindred*, Butler made a note saying, “This is the story of a black woman’s struggle to preserve the life of her white slave master ancestor without betraying her people or herself” (OEB 1187).


14. This is a frequent account that Butler tells about her earlier drafts, as in her “Convention thought stimulators” from OEB 329.

15. Butler describes the grizzly scene via Dana, “He tore loose my bra and I prepared to move. Just one quick lunge. Then suddenly, for no reason that I could see, he reared above me, fist drawn back to hit me again. I jerked my head aside, hit it on something hard just as his fist glanced off my jaw. The new pain shattered my resolve, sent me scrambling away again. I was only able to move a few inches before he pinned me down, but that was far enough for me to discover that the thing I had hit my head on was a heavy stick—a tree limb, perhaps. I grasped it with both hands and brought it down as hard as I could on his head. He collapsed on my body. I lay still panting, trying to find the strength to get up and run. The man had a horse around somewhere. If only I could find it… I dragged myself from beneath his heavy body and tried to stand up. Halfway up, I felt myself losing consciousness, falling back” (43).

16. In fact, Butler’s Dana seems to be “non” racial, able to navigate through her world without concerning herself with race matters. Her thinking may be “against race,” which black diaspora scholar Paul Gilroy defines as a “liberation not from white supremacy alone […] but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking
about thinking” (40). However, Dana works for a blue-collar temp agency that she cynically describes as “a casual labor agency—a slave market” (Butler 52). Although it could be argued that the reference to the “slave market” is another way of highlighting modern oppression and racial discrimination where workers are exploited by the capitalist system, her job in 1976, while definitely menial labor, hardly resembles slave life. Dana’s casual description of her work as slave labor not only displays the way in which the term “slavery” is often exploited as an exaggeration but also takes on more ironic weight when she is transported back to the Weylin plantation. For more on Gilroy’s construction of racializing and raciological thought, see Paul Gilroy’s Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line.

17. In 1997, while Beacon Press was working on reintroducing Kindred through their new paperback line Bluestreak Press, the associate editor Tisha Hooks wrote Butler and enclosed a copy of the cover design, noting “we all feel it’s quite striking” (OEB 3622). It might be deduced that Butler approved of this cover, as her archives do not house a response from Butler to Hooks’s letter.

18. The woman pictured in the photograph is model Chastity Jackson. The 1998 cover is by Stark Design, with cover photography by Jana Leon.

19. The twenty-fifth anniversary edition features cover art by Jana Leon, still featuring model Chastity Jackson, with cover design by Isaac Tobin. In 2003, Beacon Press’ executive editor, Joanne Wyckoff, wrote Butler with a revised cover design for the upcoming anniversary edition. She noted, “The new cover will look similar to our old one but with a striking gold seal containing information about the 25th anniversary edition and the number of copies sold to date” (OEB 3629).

20. Valérie Loichot notes this as well. She writes the design of the title “graphically ‘KiNdre d’ textually contains the severing that is at the basis of the family reconstruction” (43). For more of her analysis, see “’We are all related’: Edouard Glissant Meets Octavia Butler.”

21. In Butler’s notes about this part of the book, she explains, “This is Rufe’s most degenerate period. He has sold Dana’s ancestors and their mother has committed suicide. He is in debt. He can no longer be trusted at all” (OEB 1189).

22. The cover for Beacon Press’ twenty-fifth anniversary edition of Kindred (2004) uses the same photograph but reworks the font design and layout. Here, “Kindred” is written as a whole word, without spacing, thus losing the allusion to and significance of the phantom limb.

23. Gerry Canavan echoes this sentiment of “dread,” noting “Kindred—or, as I sometimes suggest to my students, Kin/dread—uses a clever and uniquely Afrofuturist twist on the time-travel trope in science fiction to show the radical embeddedness of the past within the present. Butler’s time-traveling narrator, Dana, is alive after slavery and despite slavery, but also because of slavery” (61).

24. See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” In a 2000 letter that Butler wrote in response to questions from students at a secondary school for the deaf, he explains the outcome of Kindred in clear and concise terms that echo Spillers’s sentiments while also providing her own personal motivations: “My own reason for having Dana lose her arm as she did was metaphorical. I didn’t want Kindred to be like a television show in which
the hero goes through hell, and survives completely unchanged. I didn’t feel that Dana could have the experience she has—be snatched into slavery, suffer and endure, then finally gain her freedom, and yet somehow be unmarked by the experience. Sadly, no one could do that” (OEB 4153).

25. From the back of this book jacket, we know that the image of the slave quarters is from the Library of Congress. The cover art is by Corbis and the cover design and photo illustration are by Bob Kosturko.

26. This was clearly an ongoing issue and debate between Butler and her editor. In later exchanges such as a letter from October 7, 1978, Butler tells Knox, “I’ve already thought about the title and DANA, I’m sorry, still sounds as bad to me as TO KEEP THEE IN ALL THY WAYS [one of Kindred’s original titles] sounds to you. Maybe we can exchange WAYS for something else.” Butler then proposes four alternative titles for them to consider compromising upon, including her first choice “GUARDIAN,” then “NEAR OF KIN,” “SEEDTIME AND HARVEST,” and “ZEITGEIST” (OEB 3914). Butler references these alternative titles again in a letter to Knox from December 26, 1978, noting that she has “come to prefer NEAR OF KIN.” Then she offers the title they would eventually compromise on, saying, “a strong, shorter version of this is KINDRED” (OEB 3918). Later on January 25, 1979, Butler writes to her friend Vonda N. M. McIntyre, summarizing the title war and asking for feedback about the titles. “What I’m asking you for is a reaction to both titles. That’s why I haven’t told you why I find DANA so unacceptable. You’re browsing through a book store and you run across a book called DANA. Do you pick it up to lief [sic through or read the cover copy? Why? What about a novel called KINDRED? (The significance of that title by the way is that the woman is being drawn back to a multiracial group of her ancestors—not especially likeable people)” (OEB 4103). In a letter to her friend Vonda N. McIntyre from about seven months later, Butler reacts to the title Dana again, explaining, “My complaint against the title, DANA was the same as yours. It is definitely a historic romance or gothic romance title” (OEB 4105). And in a letter to her friend Marjorie Rae Nadler, Butler writes, “My editor who seems to see the novel as some sort of historical romance wants to call it by the name of the lead character, the woman DANA. I resent the hell out of this because I have not, by any stretch of the imagination, written an historical romance. I still have some pride—or ego or something (inability?). My agent, who agrees with me that DANA is inappropriate, but who would like to sell again to this editor is treading very softly. Her choice for a title is A STRANGER IN THE FAMILY which is better, but by the time she told me about it, I had come up with alternative titles of my own” (OEB 4178, emphasis in original).

27. Duffy continues, much as Butler did in her letters to friends, explaining how the use of the word “sensual” is particularly ill-fitting for Kindred. “I mean, it is sensual in that Dana (and the reader, through Dana) encounters the real life pain and hardships of slave life. But there’s a certain feint towards a romance novel implicit in that word choice that doesn’t really jibe with the harrowing plot. While there are love stories to be found in the novel, that love is generally twisted into something dark, traumatic, painful. Love conquers very little” (Duffy).

28. The new paperback edition with designs and illustrations by Yeti Lambregts and a foreword by Ayòbámi Adébáyò was announced on various websites as well as on Amazon, where you were able to preorder. This edition is also listed
with a new subtitle “Kindred: The ground-breaking masterpiece.” The book was to be released May 3, 2018, though there have been delays with delivery (Cowdrey and “Kindred”).

29. For more on the play auction, see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s “Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler’s Kindred.”

30. In 2018, Junot Díaz appeared in the news in relation to the #MeToo movement, in a number of different ways. A celebrated, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and MacArthur “genius,” he shared a deeply personal essay in the New Yorker about the abuse he suffered as a child, the subsequent trauma he carried, and the impact it has continued to have on his life (Díaz). The essay was first lauded as honest and raw, but soon after, women began coming forward with allegations of verbal abuse and sexual misconduct (Morgan). In his essay, he alludes to being a bad, cheating boyfriend and a monster, but does not mention anything as serious as the allegations against him now. While this controversy is not related directly to Kindred nor Butler, it is worth mentioning since his name and praise of Butler is physically central to the cover. Much could be explored in terms of having a male author accused of sexual misconduct as simultaneously being the overseer and purveyor of taste in proclaiming Butler as “one of the most significant literary artists of the twentieth century.”

31. The book cover illustrator, Yeti Lambregts, featured an animated gif of the new book cover illustrations “arriving” on the cover in a tweet in 2018 (animated artwork by Nathan Ward courtesy of @YLambregts). In this gif, the Weylin mansion arrives first, planted firmly at the top. Next, the black silhouettes of the children playing-as-slaves arrive sinisterly underneath. Then the flames and leaves rise, as Dana appears and the red sashes greet her wrists. The gif enforces and amplifies the cover’s feeling of grim playfulness.

WORKS CITED


OEB 4105: Letter from Octavia E. Butler to Vonda N. McIntyre, May 1, 1979, Octavia E. Butler Papers, The Huntington Library.


Schwinger, Larry. Personal Phone Interview with Ellen C. Caldwell. March 5, 2018.


@YLambregts. “New cover for Kindred by Octavia E. Butler, animated artwork by Nathan Ward @KingstonUni thank you @JakeSAbrams artwork by me.” Twitter, April 18, 2018, 3:28 a.m., twitter.com/YLambregts/status/986552029542801408.
The discourses on human rights and the fantastic often find themselves intertwined with human rights advocates, decrees, and policies often seeking to address the “unthinkable” while at the same time imagining a world where, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “promises to all the economic, social, political, cultural and civic rights that underpin a life free from want and fear” (UDHR v). Taken at face value, this statement is a sweet, necessary reprieve—a cold glass of lemonade on a hot summer day. Yet, the construction of disaster and violence within human rights discourses, along with the narration of progress and peril, is not neutral in form. On this, Wendy Hesford writes, “Human rights discourse constructs humanity and its capacities through spectacular rhetorics, imagining technologies, and an ocular epistemology, and how the visual field of human rights internationalism often functions as a site of power for and normative expression of American nationalisms, cosmopolitanisms, and neoliberal global politics” (3). Thus, what underscores this chapter is an engrossment
with the imaginaries conjured throughout the *Parable* series, along with the challenges they pose to normative formations of human rights discourse and praxis. I chart the narrative mappings of subjecthood and survival evoked by Butler in the crisis-riddled, apocalyptic worlds described in the *Parable* series in order to produce a conversation about human rights or, perhaps, what may lie beyond them.

After cradling page after page of each text, it would be a fool’s errand to deny the multiple ways that Butler’s apocalyptic fiction raises questions regarding the rights of the living—human and nonhuman alike. Pressing consideration is given to two general themes that are also apparent in contemporary human rights debates. Most evidently, readers are faced with questions regarding what rights are, protections life should have, along with what a good life means. Additionally, much attention is also given to the limits of current social forms and institutions. Yet, these ruminations are presented through a narrative voice heavily influenced by a black girl-growing-woman’s perspective of living within the perpetually dangerous US empire—a framing which challenges dominant paradigms of human rights and humanness that rely on an often invisible, universalist notion of humanity. Bearing the latter in mind, my primary interest when doing this work is not to rearticulate human rights theory and apply it to each book; rather, I seek to highlight how Butler shifts the logic of “human,” “right,” and ideas of living throughout this unfinished trilogy.

Utilizing the insights of cultural analysis, I deploy an intertextual reading of *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), reading between each text to outline the ways challenges to these three frameworks arise. As Stuart Hall writes:

> Cultural analysis not only identifies the underlying patterns, but discovers the similarities existing between the patterns of apparently different spheres of human activity. In other words, the patterns that are the object of cultural analysis exist not just in the ways people behave but within the underlying set of relations which constitute the social formation. (Hall 35)

Like Hall, I see these literary elements as cultural residues which, when put into conversation to human rights as theory and praxis, provide analytical power in (re)understanding our social world. The final section of this chapter considers how these texts offer tools for conceptualizing humanity, knowledge, power, and the meanings of survival within perpetually inhospitable worlds. I end by suggesting that not only does Butler ask us to embrace dreams of justice which speak to both diversity of blackness and the value of human life more generally but to theoretically redefine the
terms and articulations of \emph{humanness} itself. This is an important practice, for, as Michelle Commander writes, “to proceed speculatively, indeed, is to live” (233).

The dominance of universalisms—related to both rights and liberalism—has been a vital component of discursive regimes helping to establish a bifurcation in credibility between certain kinds of knowledges and positionalities, between morality and evil, and the strange from the familiar. Irina Popescu argues that this trend emerges from liberal democratic principles that have become conjoined with the human rights enterprise throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In discussing Butler’s \emph{Kindred}, Popescu goes further, suggesting:

Rights discourse in the United States was predicated on the construction of an objectified other, a violated body gaining human-qualities only though its ability to feel pain and not through its ability to live and pursue happiness. It was, in other words, founded on vicariously witnessing masked as empathy. (4)

The right to witness, for Popescu, is one tethered to unequal power relations among actors and institutions, relations in which empathy can only be gained if the pain of the “other” is seen and subsequently deemed worthy of help by those privileged under liberal democracies: white, Western, and property-owning (or aspiring) males. Chandra Mohanty’s 1984 challenge to universalist assumptions about womanhood and rights affirms the existence of such an approach, even in spaces considered to be more “progressive” like feminist theorizing and political networks. Despite critiques from a wide range of scholars and activists alike, the reliance on deeply gendered, racialized, and classed ideas of what it means to be human still continues to dominate institutional approaches to crisis and social change.

On one hand, the use of disembodied—or “objective”—indicators based on Western values, liberal interventions within human rights discourses, often renders some bodies as needing to be saved, while others play the part of savior or as Gayatri Spivak has been widely quoted, “White men [are] saving brown women from brown men” (93). In some ways, this approach to human rights and violations of humanity is still commonplace within contemporary ideological and discursive frameworks emerging from Western contexts where the location of the harm, often embodied by a mythical, forlorn “other,” is perceived as both threat and call to action. Conversely, positive representations of human freedom and dignity are often represented by individual-level triumphs within market-based systems, or as Amartya Sen adds, with a focus on the “\emph{processes} that allow freedom of actions and
decisions, and the actual opportunities that people have, given their personal and social circumstances” (17). While acknowledging gross acts of violence against humanity and promoting the advancement of communities (whether fiscal, cultural, psychological, political, or otherwise social in nature) is vital work, it is not only imperative to recognize “the potential of neoliberal politics and human rights politics to jointly incorporate victim subjects into social relations that support the logic of a global morality market that privileges Westerners as world citizens” (Hesford 9). Contesting these paradigms, Butler offers theories of liberation through a creative reliance on embodied and diverse knowledges, social context, and reflexive critique of interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and ideas of progress that are fixtures of everyday life. Following this logic, I suggest that within both Parables, Butler offers an alternative for understanding social conflict and ways of being human.

TO BE HUMAN, A DIFFERENT KIND OF KNOWING

Embrace Diversity.
Unite—
Or be divided,
robbed,
rulled,
 killed by those who see you as prey.
Embrace diversity
Or be destroyed.
(Sower 196)

Through the Parable series, Butler revisits discussions of inequality by shifting the gaze of analysis away from what Foucault described as the isolating of knowledge in ways that caused the “endless birth and rebirth of a project to formalize the concrete and to constitute, in spite of everything, pure sciences”—that is, to reaffirm European Enlightenment-informed thinking on the world and that which dwells within it (Foucault 248). By shifting, I mean two things. First, Butler creates a narration of trials—and quite literally the apocalypse—with attention to detail and conflict without the use of sympathetic voyeurism, but of a grounded, informed, and reflexive narration (Popescu 2). Stylistically, this is evident in the formatting of the text, which is a series of diary-like entries. Second, the Parable series is largely written through a non-masculine or European gaze: Parable of the Sower is told to the reader by a black girl-turned-young-adult from a suburb
outside Los Angeles with an ability to share physical feelings with those around. In the opening of Parable of the Sower, we are told about a dream that doubles as both an intergenerational connection and an introduction to the concerns of the main character: “I had my recurring dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father’s daughter” (Butler 3). Clearly, an ominous future is in store for the narrator—who we later come to know as Lauren Oya Olamina—yet, with this framing, Butler places Lauren and her ever-growing mind into a place of intense knowledge production and self-construction. Invoking the idea of a fish caught on a hook, Butler transforms the imminent problem as one that can be recognized or, in some cases, denied by its enduring subjects. Embodied agency in crisis, a central tenant in black liberation theories creeps into the page through the literary use of “I try”—the present subjective—versus “I have tried” when discussing the ignoring of the unnamed unusual. That action leads to the indicative (failed) production of an impossible self—which, for Lauren, is being her father’s daughter: “The thing is, even with my writing problems, every time I understand a little more, I wonder why it’s taken me so long—why there was ever a time when I didn’t understand a thing so obvious and real and true” (Butler 78).

The directness of Lauren’s understanding of truth unseats the dispositioned knower that often functions as a broker of human rights—that is, “saving brown women from brown men”—by emphasizing how truth becomes apparent to Lauren through experience, understanding, and an intuition-like series of feelings that allow her to envision both chaos and serenity. However, the recognition of self and the importance of self-knowledge is not a process marked by individualism. Instead, this project is one attentive to context and relationality between black women and their relationships to people, community, and worlds around them, as evidenced in one of Lauren’s Earthseed verses: “A tree / Cannot grow / In its parents’ shadows” (Sower 82). Coming directly after Lauren finishes a conversation with her father, where he denies the possibility of finding shelter in the “north,” the verse represents a special bond between the two—one that Lauren is able to see and consciously navigate. This sense of recognition appears when Lauren confesses to her own enjoyment of sexual intimacy despite being the preacher’s daughter (Butler 12). Butler embeds this sort of rebellion/self-creation throughout the text, making it particularly salient around conversations of desire, sensuality, motherhood, and even the disdain she feels for others who commit to ways of life that are oppressive to others.
Parable of the Talents extends this trend in decentering white male epistemologies—even as different narrators come to offer perspectives—as Lauren’s journals remain the only artifacts that produce a nuanced representation of the past. Phillip Brian Harper calls the latter phenomena speculative reasoning, which departs from empirical trends by using informed judgment of our surroundings “conditioned by the material factors in which it is undertaken” and thus provides alternative ways of seeing the world (Harper 119). Yet, beyond simply embracing alternative “genres of being human” in a Wynterian sense, the critiques of our main protagonist Lauren—along with the contrasting perspectives of other characters—can be read as an intimate engagement with the issue of blackness and conflict in the post-slavery Americas (Wynter and McKittrick 31).

Lorraine Bethel remarks that the black female literary tradition is full of these moments of reflexivity, visibility, and recognition: “Unlike many of their Black male and white female peers, Black women writers have usually refused to dispense with whatever was clearly Black and/or female in their sensibilities in an effort to achieve the mythical “neutral” voice of universal art” (177). Butler collapses these forms of recognition onto Lauren, whose worldview not only evolves overtime but shapes the reader’s understanding of the social world at large. Several Earthseed verses testify to the centrality of Lauren’s own acknowledgment of her status as a knower, or in this case, a rescuer: “Drowning people // Sometimes die // Fighting their rescuers” (61). The emphasis on the process of knowing, its perpetual presence within the book, marks Lauren as a producer of knowledge, not despite her own positionality but because of it. Therefore, she rejects the assimilatory ideologies Nawo Crawford calls “the form of oppression that considers ‘whiteness’ as the model, the universal model of humanity” (Crawford ixx). The challenge to the centrality of masculinity offers another version of anti-assimilation logic, which can be demonstrated in the community’s rejection of this paradigm when a newcomer challenges Lauren’s authority:

He stared at me for several seconds, then went over to Bankole. He turned his back to me as he spoke to Bankole. “Look, you know I need a gun to do any guarding in a place like this. She doesn’t know how it is. She thinks that she does, but she doesn’t.”

Bankole shrugged. “If you can’t do it, man, go to sleep. One of us will take the watch with her.”

“Shit.” Mora made the word long and nasty. “Shiiit. First time I saw her, I knew she was a man. Just didn’t know she was the only man here.”

Absolute silence. (Sower 310)
Although Lauren follows up with a calm, de-escalating response, the end of this conversation comes after Bankole adds: “And if that’s not good enough for you, tomorrow you can go out and find yourself a different kind of group to travel with—a group too goddamn macho to waste its time saving your child’s life twice in one day” (311). Frequent interventions are made within the series in similar ways. Butler’s deliberate construction of Lauren as a producer of knowledge provides a segue into my second point regarding knowledge production: that the series is informed by a queer, feminist Afrofuturism, and these discourses, on the microlevel, allow for artists, scholars, and cultural workers to create alternative ways of self-production.

Alondra Nelson suggests that Afrofuturist logic “looks backward and forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was and what if” (3–4). Such logic is evident throughout the Parable series not only through style—the diary entries—but of the way that Lauren learns of herself and the world: continuous meditation on the future tides and past shipwrecks. In Parable of the Talents, we see the familiar remembering in Lauren’s first diary entry and thoughts about the anniversary of the founding of Acorn, the group’s community reserve in the mountains of California: “In perverse celebration of this, I’ve just had one of my recurring nightmares. They’ve become rare in the past few years—old enemies with familiar nasty habits. I know them. They have such soft, easy beginnings…. This one was, at first, a visit to the past, a trip home, a chance to spend time with beloved ghosts” (Talents 9).

The reality that animates the Parable series, even the catastrophes that take place in Parable of the Talents, is rooted in the racialized, sexualized, and gendered chasms of everyday life. However, the series is not an introduction to diversity studies or multiculturalism. The reader is not able to selectively sample experiences of racism, sexism, or other types of intimate violence; the “violated body”1 is not descriptively portrayed, nor does it function as “tools, ways of turning action points into outcomes” (Ahmed 153). Butler’s portrayal of violence and systematic oppression is limited in their physical appearance and, instead, are experienced through Lauren.

Aside from the position of Knower, Butler inscribes Lauren with the ability to feel what the world around her feels through a condition called Hyperempathy Syndrome or “sharing.” In Parable of the Sower, Hyperempathy Syndrome is described in a paradoxical way. Although Lauren remarks that her sharing is a delusion, she also demonstrates how real “sharing” can be:

It’s delusional. Even I admit that. My brother Keith used to pretend to be hurt just to trick me into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink
Hyperempathy Syndrome is a key aspect of how Lauren comes to learn about how pain can be inflected and how it should be dealt with. Through Hyperempathy Syndrome, she not only feels others but contemplates her own construction of liberation with these discernments in mind. Moreover, the shared feelings of pain create a protagonist who—to think of Sara Ahmed’s articulations in *The Promise of Happiness*—cannot “hold on to the good life” as others suffer (195). Hyperempathy Syndrome means that even when the sensations are blunted, Lauren cannot keep “misery within walls”: both figuratively and experientially, she avoids the persistent calls (from her father, comrades in struggle, and even her husband Bankole) to focus on her happiness alone. As Sara Ahmed writes:

> To walk away from such happiness is to be touched by suffering. To be touched by another would not be premised on feeling the other’s suffering. The sympathy of fellow feeling, which returns feeling with like feeling, is a way of touching that touches little, almost nothing. To walk away from happiness would be simply a refusal of indifference, a willingness to stay proximate to unhappiness, however we will be affected. (195)

According to Ahmed’s theorization, to against happiness is a form of protest against all that would ask us—as individuals, communities, and nations—to ignore the fires burning all around us. In Parable, Lauren’s consistent attention and concern are demonstration of this ethic—even when she is chastised by family, friends, and other leaders. Moreover, despite being vulnerable, Lauren engages in the active pursuit of a better world for others, with others, sometimes at the expense of her own feelings of pain. The interactional nature of Lauren’s personal history and her understandings of the world at large point to the macrolevel nature of Afrofuturist theory:

Describing new plausible social arrangements, political structures, and technological systems, Afrofuturism estranges its viewership from the belief that life must be as it currently is. The best of Afrofuturism is vibrantly rich, deeply evocative, and intensely polyvocal and multimodal. Perhaps most important, it’s capable of rescuing its viewership from idolatrous commitments to false necessities. (Bennett 92)
Ytsaha L. Womack argues that Afrofuturism is the combination of “science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western belief” and at times, “a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (9). Following this focus on historical revival and fiction, Mark Bould has suggested that *Kindred* relies on “always-already neo-slave narratives” and I argue that this conception can be extended to the *Parable* series as well (183). Lauren’s repeated ruminations on slavery and its supposed collapse are prevalent throughout each book. An obvious recognition of its influence is the focal point of a conversation between Lauren and her future husband Bankole:

“So we become the crew of a modern underground railroad,” I said. Slavery again—even worse than my father thought, or at least sooner. He thought it would take a while.

“None of this is new.” Bankole made himself comfortable against me. “In the early 1990s while I was in college, I heard about cases of growers doing some of this—holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in California, blacks and Latins in the south…. Now and then, someone would go to jail for it.”

“But Emery says there’s a new law—that forcing people or their children to work off debt that they can’t help running up is legal.”

(*Sower* 292)

This conversation demonstrates that even in fiction, the ghosts of social inequality can haunt us. By turning against the “newness” of slavery, the *Parable* series forces us to reckon with Simone Browne’s questioning of what happens when “blackness, black human life, and the conditions imposed upon it enter discussions of surveillance,” theory, and productions of knowledge (161). Furthermore, Lauren’s contempt for slavery of all forms, whether it is by low pay and exploitation or physical entrapment that left her first Earthseed community in ruins in *Parable of the Talents*, is made apparent throughout the text and serves as a reminder of tragedies against human life, especially black lives within the North American continent.

Moreover, Butler rejects ahistorical renderings of oppressive regimes and any defensive tactics that also reproduce them. In *Parable of the Sower*, the matter-of-fact nature of Lauren’s assumption of perpetual apocalypse and survival is most salient when she remarks to her future husband Bankole “the world goes crazy every three or four decades. The trick is to survive until it goes sane again” (Butler 229). Mark Fisher suggests that Afrofuturist perspectives
inflict a type of hauntology that confronts the colonial impulse to subvert, ignore, or deny the systematic oppressions of the “other” throughout history. One of Bankole’s diary entries repeats this narrative:

I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. (Butler 8)

Bankole’s revelations closely align with the assertion that “Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well” (Yaszek 47).

Tobias van Veen, like Bould, argues that these reflections are necessary to rewriting transformation, not only the “coordinates of blackness, but the default givens of the ‘human’ in general” (2–3). Thus, Butler’s attention to the intersection of self-making through a black woman’s lens—what Bethel notes as the “process of identifying one’s self and the selves of other Black women as inherently valuable” while rejecting both Eurocentric and male definitions (185)—along with her refusal to leave the past unexamined (even in fiction), is a critical component of the Butlerian alternatives to human rights found throughout the series.

BOOKS OF THE LIVING AND THE DEATH OF HUMAN RIGHTS

To get along with God,
Consider the consequences of your behavior.
(Sower 86)

Butler’s apocalyptic fiction raises questions regarding the rights of the living—human and nonhuman alike. Education and access to knowledge are vital components of Parable of the Talents, although Lauren’s fixation with teaching, learning, and the ability to receive education is frequently mentioned in the first book. Lauren suggests surviving, people should scour through books and encyclopedias; “anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves.” In Parable of the Talents, this becomes more explicit as she bemoans a world where public schools closed, leaving poor children without education. Moreover, through Lauren, Butler critiques cultural tropes that reproduce the sublimation of some people over others.
Roderick Ferguson suggests that a facet of a black queer framework reminds us that culture and exclusion at times work together. He writes:

As the site of identification, culture becomes the terrain in which formations seemingly antagonistic to liberalism, like Marxism and revolutionary nationalism, converge with liberal ideology, precisely through their identification with gender and sexual norms and ideals. Queer of color analysis must examine how culture as a site of identification produces such off-bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unimagined alliances. (3)

An example of the contentious nature these ideas can be found in *Parable of the Sower*, when then teenaged Lauren has a tense discussion with her friend Joanne about politics, culture, and the end of their parents’ way of life. Lauren begins, “No. No. Donner’s just a kind of human banister,” and Joanne asks, “A what?” Lauren clarifies:

I mean he’s like...like a symbol of the past for us to hold on to as we’re pushed into the future. He’s nothing. No substance. But having him there, the latest in a two-and-a-half-century-long line of American Presidents make people feel that the country, the culture that they grew up with is still here—that we’ll get through these bad times and back to normal. (*Sower* 56)

Here, Butler challenges the hegemonic universalisms regarded as cultural and social order by revealing their constructed nature. Another visible repudiation of the use of culture for unjust exertions of power comes when she links her neighbor’s exploitative family structure to other forms of social and political slavery. The neighbor, Richard Moss, had taken three wives in the name of an ancient West-African custom. Olamina recalls that Moss put together his own religion—a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible. He’s an engineer for one of the big commercial water companies, so he can afford to pick up beautiful, young homeless women and live with them in polygamous relationships. He could pick up twenty women like that if he could afford to feed them. I hear there’s a lot of that kind of thing going on in other neighborhoods. Some middle-class men prove they’re men by having a lot of wives in temporary or
permanent relationships. Some upper-class men prove they’re men by having one wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. (Sower 36–37)

The 2014 UN Report on the Rights of Women might regard Moss’s situation as a violation of rights that needs state intervention, policy development, and action. These interventions are often considered the only method of addressing inequality or exploitation, for, as Sally Engle Merry writes, they are ideological seen as “essential technology of reform” (37). However, Butler never frames these inequities in this way, opting to leave the entire discussion of “human rights” outside of the books. Instead, an Earthseed verse simply dictates the following: “To get along with God, / Consider the consequences of your behavior” (Sower 87). It is unsurprising that the attention to exploitation of all forms, violence, and ecological issues—like water scarcity and environmental collapse—is highlighted within the Parable series in complex ways.

In Parable of the Talents, Butler highlights how state entities use culture—particularly those thought to be primitive or transgressive—as reasons for discrimination and oppression. Lila Abu-Lughod suggests that this is done by rationalizing violence through the creation of “moral high ground” and the incorporation of liberal, democratic, capitalist, and Western societies as “acultural norms” that provide a universal standard for measuring society-level success (82–85). Butler’s later discussion of the violent decimation of the Acorn community in the name of Christian America fits into this logic. Thus, Butler forces us to question ideas of safety, social order, material gain and benefit, along with what kinds of “rights” must be more critically examined. In Parable of the Sower, the growth of privatized cities is a peculiar form of enslavement.

Cities controlled by big companies are old hat in science fiction. My grandmother left a whole bookcase of old science fiction novels. The company-city subgenre always seemed to star a hero who outsmarted, overthrew, or escaped “the company.” I’ve never seen one where the hero fought like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company. In real life, that’s the way it will be. That’s the way it always is. (Sower 123).

Lauren’s somber attention to this paradox is magnified by her father’s assertion that freedom is “dangerous, but precious” (122). This fosters the connection between Butler’s omission of “human rights” with one of the more latent themes within the text: the rejection of legal protections as natural law.
Throughout each text, the limits of law and juridical power are exposed—for example, when Lauren remarks “Crazy to live without a wall to protect you,” after reflecting on her dad’s life before her birth (*Sower* 10). The precarity faced by her community is underscored by the expensive and inattention institutions—like police and fire rescues—that are considered essential within contemporary society. When her brother Keith is murdered by a gang as an act of retaliation for a betrayal of trust, the reader views a more salient distrust of policing regimes:

The cops went nosing around the neighborhood, but no one else admitted knowing anything about a fight. After all, they knew Dad didn’t kill Keith. And they knew the cops liked to solve cases by “discovering” evidence against whomever they decided must be guilty. Best to give them nothing. They never helped when people called for help. They came later, and more often than not, made a bad situation worse. (114)

Yet, while Butler reimagines a world where alternative ways of living are celebrated, she does not write a manifesto condoning all courses of action. Although Lauren is involved in several violent and often deadly altercations, she maintains a curious attachment to the preservation of life. In *Parable of the Sower*, this is evident in her quiet challenge to Keith, who in his days as a runaway robs and kills a traveler he had befriended. While he laughs off his new fortune, Lauren interjects by stating—not questioning—a short response: “He talked to you. He was friendly to you. And you shot him” (109). Later, when discussing her lack of tears during Keith’s funeral, Lauren recalls his actions:

It wasn’t that I was holding back, being stoic. It’s just that I hated Keith at least as much as I loved him. He was my brother—half-brother—but he was also the most sociopathic person I’ve ever been close to. He would have been a monster if he had been allowed to grow up. Maybe he was one already. He never cared what he did. If he wanted to do something and it wouldn’t cause him immediate physical pain, he did it, fuck the earth. (115)

Lauren’s observations, when taken with other statements in *Sower*, reveal how familial bonds do not erase violent fissures. The dichotomy between the public and private is not upheld within Lauren’s narration. Additionally, in writing “fuck the earth,” Butler invokes her concern about the intersectional and interconnected nature of ecological and anthropological existences. Thus, Keith’s choices were a threat not just to human life but of the world.
around him. Despite this repudiation, there is no one enemy or force to sanction by the end of the two novels. Even the late President Donnor and his successor, President Jarret, whose quest to “Make America Great Again” (Talents 20) results in murderous and institutional repression, are repeatedly considered singular manifestations of wider social inequalities in the world. Most conflicts are treated this way throughout the Parable series, and thus give context to why individual or community-level human rights are remarkably absent in Butler’s creation of a world postapocalypse.

By reading these absences as purposeful choices, Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents demonstrate how a single-issue/enemy focus obscures the ways in which “we are all recruited often unwittingly and/or unwillingly to devalue lives, life choices, and lifestyles because valuing them would destabilize our own precarious claims to and uneasy desire for social value” (Cacho 27). Instead, by illuminating the pitfalls of uncritical engagements with culture, the limitations of social institutions (including policing, law and “legal” policies, religion, and family), and by carefully writing against violence and normative ideas of progress, Butler calls our attention to something else. That thing—which is articulated through the reimagining of community, personal and societal values, and a pragmatic yet daring hope for a different future found throughout the Parable series—offers potential examples of what Ahmed has called a queer commitment to life; that is, Butler creates stories that foster “an opening up of what counts as a life worth living, or what Judith Butler might call a ‘liveable life’” (Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology 178).

TAKING ROOT AMONG THE STARS; OR, BEYOND THE TRICKSTER’S PARABLE

To survive,  
know the past.  
Let it touch you.  
Then let  
The past  
Go. (Talents 376)

Through both the Parable series, Butler undoes and rewrites histories of the apocalypse, the past, and the future. Lauren’s telling of her life offers a vision of struggle and the precarious inevitability of liberation; it is a story complete with trials, setbacks, and the limits of the human condition. However, Butler gives more than that. When pairing a critical reading of
human rights debates with *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, one
finds a new articulation of livelihood, social justice, and future possibilities
that lies outside of liberal human rights paradigms.

As I have argued earlier, Lauren represents a break with disembodied
formulations of knowledge production and transmission. Her positionality
stands as a rejection of the disappearance of black women in radical visions
of freedom that, as Robin D. G. Kelley writes, “comes to us largely as a male
dream of armies liberating the motherland from their imperialist adversaries”
(Kelley 136). Further, by uplifting a critical feminist Afrofuturist narrative
within the work, Butler dispels ahistorical renderings of identity, cultural,
and societal norms. As the Earthseed verse which precedes this section
foreshadows, “Lauren Olamina, unencumbered by those things considered
sacrosanct to previous generations, offers her community the pragmatic
religious strategies that she believes are necessary for survival and thriving in
a radically ‘other’ world” (McCormack 25). This, coupled with an engaging
story line with a vivid disavowal with androcentric, nationalistic, racialized,
and legal framings of belonging, challenges conceptions of rights that are
overtly reliant on identity politics or the constructions of new laws that
otherwise maintain the structural conditions of society. Yet, like the *Parable*
series, Butler’s work is left unfinished. As Gerry Canavan writes, “the long-
promised third book, *Parable of the Trickster*, never arrived”—nor did any of
the texts which were to complete the seven-part series Butler had imagined
come into fruition (Canavan 2014).

Frustrated by writer’s block, frustrated by blood pressure medication that
she felt inhibited her creativity and vitality, and frustrated by the sense
that she had no story for *Trickster* only a “situation,” Butler started and
stopped the novel over and over again from 1989 until her death, never
getting far from the beginning. (Canavan, “There’s Nothing New/Under
The Sun”)

After analyzing the Huntington Library’s archive containing the materials
Butler had generated while developing the unfinished *Trickster*, Canavan
finds not only a main character, Imara, but several divergent themes and
possibilities for the world among the stars that Lauren solemnly envisioned
during the final pages of *Parable of the Talents*. That section, written as
an excerpt from “The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina” which appear
throughout Talents, starts firmly: “I know what I’ve done.” Following
this, the entry goes on “I have not given them heaven, but I’ve helped
them to give themselves the heavens” (*Talents* 405). Given the intensity of
intellectual production found within the *Parable* series, much like the rest
of Butler’s work, in addition to the fact that “in personal journals Butler admits Olamina is an idealized self, her ‘best self’—and the poetry that drives the Earthseed religion actually mirrors the style of the daily affirmations, self-help sloganeering, and even self-hypnosis techniques Butler used to keep herself focused and on-task,” I read this journal entry as a Butlerian double entendre. Here, I mean that we can read these lines as both fiction and Butler’s confession of knowing exactly what she has done: she has drawn up too-familiar chaos and planted seeds to sustain us as we navigate within and beyond its grasp. With this double reading, we can also imagine a Butler—perhaps equal parts cynic and hopeful visionary—prepared for the possibility for this fragmentation, that is, the incomplete nature of this work.

I will go on the first ship to leave after my death. If I thought I could survive as something other than a burden, I would go on this one, alive. No matter. Let them someday use my ashes to fertilize their crops. Let them do that. It’s arranged. I’ll go, and they’ll give me to their orchards and their groves. (Talents 406).

With drafts unfinished, it is left for us to dream, this new world. Leaving us with examples, much excitement, and many more warnings, I argue that Butler has laid a foundation for us to do “the work” of dreaming. As an extension of Butler’s alternative conceptualization of human rights within Parable of the Sower (1993) and Parable of the Talents (1998), I suggest that this fertile ground is predicated upon thematic reinterpretations of the “Human,” knowledge, and ways of being in the world—of making that being all the more livable.

Butler’s commitment to privileging Lauren’s evolving knowledge, along with the threads of black feminist Afrofuturist thinking which spill across the pages of each text, reaffirms a necessity for a politic rooted in personal experience and critical analysis. The model Butler offers—built on affect, history, intellectual and creative production, and Lauren’s experiences of the world around her—asks us to attend to the specificity of our own lives and the contexts in which they emerge. Moreover, when documented and practiced, Butler urges us to recognize that these knowledges can be the basis of transformation and social change. We see this reflected in Parable of the Sower as a young Lauren ruminates on her own intellectual capacities:

Then, someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I’ll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense. (Sower 79)
In centering these experiences as legitimate sites of knowledge, Butler reminds us that positionality and felt intuitions, particularly those emerging from black queer subjectivities, not only have meaning but embody agency and possibility despite structural, institutional, and interpersonal oppression. Yet, as alluded by Lauren’s statement above, respect for such knowledges is another element of world-making: to witness ourselves and each other is to do the work of decolonization. Relatedly, an enthusiasm for exploration marks another facet of Butlerian revolutionary praxis.

Lauren, along with her budding community, is united by a curiosity of and for the world. Guided by Earthseed, they exude a willingness to learn and seek out new and old potentials within their lives. Following Butler’s challenge to current social institutions and formations, it makes sense, then, to understand this curiosity as exemplified in the following quote:

God is Power—
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
And yet, God is Pliable—
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is Change. (Sower 1)

Widely shared, this verse lays the groundwork for the journeys to be traveled within the *Parable* series and acts as a hymn to readers willing to embrace inevitable and ever-present alterations to the world we have come to know. In fact, the importance of this curiosity can be read in the ire of Lauren, as she mourns the ambivalence that her daughter Larkin has for watching the first Earthseed voyages head into space. There, she laments: “How completely, how thoroughly he has stolen my child. I have never tried to forgive him” (*Talents* 407).

In emphasizing openness for change—for things in and beyond the world, gestures toward the ways in which being in the world continues to be shaped and challenged, especially by minoritarian and “othered” bodies, Butler provides many examples of this: interracial alliances (e.g., Zahra and Harry; Harry and Lauren; the Earthseed community and networks), same-gender and other queer longings (e.g., Nia Cortez and Lauren; Allie and Mary Sullivan), alternative family formations, diverse age groups engaged in
struggle, folks experiencing homelessness, and, of course, the complex group of “sharers” found throughout the series. All of the people are taken as fluid characters with gifts that are honored as valuable contributions to Lauren’s quest to build more just futures. They also can be taken as a Butlerian urge for expansive thinking and inclusion within our broader social world or to bring attention back to an Earthseed quote referenced earlier within this piece, the necessity to “Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed.”

Finally, Butler reminds us of the importance of interdependence and practices of solidarity that flourish in spite of difference and normative understandings of time. Throughout the *Parable* series, the linkages between kin and potential comrades unfold at steady, sometimes unpredictable paces. Considering Butler’s critique and attention to history and social institutions, these narrative twists underscore the magnitude of such relationships. For example, although Lauren’s connection with Nia does not unfold as a physical romance in *Talents*, their bond is nonetheless valued, signifying a revelation:

> I need people like her. Until I met her, I had not realized how much I needed such people. Len had been right about what I should be doing, although she had known no more than I about how it must be done. I still don’t know enough. But there’s no manual for this kind of thing. I suppose that I’ll be learning what to do and how to do it until the day I die. (*Talents* 371)

Although “there’s no manual for this kind of thing,” Butler allows us to peer into a world where a different kind of time—one less precise, but still beautiful—produces comraderies which are in pursuit of making new lives for all people, regardless of their marginalized status or their perfections. Or, to take from another Earthseed verse, “To benefit your world, // Your people, // Your life, // Consider consequences, // Minimize harm // Ask questions, // Seek answers, // Learn, // Teach” (*Butler, Parable of the Talents* 61).

Yet, even with these fragments, *the work*—what Jafari Allen has elsewhere described as “paid and unpaid intellectual, artistic, and activist labor as a serious, necessary undertaking”—still lies with us (Allen 214). Moreover, within another Earthseed verse, Butler reveals that ideas alone do not constitute such activities. She writes, “Belief will not save you // Only actions // Guided and shaped // By belief and knowledge // Will save you” (*Talents* 349). Perhaps, then, it starts with a deep commitment to believing that there are people also doing *the work* and—despite personal and social setbacks, individual and systemic violence, and all the failure that would drive us to believe otherwise—they, like the worlds we envision, have and continue to exist. For, as Butler (quoted by Canavan) has written elsewhere:
“There’s nothing new / under the sun, / but there are new suns.”

By learning from history, black feminist ancestral wisdoms, and utilizing our own gifts may we become ever closer to finding them.

NOTES

1. Popescu elaborates on this idea: “This connection illuminates a fundamental problem: the development of rights discourse during emancipation (and after) is subtly tied to the construction of the black body as a violated body” (4).

2. The final section of this chapter takes inspiration from in-depth conversations with Chrissy Etienne (unpublished, 2019). With gratitude.

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Despite having written her share of short stories, Octavia E. Butler, who preferred the novel form’s space and freedom to create and explore entire worlds, is perhaps best known for her expansive series: her Patternist books (Seed to Harvest), her Xenogenesis trilogy (Lilith’s Brood), and her incomplete Parable series (Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents). The Parable novels were the last series she worked on—the standalone Fledgling was her final book before her death—and in Sower and Talents, Butler pivoted away from her previous fantastical gene-trading extraterrestrials and body-jumping and shape-shifting immortals to focus exclusively on the mundane yet self-destructive and hateful behaviors of humanity that create a dystopian near future Earth. Lauren Olamina, a young black woman who has experienced the worst of this world, endeavors to save the human race with a Destiny “to take root among the stars,” and Talents ends with Earth’s first starship poised for its journey to a new home on an extrasolar planet. Here the narrative abruptly terminates, prematurely abridged in spite of the author’s best efforts to write the final installment of what was supposed to be a trilogy, leaving only tantalizing questions in its wake: What is life on
this new planet like? Does it become the heaven that Olamina promises, or does it become another man-made hell? What is in store next for humanity?

Fortunately, like her protagonist, Butler compulsively saved all her writing. She bequeathed everything that she wrote, hundreds of boxes of materials, to the Huntington Library in her hometown of Pasadena, California. At the Huntington, I combed through the boxes and folders that contained material for Parable of the Trickster, the trilogy’s planned conclusion: partial drafts, writing workbooks with character biographies and plot outlines, research findings, and assorted typed and handwritten notes. Despite such a monumental effort, Butler, for myriad reasons, never finished Trickster. The most direct cause was Butler’s writer’s block in the 2000s, but she also developed some health issues and was generally disillusioned with the world at the time, angry at the Bush v. Gore Supreme Court decision and the false pretenses used to enter the Iraq War. Sometimes, she had to abandon promising drafts because of similarities to other works, like José Saramago’s Blindness and Kim Stanley Robinson’s Red Mars. Moreover, when writing Trickster, Butler was at a crossroads. She was a mature writer, having tackled most of her planned subject matter earlier in her career. Clearly struggling with the notion of her legacy, she asks herself, “What else is there?” (OEB 2070).¹ She had already made history at this point as the first African American woman to have a career writing science fiction; she had lots of fans as well as critical recognition both inside and outside her industry, having received multiple Hugo and Nebula awards as well as being the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. Therefore, the question of “What else is there?” may have haunted her.

This chapter is an attempt to make sense of these fragmentary materials as well as to provide a reading of the two published Parable books. Since most of Butler’s science fiction centers on trauma, or the unexpected encounter with something unknowable, I focus on trauma’s inherent epistemological ambiguity, its unlocatability, amid the generic conventions of science fiction. How much can trauma really be known, what does it mean for trauma to be unknowable, and what is the relationship between Butler’s science fiction and the unknowability of trauma? First, I focus on the narrative of survival in the two published Parable books, exploring the characters’ attempts to locate and manage trauma via spatial and temporal modes, which leads me to conclude that the Parable books—intentionally or not—² are conversing with Freudian trauma theory by echoing Sigmund Freud’s own struggles with trauma’s theoretical framework while simultaneously presenting the Destiny as an alternative to future unknowability. Next, I argue Sower and Talents uniquely address and complicate this unknowability in a way that perhaps only Butler’s historically conscious science fiction can, through an
examination of technology’s role in the repetition of history that ultimately reveals trauma’s technological depths. In this manner, Butler actually rereads Freud through a science fictional lens, not only bringing into the forefront Freud’s own use of technology to conceive of trauma but also suggesting that what is unknowable about trauma is what is unmasterable about technology. Finally, I conceptualize Butler’s unfinished *Trickster* drafts as a testimony to the aporia of the Destiny, originally presented as the solution to trauma but which could not be resolved in the spatial and temporal framework of the narrative, concluding they are not narrative failures but a form of resistance to the unresolvable unknowability of trauma. By not completing *Trickster*, Butler, who has positioned trauma as essentially a problem of the future, defies the idea of trauma as humanity’s predetermined fate.

**BUTLER AND FREUD: WHERE (OR WHEN) IS THE TRAUMA?**

*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* can be considered a story of survival in the face of overwhelming, apocalyptic trauma. In fact, the protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, comes of age during a period officially referred to as “the Apocalypse,” or “the Pox,” a complex confluence of cataclysmic climate change, simultaneous global wars, unprecedented economic crisis, and complete sociological breakdown. However, what makes the *Parable* books traumatic, I would argue, are not the terrible catastrophes plaguing the world but rather the ways in which they remain, for the characters, fundamentally unknowable; consciousness cannot assimilate trauma. Butler actually presents two working theories of trauma, spatial and temporal, that demonstrate trauma’s unlocatability; that is, none of the characters can quite figure out from where or when tragedy will arise. Together, the spatial and temporal facets of trauma in Butler’s *Parable* books evoke Sigmund Freud’s conception of trauma first articulated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Indeed, Freud and Butler have an overlapping, complementary model of trauma that, when read together, can deepen the understanding of each. While Freud seems to accept that trauma is defined by its unknowability, Butler, who has described *Talents* as “a novel of solutions” (411), attempts to shed some light on this unknowability with the Destiny, simultaneously an amendment to the theory of trauma and a treatment protocol that models a way to live through catastrophe and ensure humanity’s continued long-term survival.

Like Freud, Butler sets up her system for protection by introducing a spatial model that depends on a separation between the inside and outside, designed to keep out danger. This spatial conceptualization of recognizing
and isolating threats lends itself well to this chaotic world where trouble is omnipresent, and in practical terms, this system takes the form of walls and other defensive measures\(^3\) that create physical boundaries and separation from the outside. Those who can afford it create gated estates or communities, ranging from vast fortified demesnes protected by private armies to more modest walled neighborhoods like Lauren Olamina’s cul-de-sac in Robledo, California. A mere twenty miles from Los Angeles, one of the most dangerous cities during the Pox, the eleven houses on the cul-de-sac remain standing largely because of the imposing wall that encloses it: three meters of concrete topped with glass shards and Lazor wire, a near invisible material that is sharp enough to cut through bone, with a locked, reinforced metal gate as the only access point. This wall is enough of a barrier to keep out most of the street poor and violent gangs that are situated immediately outside. Not only is it a physical fortification that protects the residents, the wall also serves an epistemological function, establishing knowledge of trauma by demarcating the boundary between the chaotic and perilous outside and the safe haven inside. Survival for Olamina and her neighbors, therefore, is a matter of maintaining this clear spatial distinction, of keeping the outside world firmly on the other side of their wall.

However, the spatial model of trauma is flawed from its very inception because it sets up a false dichotomy; the sources of trauma do not exclusively originate from outside the wall, and there are numerous issues within the neighborhood’s confines that prevent it from being a separate, safe place. For instance, it can be argued that Keith, Olamina’s brother who runs away from home and becomes a violent criminal, becomes corrupted by the world beyond the cul-de-sac, but Keith has always been a troubled individual, ruled by greed and a sadistic streak long before he ever step foot outside the wall. He has stolen from the neighborhood, and as a child, he tormented Olamina by faking injuries to trigger her pychosomatic Hyperempathy Syndrome. Meanwhile, the Dunn family allows one of their daughters to get raped by an uncle for years before she becomes pregnant at the age of twelve and gives birth to a girl who is also subsequently neglected. In fact, it is the neighborhood men who exile the uncle, not anyone from the family. This banishment is an attempt to make the community within the wall safe, a public performance that reaffirms the boundary between the safe interior and dangerous exterior, but because this threat emanated from within the community, any action would have been always already too late. The prospect of keeping trauma out is futile because it is always already “inside.” The inside-outside distinction is further eroded by another neighbor, Richard Moss, who purchases his wives. During the Pox, this exploitive brand of polygamy and other forms of de facto slavery become widespread, but these
practices are supposed to happen elsewhere, beyond the safe confines of the cul-de-sac. Yet Olamina, who will be enslaved herself a few years later, has her first encounter with human ownership inside her gated community. The madness of the wider world simply distracts from the neighborhood’s own homegrown issues that actively problematize the knowledge represented by its wall.

Given the fundamental flaws in the spatial conception of trauma, it is not a surprise when this model ends up catastrophically failing, and shortly after Olamina’s eighteenth birthday, her community is attacked and burned to the ground. Though the wall and the armed nightly patrols have been able to deter smaller assaults, they are useless when a much larger and better equipped group simply drives a truck through the gate and shoot the watchers before they can alert the rest of the neighborhood. “Paints” high on “pyro,” a drug that causes users to become fascinated and aroused by fire, set the neighborhood ablaze and go on a raping and shooting spree that ends with almost all the inhabitants murdered. Olamina’s neighbors had become complacent, believing they had mastered threats to their existence with their seemingly impenetrable wall and their inside-outside understanding of trauma: “Those big walls. And everybody had a gun. There were guards every night. I thought... I thought we were so strong” (Butler Sower 187). This statement by Zahra Moss, one of the only survivors, reveals the shortcomings of the spatial approach in fully locating and managing trauma.

Olamina, believing that Robledo fell because it was woefully underprepared for such a brutal, coordinated attack, sets up a new community that incorporates the lessons she learned from Robledo’s destruction yet continues to spatially conceptualize survival as an inside-outside matter. Hidden in the coastal hills of northern California, Acorn becomes a self-sustaining oasis from the generally violent and treacherous world at large, which is once again demarcated by a wall: “Cactus by cactus, thornbush by thornbush, we’ve planted a living wall in the hills around Acorn” (Butler Talents 28). Understanding that this wall alone cannot prevent determined intruders, Olamina institutes armed, round-the-clock guards and other security precautions, including contingency plans and routine drills for a full-on assault. Despite all these preparations, after several years of growth and peace, Acorn falls to a coordinated assault by well-equipped zealots. Instead of paints looking for a thrill while high, the attackers this time are young men who call themselves Jarret’s Crusaders, driven by a fanatical desire to carry out the hateful, misguided version of Christianity espoused by the US president. Their invasion tactics recall that of Robledo, with overpowered vehicles smashing through the community’s protective boundary seemingly out of nowhere, with no notification from those on watch. Once again, thus,
the catastrophe occurs on the design of the barrier, a repetition that points toward the futility of identifying the threat in spatial terms.

If the spatial model is so flawed, why does it crop up again and again in the series? The destruction of Robledo in *Sower* has made it abundantly clear that it is impossible to physically keep out all sources of danger, so why does Butler have her protagonist repeat this approach as the basis of an entirely new community in *Talents*? Perhaps it is because, despite all its shortcomings, the spatial model has a sticking power that dates back to the beginnings of psychoanalytic trauma theory. Freud’s original understanding of consciousness is based on a spatial (and later temporal) framework. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud gives the following analogy for the nature of consciousness, which becomes the basis of his trauma archetype: “Let us picture a living organism in its most simplified possible form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation” (28). Immediately outside this living vesicle (i.e., consciousness) are all manner of stimuli that can bombard it and even kill it with overstimulation. What safeguards this vesicle is a barrier or membrane that acts as a protective shield. This analogy sounds remarkably like Robledo and Acorn, with their surrounding walls acting as their shields that protect against the dangers of the world at large. Of course, the cell membrane is not supposed to be impenetrable and has evolved to take in small samples of the external world, and in much the same way, Olamina’s two communities receive news from the outside, and its members can come and go. However, the barrier is meant to keep out excessive amounts of harmful stimuli: “We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (Freud *Beyond* 33). Here, Freud’s structural description resonates with Butler’s walled communities: the intruders who break into the Robledo houses climb over the wall but do not irreparably damage it; the neighborhood can fend off and recover from these smaller attacks. Robledo and Acorn fall only when invaders drive their vehicles through the walls, thus rupturing the protective shields that separated the communities from the outside.

Olamina’s walled communities may align with Freud’s spatial understanding of trauma to an almost uncanny degree, but Freud’s model does not remain static. Freud struggles to theorize how to conceive of trauma, at first “tentatively” accepting a major breach to the cell’s protective shield as the cause for “traumatic neurosis,” but then dismissing this focus on the structural rupture to the molecular form in favor of an inquiry into what happens to the mind by that rupture, thus calling attention to the breach’s timing (*Beyond* 35). He believes that this alternative temporal emphasis accounts for the traumatic effects engendered by the break, explaining that
fright is produced by “lack of any preparedness for anxiety,” clarifying that “the difference between systems that are unprepared and systems that are well prepared [...] may be a decisive factor in determining the outcome” (Beyond 36). More than seventy years later, Butler echoes Freud’s shifting conception of trauma, suggesting that temporal readiness may play a more vital role than spatial preparedness in her narrative. Because they are prepared for such small attacks, the people of Robledo and Acorn can contend with individual intruders, but they cannot defend against the catastrophic and unanticipated assaults by the paints and the Crusaders. In other words, the suddenness of the attacks may be more traumatizing than the damage done by the breaching of the walls. And actually, in light of these raiders’ armored tanks and automatic weapons that far outclass Robledo’s and Acorn’s defensive technologies, no amount of planning may have been enough, since preparedness is useless when “the strength of a trauma exceeds a certain limit” (Freud Beyond 36). Olamina, despite her own extensive precautions, admits after her childhood neighborhood burns down: “No one could have been ready for that” (Butler Sower 187). Likewise, the attack on Acorn is too sudden and overpowering for that community to react.

This adjustment in Freud’s thinking is an important moment in the theory of trauma because it adds an extra dimension to an otherwise flat structural model and paves the way for the crucial idea of repetition compulsion. For Freud, traumatic temporality appears to be structured on the past: that is, what happened in the past can return in the future. This reasoning comes from the conservative nature of the death drive, which posits that “the aim of all life is death” (Freud Beyond 46); in other words, since inanimacy, or death, existed before life, all living things eventually return to their previous inanimate state. The death drive, even when it looks like it is oriented toward the future and survival, always reverts to the past, and this drive is also responsible for the repetition that occurs with traumatic situations. Consciousness belatedly tries to return to the moment before catastrophe to prepare for it, so the event can be assimilated or even undone, but trauma, which strikes without warning, is something for which consciousness cannot prepare. Mastering a trauma after the fact is an impossible gesture; consciousness continuously attempts to return and recreate the sequence, but it only results in the traumatic experience being repeated over and over again. This repeated failure to return takes the form of recurring nightmares, flashbacks, or other intrusive symptoms that manifest after the initial incident and are out of the control of the survivor, preventing him or her from moving past it. In Butler’s narrative, this unwitting repetition occurs beyond the individual level, with all of Acorn reenacting Robledo’s earlier tragedy, and if Olamina were to establish another community, it may also end up destroyed.
Because the temporal framework is defined by both this innate function of repetition and a corresponding unpredictability regarding repetition, it cannot accurately “locate” trauma. Acorn’s traumatic reenactment of Robledo’s destruction and the suddenness of both assaults support a trauma model that is based on time, but Olamina, even after learning that trauma returns, is unable to predict and therefore prepare for future attacks that are guaranteed to come. Freud accepts that trauma is constituted by a certain not knowing, with the impossibility of predicting its return at the heart of trauma’s innate unlocatability. Meanwhile, Butler and Olamina still strive to identify and even master trauma, looking for answers in Earthseed, Olamina’s original belief system she developed as a teenager. Born into a world that is falling apart, Olamina constantly hears the adults around her talk about how different—and better—the world used to be and how “good times would come back. [...] they always did” (Butler Sower 305). Olamina firmly rejects this backward-looking tendency and concludes instead:

The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change. (Butler Sower 3)

Out of this central tenet, Butler develops her unique response to trauma’s unlocatability.

According to Earthseed, even though change is inevitable and can even be unrelenting, people can “shape God,” thus mitigating or adapting to change (Butler Sower 17). After the devastating change that is the destruction of Robledo, Olamina tries to shape God by establishing and cultivating a new community, but Acorn ultimately is not that different from her earlier inward-looking neighborhood. With both communities, Olamina is proven wrong by her own philosophy, failing to see the true extent that “God is Change” because of her overreliance on a static inside-outside conceptualization of trauma. Indeed, Earthseed’s emphasis on change implies a kind of chronology, with changes occurring over time, into the future, and Olamina realizes that she must stop ignoring Earthseed’s temporal solution, its transcendent spacefaring “Destiny.” Earthseed allows believers to internalize the fact that terrible things can happen while discouraging them from hiding behind walls or otherwise maintaining the status quo; however, it is the Destiny that offers the possibility for radical positive change in the future, a way to finally break free from traumatic repetition. Specifically, the Destiny can be considered a method for locating and mastering trauma because it is designed to prevent the ultimate manifestation of the death drive, the extinction of
human life on Earth. The Destiny models a way to survive by redirecting human energy away from destructive endeavors and sublimating it into its seemingly impossible goal of extrasolar space travel and colonization. The last few chapters of *Talents* rather abruptly and quickly recount Olamina’s successful proselytizing efforts, which lead to the funding and development of the technology necessary for the Destiny. The epilogue, set more than half a century later, features a very old Olamina, the immensely rich and powerful leader of a worldwide faith, watching the initial shuttles depart for the very first Earthseed starship, soon to embark on a journey to a new home outside the solar system. Humanity’s cycle of self-destruction seems to be drawing to a close as *Talents* ends.

However, an assessment of the Destiny as an effective treatment for traumatic repetition is impossible because Butler never finished the final installment to her *Parable* series; humanity’s future survival via the Destiny can only be an unclaimed possibility. Readers of the two published novels are stranded at the pregnant moment of the earliest shuttles’ launches, never to go beyond it and learn how the Destiny will unfold. Instead, we are left with so many unanswered questions: Will the Destiny ensure the continued survival of the human race? Will it actually provide a better future for humanity? Can it heal people’s traumas, or will it just generate new ones? These questions force us to reconsider whether the Destiny can actually avoid trauma’s inevitable return because knowing and managing trauma mean successfully anticipating the future, and Butler’s abbreviated treatment of the Destiny does not hint at any prognosticative function. Butler gives much attention to the traumatic repetition of the past in her novels, but there is also the very real possibility of repeating in the future that the Destiny may not be able to eliminate. The temporal aspects of the Destiny may in fact add to the confusion; the Destiny’s colonists endeavor to avoid an annihilation that has not yet occurred, but because of trauma’s temporal unlocatability, the referent is unclear, and we cannot know if they are preventing a future trauma or escaping a trauma that has already happened, namely the Pox. In other words, the Destiny is supposed to lead to the future, yet it is modeled on the past, thus inscribing within itself the uncertainty of return. Therefore, the Destiny may not be a transcendental solution that goes beyond trauma but rather a threat of its potential return or, at best, a delaying tactic.

Not only is the Destiny a deferred solution to trauma, it is also a confused archetype of it. Other questions raised at the end of *Talents* include: Will the conditions on a new planet stop the cycle of violence that originated on Earth? Can settling an extrasolar planet really change anything about human nature? These questions hint at a structural component to the Destiny that may exist alongside its concerns with time. Olamina, believing that she will
never achieve her utopia on Earth, insists on the Destiny’s necessity: instead of turning inward and fortifying, she proposes going outward to the stars for humanity to have a future. However, Olamina’s logic, even though it seems to reject the notion of a secure inside, actually reinscribes the inside-outside paradigm, with the wall now between planets; extrasolar colonization simply creates another type of interior in the form of the new world. Thus, the Destiny, due to its future orientation, may resemble a temporal answer to trauma, but its modus operandi is a change of place. In the most negative light, the Destiny may merely provide new scenery for humanity to sabotage itself all over again.6 With the seemingly temporal Destiny revealing its spatial characteristics that in turn may lead to more repetition, we once again find ourselves back at Freud’s struggle to theorize trauma.

ON TRAUMA, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE

Despite what appears to be the Destiny’s concession to the unpredictable threat of traumatic repetition, Butler’s novels do more than reiterate Freud’s findings on the unknowable nature of trauma—already accepted by trauma theorists and literary critics as erasure or deferral—7 they uniquely address and complicate this unknowability with an examination of history and technology, revealing trauma’s technological depths in a way that perhaps only a work of science fiction can. Talents’ brief glimpse of the Destiny leaves us with the specter of repetition, but this repetition has a distinct technological element. The Destiny is a science fictional response to trauma, relying on imagined future technologies—procedures for suspended animation, machinery for freezing animal and human embryos, a vessel capable of crossing solar systems—to prevent another cataclysm, one more final than the Pox. However, Butler’s use of the genre conventions of science fiction amid an apocalyptic futurity actually reveals that technology cannot keep trauma from repeating; rather, technology, or more specifically, the unresolved human relation to technology, is inextricably bound up with traumatic repetition. What repeats in the Parable novels is some relation of the human to technology that is not understood or mastered; thus, the unknowability of trauma relates to something that cannot be grasped about technology. The science fictional aspects of Butler’s texts unveil some fantastic quality to the unknowability in Freudian trauma theory, in turn making Freud’s theory start to sound like science fiction.

If we take this idea back further, we can see technology in the origins of trauma theory. For much of his career, Freud focused on sexuality and the pleasure principle, but the concerns of modern, urban life were a persistent undercurrent in his work. Eventually, humanity’s inability to master the
technological issues arising from modernity and industrialization compelled Freud to take on trauma and led to his formulation of the death drive. In fact, Freud and his contemporaries first thought “traumatic neurosis” was caused by “severe mechanical concussions” or some other “gross mechanical force” such as Victorian-era railway accidents and shell shock from the Great War (Beyond 10). Freud later dismissed part of this theory because it did not account for the vagaries of shell shock, but this clash between new technologies and the human nevertheless had a foundational effect on trauma theory. Furthermore, technology continued to permeate Freud’s thinking on trauma, which transitioned from a naturalistic, cellular model of the psyche in Project for a Scientific Psychology and Beyond the Pleasure Principle to one that is explicitly technological in “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad.’” Five years after his struggle to find an appropriate theoretical framework for trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud finally settled on a piece of technology, a children’s toy consisting of a wax board and a clear plastic sheet, to explain how the psyche records new memories and stores old ones.

Hence, technology was always a part of the understanding of trauma, a relationship that Butler uniquely highlights and complicates with her depiction of the future in the Parable series. The novels’ future traumas, constituted by a certain not knowing, repeat something about technology that has never been grasped; therefore, the apocalyptic conditions are not a discrete future development but have been brewing for a long time. For instance, the Pox’s dire environmental problems are not part of the natural cycle but are caused by anthropogenic climate change, a legacy of an out-of-control Industrial Revolution. According to Freud, when trauma occurs in the future, it is a repetition of what has happened in the past, and we have already seen that the fall of Acorn unwittingly repeats Robledo’s destruction. The series’ motif of history repeating itself applies to larger historical events and trends as well since Butler is actually meditating on and critiquing America’s past when presenting her vision of the future. The most apparent example is the reinstitution of slavery during the Pox, in increasingly cruel, creative, and varied iterations. Olamina wonders, “Is that the future: Large numbers of people stuck in either [economic or sexual slavery?]” (Butler Sower 37), juxtaposing a vision of the future with what was long considered a dead practice. Company towns and economic colonies are allowed to operate with impunity, and many destitute people are mired in debt slavery or indentured servitude. Sexual slavery ranges from the coerced polygamy of desperately poor women to the forced prostitution of kidnapped children. Meanwhile, Jarret’s Crusaders turn Acorn into Camp Christian, a reeducation camp in name but really a concentration camp that revives the
practices of plantation-style slavery; such camps where prisoners are forced into hard labor under brutal conditions eventually become widespread.

What these forms of revived slavery have in common with each other and the historical version of slavery is technology. The transatlantic slave trade can be seen as an unwanted encounter with technology wielded by colonizing Europeans; in the mid-fifteenth century, the newly invented compass and caravel allowed Portuguese explorers to reach West Africa, and firearms helped them subdue their human cargo. Later, the invention of the cotton gin exponentially increased the demand for slaves in the South’s plantations, where slave owners continued to use technologically enhanced methods of control, including whips, brands, spiked metal collars, and iron bits, to subjugate and punish slaves. Meanwhile, in the Parable novels, the technology used to enslave and torture millions of people hundreds of years ago return in upgraded forms; for example, electrical shock-producing collars are a high-tech combined update to neck shackles and the slave driver’s whip, capable of disciplining dozens of people at once with the touch of a button.

Thus, the advanced science and technology that clearly play a role in the trauma of the future are extrapolated from past and existing models, but when Butler imagines this technocentric future, she is repeating a human relationship to technology that has never been fully controlled. Another example is the drug Paracetco, which helps users focus but causes the unintended birth defect of Hyperempathy Syndrome in their children. This devastating yet accidental side effect illustrates how this drug was never understood or mastered by its original users, and the next generation repeats and suffers the consequences: people born with this disorder are sought out and even captured by the owners of the reestablished factory towns and plantations because hyperempathy makes them easier to control—and for the sadistically inclined, more fun to punish.

Repetition has an undeniable technological element, but more than that, every attempt to overcome repetition is also bound up with some sort of technological structure. The Robledo residents rely on technology for protection, but the Lazor wire and other innovations to their wall fail to protect the neighborhood when an armored truck barrels through the gate. Robledo represents the failure of advanced technology, defeated by the unexpected and unorthodox use of an older technology (with gas prices so high, most people do not drive automobiles). In order to avoid the same fate as Robledo—but also partly out of necessity and lack of opportunity—the new community of Acorn embraces a preindustrial existence. With its emphasis on communal living in nature, it evokes a pretechnological Eden, especially with its thorny plant wall, a living alternative to the inorganic
materials of the Robledo wall. This concerted attempt to overcome repetition not only fails, but this failure—that is, this repetition—is brought about by technology: “That Friday, seven maggots came crawling out of the hills and through our thorn fence toward us” (Butler *Talents* 186). Maggots are cutting-edge armed and armored tanks that make little work of trampling Acorn’s living wall. Acorn is brought down by technology, while technology cannot defend Robledo; therefore, Acorn repeats Robledo while also being a reversal of it.

When technology has not been mastered, it can threaten and destroy as easily as it can protect and aid, despite its original intent. While there have been plenty of positive scientific and technological advancements developed for the Destiny, Earth’s first starship is troublingly called the *Christopher Columbus*, evoking the controversial explorer’s own ships and recalling the technologies of early European imperialism and the slave trade. The *Christopher Columbus* is a piece of future technology that threatens to repeat some relation to the earlier technology that has never been tamed, no matter how much Olamina resists: “This ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It’s not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch” (Butler *Talents* 406). It foreshadows humanity’s inability to let go of its destructive past, invoking a historical trauma that may follow the colonists beyond the solar system. In this light, even the celebratory repetitive aspects of the Destiny—“It is to leap into the heavens / Again and again” (Butler *Talents* 276)—can take on a sinister connotation. Thus, the human relation to technology is almost aporetic, or at least it appears to be a series of deferrals with mastery just out of reach.

The *Parable* books demonstrate not only the unknowability of trauma, but the novels’ science fiction conventions in particular reveal the technological heart of trauma’s unknowability; trauma’s spatial and temporal unlocatability may be connected to humanity’s unresolved, unknowable, perhaps even estranged relationship to technology. This complicated relationship is evident in the *Parable* novels, but there are clues to it as well in Freud’s theory, which actually starts to resemble Butler’s science fiction. In fact, before introducing his consciousness model in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud inadvertently yet accurately describes the purpose of speculative and science fictions, warning his readers, “what follows is speculation, often far-fetched speculation,” adding that it is “an attempt to follow out an idea consistently, out of curiosity to see where it will lead” (26). Moreover, Freud is haunted by the idea of an annihilated future, perhaps unsurprising given his belief in the death drive, but like Butler, he fuses such a future with technology. He gets the closest to articulating Butler’s vision of apocalyptic futurity—“here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones
and ashes of our cities” (Sower 222)—at the end of Civilization and Its Discontents: “Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man” (154–155). Freud wrote these prescient words in 1930, anticipating the horrors that would come with the rise of Hitler, but this technological “control over the forces of nature” that can eradicate humanity also foreshadows nuclear capability long before the development of the atomic bomb. This weapon of mass destruction that Freud anticipates is not a discrete phenomenon; it is the return of an earlier, unmastered human encounter with technology, like the railway disasters and shell shock that Freud witnessed traumatize so many in the past. Perhaps it is impossible for humanity to truly master technology and its incalculable ramifications, but the lack of a definitive resolution to Butler’s series as well as Freud’s philosophy—“But who can foresee with what success and with what result?” (Civilization 155)—thrusts this problem, along with the rest of the Destiny, to the future.

RESISTANCE THROUGH THE LIFE DRIVE

Whether it is through the endless, aporetic struggle between the life and death drives or the Destiny’s untested ability to help humanity grow out of its self-destructive impulses, both Freud and Butler have uncertain, possibly unresolvable endings in mind, with the obliteration or continuation of human life intertwined with technology. With this perspective of an unknowable future, we turn to Butler’s own unfinished writing. The preparations for the Christopher Columbus’s launch were never meant to be the ending to the Parable series; Butler had at least one more novel in mind, Parable of the Trickster, that would have chronicled the first Earthseed colony in space and thus addressed many of the questions about the Destiny. Starting after the publication of Talents and continuing until her death in 2006, Butler worked on this final installment, producing about 1,500 pages of false starts that never added up to a complete novel. With her repeated attempts to write the third novel, Butler appeared to be suffering from “archive fever,” wherein the elements of traumatic futurity, including repetition and the death drive, were enacted on the level of her writing, in the very act of her writing. And because these fragments do not contain the complete story of the Destiny, Butler’s response to traumatic repetition and unlocatability, they cannot pierce trauma’s unknowable nature, including what is ungraspable about the human relation to technology. But another way to consider this incomplete novel is as Butler’s testimony to trauma’s unlocatability and her resistance to a traumatized future that is predetermined by the Destiny.
Butler felt overwhelmingly compelled to finish the story of the Destiny: “I want—need—to write Trickster” (OEB 2070). Butler’s single-minded determination and obsessive writing and rewriting of *Trickster* are characteristic of what Jacques Derrida calls archive fever: “It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive […]” (91). Derrida’s description of archive fever is remarkably similar to Butler’s self-assessment of her writing: “I keep imagining that the drought is over and I’ve finally got a story, and the ghost that I imagine to be a story keeps dissolving away. Why? Why does it happen and how can I stop it from happening, prevent it from happening?” (OEB 2500). While Butler is not archiving per se, her writing is characterized by the same compulsive drive that Derrida describes. Searching for just the right scenario to undergird her narrative, Butler threw every obstacle and challenge she could imagine at her colonists. One version is about a “transmigrating immortal” who adopts the role of “guardian angel” for the colonists (OEB 2209), while another abandoned plot is a murder mystery, but with “hallucinations, deepening religious differences, the struggle to live on another world with no back-up, and power struggles” (OEB 2217). But the majority of the drafts are iterations of the following scenario:

TRICKSTER, TEACHER is the story of Imara Hope Lucas’s struggle to survive her blindness and help her extrasolar colony (totally and permanently isolated from Earth), to survive its spreading epidemic of telepathy (of absolute truth, of shared nightmares and hallucinations, of alienation through forced intimacy, of terrible addictive unity, of zero privacy) all coupled with nearly pathological homesickness. (OEB 2127)

The compulsive and repetitive aspects of Butler’s archive fever are evident in her numerous permutations of this setting, with only slight changes differentiating them. For example, versions centered on the blindness epidemic explore both the gradual and sudden onsets of the condition and, in one draft, blindness only affects black people (OEB 2107). Likewise, one of the numerous telepathy scenarios features just the women developing the ability, while in another one, it is spread through touch (OEB 2143).

Butler exhaustively explored these and even more narrative dramas across 186 fragmentary drafts—some only a couple of pages long, others spanning several chapters—all of which she eventually discarded. These cast-off drafts resonate with what Derrida believes is the anarchiving, or self-
cannibalizing, nature of the archive, a consequence of the archive’s innate death drive. By reading Butler’s *Trickster* drafts, especially the acts of their repeated writing and discarding, as archive fever, I show how Butler was still motivated by what is unknowable in trauma while reenacting the death drive. For instance, the drafts’ frequent figure of homesickness, which Butler conceived as “phantom-limb pain” from an “incomplete amputation” from Earth (OEB 2127), recalls archive fever’s “irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (Derrida 91). While homesickness may mean different things for Butler and Derrida, both versions have the idea of origins in common, which recalls the Destiny’s objective of locating and mastering traumatic repetition.

However, Butler’s drafts never got far enough to reveal the outcome of the Destiny, which is an ongoing process, not one that is completed simply upon landing on a new planet. Olamina envisions the sublimated cooperation first necessary to leave Earth continuing on the new planet, with people coming together this time to contend with the hardships of extrasolar life, in pursuit of the Destiny’s long-term goals “to live and to thrive” in their new home and eventually even “become new beings” (Butler *Talents* 276). In the plots involving mass telepathy and blindness, Butler hinted at some of the ways humanity can evolve, but it is safe to assume that humanity’s transformation will always entail an altered relationship to technology. In her plans for *Trickster*, Butler lists technology as one of the “bags from which linked dramas may be scooped” (OEB 2211), and even when the thematics of technology is not overtly expressed in her drafts, it is invariably, implicitly present because human life outside of Earth is only possible with advanced technology and science. Any version of the Destiny involves the entwining of technology with the future, which may shed some light on the title of the trilogy’s final novel. Unlike *Sower* and *Talents*, *Trickster* is not drawn from the Bible but from African and Native American folklore. Butler planned for the titular trickster to be either a leader or the new world itself, someone or something that is not what it appears to be (OEB 2070). In the same vein, the trickster can be the figure of technology, perhaps stretched to limits never imagined on Earth. In several drafts, the colonists live inside domes due to the planet’s lack of breathable atmosphere, illustrating how technology becomes integral for survival; unlike in Acorn, the settlers cannot live off the land because the planet’s natural resources are not compatible with humans, so there is more reliance on technology than ever before in human history. But will this necessary technology always protect its human creators, or will it somehow be changed by the planet itself and become something new altogether? The Destiny, then, may alter humanity’s relationship to technology, but because there is not a single complete draft or even a clear intended ending to the
trilogy, we cannot know if people will ever master technology, especially if its already unforeseen consequences become further complicated with the trickster’s involvement.

Do Butler’s *Trickster* fragments reveal anything beyond traumatic repetition? While it can be argued that Butler’s writing anarchives itself and that the uncertainty of the ending means that there is no future, another way to approach these unfinished drafts is to read the Destiny model itself instead of reading within the model as failure: that is, the unresolved fate of the Destiny is the actual archetype of futurity that is inscribed within the Destiny. *Trickster* is supposed to narrate the progress of Earthseed’s Destiny, which is designed to save humanity from extinction and consequently the death drive, resolving the issue of traumatic repetition in the process, but Butler’s inability to complete the story does not constitute a narrative failure but reveals a problematic aspect of the Destiny itself. While survival via the Destiny is possible in the future, it is not yet claimed in the same manner as death’s repetition or return: “On a living world, / Only death / Is foreordained” (OEB 2214). Therefore, the Destiny only defers the unavoidable death that plagues humanity, which suggests that the Destiny itself is predestined as trauma. Yet Butler rejects this fate, with the incomplete novel’s title also signaling the unsuitability of the Destiny model. While morally ambiguous, tricksters represent great growth and change, fully embodying the Earthseed philosophy that “God is Change.” In a religion centered on change and adaptability, it is not surprising that even fundamental aspects of its doctrine are subject to revision, something that Olamina never accepts yet her husband is able to predict almost immediately. The notion of change immanent in *Trickster* also beckons to a new, changed paradigm as the only way to survive and become new beings. By leaving the ending to her series open, Butler allows for the possibility of hope in a sort of Schrödingerean abeyance that rejects humanity’s inevitable death.

Therefore, although Butler’s unfruitful, abandoned writing of *Trickster* may seem like a product of archive fever and repeat a death drive problem, it is actually an important form of resistance that constitutes a mode of survival. The problematization in her writing enacts a different form of survival than that narrated in the two published *Parable* novels—namely, the life drive. The fragments offer their own kind of testimony that allows for a type of writing that is more akin to the life drive than the death drive, one that rejects the notion of trauma as fate by leaving things unwritten. In *Sower* and *Talents*, death is always on the horizon, and survival just seems to be a deferral of death, while the incomplete third novel suggests a form of survival unclaimed by death. By not finishing *Trickster*, Butler offers the possibility of an alternative, an adaptive mode of survival that hints at hope, at life.
IV. CONCLUSION

During some of their most desperate moments in Camp Christian, Olamina tells her followers to learn all they can, a reminder of Earthseed’s stance that knowledge can shape change: “We’ve survived as well as we have because we keep learning” (Butler Talents 27). Meanwhile, a line of not knowing, of the unlocatability of trauma, passes through Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents, terminating in a final bit of uncertainty that is inscribed in the writing of the incomplete Parable of the Trickster. While faulty knowledge about the spatial and temporal nature of trauma has often endangered the characters’ lives, this final unknowability that results from the unfinished drafts is not a failure. If Earthseed preaches that knowledge is necessary for survival, then this unknowability is a form of knowledge that rejects the flawed model of futurity that is the Destiny, which always has within it the possibility of obliteration. On the other hand, the uncertainty that defines Butler’s testimony in the act of her writing is a different possibility, one that can be considered a new mode of survival. This possibility of persevering is hinted in one of the dedications to Trickster: “The future” (OEB 2354).

NOTES

1. The “OEB” citations refer to the folder numbers from “The Octavia E. Butler Papers.”
2. While I was able to read through some of Butler’s research notes and even a couple of her college papers at the Huntington, given the sheer vastness of her archives, I was unable to determine her relationship to Freudian or other psychoanalytic theory.
3. This talk of walls is just one way the Parable books resonate with our current political climate, and a lot of attention has been paid recently to the similarities between Butler’s imagination and our reality. For example, Abby Aguirre explores this connection in a recent article from The New Yorker.
4. This “living wall” not only illustrates the community’s practice of salvaging and repurposing useful materials around them but also represents the value it places on environmental sustainability and life in general.
5. Indeed, trauma is defined by its return: Cathy Caruth writes that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2).
6. Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy sets up similar unresolvable aporias. The same delay structure is apparent with the spacefaring, gene-trading Oankali staving off eventual obsolescence and extinction with a perpetual search for genetic diversity in the galaxy. Likewise, we do not know if moving from Earth to Mars can guarantee the long-term survival of the human resisters who refuse to have the genes of the destructive human contradiction removed.
7. Please refer to the work of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man for evidence of this thinking.
8. This trend has not stopped with the abolition of slavery. Mark Dery writes of how “technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)” (180). And gun violence can also be added to the list.

9. Darko Suvin defines science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement,” and I find estrangement to be a useful description for the human relation to technology that cannot quite be grasped or mastered, a theme often explored in science fiction.

10. At one point, Butler considered a spin-off series that would span four books. *Parable of the Trickster* is the title Butler most frequently gravitated toward in her many drafts.

11. In this May 19, 2002, journal entry, Butler is referring to another novel, *Spiritus*, an attempt to switch gears and focus on another project for the time being, but it is clear that her writer’s block had no intention of letting up.

**WORKS CITED**


Octavia E. Butler’s Hugo and Nebula award-winning “Bloodchild” is the story of Gan, a young Terran man, who was chosen at his birth to be the consort of a politically and physically powerful Tlic alien, T’Gatoi. Gan’s family, like all Terrans, live within the bounds of the Preserve on the Tlic home world. Several generations prior to the story’s opening, Terrans arrived as refugees from Earth, only to find that their new world was as dangerous in its way as the old. The Tlic, described with a combination of snake-like and insect-like features, are three meters long, razor-clawed, and armed with teeth and stingers. Their reproductive cycle requires implanting their eggs in the abdomen of “convenient, big, warm-blooded animals” (Butler 5). Terrans, without the safeguards that the planet’s indigenous life evolved, prove to be better, more fertile hosts than any others the ailing Tlic have been able to find. The Tlic capture the Terrans, drug them with their infertile eggs, and force them to reproduce themselves and act as hosts for hungry Tlic
children. Even after the Terrans prove their sentience and are granted the opportunity to live in the Preserve, they are prevented from owning guns or vehicles, due to their propensity for assassinating their captors.

When “Bloodchild” opens, this past is prologue, and Gan knows it better than most, since he has travelled outside the Preserve among the Tlic. He has watched T’Gatoi bargain with other Tlic over Terran lives. T’Gatoi believes her intentions are good when she works to join Terran and Tlic families together. Gan, however, knows that Terrans are still treated as possessions, status symbols, and breeding opportunities. He has grown up sheltered, coddled, yet always in the full knowledge that his body will be used to ensure another’s political career and posterity. Sweta Narayan argues that Butler’s short stories “address topics where the hurt and fear is close to the surface, not without fear, but without flinching” (438). In “Bloodchild,” Gan must face his fears surrounding pregnancy: the possibility of a traumatic birth and, perhaps worse, of losing T’Gatoi as his partner.

Anxiety centered on reproduction—from romantic partnerships through sexual relationships, to pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing—permeates Butler’s fiction. Several of Butler’s protagonists suffer from genetic conditions which they fear passing on to their children. In “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” Lynn resents her parents for risking her birth and passing on a horrific and incurable genetic disease. Likewise, Lauren Olamina suffers through her Hyperempathy Syndrome in *Parable of the Sower*, and she debates whether it is a gift or a curse of genetics. Butler’s fiction also explores relationships in which protagonists search for, but ultimately cannot realize, deep personal connections. In *Dawn*, Lilith and Joseph cannot have sex or even touch each other once they are sexually bonded through their ooloi partner, Nikanj. Though Lilith comes to love and value Nikanj and her two Oankali mates, she also hates the feeling of disconnection from her human partner. This combination of love and revulsion is echoed in how the half-human, half-Oankali construct children are regarded by the human community. Finally, Butler’s fiction examines troubled relationships between parents and children. In *Wild Seed*, Anwanyu and Doro’s fundamental conflict arises from their respective parenting strategies: Doro wishes to control his children, while Anwanyu tries to nurture them, yet both fret over how best to shape their children’s lives. In each of these examples, the characters’ biological drive toward reproduction is tempered by apprehension surrounding the process of having and raising children. Yet nowhere is the theme of reproductive anxiety more clear than in “Bloodchild.”

On the night that T’Gatoi intends to implant Gan with her eggs, Gan witnesses the outcome that awaits him. Another man who has hosted his
Tlic consort’s eggs, Bram Lomas, arrives at Gan’s door in extremity, just as the hatched grubs have begun to eat their way out of his body. Gan grew up knowing he would be the host for T’Gatoi’s eggs. He believes he has come to terms with the inevitable pain of this kind of “birth” (Butler 10). Yet when T’Gatoi demands that Gan hold the struggling, screaming Lomas down, the reality of the situation forces Gan to face how deeply terrifying the process is. T’Gatoi’s swift operation on Lomas, undertaken with apparent relish with claws and teeth, strikes Gan as both terrifying and alien: “something else, something worse. And I wasn’t ready to see it” (10). Afterwards, shaken, Gan vomits remembering the “red worms crawling over redder human flesh” (10). Though Butler crafts highly effective body horror in the birthing scene, the anxiety of reproduction in “Bloodchild” reaches its peak when Gan chooses to accept T’Gatoi’s eggs with a more mature understanding of the process: “Yet I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life. I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in” (18). This moment, deftly eroticized, represents the height of Gan’s vulnerability, not despite but because of its intimate mood. Gan approaches T’Gatoi in his room like a virgin bride with only a theoretical understanding of sexuality and childbearing, and T’Gatoi responds with gentleness but also a firm and unbending control over the situation. In interviews, Butler links Gan’s experience with “a class who, like women throughout most of history, are valued chiefly for their reproductive capacities” (Helford np). Gan’s journey from carefully cultivated ignorance to clear-eyed acceptance involves struggling for acknowledgment in a society where his partner is more privileged and acts as the head of their household. Butler explains that her story is not about a man proving himself a woman’s equal by usurping her reproductive role but about a man “choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties” (31). Gan’s choice in becoming pregnant is about love first and foremost, though elements of coercion and politicking echo throughout the story. The anxiety at the heart of the story is an anxiety borne both of the toll of pregnancy and birth on the body, but also an anxiety that arises from a fear of emotional vulnerability with a partner.

Butler’s story is widely praised for its approach to a man becoming pregnant, but it is far from unique in exploring the repercussions of a man finding himself undergoing a process largely confined to women. While there have been comedic film treatments of men becoming pregnant, such as *Junior* (1994), these tend to focus on men becoming pregnant as a joke, experiment, or to prove themselves, rather than “as an act of love,” as Butler outlines in her Afterword (31). In contrast to a man becoming pregnant
as fodder for comedy, there exists a widely popular genre of texts about male pregnancy in which the dramatic tension arises from the frightening intimacy of both the physical changes to his body and the challenge to his romantic connection with his partner.

In fan writing communities, mpreg, or male pregnancy, is a genre of stories in which a cisgendered male character becomes pregnant. The emotional tenor of mpreg can range from unremitting body horror through saccharine domestic romance. The pregnancy that the male character experiences is often stereotypical in its symptoms and progression, yet because the pregnancy has been imposed (sometimes horrifically, sometimes beatifically) on a male body, fan writers defamiliarize how women experience pregnancy. Kristina Busse argues that mpreg “allows a female writer to play out themes of female bodies, concerns of gender in relationships, and issues of reproduction” (np). Mpreg stories linger over pregnancy’s horrors and its pleasures in a safely distanced fictional space. Just as in “Bloodchild,” Butler extends “both the emotional potency of motherhood and the physical possibility of pregnancy beyond women” (Lilvis 7), fan writers of mpreg stories conduct “a thought experiment about gender, sexuality, and the male body” (Ingram-Waters 1.1). Amanda Thibodeau comments that reading Butler’s short story “as a mere reverse-metaphor for patriarchal oppression” omits the important ways in which “Bloodchild” challenges heteronormativity (271). I argue, however, that even beyond the queer dynamics of Gan and T’Gatoi’s relationship, there is nothing “mere” about the reversal. In order for women’s pain and women’s emotional reality to become visible, it must first be reinscribed onto a visible body. Male bodies offer the default which provides that visibility. By linking Butler’s fiction with the ongoing production of mpreg stories in fan communities, I show how writers explore themes of reproductive anxiety by shifting the locus of anxiety onto male bodies. Critics have approached Butler’s short story from three main metaphorical vantage points: as a story about slavery, about parasitism, and about a queer relationship between two “very different beings” (Butler, “Afterword” 30). I argue that these readings intersect when viewed through the lens of reproductive anxiety.

MULTIPLE METAPHORIC POSSIBILITIES: SLAVERY, PARASITISM, AND QUEER BODIES

Butler definitively dismisses the idea that “Bloodchild” is about slavery in her Afterword: “It isn’t” (30). Nevertheless, Alys Eve Weinbaum makes a compelling argument that Gan’s choice to accept T’Gatoi’s eggs is less a moment of considered agency and more the effects of his lifelong dependence on the Tlic in general and T’Gatoi in particular. On a societal scale, Terrans
live largely contained within the Preserve on the Tlic home world. Tlic desperate for reproductive guarantees see no reason Terrans should not be “courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them” (Butler 2). As a result, the Terrans’ reproductive labor is forcibly appropriated and exploited (Weinbaum 50). Though T’Gatoi’s political faction controls the doling out of Terran hosts, and she tries to make equitable choices, nevertheless the choices are hers and not the Terrans’. When Gan’s brother, Qui, tries to run away, there is no “away” he can run to; there is no safety or freedom for him either within or beyond the bounds of the Preserve (Butler 11). Furthermore, what agency Terrans have in their own reproductive lives is superficial at best. T’Gatoi introduced Gan’s parents to each other (4). Butler implies that T’Gatoi encouraged the Terran pairing that would yield offspring most valuable to her cause. In return, Lien promised one of her children to T’Gatoi, not out of selfless gratitude, but because “she would have to give one of us to someone, and she preferred T’Gatoi to some stranger” (4). As Lien’s bitterness grows, she has no way to express her feelings of being coerced and caged other than by refusing T’Gatoi’s life-extending eggs and “to age before she had to” (1). While Gan’s sisters may escape his fate to act as host, it is difficult to imagine that they would be allowed to refuse to bear their own children. In extremity, Tlic will do what it takes to “be sure of getting another generation” of Terrans (5). The Terrans are a resource for the Tlic, which they use to increase their status and their reproductive capacity.

Within this system, the extent to which Gan can freely give his consent is limited at best. Weinbaum points out that T’Gatoi raised Gan “from infancy to be her sexual partner and surrogate ‘mother’ to her young” (60). Gan grows up knowing that he will host T’Gatoi’s eggs, and unlike his brother Qui and his mother Lien, Gan accepts—perhaps blindly—T’Gatoi’s political priorities. Because Gan has known T’Gatoi since his birth, he finds it impossible to be frightened of her. He sees this as an advantage for both Terrans and Tlic, and he defends to both species T’Gatoi’s choice to have Terran children adopted into the Tlic families where they will one day be expected to act as hosts (Butler 4). Weinbaum views Gan’s position as the inevitable result of T’Gatoi raising him to accept her dominance and the relationship she imposes on him (60). She further suggests that Gan’s consent is ultimately immaterial, because Gan is a privileged member of the minority and oppressed species. Therefore, Weinbaum contends that when Gan “consents’ to [his] exploitation,” it is a meaningless consent because he exists “side by side with those who are forcibly enslaved and rendered disposable” (51). Even Gan understands that he cannot meaningfully say no to T’Gatoi; the only concession he asks is that she ask him first before
assuming he will be willing (Butler 15). Gan’s refusal isn’t on the table. T’Gatoi’s acceptance that he is worthy of being asked is.

Weinbaum’s argument, like Butler’s story, hinges on issues of reproductive power as it pertains to consent. I suggest that Butler’s focus on Gan’s consent has more power in the context of Gan’s reproductive anxiety. Sarah Madsen Hardy questions the slavery interpretation by pointing out that “if [Gan] were merely a slave, to be used as an animal, his consent would be irrelevant” (np). However, the issue of Gan’s consent is the through line of the story. Lien’s anxious hostility in the opening scene arises from her understanding that T’Gatoi intends to impregnate Gan that night. She does not tell Gan the truth, but only insists she didn’t “sell him for eggs” (Butler 3). She denies Gan’s power of consent as much as T’Gatoi because she does not explain the situation fully to him. She assumes he will be used unwillingly. Likewise, T’Gatoi first addresses Lien’s anxieties by “humouring her” and stinging her into unconsciousness—a clear violation of Lien’s brittle boundaries (3). Structurally, then, the story opens with several examples of nonconsensual behavior. After Gan assists in Lomas’s birth, however, he threatens to kill himself with his outlawed rifle. T’Gatoi first responds by manipulating Gan with guilt over her children’s future, and then threatens to break off their relationship, but despite these tactics, she does wait for him to willingly ask her to use him as a host (17).

The reader can interpret Gan’s threats against T’Gatoi’s eggs or against his own life as hollow. Elyce Helford, for example, reads the story’s final words, T’Gatoi’s reassurance that she will “take care” of Gan, as suspicious or perhaps subtly threatening (np). When Gan argues to T’Gatoi that relations between Terrans and the Tlic will improve if young men are allowed to view the kind of “births” in which they will take part, Helford doubts whether T’Gatoi takes Gan’s input seriously and whether she will honor his suggestion (np). Nevertheless, the story concludes with a love scene after Gan encourages T’Gatoi to impregnate him with her eggs, and she vows to care for him and the children he will bear for her. Gan’s consent leads directly to the resolution of the crisis in his and T’Gatoi’s relationship.

My reading of the anxiety of reproduction does not erase the parallels with slavery, which are inescapable. But by putting them in the context of reproductive anxiety, the power of the story’s resolution grows out of the ambiguities established in Gan and T’Gatoi’s relationship and from the mutual vulnerabilities that they display to each other. Butler does not resolve “Bloodchild” with Lomas urging Gan to flee what he has gone through, nor with Gan murdering T’Gatoi with the rifle his father (who died under similar circumstances) left to him. Instead, faced with the reality of his position as T’Gatoi’s chosen partner, Gan struggles to come to terms with what he
means to her. Is Gan interchangeable with other hosts she might pick, like his sister Hoa? Is there room in their relationship for Gan to act as T’Gatoi’s romantic partner and equal? When Gan embraces her, he is also embracing the pain of birth that he knows will result. He willingly takes on that promised pain as a way of making himself vulnerable to T’Gatoi and to demonstrate his love. He faces his reproductive anxiety and overcomes it for T’Gatoi’s sake. T’Gatoi returns his promise by accepting as her partner an individual who may instigate a society-wide debate on what parenting should look like between Tlic and Terrans. Gan’s insistence on his independence and equality as T’Gatoi’s partner makes her, and by extension, her children, vulnerable. Yet she too overcomes her anxiety to soothe Gan’s fears and reinforce their relationship.

The second prevalent interpretation of “Bloodchild,” again suggested by Butler in her Afterword, is that the Tlic are a science fictional representation of a harmful parasitic relationship. Butler was inspired to write “Bloodchild” to deal with her terror of botflies, and as such, the parasitism metaphor is perhaps closest to the surface of the story (31). Thibodeau argues that when Gan threatens to shoot himself, he presents T’Gatoi with irrefutable evidence that she and her people are as dependent on the Terrans for their reproductive capacity as the Terrans are on the Tlic for their refuge:

He makes it clear that he has control, and that the power of decision—to kill himself, to kill the Tlic, to accept the role of host, or to send T’Gatoi, heavy with an egg, to implant his unknowing sister—rests with him. In demanding that she acknowledge his choice, Gan forces T’Gatoi to recognize the parasitic nature of their relationship. (Thibodeau 270)

T’Gatoi admits that Gan has the power to harm her and her unborn young as much, if not more, than the birth process will hurt him. Before they had Terrans to impregnate, the Tlic were succumbing to their evolutionary arms race with host animals that could eradicate their eggs. If Gan decides to kill himself after T’Gatoi impregnates him, then he will kill her children as well, and perhaps usher in a mutually assured destruction between Terran and Tlic.

Maria Aline Ferreira examines tropes of parasitism in Butler’s work and concludes that Butler’s fiction promotes characters who use strategies which involve “the understanding and assimilation of otherness” and “the negotiation and incorporation of hybridity” (401). In “Bloodchild,” the Terrans and the Tlic have achieved a fragile but stable symbiosis. If either side of the detente characterizes their mutual dependency as mere parasitism, then the balance may not hold. Sophia Booth Magnone frames
Gan’s choice as the result of the slow domestication of the Terrans (109). Magnone’s article bridges the gap between critics’ views of the Terrans as slaves and the Tlic as parasites. If Terrans can reconcile themselves to the Tlic’s reproductive demands, both species will change, but both will benefit. By blending their family together, Gan and T’Gatoi are paving a way for both the Tlic and the Terrans to see beyond a parasitic relationship between the two species.

However, as Madsen Hardy points out, Butler “does not say that ‘Bloodchild’ is a story about parasitism, but rather writing the story was a way to ease her fear of them” (np). Gan’s fear of T’Gatoi’s eggs as parasites feeding upon his flesh is very real, but in pregnancy, the fetus acts as a parasite as well. Women’s reproductive anxiety is highly rational. Laura Bollinger writes that Butler’s story “offers a horrific revisioning of pregnancy” (332), but this claim depends on assuming that pregnancy is not already horrific in its details. “After all,” Madsen Hardy argues, “babies occupy and are nourished by the bodies of their mothers […] in a way analogous to how parasites occupy and are nourished by the bodies of their hosts” (np). Magnone, too, strips pregnancy down to its biological realities by writing that “one body becomes a fleshy case to shelter and nourish the bodies of others; in delivery, the case is opened, the new lives torn free” (119). The birth that Butler describes is bloody and horrifying, but no more so than the conclusion of many human pregnancies. The theme of reproductive anxiety in “Bloodchild” is the theme of parasitism: Gan’s fear is the same as any pregnant person’s fear, the fear of being “vulnerable, susceptible to being hurt and used” (Pasco et al. 249).

Through the lens of reproductive anxiety, the parasitism reading moves beyond the physical dependence the two species have on each other. When Gan threatens to end his own life, he forces T’Gatoi to admit her emotional connection to him, that is, to confess her care for him as a person, rather than as a warm body. While Gan’s coming of age is foregrounded in the story by his first-person point of view, T’Gatoi’s character development pivots on reproductive anxiety as well. T’Gatoi’s career in the world beyond the Preserve has been a political role dedicated to improving how Terrans are treated and adopted into Tlic families. She believes that Terrans should not be distributed as slaves or status symbols. Nevertheless, she feels fully entitled to Gan’s reproductive capacity. She pinches Gan to assess his body fat and encourages him to drink more than his share of the narcotic egg without informing him why (Butler 1). Indeed, she acts much like the other Tlic that Gan has encountered who cannot hide their “desperate eagerness” to have a Terran made available to them (2). It is only when Gan threatens suicide that T’Gatoi must face her own facile words that the Tlic do not view
Terrans as animals. She may believe that she does not, but Gan’s perspective on the world outside the Preserve suggests that many Tlic do. Gan demands that she accept the risk of a partner: that she allow herself to be vulnerable.

Witnessing the failure of Lomas’s relationship with his N’Tlic catalyzes the emotional crisis in Gan and T’Gatoi’s relationship. Gan frames his relationship with T’Gatoi to himself as one based on love and care, but he can only negotiate the terms of their partnership after she recognizes her own involvement. He cannot refuse T’Gatoi’s advances or his own role as host without losing her as a partner. Though T’Gatoi loves and prefers Gan, she informs him that her children are more important to her than the body that hosts them: she will go to his sister, who would eagerly accept her, rather than lose the chance at implanting her eggs. She plans to go to Hoa because she must “do it to someone tonight,” but she reacts with hurt to Gan’s rejection and his fear (Butler 18).

The risk that T’Gatoi takes is one of “Tlic futurity” (Weinbaum 60): Gan may choose not to carry her eggs to term, or he may kill himself. But I argue that the greatest risk of all is to T’Gatoi’s sense of herself within her partnership with Gan. He asks her to change her ways and to accept his input. He has “planted the thought in her mind. Chances were it would grow, and eventually she would experiment” with Terrans viewing births (Butler 19). By being with him, she risks changing how she views parenting and family. She must acknowledge both as valid in order to put her eggs into his care. The risk for T’Gatoi is crystallized when Gan demands to keep his father’s rifle: “A shudder went through her and she made a hissing sound of distress” (17). When she releases the rifle back to him, she consents to the danger he represents. T’Gatoi, as much as Gan, must demonstrate commitment and vulnerability before their relationship emerges on stronger, more mature terms.

Queer readings of “Bloodchild” have an abundance of bodies to choose from: Gan, the pregnant man, placed in a “woman’s” role by T’Gatoi’s impregnation; and T’Gatoi herself, as an alien Other whom Gan loves. Thibodeau argues, furthermore, that by explicitly situating the Terrans not as settlers but as exiles, Butler challenges the science fictional trope of a triumphant, colonialist expansion from Earth. Terrans flee to the Tlic home world as abject refugees rather than as discoverers and conquerors of virgin territory. Thibodeau characterizes Butler’s story as “deeply uncomfortable,” especially for audiences “accustomed to appealing and masculine heroes” (263). Gan, like his people, is at the mercy of the Tlic. But this does not set the stage for a rebellion, even a fruitless one. Rebellious sentiment exists, as Qui demonstrates, but most Terrans are resigned like Lien or accepting like Gan and Hoa. Even Lomas, who suffers the most during the story, only wants to
be reunited with his Tlic consort. The Tlics’ mercy, in the form of T’Gatoi, is tempered with parental affection and even romantic love. Butler presents the Tlics’ progression from viewing Terrans first as animals, later as sentient beings capable of reaching an “unusual accommodation” (Afterword 31), and finally as potential equals. T’Gatoi’s benevolence may be self-serving, but is not something to be spurned, rather to be mediated and accommodated. This is the work that Gan undertakes when he asks T’Gatoi in all sincerity, “What are you? […] What are we to you?” (Butler 15). He is genuine in his desire to understand T’Gatoi more deeply than he has been allowed to during the innocence of his childhood. In Thibodeau’s estimation, Gan “attempts to transcend his feelings of abjection and horror in order to reach a new understanding of his intimacy with T’Gatoi” (272). Gan chooses to accept rather than to struggle against his position. His emotional intimacy with T’Gatoi becomes more important to him than his own physical boundaries and body. Yet intimacy is false without reciprocation.

In Thibodeau’s queer reading of “Bloodchild,” she suggests that the symbolic alien acts as a canvas for the “projection of anxieties and desires” (267). In Gan’s case, his reproductive anxiety combines his fear of pain and subservience with his possessive desire to keep T’Gatoi for himself (Butler 19). Gan recognizes his jealousy when T’Gatoi nearly chooses his sister Hoa over him. Gan and Hoa, like Gan and Qui, are a mirrored pair in the story. Qui represents Gan’s terror and revulsion. He once viewed a Tlic birth that went badly. He tells Gan, “I saw the grubs eat their way out [of the man’s abdomen], then burrow in again, still eating” (12). Gan hates Qui for telling him the truth as Qui sees it, because it reminds Gan of his own fear. He acknowledges to himself that he “could become [Qui]” and save himself from his anxiety by sacrificing his sister instead. When given the opportunity to escape his destiny, however, he turns away at the last moment and asks T’Gatoi not to “do it” with his sister.

Hoa stands for the opposite extreme from Qui: submission without judgment. She alone of the Terrans Gan knows is comfortable being cradled in a Tlic’s many legs. She does not interpret their hold as a cage (3). Hoa, who is silent throughout the story, wants T’Gatoi unconditionally and the only action the reader sees her taking is obeying T’Gatoi’s orders (4), and she shows no curiosity about Lomas’s condition. In her, the anxiety of reproduction appears absent altogether. Gan thinks she would be “proud… not terrified” as he is (16). But Hoa would receive T’Gatoi in an even more abject position, “on the floor” where Gan has a couch to offer (18). Where Hoa represents unconditional surrender, Gan chooses T’Gatoi on the condition that she acknowledge him as her partner. As Bollinger contends, “only a choice made with full awareness of its cost can be understood as a
genuine choice of connectedness, with the alterity of both figures preserved” (335). Instead of submission to T’Gatoi, Gan demands intimacy.

The theme of reproductive anxiety in no way displaces the readings discussed above, but instead works in concert with them. Magnone contends that the “multiple metaphoric possibilities for the Tlic-human relationship do not displace each other, but rather coexist and reinforce one another” (124). Finally, reading Gan’s fear, desire, and ultimate consent through the lens of reproductive anxiety requires placing “Bloodchild” within the context of stories exploring similar thematic ground, that is, the genre of mpreg within fan writing communities.

A SHIFT TOWARD INTIMACY

My concept of reproductive anxiety arises out of my familiarity with the subgenre of mpreg in fan writing. In recent years, fan fiction has received greater critical attention, and fan studies is a growing area of scholarly interest. Many fan scholars, including myself, are ourselves fans and have roots in the fan communities about which we write. Busse and Helleckson, for example, position fan studies at the intersection of academia and fandom and believe that scholars who claim ties to both worlds can provide fruitful alternate perspectives and more complex insights because as fans, we are embedded in our field of study (25). Briefly, fan fiction consists of stories written about others’ fictional characters, whether from books, films, television shows, or other media.

Much fan fiction is romantic in nature, whether queer or heterosexual. Two or more characters are paired or, for a same-sex couple, slashed together to explore their amorous and erotic relationship. Elizabeth Woledge most thoroughly unpacks the importance of intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional connection in slash fiction. Woledge argues that whether slash fiction is explicit or not, its key feature is that it occurs in what she calls an “intimatopia,” “because its central defining feature is the exploration of intimacy” (99). She suggests that slash writers use both external, plot-driven hardships and the characters’ internal, emotionally driven fears as impulses toward increasing the characters’ affinity with one another: “The writer will do almost anything to engender intimacy, including depicting the extreme suffering of their heroes” (Woledge 110). These stories create dramatic and narrative tension by focusing on the pairing’s romantic anxiety: whether their partner accepts their feelings, and returns them; whether the wider world will accept their relationship, especially if it is forbidden in some way; and whether the obstacles between them are too difficult to overcome. In love scenes, Woledge suggests, the pairing’s sexual union is not an end in
itself so much as another “tool” to increase intimacy (103). I argue that mpreg stories use pregnancy toward the same ends. When a male character becomes pregnant in an mpreg story, reproductive anxiety is added to the romantic tension.

In mpreg stories, the method by which a man becomes pregnant is less important than the resulting impact on his relationships with the other characters, especially his romantic partner or partner-to-be. The pregnancy is “sometimes explained within the logic of the source show’s universe through magic or science, but more often just [occurs] spontaneously” (Busse np). The pregnant character may be shocked, terrified, or overjoyed, but rarely lingers on the cause, as the outcome rises to the top of his priorities. Berit Åström, investigating the genre of mpreg in Supernatural fandom, notes that the stories’ “emphasis is on interrelational and emotional aspects” (1.1). Busse notes that mpreg stories “come in all shapes and sizes and, as a result, can fulfill a vast variety of fan desires: a romantic need to create a love child between male lovers, an interest in pregnancy’s emotional or physical fallout on a partnership, or even a fascination with the horrors of forced breeding” (np). Some fan writers develop elaborate speculative worlds in which the man’s pregnancy is contextualized, including discrimination based on alternate gender hierarchies. Others write mpreg stories as erotic fantasies in which the man’s pregnancy, from conception through to carrying his partner’s offspring to the birth itself, is presented as an opportunity for sexual titillation. Many mpreg stories do both. Whether the pregnant male character has encouraged and accepted his pregnancy, as in many erotic stories, or he feels challenged and undermined as a man by the sudden surprising revelation, the pregnancy acts as a catalyst which deepens his relationship with his partner.

THE PREGNANT MAN STORY AND THE MARGINALIZED BODY

Beyond the fact of a man becoming pregnant, there are many links among mpreg stories and Butler’s “Bloodchild” which demonstrate the relevance of reproductive anxiety to both. The first of these is the transplantation of an experience highly associated with women onto a man’s body. In “Bloodchild,” Thibodeau writes, Gan “has been sheltered from the physical reality of his gendered bodily expectations, and must now face the truth of his situation” (270). Similarly, in mpreg stories, even male characters who are aware of their own reproductive capacity are often blindsided by the pregnancy itself or by the intensity of their subsequent feelings for their partner. In stories where the pregnancy is chosen, the man slowly grows to
realize the enormity of his choice. His body and his bodily autonomy are at stake in a way he never expected. As Busse writes, he becomes a “victim of biology” (np). Gan struggles to overcome a similar victimization and prove that his choices and intentions matter when choosing to partner with T’Gatoi. Finally, Butler writes in her Afterword, “I sort out my problems by writing about them” (30). Fan scholars suggest that fan authors—a large majority of them women—write mpreg stories in order to consider pregnancy from a distance, safely imposed on an impossible body. The anxiety of reproduction in mpreg stories, as in “Bloodchild,” is resolved by the characters reaching a greater state of intimacy with one another.

Fan fiction and science fiction both have the advantage of being able to use male pregnancy as a plot element without breaking their audience’s suspension of disbelief. Gregory Hampton suggests that science fiction readers are willing “to consider what would be rejected as nonsensical in any other genre” (xiv), but fan scholars have likewise pointed out that fan authors “can rely on readers accepting a world where men can get pregnant” (Åström 1.1). Mpreg readers will accept a story with no logical explanation for the pregnancy or indeed no explanation whatsoever. Once that hurdle is cleared, then, the male body becomes the focus of the story.

Gregory Hampton argues that Butler’s fiction “foregrounds the experience” of the “generally marginalized body” (xviii, italics original). In “Bloodchild,” she creates this effect by putting a young man in the position of the helpless and exploited victim. Gan is either preyed upon or seduced; his active agency is limited. In fiction, it is a woman’s body that is regularly placed in this position: to be penetrated, impregnated, and eventually injured in the process of bringing forth children. Weinbaum makes the connection between Gan and women’s bodies when she notes that either women or men can act as hosts for Tlic eggs. Therefore, she argues, “the differences among human beings are flattened and homogenized, [and] all of humanity is feminized” (61). Helford, as well, finds that “the image of the female penetrating the male and impregnating him clearly complicates the traditional gendering of sexual imagery” (np). By hosting the eggs, by being subservient to T’Gatoi’s interests, Gan’s body is equated with a woman’s marginalized body.

Likewise, the female body is replaced in an mpreg story, yet not entirely erased. In mpreg stories, pregnancy is “mapped onto the male body, bringing with it a specific, gendered discourse” (Åström 6.1). Story arcs often follow the gestation, so that the story’s emotional beats are tied to the physical symptoms of pregnancy. Men experience cravings, swollen ankles, and hormonal crying jags. It is the very stereotypicality of an mpreg pregnancy that allows the man’s body to inhabit the feminine space of pregnancy.
Women’s experiences are reduced to fictionalized clichés, while at the same time, the male character is most often presented as cis, with a “masculine gender identity that also matches their physical sex” (Ingram-Waters 4.3). (Many fan fiction stories are written about trans men becoming pregnant, but these are not widely considered to be “mpreg,” where the pregnant character’s cis identity is part of the appeal of the genre.) Therefore, the traits that Hampton observes in Butler’s fiction apply to mpreg as well: it “highlights the construction and valuing of the marginalized body” because the marginalized body is displaced and disrupted. Men’s bodies are more legible in fiction, and so when they become pregnant, their bodies are constructed as valuable and their experiences as legitimate.

Indeed, critiques of mpreg stories tend to examine the problematic way women are erased from their own stories. Mpreg stories are most commonly written about a same-sex pairing between two men. The pregnant man generally takes on a more feminine role within the partnership, whether or not that is consonant with their characterization in the source material. As a result, mpreg “replicates rather than critiques the portrayal of women by embracing stereotypical gender roles” (Busse np). Interestingly, similar charges have been levelled against “Bloodchild.” Helford quotes Jardine when she writes:

To refuse “woman” or the “feminine” as cultural and libidinal construction (as in “men’s femininity”) is, ironically, to return to metaphysical—anatomical—definitions of sexual identity. To accept a metaphorization, a symbiosis of woman, on the other hand, means risking once again the absence of women as subjects in the struggles of modernity. (np)

Either pregnant men are feminine because they are pregnant—foreclosing the possibility of a masculine experience of pregnancy and reinforcing an essentialist concept of gender—or else men usurp pregnancy from its “uniquely” feminine arena. Yet mpreg focuses on, even fetishes, pregnancy itself. In mpreg, Åström points out, the pregnant men “may be surprised to find themselves pregnant, but they are never constructed as unnatural, monstrous, or threatening. Instead the pregnancies are, most often, described as life-affirming experiences resulting in the joy of fatherhood” (1.5). Though the female body disappears, it is also celebrated and foregrounded. Thus, like Butler’s fiction, mpreg offers “an examination of the contradictory ways the body is legible in fiction” (Hampton xxiii).

Science fictional stories which explore sexuality and alternate modes of childbearing do not escape the cultural context in which they are written.
Thibodeau argues that the importance of queer science fiction is that it troubles heteronormativity, which is “both reinforced and undermined” by the speculative worlds that “may posit a livable world for queer subjects” (265). In “Bloodchild,” Butler does not reverse or erase heterosexuality but complicates it. Gan and T’Gatoi are superficially heterosexual in that they are a romantic pairing between one male- and one female-identified person. Their conflict throughout the story centers on how pregnancy will diminish Gan and benefit T’Gatoi, and the unequal resources they will commit to nurturing the children. Yet because the inequality is tilted in the female’s favor, the heteronormativity of the conflict is destabilized. While queerness hovers around the story’s margins—Thibodeau goes so far as to suggest it is Gan’s “coming out story” (269)—I argue that queerness is not what is at stake. Gan frets over political difference, over physical incompatibility, over his fear of pain, but not over his sexuality. He loves T’Gatoi, as he was raised and is expected to do. What he worries about is intimacy as it pertains to reproduction.

The pregnant man in mpreg stories faces many of the same apprehensions that Gan does in “Bloodchild.” Mpreg stories in fact reverse the “imperialist thrust” that Thibodeau discusses (267). Because the pregnancy narrative is imposed onto a man, it dispels female anxieties over loss of bodily autonomy and patriarchal narratives. “Loss of bodily authority” is an important aspect of mpreg, “just as many women are shown to do in popular cultural narratives” (Åström 5.2). The person losing his autonomy and agency—as Gan does—is a man, not a woman. Similarly, pregnancy is allowed to be depicted as terrifying or horrifying; the fears are legitimized, as are the desires. Busse argues that mpreg allows a female writer to “interrogate these ideas in a setting that allows for a certain emotional distance by divorcing the pregnancy from the female body” (np). A man’s pregnancy in mpreg stories is not the “gendered humiliation” that Magnone suggests would result from “the violent ‘feminization’ of a male body” (126). The male characters are not humiliated by the pregnancy (except, in some erotic stories, consensually). They have simply become pregnant because “sex is far from the only way of expressing intimacy” (Woledge 111).

“Bloodchild” parallels these aspects of mpreg stories in that all Terrans, like the pregnant man in mpreg stories, have become vulnerable. Speaking about Dawn, Butler noted that the men Lilith encounters are outraged because they “aren’t at the top of the hierarchy any more, biologically or sexually” (Mehaffy and Keating 63). The Terrans in “Bloodchild” experience a similar dethroning. Their exposure to Tlic desire “is surely an uncomfortable one” (Pasco et al. 250). The Terrans’ lower caste sets the stage
for Gan’s coming of age, because, as Woledge writes of slash fiction, “when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable” (110). His emotional openness with T’Gatoi and willingness to meet her in good faith make him like the “emotional hero” of the slash fiction story (Woledge 99). Madsen Hardy concludes that “T’Gatoi and Gan do—as would characters in a conventional love story—love each other, face a crisis in their relationship, and transcend their difficulties, culminating in Gan’s impregnation” (np). His pregnancy is the physical expression of the intimacy that he and T’Gatoi have reached and the resolution of their reproductive anxiety.

A LOVE STORY BETWEEN TWO VERY DIFFERENT BEINGS

When writing about the enormous leap of faith that Gan must make in order to become a partner to T’Gatoi (and to a lesser extent, for her to become a partner to him), what Butler is writing about is the anxiety about losing one’s bodily autonomy and risking one’s emotional vulnerability in a romantic partnership. The fact that these narrative concerns are addressed over and over again in fan fiction points to the trope’s ongoing influence. A man’s pregnancy provides a vehicle which reveals pregnancy in all its “precariousness and strangeness” (Thibodeau 270). The body undergoes a socialized process which can be examined, eroticized, or shown as horrific when projected onto an otherwise neutral body. Butler imagined “becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties” (30), because that is a choice that women must make every day. Bollinger argues that Butler uses “maternity, however constructed, as a vehicle for exploring intersubjectivity alongside questions of domination and subordination” (331). Her depiction of the uneasy balance between fear and intimacy is echoed in mpreg fan fiction. The gendered construction of sexuality, penetration, and the pain of labor is foregrounded in both. In mpreg and “Bloodchild,” men are given “access to the power of maternal love” (Lillvis 8). By linking Butler’s work with this continuing genre of fan fiction, I believe the importance of the anxiety of reproduction is made clear in both. As Scheer-Schazel writes, “‘It is the emotional closeness, the intimacy between T’Gatoi and Gan, the tenderness displayed by both […] that justifies the designation as a love story’” (Bollinger 335). The trope of male pregnancy provides a tool by which authors grapple with the toll that pregnancy can take on a woman’s body, yet inscribed on the fictionally legible male body. In the end, the anxiety of reproduction is eased by intimacy between the characters, as they resolve their deep-seated desire for emotional connection.
NOTE

1. Lomas’s status as an N’Tlic is due to the fact that he has mated with and carries his Tlic partner’s eggs. After T’Gatoi impregnates Gan, she refers to him with the honorific of N’Tlic. In the sense used in the story, the term is more than an endearment: it is a sign of the deepened bond between the partners and their commitment to each other.

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There is no questioning the literary and cultural influence of Octavia E. Butler’s work. Her books have been translated into more than ten languages and sold more than a million copies; she was the first science fiction author to receive a MacArthur Fellowship; and she has been awarded two Hugos and two Nebulas (Fox). Her work is widely lauded by science fiction fans and critics, and frequently taught. It is within this context that I want to comment on what I have often thought is a peculiarity of my experience teaching Butler: my students’ frequent reticence to discuss her work.

During the 2010–2011 academic year, while teaching a course on feminist speculative fiction, I assigned my students Butler’s 2005 novel, *Fledgling*. *Fledgling* features a vampiric protagonist who—while actually in her fifties—appears to be a young girl. Shori, an “Ina,” lives by feeding on her sexual partners, or “symbionts,” who enthusiastically bond with her in physical, emotional, and sexual “mutualistic symbiosis” (123). While all the symbionts involved in this arrangement are intensely connected to Shori, and while she herself is fond of her partners, the degree to which her human companions (or even Shori herself) consent to their situation is ambiguous. Because *Fledgling* engages provocatively (as do so many of Butler’s works) with fundamental, important questions about sexuality, gender, race, consent, and power, I was excited to teach it. My students, however, were
not excited to discuss it. When I attempted to open up conversation, they sat silently in the classroom. Conversation, when it ensued, was stilted at best and peppered with awkward pauses. When I reflected on the portions of the novel they had read in preparation for class, it was no surprise to me that they had hesitated to speak.

This chapter will engage with the concept of the taboo to highlight the way in which Butler’s texts, specifically *Dawn*, “Bloodchild,” and *Fledgling*, can provoke discomfort in readers. Ultimately, it will argue that Butler’s mobilization and upending of the taboo push readers to recognize and interrogate their own response to the text. Within this context, the chapter will advocate for the importance of foregrounding the reading experience for students. By acknowledging the potential for discomfort, instructors can encourage students to engage intellectually with the text and its implications.

**TABOO IN BUTLER’S WORK**

In preparation for the conversation described above, my students had read the first part of the book, including the scene in which Shori meets her first symbiont, Wright. Early in Chapter two, Wright picks up Shori at the side of the road and immediately comments on her age: “‘You shouldn’t be out here in the middle of the night in the rain!’ he said. ‘You can’t be any more than ten or eleven’” (8). He commands her to get into his car, and she states, “I surprised myself completely by instantly wanting to go with him” (8). The reader’s potential discomfort at this exchange is solidified when Wright, who is described as wanting to take Shori to either the hospital or the police station, physically prevents her from throwing herself from the car:

I turned to open the car door. He grabbed my arm before I could figure out how to get it open. He had huge hands that wrapped completely around my arm. He pulled me back, pulled me hard against the little low wall that divided his legs from mine. He scared me. I was less than half his size, and he meant to force me to go where I didn’t want to go. (10)

Thus far, the scene explicitly engages with a familiarly ominous cultural narrative about child abduction.

Yet the scene soon takes an unexpected twist, as Shori powerfully “[catches] his wrist, squeeze[s] it, and yank[s] it away” (10). She then contemplates and decides against breaking his arm: “Breaking his bones would be wrong” (10). Instead, she bites his hand (11). The seeming victim is revealed to be more powerful than expected and even predatory. As the scene continues,
it positions Shori as an aggressor in a scene that quickly turns sexual: “I felt him try to pull away. He shook me, actually lifting me into the air a little, trying to get away from me, but I didn’t let go. I licked at the blood welling up where my teeth had cut him. He made a noise, a kind of gasp” (11). The two characters have a frank discussion of the pleasure they are experiencing: “‘It doesn’t hurt anymore,’ he said. ‘It feels good. Which is weird. How do you do that?’ ‘I don’t know,’ I told him. ‘You taste good.’ ‘Do I?’ He lifted me, squeezed past the division between the seats to my side of the car, and put me on his lap” (11). Within fifteen pages, the relationship progresses to sex. While the reader is assured the child is not in fact a child—Shori states “I don’t think I’m as young as you believe” (21)—and we later learn that she is an adult, the explicit depiction of what appears to be a consensual child-adult sexual relationship violates deeply held taboos.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud drew on the Polynesian usage of the term in his definition:

> On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean. The opposite for taboo is designated in Polynesian by the word *noa* and signifies something ordinary and generally accessible. Thus something like the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions. (Freud)

According to Mary Douglas’s classic work on pollution and taboo, the taboo marks the line of the social and moral order in which “the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors” (Douglas 3). Drawing on Douglas’s work, Courtney Megan Cahill points out that “a key feature of taboos and pollution rituals [is] the importance of border control and policing the line separating this from that, us from them” (1606).

The penalties for violating the taboo can be grim. As Chaim Fershtman, Uri Gneezy, and Moshe Hoffman note: “Taboos can…be viewed as strong social norms that are supported by severe social sanctions,” which can also be self-inflicted (140). Transgression of these social norms disrupts a communal and individual sense of order and rightness, eliciting complex emotional reactions like fear, anger, and disgust, and leading to a frantic attempt to redraw the boundary line. As Cahill argues, “Sociomoral disgust arises from a fear of boundary violation (and ensuing contamination) and necessitates the imposition of boundaries in the human body-politic” (1578–1579).

Interestingly, one does not actually have to witness or perform the violation of the taboo to be “contaminated” by it, as pointed out by Fershtman, Gneezy, and Hoffmann:
Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the “unthinkable.” Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic. The sanctions associated pertain not just to the behavior that contradicts the taboo, but also merely thinking or considering such a behavior. Under this interpretation, a taboo is a form of “thought police” that governs not just human behavior, but also its thoughts. (140)

Both the defensive response to taboo violation and the idea that thinking about violating a taboo can equate to the act itself seem relevant to me when considering student silence in the classroom. Being able to monitor boundaries is a mode of moral, psychological, and emotional control. I suspect that by portraying what at first seems to be the willing violation of the taboo of child-adult sex, these passages in *Fledgling* may have shocked students, possibly leading to disgust or discomfort at the threat of “boundary violation.” In the face of the “unspeakable” produced by the encounter with the text (i.e., the violation of a sexual taboo), readerly control over the material and the response to it is explicitly violated. Some students may have reasserted their control by putting the book down; others may have continued to read, but chosen to be silent in discussion.

An uncharacteristically quiet response to Butler’s work is not restricted to *Fledgling*. While students have been less reticent when responding to *Dawn* and “Bloodchild” than when encountering *Fledgling*, they are often quieter than usual. Unsurprisingly, a quick look at these texts illuminates a similar engagement with sexual and reproductive taboos. In *Dawn*, we see a violation of the taboo against group sex, while in “Bloodchild” we see the breaking down of a conventional line between male and female reproductive functions. More significantly, it seems to me, both texts violate a taboo against cross-species sex or bestiality. The aliens in *Dawn* are explicitly nonhuman, sporting “tentacles” more akin to a squid or octopus. In “Bloodchild,” the aliens are large, intelligent insects that use human bodies to host their grubs, which are described as “limbless and boneless… blind and slimy with blood” (761). In each of these texts, nonhuman species enlist humans in cross-species reproductive projects that will boost the survival of both.

In tandem with their transgressive projects, each text explicitly stages a concomitant violation of an important boundary: the boundary around the human body. *Fledgling* clearly engages with the piercing of the skin through the act of biting. In *Dawn*, the Oankali “penetrate” humans in order to share genetic material: “Nikanj penetrated her body with every head and body tentacle that could reach her, and for once it felt the way she had always
imagined it should. It hurt! It was like abruptly being used as a pincushion. She gasped, but managed not to pull away” (232). In “Bloodchild,” the abdominal cavities of hosts are pierced as the eggs are implanted and cut open when grubs are withdrawn. While the process is described as “painless,” it is invasive: “I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the blind probing of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine” (766). As opposed to this “painless, easy” implantation, the process of carrying the grubs can be life-threatening, and one host is almost eaten alive by the grubs he carries.

The violence of these images is paired with an uncomfortable ambiguity around, or explicit lack of, consent. In *Fledgling*, symbionts are not only soothed and aroused by the bite of the Ina; according to one Ina, “We addict them to a substance in our saliva—in our venom...It makes them highly suggestible and deeply attached to the source of the substance...They die if they’re taken from us or if we die” (73). Similarly, in “Bloodchild,” Gan “chooses” to mate with the alien T’Gatoi; at the same time, he depicts his choice to participate in the mating ritual as an attempt to protect his sister from the dangers of carrying the grubs. He has spent the entirety of his life lulled by the Tlics’ soporific “eggs” and been groomed to be a host from birth: “I’m told I was first caged within T’Gatoi’s many limbs only three minutes after birth. A few days later, I was given my first taste of egg” (758). In *Dawn*, while Lilith is encouraged to choose whether or not to participate in the Oankali’s plan to engender a future hybrid race, she is impregnated against her will. Meghan Riley argues convincingly that “Butler’s human characters are like rape victims [in] their inability to say ‘no’ and have that statement respected as truth” (130). She notes that *Lilith’s Brood* and *Fledgling* “show the ways in which constraints on agency via access to privileged information, force, deceit, limited choice, and drugs can result in nearly complete control of a subject” (134). *Fledgling*, *Dawn*, and “Bloodchild,” therefore, all depict intimate bodily violation and ambiguous consent (or lack thereof) within a larger social structure that depends upon the subjugation of the human body for the furtherance of a species.

It is therefore worth exploring: what is Butler doing in her mobilization of sexual taboos? How might we understand her repetitive centering and upending of those taboos? To address these questions, I will now consider the way that the related concepts of “defamiliarization” and “estrangement” have been mobilized in science fiction, feminist, and cultural studies, as well as their pedagogical application in the college English classroom.
DEFAMILIARIZATION AND ESTRANGEMENT IN PEDAGOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

In “Art as Technique,” Victor Shklovsky argues that “the technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12): in short, to “make the familiar seem strange” or “defamiliarize” the object (13). In Anthropology as Cultural Critique, George Marcus and Michael Fischer describe defamiliarization as it plays out in cultural criticism: “Disruption of common sense, doing the unexpected, placing familiar subjects in unfamiliar, or even shocking, contexts are the aim of this strategy to make the reader conscious of difference” (137). The “defamiliarization effect,” they argue, may be “only a springboard for a sustained inquiry” or it may “entail a critical reflecting back on the means of defamiliarization itself” (137).

Instructors from a range of fields have advocated for the use of defamiliarization as a pedagogical approach that can help students grapple with cultural difference, racism, and civil and human rights violations. Anthropologist William Buse, for example, describes how he employed a “following exercise,” in which students first followed a stranger through public space, recording their findings, and then imagined themselves as the stranger representing the person following them. He argues that “the decentering of the student’s ordinary egocentric vantage point, the fleeting abandonment of the self, and the defamiliarization of the student’s world all seemed to have a profound impact; taken together they experientially demonstrated the interdependent link between the students’ identity and their social, spatial, and temporal landscapes” (117). The exercise, he argues, promoted discomfort and therefore reflection:

Students produced texts that revealed two distinctive orientations: an internal or psychological lens through which students situated themselves uncritically at the center of a familiar, if not homogeneous, social world as imaginatively reflected in their own image; and an external or anthropological lens through which students uncomfortably looked to their unfamiliar, if not heterogeneous, social environment for their imagined reflection. (119)

For his privileged white students in particular, Buse claims, this exercise allowed them to “examine the social conditions by which they receive and maintain their privilege” (108).

In an example closer to the concerns of this chapter, in response to his white students’ inability and/or unwillingness to recognize racist representations
in popular culture, Clayton Zuba designed a course meant to press students to examine constructions of monstrosity and humanity in literature and film. Starting with three Victorian science fiction novels—*Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*—and working toward texts like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and *Blade Runner*, Zuba encouraged the students to draw connections between the tropes and dynamics reflected in the various texts, arguing that such a strategy raised awareness “of the problems of race that these science fiction texts sought to explore beneath their generic surfaces” (362). He notes that “in this way, such novels offer students the opportunity to explore racial discourses as developed during the height of British imperialism, yet simultaneously defamiliarize problems of race from the contemporary contexts that often render them invisible” (359–360).

I believe it is no accident that many of the texts Zuba chose to draw upon were science fiction classics. Science fiction was defined by Darko Suvin in his landmark essay “Estrangement and Cognition” as a “literature of cognitive estrangement,” in which the text “factually” reports a fictional system, lending the effect of “confronting a set normative system—a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture—with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms.” Suvin draws upon Bertolt Brecht’s definition of representational estrangement as the act of making the subject both recognizable and unfamiliar to argue that “in SF the attitude of estrangement—used by Brecht in a different way, within a still predominantly ‘realistic’ context—has grown into the formal framework of the genre” (original italics). Suvin argues that these fictional systems revolve around “a strange newness, a novum” and appear to be cognitively comprehensible: “SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.” Science fiction, in other words, is grounded upon the act of defamiliarization.

Critics like Veronica Hollinger have discussed the importance of defamiliarization and estrangement as a narrative framework within feminist science fiction, including in Octavia E. Butler’s work. Hollinger argues, for example, that “Bloodchild” “presents a fictional defamiliarization of human reproduction that is as chilling in its own way as is Mary Shelley’s depiction of the creation of artificial life” (129). Hollinger explains as follows:

In “Bloodchild”, a “natural” physical experience that virtually defines what it means to be a “woman” is defamiliarized, assigned to a male character, embedded in an estranged context that politicizes one of the most “natural” of human experiences/relationships. Like so many sf stories
by women writers, “Bloodchild” undermines our readerly tendencies to naturalize certain aspects of human nature and human experience as “essentially feminine” or as “essentially masculine”; it resists any too-easy conflation of the sexed body with the culturally determined gendered behaviours that are imposed upon that body. “Bloodchild” suggests, in fictional terms, the theoretical recognition that gender is not a body, but a position. (130)

What I described earlier as a taboo, therefore, Hollinger understands to be a productive act that questions conventional ways of thinking about gender, the body, and reproduction by making those categories less familiar.

THE POTENTIAL—AND VIOLENCE—OF TRANSGRESSION

Part of the way that speculative fiction has historically defamiliarized its subjects is by embracing the crossing of boundaries that are often thought to be stable. Hollinger points out that “the figure of the cyborg has become a privileged theoretical representation in feminist cultural studies of science and technology” (133). The cyborg, of course, is the figure produced by the merging of the organic body and cybernetic technology, producing what many theorists consider to be fertile ground for posthumanist challenges to the ontological self. Hollinger references Donna Haraway’s classic socialist feminist writing on the cyborg, reminding us that “sf itself is a particularly valuable imaginative arena within which to consider how science and technology are disrupting and revising many conventional ideas about human subjectivity and human embodiment. In Haraway’s terms, ‘The cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artifact, member of a race, individual identity, or body’” (133).

What Ingrid Thaler dubs “Black Atlantic Speculative Fiction,” a literary subgenre of Afrofuturism, relies, too, on the crossing of unstable categorizations. Thaler draws upon Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic in which “black culture’s in-between-ness [is] an intrinsic part and result of the processes of Western modernity....As an intercultural positionality’ and transnational imaginary space, the Black Atlantic is the focal point for ‘[t]he fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation’” (Thaler 15). She argues that “in Black Atlantic Speculative Fiction, the speculative proves to be a productive space for negotiating ‘double consciousness’ and theorizing about the in-betweenness of black subjectivity” (4). In these formulations, the crossing of boundaries and the transgression of limits form a foundation for “cultural and political exchange and transformation.”
Both Thaler and Sarah Outterson position Butler’s work in relation to such a vision. Thaler notes, for example, that “Butler’s *Wild Seed* complicates genre categories… by Appropriating ‘interpolation’… Through interpolation an alien space [is introduced] within a familiar space, or between two adjacent areas of space where no such ‘between’ exists” (Thaler 20). She references as well Nancy Jesser’s vision of “Butler’s heroines [as] maternal models as a ‘powerful intersubjective body’ that goes beyond the Cartesian split between mind and body” (Thaler 37). Outterson cites Peter Sands’s description of Butler’s “‘rhetorical worldview’ that emphasizes the ‘fluidity of bodily borders, perhaps of essences’” (2–3).

We might also think of *Fledgling*, *Dawn*, and “Bloodchild,” where interspecies hybridity, often sexually and reproductively produced, is imagined to be the primary method for ensuring species survival and evolution. In *Fledgling*, for example, Shori’s body has been genetically modified to contain both human and Ina DNA, so that she has “better-than-usual protection from the sun and more daytime alertness” (77). Her hybridity, in other words, is one of her strengths. Similarly, her symbiont Wright is told “you’ll live to be between 170 and 200 years old… Your immune system will be greatly strengthened by Shori’s venom, and it will be less likely to turn on you and give you one of humanity’s many autoimmune diseases. And her venom will help keep your heart and circulatory system healthy” (63). In *Dawn*, the Oankali’s genetic project is described by Jdayha as “what you would call genetic engineering… We do it naturally. We must do it. It renews us, enables us to survive as an evolving species instead of specializing ourselves into extinction or stagnation” (40). He explains that due to this genetic engineering, “Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you. Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies, we’ll share those abilities with you” (42). And in “Bloodchild,” we learn that humans help the Tlics to survive, and vice versa: as T’Gatoi tells Gan, “The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived… Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. And your ancestors, fleeing from their home-world, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them—they survived because of us” (765). These hybrid projects—for example, the Oankali’s and Ina’s genetic engineering projects as well as the Ina’s and Tlic’s reproductive projects—are positioned as the only way forward for all species involved.

Outterson has argued that in emphasizing the “fluidity of bodily borders, perhaps of essences,” Butler at the same time “depict[s] violent transgression of bodily boundaries” (2–3). In fact, she suggests, “these violent transgressions at time seem to constitute Butler’s entire project” (2). Earlier
in this chapter, I described such bodily transgressions in *Fledgling*, *Dawn*, and “Bloodchild,” as well as the psychological violence associated with the ambiguous nature of consent in these texts. I would also like to highlight the fear, anxiety, discomfort, disgust, and anger associated with the violation of the taboo, which under normal circumstances serve to police expected social boundaries. After Outterson, I would argue that—while Butler’s work participates in the utopian vision embodied in the boundary-crossing mechanisms of transgressive hybrid projects—it also illuminates the violence and trauma attendant and responding to such projects.

In their portrayal of an overlap between ambiguously beneficial hybrid projects and social taboos, Butler’s texts ask the reader to consider the violent response to transgression, which often emerges from unacknowledged fear and discomfort. In *Fledgling*, for example, part of the plot revolves around the uncovering of the perpetrators of a brutal massacre of Shori’s family. When one Ina behind the murders, Katharine, is unveiled and confronted, she responds by defending the boundaries of the species, telling Shori, “I challenge your right to represent the interests of families who are unfortunately dead. You are their descendent, but because of their error, because of their great error, you are not Ina!… Your scent, your reactions, your facial expressions, your body language—none of it is right…. We are Ina. You are nothing!” (271–272). Katharine equates Shori being non-Ina with her blackness and defines her as “other,” arguing that Shori’s perspective is also illegitimate because “when I came to this country, such people were kept as property, as slaves” (272). In *Dawn*, Paul Titus represents a similar approach to the hybrid project. While Lilith maintains some optimism about the potential of learning from the Oankali, Paul describes genetic engineering in dystopian terms (94) and maintains that “when they’re finished with us, there won’t be any real humans left” (92). His framework here is similar to Katherine’s: he imagines a line between “real humans” and not-real hybrids. When he attempts to rape Lilith, she fights back by mobilizing his fear of the incest taboo: “Maybe they’ve made you do it with your sister… Maybe they’ve made you do it with your mother!” (96). Paul erupts in anger, brutally assaulting her. Butler’s depiction of the root of the violent response to the hybrid project is clear: Lilith describes Paul as maintaining “a kind of deliberate, persistent ignorance” (89). In “Bloodchild,” Gan’s brother Qui takes on a similar role. Unable to process his own witnessing of a host’s violent death, Qui retreats to “contempt” and “bitterness” (763). “Don’t give me one of her looks,” he tells Gan, in reference to T’Gatoi, “You’re not her. You’re just her property” (762). When Qui tells Gan of what he has witnessed, their exchange progresses into a fistfight (764). These characters, therefore, illuminate the violent outcomes of the inability to acknowledge fear over the transgression of the taboo as well as the attempt to reestablish boundaries.
Characters like Katharine, Paul Titus, and Qui respond to their discomfort with hybrid projects by attempting to police the line between legitimate and illegitimate, pure and impure, human and not human. When they do not succeed, they lash out violently at the participants in these projects (Shori and her family, Lilith, and Gan). Yet, the protagonists and other main characters of the stories are not necessarily comfortable with their role in relation to the larger projects either. In “Bloodchild,” for example, Gan vomits and sobs at his first encounter with the reality of what it means to carry T’Gatoi’s grubs, thinking that “the whole procedure was wrong, alien” (762); while in this frame of mine, he instigates the fight with his brother (764). When Wright learns about mutualistic symbiosis, he states “It scares me a little” (63). And, in Dawn, Lilith forcefully resists having her brain chemistry changed (75–76).

As Gregory Jerome Hampton points out about Wild Seed, the mobilization of the taboo in Butler’s work can illuminate “the struggle of the protagonist to adapt to difference. Anyanwu is forced on several occasions to overlook what she considers to be a taboo in order to survive” (41). He writes that “the representation of Anyanwu’s accommodation and ambivalence, suggests that we reconsider the construction of the moral and the immoral” (42). The difference between Gan, Wright, and Lilith and Katharine, Paul Titus, and Qui is that—while these main characters are at times frightened, uncomfortable, and disgusted by the transgressive hybrid projects with which they are presented—they are willing to acknowledge these emotions. In so doing, they open themselves up to learning about, thoughtfully considering, and ultimately participating in these projects, as well as to forming intimate, symbiotic relationships across difference.

In Butler’s work, therefore, the violence associated with transgressive projects does not necessarily undermine the projects themselves; it does, however, illuminate their flaws, limitations, implications, and effects. Outterson has read Butler as both championing the importance of learning and illuminating the violence of the learning process. She claims that Butler’s “rhetorical, and, as I will emphasize, pedagogical worldview arises out of the idea that the process of encountering difference and allowing yourself to change in response to it (even in order to build more intimately connected communities) is a much more violating experience than we often sentimentalize it to be” (434). Outterson develops the role violence plays in Butler’s text to suggest that it is not unavoidable but is instead central to her project: “She does not suggest that we can reach a less violent future through any attempt to rid ourselves of violence. Her hope is not as much ‘post-apocalyptic’ as per-apocalyptic: violence transmuted, not overcome” (441). Similarly, texts like Fledgling, Dawn, and “Bloodchild” depict the “transmutation,” but not the “overcoming” of the violence of
the transgressive hybrid project. I would argue that by embracing the taboo, Butler asks us to see both the potential and the damage of these projects. If her characters are often open-minded, compassionate, and thoughtful, their existence is marked by suffering, moral judgment, social exclusion, lack of agency, and the threat (and enactment) of violence.

Within this context, I would like to return to my students’ frequent retreat into silence when first encountering Butler’s texts. In the explicit mobilization of a range of taboos, Butler’s work might be thought of as aggressively and even deliberately inducing readerly discomfort. When brought face to face with the violation of strong taboos, readers may hesitate to acknowledge that discomfort, as thinking about the taboo can be “contaminating.” Yet, by linking “deliberate, persistent ignorance” with violence, Butler urges us instead to find alternate responses to those projects, as modeled by her protagonists. As Outterson puts it, in Butler’s work “violence is necessary for freedom. Knowledge, adulthood, and the reconciliation of difference are attained through a gauntlet of destruction” (Outterson 448). Instructors can step into this process to help guide students through the “gauntlet of destruction” embodied by reading Butler’s aggressive texts and toward a kind of intellectual “freedom.”

**DISCOMFORT AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY**

As discussed above, I had earlier hypothesized that my students were silencing themselves in discussions of Butler’s texts because of their confrontation with the violated taboo. Since 2017, therefore, I have decided to experiment with a different approach to discussions of Butler, in which I highlight the experience of reading. In what follows, I will report back on student responses to this approach to explore the relationship between the theoretical pedagogy of the taboo I trace above and the way it might play out in the classroom.

In May 2018, I assigned Butler’s “Bloodchild” to my Science Fiction class at Lane Community College in Eugene, OR. We discussed the text at the end of week 7, during a unit on alien encounters. The unit’s questions included:

- What does it mean to be human?
- How does defining or denigrating the other help one to define oneself or one’s culture?
- What’s the line between self and other? How and with what effect is that line maintained, blurred, or crossed?
What does it mean to be treated as the other, racially or otherwise? How can alien encounter texts illuminate the mechanisms of past or present power structures and dynamics, especially in relation to race, gender, and sexuality?

We read “Bloodchild” as one example of an Afrofuturist representation of the alien encounter; the other was Nalo Hopkinson’s “Message in a Bottle.” To prepare for the class, students had read the two short stories along with Lisa Yaszek’s “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future.” They were expected to have completed a prep writing responding to the prompt: “How do ‘Bloodchild’ and ‘Message in a Bottle’ depict the relationship between the self and the (alien) other?”

I started the class period by mobilizing Yaszek’s definition of Afrofuturism as a pan-disciplinary aesthetic project that engages with questions around race, power, identity, and othering. I reminded the students of other Afrofuturist texts we had read by Nnedi Okorafor and Samuel Delany and asked them to consider the importance of alien encounter texts within a diverse Afrofuturist project. Then, I had them write their answers to the following questions:

- What was it like to read “Bloodchild” (intellectually, emotionally, physically, or morally)?
- What moments from the text did you respond to the most strongly as you read?
- Are you looking forward to discussing this text? Why/why not?

We moved from the in-class writing to partner discussion and large group discussion. My theory in assigning this in-class writing was that explicitly foregrounding the experience of reading would authorize students to acknowledge potential discomfort, thereby undermining any silencing effects of their responses to taboo violation.

I anticipated that students would have strong emotional and moral reactions to the text, including disgust, and that many of those reactions would respond to events in the second half of the story, including a scene in which an “N’Tlic” (host) man named Lomas has grubs pulled out of him and Gan’s impregnation. I was curious as to whether or not students would want to discuss the text. I received twenty-one anonymous responses to these initial questions.

When asked to describe their experience of reading the text, students used the following words to describe the story itself and their experience of reading it:
The story
Visceral/graphic/explicit/vivid (5)
Mesmerizing/interesting/fascinating (4)
Gross (4)
Confusing/Raised questions (3)
Unsettling/feeling of uneasiness (2)
Horrible (1)
Sick (1)
Weird (1)
Amazing/Enjoyable to read (2)
Beautiful (1)
Well-written/Great worldbuilding (1)
Gut-wrenching (1)
Shocking (1)

Their experience of reading
Disgusted/grossed out (3)
Sick to my stomach (2)
Uncomfortable/unsettled/tense (2)
Raised curiosity (2)
Strange/weird (2)
Shocking (2)
Appalled (1)
Not pleasant (1)
Grotesque (1)
Undescribable (1)
“Cringe” (1)
Loved it (1)
Enjoyable (1)

As anticipated, students reported the most intense responses to the passage in which the grubs are pulled out of Lomas’s body (and the lead-up to this moment) (13). Other commonly mentioned scenes included T’Gatoi’s conversation with Gan, including the moment where Gan places a gun under his chin (6) and Gan’s ultimate choice (4). These scenes, students pointed out, illuminated the nature of Gan’s situation, his internal struggle, and the relationship between him and T’Gatoi, which some students found to be “manipulative” and “abusive” and others found to be “beautiful” and “sweet.”

Some people drew connections to other cultural texts, genres, and tropes. Two students referenced *Alien*, while others referenced the film *Fleshburn*, the TV show “Monsters Inside Me,” and “a gross youtube [sic] video that
you can’t look away from.” One person compared the dynamics in the text to “Stockholm Syndrome.”

Two people who had strong reactions to the text indicated that they would not want to discuss the story, writing, for example, “I would rather have class be done early than discuss the reading” and “I really don’t want to talk about this one.” Another student who wanted to discuss the story wrote “I had to take a few moments afterwards to fully digest the story…. I like horror science fiction as much as the next person, but I would not reread this again.” And another person who also wanted to discuss it wrote: “It took everything I had to not close the book and skip this reading. As somebody who is already horrified by the act of giving birth I was unsettled by the way it made me face some of my fears.” Interestingly, one student said they were not looking forward to discussing the text because they thought their peers would be too “squeamish.”

To my surprise, fifteen people responded that they were looking forward to the discussion, for the following reasons:

- They were curious about what others would have to say/They thought people would have a lot of interesting things to say/They thought there was a lot to talk about (nine respondents).
- They had questions they wanted answered (two respondents).
- They thought it would be fun to hear people’s reactions to what they thought was a disgusting story (two respondents).
- They wanted to see if others agreed with their interpretation of the text (one respondent).

On reflection, I think it is worthwhile to highlight the reading experience in this way to acknowledge students’ responses to the text and to stage a further discussion of Butler’s project. In this particular situation, while students’ overall responses to the text itself mirrored my expectations, their general enthusiasm to discuss it makes me question whether or not I would have experienced a quiet class. It’s worth noting that by this point in the term the students were comfortable with each other and often quite lively during discussions. We had also encountered a number of other texts dealing with taboo subjects, not least some of Ursula Le Guin’s short stories on gender and sexuality. While I recommend employing this strategy whenever teaching Butler, therefore, it may be especially useful early in the term or with a class that generally hesitates to participate.

Drawing upon the moments students described in the above writing as well as in their prep writing, we discussed representations of aliens, humans, and the relationship between them, working toward an understanding of
Butler’s larger project in the context of both the alien encounter narrative and Afrofuturism. Finally, I moved to more explicit instruction on the taboo and asked students to write down their answers to the following questions:

- (How) does it change your understanding of the story or your/other students’ reaction to it to think about the story in relation to the concept of a taboo?
- If you think it does: how and why does the story ask us to rethink taboos or responses/reactions to violating them (ours and/or the characters’)? What is dangerous or productive (etc.) about violating the taboo?

While some students didn’t see a connection between the text and the taboo, most worked with these questions to share a series of insights and questions. A number of students used the prompt to comment on the flexible, culturally dependent nature of the taboo.

- “Don’t you have to have some form of concept of ‘wrong’ or ‘inappropriate’ to see the taboo in the first place? The worms are gross, something difficult for most of us to comprehend, let alone accept. It is reproduction, at the end. Different from what we know, but still a concept we can relate to…. Who decides a taboo, at least in this sense…. What is the difference between ‘this is bad and harmful’ and ‘this is taboo.’”
- “What is tabooed to us might be much different from that of another culture. What I find terrible and strange in this story is completely normal to the people who reside in this world.”
- “Even though these actions are unthinkable to us, they see it in a different way. They think that they are doing it for the best, so to them, it isn’t a taboo like it is for us.”
- “How others felt about the story made me feel that [other students] couldn’t put the story out of the context of their worlds. But it’s not their world. It’s Butlers or the T’lics. As we deal with changes the world will eventually give us I think things that were taboo won’t be and things that aren’t will be taboo.”
- “I think Bloodchild asks the reader to consider how taboos are fluid and change with time or place. ‘Beastiality’ [sic] clearly isn’t taboo to the humans or T’lic, parasites aren’t fearful to the T’lic, and so on.”
- “Sometimes a taboo in one culture wouldn’t be considered a taboo in another. Like when women aren’t allowed to do anything without a male present as opposed to our culture where women
are generally allowed to do most things without male permission. Something like this changing could be productive to society as a whole, however, to force a cultural change like that could also be very dangerous.”

Two students considered the productive potential of violating taboos, especially in relation to race relations.

- “Taboos, in relation to social norms, should be pushed, in a healthy manner. If people keep doing things because ‘that’s the way they are done,’ no progress will be made.”
- “Perhaps it could mean that this text is alluding to mixed race couples and the stigma that could be placed on them. It can be productive to force taboos to help [further] develop our culture. It could be asking us to do this because of our own stubbornness as a culture.”

A number of students discussed the effect of violating taboos on the reader, noting that Butler’s engagement with the taboo pushes the reader to engage with issues they might not otherwise consider.

- “Butler is clearly attempting to invoke a strong emotional response in the reader by directly challenging these sort of sacred reproductive privileges humans claim to hold so dear. Multiple taboos are crossed: consent, interspecies relations, the idea of attempted suicide, etc. and each is meant to trigger a reader into an emotional response. Many authors employ the concept of taboo to either garner attention or prove a larger point, and I largely think that’s what Butler is aiming to do.”
- “The concept of men giving birth is a taboo in its self, but the way it is done here builds on that further. The use of graphic description makes the story that much more stomach turning. Then there is the concept of the human being the oppressed as opposed to the oppressor. This looks to make you think more thoroughly about the actions of humans by flipping the roles.”
- “I think the major taboo violated here is treating humans (or intelligent animals) as ‘animals’ in the sense that basic rights are being violated. I think this taboo ultimately stems from how we need to separate ourselves from other animals and placing us on a pedestal where ‘all human life is sacred.’”
- “I think this story is definitely trying to push at boundaries. Whether it’s the parasite gross factor or the abusive relationship that is
up front through the story. I don’t know if its asking us to rethink it as much as it is just throwing it out there and exposing it to us.”

- “[I]t is nice to conceive that we can go beyond ourselves to express different forms of compassion.”

Finally, students commented on the implications of violating taboos:

- “I think violating taboos as an author is risky because you risk people missing your message because their disgust overwhelmed all other thought.”
- “I think it’s important to violate taboos, at least in conversation, to get a better understanding of why they’re taboo or come to the conclusion that they shouldn’t be. I do believe there are things people shouldn’t do, but nothing people shouldn’t discuss.”

Within strict time constraints, therefore, these reflections pushed beyond immediate response and into thoughtful critical reflections on Butler’s larger project and its implications.

**CONCLUSION**

When teaching controversial texts and authors, instructors can forget that students engage with a text on multiple levels (emotional, psychological, moral) and fail to remember that student silence can emerge not just from disinterest but instead from discomfort. In this chapter, I hope to have illuminated the way Butler’s works push readers to the limits of their discomfort by mobilizing and upending the taboo. At the same time, I hope I have shown how her works offer multiple models for dealing with this discomfort: on the one hand, a violent, defensive, and unthinking refusal to acknowledge that discomfort and, on the other, an open acknowledgment of discomfort leading to thoughtful and compassionate consideration of the larger project. By encouraging students to reflect on rather than stifle their reactions to Butler’s texts, instructors can open a space for a deeper and more self-reflective engagement with the problems and possibilities her work illuminates.

**NOTES**

1. Cahill elaborates on this insight to note the way recent laws have policed LGBT marriage and sexuality: “This peculiar relationship between sexual taboo and border control (or policing the line) is perhaps nowhere more clearly dramatized in the law governing sexuality than in the recent expansion of state ‘mini-DOMAs’ and state constitutional amendments as a means of
ensuring that state recognition of one sexual taboo—in that case, same-sex marriage—does not ‘seep over’ the borders and contaminate less tolerant states” (1581).

2. Perhaps relevant to this article, Shklovsky notes that “quite often in literature the sexual act itself is defamiliarized… Defamiliarization is often used in describing the sexual organs” (21).

3. Zuba writes: “First-year students, especially those from white, middle-class backgrounds, sometimes enter the classroom unequipped to discuss seriously issues of race in American society. Some of these students believe that race does not affect their lives or, as Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. Moya note, believe that race affects only people who live in ‘barrios (or) ghettos’ (22). These students typically misapprehend the notion popularized after the 2008 presidential election that we live in a postrace world. Accordingly, as Terrance Tucker notes, they believe that ‘instances of racist activity are isolated incidents, residue from a bygone era that no longer affects them or their thought processes’ (134)…. Other students resist talking about race because they are worried that they will inadvertently appear racist. They feel guilty talking about race because they have been taught that it is wrong to acknowledge race and difference in American society” (356).

4. “A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time make it seem unfamiliar” (Brecht, in Suvin).

5. Butler’s work features many other “boundary crossings,” often quite literal; in Kindred, for example, the narrator literally crosses through a wall in her passage from the antebellum South to the present, so badly injuring her arm that it must be amputated.

WORKS CITED


Octavia Butler published her first works of science fiction, a genre popularly written and published by white men, in the 1970s: the short story “Crossover” in the 1971 *Clarion: An Anthology of Speculative Fiction and Criticism from the Clarion Writer’s Workshop*; and in 1976, *Patternmaster*, her first novel and the beginning of her *Patternist* series. Nearly forty years later, and after decades of acclaim and awards, Butler’s novel *Kindred* was adapted into a graphic novel by Damian Duffy and John Jennings.¹ In Nnedi Okorafor’s introduction, she expresses an exhilarating surprise at this comic, writing, “A graphic novel adaptation of Octavia E. Butler’s mold-smashing science
fiction book *Kindred*. Can you believe it?” Okorafor continues to praise Duffy and Jennings as “visual mad scientists” and contends that “the very medium of the graphic novel already electrifies words and images. Tell one of Octavia Butler’s most immersive, relatable tales through this medium, and you have fire.” “This is an exciting moment in storytelling,” Okorafor notes, “Octavia Butler, Level 2” (iv). Indeed, Duffy’s and Jennings’s adaptation elicits excitement for rocketing Butler into the world of comics as well as working within a current trend of Black Comix, seen in other works by Duffy and Jennings, as well as a series of recent publications: Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner* (2006); the *March* trilogy (2013, 2015, and 2016), chronicling the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 1960s as told by John Lewis and put together by comic artists Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell; Andrew Helfer and Randy DuBurke’s *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* (2006); the many iterations of *Black Panther*; Paolo Parisi’s biographical comics, including *Coltrane* (2009), *Basquiat* (2016), and *Blues for Lady Day: The Story of Billy Holiday* (2017); Marvel’s *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, created by Amy Reeder, Brandon Monclare, and Natacha Bustos in 2016; and Duffy’s and Jennings’s *Black Comix: African American Independent Comics, Art and Culture* (2010) and *Black Comix Returns* (2018), both of which serve as anthologies of “black illustrators, storytellers, educators, and organizers pouring their artistic truths into personal projects—serving creative expression and community building more than any calculated quest for a movie franchise ever could” (Jennings and Duffy 5).

*Kindred* tells the story of Edana, or “Dana” Franklin, a young black woman who travels in space and time to a Maryland slave plantation in the early nineteenth century. Dana makes this time-space travel several times, always arriving in the past to save a progressively older, violent, and racist slaveholder, Rufus Weylin, her distant ancestor. She returns to the present when her life comes into imminent danger. How she makes these journeys is never made clear, but Dana does learn that she has returned to the past to ensure her great-great-grandmother Alice has a child with Rufus named Hagar. *Kindred* closes with Alice delivering Hagar and shortly after committing suicide. Rufus tries to rape Dana, crossing a line she set earlier in the novel, and Dana stabs and kills him, sending her home to the present in the process. Dana’s final return home offers, perhaps, the novel’s most peculiar scene where her arm becomes attached half inside her wall. Butler describes this bizarre scene, writing:

Something… paint, plaster, wood—a wall. The wall of my living room. I was back at home—in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it—or growing into it. From the elbow to the ends of the fingers, my
left arm had become a part of the wall. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster, stared at it uncomprehending. It was the exact spot Rufus’s fingers had grasped. (261)

Dana loses her arm, which both the novel and the graphic novel reveal in the first sentence of *Kindred*: “I lost an arm on my last trip home.” But she lives, of course, highlighting Butler’s argument of how the past and present in America regarding slavery are not separate ends on a linear narrative, and that such a relationship has a profound and disabling effect on everyone, white and black, but especially for black women who bore, and bare, the brunt of a violent patriarchal white supremacist society. Butler similarly reveals in *Kindred* a tradition of resistance from black women that can often be overlooked with such luminous figures as Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois, and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, for example.

As a whole, Duffy’s and Jennings’s *Kindred* captures Butler’s work. In Jennings’s art, Butler’s message of the lasting effects of slavery into the present day is best represented. For example, Jennings colors the present-day panels in sepia tones, contrasting that with full color—saturating many pages in purples and oranges—in the past-day panels. Duffy comments on these contrasting color schemes in an interview in the graphic novel, explaining, “we had this idea of flipping the way comics and movies often show the past as desaturated and the present day in full color. Because in the novel Dana and Kevin both describe the 1970s as seeming somehow ‘soft,’ less visceral, less real than the 1800s.” Jennings adds an interesting note regarding a particular blue he used, “what's called ‘haint blue’ by the Gullah people in South Carolina.” He notes, “The color’s supposed to ward off haints—spirits and ghosts. And in a way Dana is a ghost, haunting her own past” (242). As to the style of the artwork, Jennings’s drawings appear sketch-like throughout, with strong border lines in black and white inks and a smudgy appearance in depictions of the characters that reflect on the unfinished nature of the American project due to the legacies of slavery in the present day. In many scenes featuring sound effects, onomatopoetic words are spelled with a “K” and written three times prominently on the page, evoking the Ku Klux Klan and the terrorism of white supremacy. As Dana hides from a slave patrol during her first escape attempt, one panel depicts her face with the sounds “kclump kclump kclump” written in bold white ink (38), and as the patrol passes by on horse, the top panel on the next page shows “kclump kclump kclump” in white letters with a smaller black “kclump” in the left background (39). Indeed, Duffy’s and Jennings’s graphic novel adaptation powerfully reflects Butler’s *Kindred* in visual ways that prose fiction finds almost impossible.
This chapter’s aim, however, is to read Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* as a superhero comic primarily through the graphic novel adaptation by Damian Duffy and John Jennings. On the surface, this adaptation is not a superhero comic, in that there are no costumed heroes with superhuman strength, speed, or telekinetic abilities, nor does the publisher, Abrams Comicarts, traditionally publish in the superhero genre. Yet something about the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* draws me to read it as a superhero comic. While reading the graphic novel, I started asking myself whether the novel’s protagonist, Dana, is a superhero considering the novel’s supernatural/science fiction theme, the foes she faces, and the tactics she uses in those battles. After asking that question, I started looking for and seeing other relationships the graphic novel had to superhero comics. The graphic novel uses iconic sound effects often seen in superhero comics to represent sound (“THWACK!” and “POW!” for example), there are many intense, violent action scenes presented in Jennings’s artwork and Duffy’s paneling, and Dana’s supply bag, reminiscent of the many superheroes who rely on technology in place of superpowers, moves *Kindred* across genres closer to superhero comics. Admittedly, comics of all sorts utilize these devices and are thus not solely confined to superhero comics. However, as this chapter will argue, elements of superhero comics exist within Duffy’s and Jennings’s *Kindred* that draws me to see these comic tools utilized in ways that arguably nod to superhero comics.

As to *Kindred’s* generic classifications, and Butler’s work in general, there is a certain resistance toward simple, monolithic categorization. In the introduction to his book *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, A. Timothy Spaulding calls the novel a “postmodern slave narrative” (3). In Gregory Hampton’s “*Kindred: History, Revision, and (Re)memory of Bodies,*” he describes Butler’s work as “[blurring] the boundaries of several genres (autobiography, slave narrative, science fiction/fantasy, contemporary African American fiction, etc.)” (1). Patricia Melzer argues in *Alien Constructions: Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* that “viewing Butler only in relation to [science-fiction] limits the understanding of her work in terms of black women’s imagination and cultural production” (37). With these critics’ thoughts in mind, Duffy’s and Jennings’s graphic novel adaptation, through its generic relationship to the superhero comic, continues and adds to the complexity of Butler’s fiction. By examining the graphic novel among superhero scholarship alongside black feminist writer and critic Jewelle Gomez’s “Black Women Heroes: Here’s Reality, Where’s the Fiction?” I find a revised superhero model that can be applied to *Kindred* and to the larger canon of African American literature.

To discuss this novel within the confines of the superhero comic requires an understanding of what makes a superhero. Peter Coogan’s “The Hero
Defines the Genre, the Genre Defines the Hero” offers valuable insights into what constitutes a superhero, yet also confines the superhero into narrow generic conventions. Coogan’s chapter works to make clear who is and is not “super” based upon four key tropes: mission, powers, identity, and generic conventions. The chapter begins with an epigraph that serves as a dictionary-style definition of a superhero that encompasses these four tropes:

A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. (3)

This definition serves as a decent springboard to ask if characters are superheroes or not, despite its male-centered focus and lack of societal and historical nuance.

Concerning Dana’s “selfless, pro-social mission,” *Kindred* begins with Dana selflessly saving Rufus’s life for the first of six times. In the graphic novel this scene takes place in a rapid-fire succession of panels showing Dana transported from inside her home in the present to a riverbank and the sounds of someone shouting, “No! Rufus!!” Seeing a young boy drowning, Dana swims to Rufus to save him from drowning, and when she brings him to the bank Dana is attacked by a white woman, yelling, “You killed my baby! You killed him!” The next panel depicts Dana grasping the woman’s wrists, shouting, “Stop it! He’s alive!” (12) and then moves to the next page and four panels showing Dana performing CPR on the gray-faced, muddy, lifeless Rufus. He revives and the page’s last panel focuses on Dana’s face as she hears, “What the devil’s going on here?!” and the “CLICK” (13) of a pistol pointed inches from her face in the first panel of the preceding page. Given that Dana returns and saves Rufus five more times, we can say Dana is extraordinary in her “selfless” mission to save Rufus’s life.

What complicates Dana’s mission, of course, is the fact that she continually saves Rufus’s life so that he can rape and impregnate Alice so that she can conceive of and give birth to Hagar Weylin. The graphic novel reveals this biographical information visually on Dana’s family tree, shown in a panel with a caption that reads, “Grandmother Hagar—Hagar Weylin. Born 1831, died 1880…Hers was the first name listed; she gave her parents’ names as Rufus Weylin and Alice Green-something” (Duffy and Jennings 34). Dana helping in this “mission” in order that she and her family can be born
moves away from Coogan’s idea of a “selfless, pro-social mission,” but not entirely considering Dana works to ensure the birth not just of herself but of her entire family. Furthermore, the family tree illustrations work to adapt Butler’s original text in graphic ways special to comics, but it also connects Dana in a way to superheroes in providing her origin story, an element of the superhero encapsulated in Coogan’s definition. Arguably, Dana’s existence on the Weylin plantation as Alice’s and Rufus’s far distant relative marks her as distinct: she is a time-space traveler; a distant relative of Alice’s and Rufus’s, yet somehow older than them. Her origin, further, provides Dana with the motivation to see her mission through, as well as supplying her with considerable confusion and revelation upon learning that her great-great-grandfather is a white slave-owning man who raped her great-great-grandmother, creating Dana’s only known ancestry.

At first Dana sympathizes with an adolescent Rufus, but as time goes by and Rufus grows into manhood and his heritage as a racist slaveholder, she begins to see him as a dangerous and irredeemable foe. On her fourth trip to the past, Dana says to herself, “I’d been foolish to try to influence him” (Duffy and Jennings 115). Later in this chapter Rufus tells Dana to talk with Alice, meaning, to convince her to sleep with him, telling Dana, “I’ll have her whether you do or not. I just want you to fix it so I don’t have to beat her” (Duffy and Jennings 154). In the next panel Dana thinks to herself as she walks to Alice’s cabin to discuss Rufus’s demand, “No, I couldn’t refuse to help her avoid at least some pain” (Duffy and Jennings 155). Dana is torn between helping Rufus and protecting Alice until Hagar is born. During Dana’s last time-travel to the past, she discovers that Alice has hanged herself, but that Hagar is alive and free. Rufus attempts to rape Dana and she stabs him, then is transported home where her arm becomes attached to the wall, stuck in-between past and present times and places. Superheroes are often put in dilemmas, but rarely if ever has a superhero been faced with one like Dana’s. In this way, American history complicates the notion of a superhero’s “selfless, pro-social mission,” asking what happens to those stakes when slavery becomes both the supervillain and the (super)heroine’s heritage? Such a race-based, societal/historical focus on a superhero’s mission will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter with scholarship that further complicates what it means to be a superhero, helping to answer this question.

Powers, or superpowers, are the second of Coogan’s quintessential elements of the superhero. Such superpowers are defined as “extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills” (3). Here again Kindred complicates the idea of superpowers; yes, Dana has an extraordinary ability or mystical skill to travel back and
forth in time and space, but she has no idea who or what causes such abilities. Dana would not be the first superhero, though, who is unaware of the origin or source of their superpowers, Marvel’s Wolverine and Ben Edlund’s The Tick, being other, more popular examples. Yet throughout Kindred Dana harnesses other powers in ways similar to superheroes not gifted with the supernatural and/or scientific superpowers of Superman or The Incredible Hulk, for example.

Dana uses “advanced technology” in critically helpful ways throughout Kindred. Numerous panels in the graphic novel focus on a supply bag Dana puts together after her second trip to the past. Including clothes, Kevin gives Dana a knife to put in her bag after she tells him, “I’m not sure it’s possible for a lone black woman to survive there” (Duffy and Jennings 54). Arguably, some of the supplies she brings save her life. In the fourth chapter, Dana adds hygienic items, aspirin, and paper and pencil, perhaps not the same technology Batman uses to fight crime, but given the context of Dana’s situation, the aspirin, paper, and pencil become extremely powerful technologies in early nineteenth-century Maryland. In her second to last time-space travel to Maryland, Dana finds herself separated from her bag as she begins to feel the dizziness that accompanies these trips. She yells to Kevin, “Get my bag! Kevin, in the living room! My bag!” (174). The next panel zooms in on Kevin’s hands passing the bag to Dana, with Kevin saying, “Here!,” and Dana responding, “Now get away from me!” (174). It appears that her supply bag is even more powerful a tool for the early nineteenth-century slave plantation she is traveling to than her husband, a white man who could fit in among the Weylins, but not as Dana’s husband nor as an opponent of slavery.

Aside from this supply bag reminiscent of certain superhero’s utility belts, Dana uses another advanced technology throughout Kindred, that being her pencil and paper to write to Kevin who became stuck in the past during Dana’s third time travel, and to teach children, including a young Rufus and Nigel, his black counterpart. Even Kevin’s presence acts as power of sorts, enabling Dana a modicum of freedom from other white slave owners who believe that Kevin is Dana’s master. As to literacy, there should be no dispute here to its power, especially in the context of slave narratives. Literacy in this superhero discourse serves as a kryptonite to slaveholders and is akin to advanced technologies such as Ironman’s suit, which enable enslaved peoples to harness a power to fight against their enslavement. Frederick Douglass discusses the power of literacy in his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. After being sent to Baltimore, Douglass relates the words of his new master, Mr. Auld, scolding his wife for beginning to teach Douglass to read and write. Douglass writes:
Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words... he said, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” (49)

Upon hearing this, Douglass relates that “these words sank deep into my heart... and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things... I now understood what had been... the white man’s power to enslave the black man” (49). With this realization, Douglass claims, “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom... I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (49). In *Kindred*, the third chapter ends with Tom Weylin catching Dana teaching Nigel with a “Speller.” As Tom beats her, he shouts, “I treated you good. And you pay me back by stealing my books. Reading!” (98). Therefore, her power of literacy sets her apart from the other black characters in *Kindred* and in opposition to white slaveholders, while also placing Dana in conversation with the tradition of literacy in slave narratives.

Jennings is also able to use visual icons to graphically represent slavery. For example, on Dana’s second trip to the Weylin plantation, she leaves at night for Alice’s cabin (unaware at this stage in the novel of their relationship) at a young Rufus’s suggestion of where to go so as not to be found in the morning on a slave plantation. She arrives at the cabin to find the slave patrol she had earlier hidden from engaged in whipping a man. In a panel in the middle-left of the page, Jennings focuses on the tail-end of the whip, curling and ready to snap, and drawn in the shape of a large “S” (42). Such a visual symbol juxtaposed with the content of the novel and the action of the whip is profoundly representative of the institution of slavery that allowed such behavior, and can only be represented in such a way through comics, allowing readers to focus on the images in stasis while also seeing the movement from their connection to all of the panels around them. The large “S” in the whip’s depiction likewise stands in as an iconic symbol in this superhero context for the institution of slavery.

The third trope of Coogan’s definition of the superhero is the identity, which he argues is “embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero)” (3). At first glance, compared to the
capes and tights iconic superheroes often wear and the superhero identities such as Marvel’s Storm, for example, or DC’s Clark Kent being Superman, Dana seems to fall short here on the superhero identity. Yet there are a few places in *Kindred* where one could suggest an alternate identity to Dana’s twentieth-century identity as Dana Franklin. First off, her full name Edana signifies that she has shortened her name to have a more general and American sounding name. However, Butler goes no further in the novel to explain this name change. In traveling to the past, however, Dana stands out from the other black women on the Weylin plantation for several reasons: her clothes and her short hair often cause others to mistake her for a man; the way she speaks distinguishes her from the black characters on the Weylin plantation; and her marriage to Kevin sets her apart from virtually everyone on the plantation, a fact which she and Kevin hide when they first travel back in time to Maryland together. Further, as a black woman from the twentieth century, Dana must navigate nineteenth-century Maryland in ways much different from her present self, causing her at one point when she returns home to search for examples of free papers so she can forge her own to identify, legally, as a freewoman upon her return to the past. So, while Dana’s identity is not entirely that of Coogan’s definition, it does resemble certain elements that set her aside from the other characters in *Kindred* and that also “express [her] biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero)” (3).

Scholarship focused on black superheroes nuances this superhero reading of Duffy’s and Jennings’s *Kindred*. Kenneth Ghee’s chapter “Will the ‘Real’ Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, examines many elements of African American culture in comics, including what it means to be a black superhero. Ghee is also the creator of Amen Ra, who he describes as “a [black] superhero icon that fights racism and ignorance” (234). In his essay, Ghee writes about the need for black superheroes in a culture of the genres’ comic books being largely composed of white characters. He makes the point that “unlike in European American (White) culture, there is a dearth of serious culture bound hero archetypes available to the youth in black culture that truly ‘represents’ the affirming African-centered values of African American (Black) culture” (227). Speaking to this “dearth,” Ghee comments that “the emphatic point is that a Black child should, at the very least, be able to imagine a positive superhero or mythological archetype and icon from his/her own race and culture instead of always having to look to another culture for his/her pretend play and idolism” (228). “Cultural allegiance,” Ghee writes, “is the most relevant evaluative critique in most successful and prospering cultures for real or mythologized ‘heroes’ and is not unique or specific to a Black cultural
critique” (231). This “cultural allegiance” sees black superheroes not fighting to “save (White) America ‘proper,’” but instead, as Ghee depicts the fight in Amen Ra, “real-life ‘culture bound’ heroes who have fervently worked to change (a racist White) America for the betterment of the cultural in-group (African Americans)” (230). Ghee continues, saying of black superheroes, “Real-life Black heroes are typically viewed as culturally allegiant and culture bound and indeed they were/are necessarily antagonistic to racist forces in White America in the interest of Black American collective empowerment” (231, Ghee’s emphasis). Ghee’s discussion of black superheroes allows for this reading to dig deeper into viewing Kindred in the realm of the superhero while also complicating Ghee’s arguments based on Dana’s difficult decisions in working with Rufus to bring Alice to his bed willingly, and in Dana’s marriage to a white man, which both the novel and graphic novel depict as contentious for both Dana and Kevin’s families.

Taking these superhero tropes into account, Jewelle Gomez’s essay “Black Women Heroes: Here’s Reality, Where’s the Fiction?” speaks in overt and covert ways about black women as superheroes. First, Gomez discusses her novel The Gilda Stories, which could be considered a postmodern slave narrative that merges the slave narrative genre with vampire narratives. Of this novel, Gomez writes, “My idea was/is to create a super heroic black woman who interprets our lives through a phenomenal perspective” (8). Here we can connect Dana to Gomez’s vision, as Dana is certainly intended to represent black women “through a phenomenal perspective” as a time-space traveler. Gomez’s essay continues by discussing “post-Civil War depictions of Afro-American women” in novels who devote their lives “to the uplift of the race” (9). These characters can be equated to traditional superheroes in their unrealistic depictions as morally superior characters. Gomez moves forward to list “the scope of black women characters” who differ from these flat characters, which include “the matriarchal or independent characters…[who] might be termed the heroic figure” and “the bitch, who comes closest to being mythic” (10). Discussing “European/American heroism…predicated on male dominance,” Gomez states that “for the Afro-American women this kind of romanticism is antithetical to our heroism. We have as frequently had to be the rescuer as the rescued” (10). In this light, Dana can be seen as a mythical sort of matriarch protecting African American families by specifically making sure that Alice gives birth to Hagar, “rescuing” Alice from a physically violent rape, while simultaneously rescuing herself from nonexistence if Hagar is not born, as well as continuously saving Rufus’s life so he can impregnate Alice. While Dana, perhaps, could be construed as “the bitch” character, who, as Gomez states, “controls her life and will stop at little to achieve her goals,” Dana is
also representative of the “conjure woman...an otherworldly force whose magic capabilities are both fear and awe-inspiring” (10). Indeed, Dana elicits certain fear and awe in many of the people on the Weylin plantation the more that she time-space travels, appearing and disappearing in mere moments six times between 1812 and 1831.

Tom Weylin conveys his attitude about Dana in the fourth chapter when she arrives at his home with an injured Rufus, at first saying, “You’re the same one, all right. I didn’t want to believe it. Who are you? What are you” (123). He says this because the last time he saw Dana was five years ago when she disappeared in front of him as he whipped her for teaching Nigel to read and write. Dana answers in the next panel, drawn with her hands raised as if being interrogated by the police, saying, “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m Dana. You know me,” to which he replies in the following panel with a finger pointed in Dana’s face, “Don’t tell me what I know!” (123). Nigel explains to Dana that “Marse Tom knows about you. Marse Rufe and Mister Kevin both told him. He figures that you know enough to do some doctoring” (126). Not only does Dana’s mysterious time-space traveling abilities confuse Tom Weylin, but they at least instill a certain amount of awe in his belief that her mystical presence somehow makes her “capable enough to do some doctoring,” and not on just anyone but on Tom’s very own and only son, Rufus. The black characters in Kindred regard Dana with mixed emotions. Sarah, Nigel, and Carrie trust Dana, who has helped with work and healing the sick and injured on the plantation even though she did not necessarily have to, though at times they have to remind her of her time and place. Alice and Dana’s relationship, however, is troubled, which should not be too surprising considering Dana and Rufus’s relationship. At least twice, Alice accuses Dana of being a “white-nigger” (152 and 205) because of her allowances on the Weylin plantation despite her race juxtaposed to the fact that her skin color still and always casts her in with the enslaved people on the plantation.

Gomez moves from these specific types of characters to discuss fantasy/sci-fi novels by black women writers, saying of them, “to be heroic or mythic within that context means for...black women...having the ability to be a part of the survival of a community in the way we chose and at the same time keep one eye turned toward our own survival as black women” (11). In mentioning Octavia Butler, Gomez writes that “these writers eschew the centuries old idea...which dictates that heroism for women consists largely of being physically beautiful and overtly compliant” (11). Discussing Kindred specifically, Gomez claims that “Dana becomes an inexplicable fixture, reappearing over the years on the plantation providing the slaves with a magical, legendary character” (11). Thus, in converging Peter Coogan’s
definition of what constitutes a superhero with Gomez’s notion that black women have historically had to act heroically for themselves and African Americans as a group, along with Butler scholars such as Gregory Hampton and Patricia Melzer who suggest expanding the generic placement of Butler’s work, *Kindred* transgresses against typical notions of what makes a superhero comic and shows alternate conceptions of the superhero to fit within African American literature and specifically the genre of slave narratives, in this theoretical vein, a serialized superhero comic world, much like the one in which “persecuted minorities like the X-Men, who sometimes fought to overcome prejudice rather than preserve the status quo” (Singer 40).

The last trope of Coogan’s superhero, the generic conventions, is where *Kindred* falls shortest in reading the graphic novel as a superhero comic. In that most superhero comics are serialized installments of large story arcs and world-building with distinct heroes and villains, *Kindred* is an isolated novel, not even connected to Butler’s many other fictional works aside from their placement on Earth and the racial focus characteristic in Butler’s fiction. One of the defining features of the serialized superhero, though not ubiquitous in the genre, is a temporal phenomenon Umberto Eco took up in his seminal essay in 1962, originally written in Italian, “Il mito de ‘Superman’ e la dissoluzione del tempo,” and later translated into English in 1972 by Natalie Chilton. Marc Singer explains this phenomenon in “The Myth of Eco: Comics, Continuity, and Cultural Populism,” the first chapter in *Breaking the Frames*, writing “that Superman comics, and by extension any popular serial narratives, are caught in a temporal paradox as they attempt to combine the stasis and timelessness of mythical characters with the progressive development of the modern novel” (36). In other words, superhero comics end with resolutions after the superheroes battle criminals and supervillains, yet the superheroes appear in these comics for decades without aging or with wholly new reboots of characters who may have been killed off in one issue only to appear in later installments. As Singer writes of this phenomenon in discussing the changes of Spiderman and death and rebirth of Captain America, “Sooner or later the most popular superheroes will inevitably find themselves reset to their most familiar forms” (42).

Considering the theme of time in *Kindred*, not so much the time travel but Butler’s conclusion that the past is being repeated in the present regarding the institutions of slavery and white supremacy in this country, the novel in itself begins to move toward the temporal paradox of the superhero that Eco and Singer discuss. Taking a step back to look at Butler’s collected works, a certain serialization appears in terms of her novels’ and stories’ themes that focus on the effects of, what bell hooks refers to in many works, the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 20).
beyond Butler, now, to look at African American literature in these terms, I argue a certain serialization appears, not in the way that Superman comics always seem to restart in each new issue but in the way that a majority of African American literature comments, if not focuses on, the legacies of slavery that Butler speculates on in *Kindred*. The black characters navigate a racist, white supremacist narrative that usually takes emotional and physical tolls, leaving the characters with the scars to show, though just as often metaphorically rather than how Butler physically removes Dana’s arm. For over two hundred years this serialized American superhero comic book of African American literature has been battling white supremacy, and while many accomplishments have been made and the literature has changed reflecting such accomplishments, the novels, stories, plays, poems, movies, and comics seemingly start from the beginning, as if those changes were merely part of a story told in a past issue of the long-running comic, *Kindred*—an aptly named title, indeed.

While finishing this chapter, I watched the new movie on Netflix *See You Yesterday*, produced by Spike Lee’s 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks and directed by Stephon Bristol. The movie follows the breakthrough experiments of Claudette “CJ” Walker (Eden Duncan-Smith) and Sebastian J. Thomas (Dante Crichlow), young African American high school students who have discovered “temporal relocation” as they refer to what the layperson calls time travel. On their first successful experiment, the time-space continuum, of which they are aware of the dangers, is disturbed and CJ’s older brother is shot and killed by an NYPD detective in a case of mistaken identity and police abuse of power. The rest of the movie focuses on CJ and Sebastian as they attempt to change the past and save her brother’s life, resulting in further violence and an alternate murder when Sebastian is shot in their second attempt, plunging CJ into a complex time-space web of consequences where someone close to her seemingly has to die. *See You Yesterday* ends hopefully with CJ preparing to continue her temporal relocations in order to save those close to her. She and Sebastian argue in their “lab,” Sebastian’s grandparent’s garage, and after he declines to go back in time, once again, to try and save CJ’s brother, he tells her, “I can’t afford to lose anymore.” CJ locks Sebastian out of the garage and sends herself back, and the movie ends with her running to warn her brother, representing the tirelessness of her efforts and black women’s efforts to resist the violence of white supremacy and ensure the safety of their families. While superhero themes are not overt in this movie, I tie *See You Yesterday* into this chapter because of the obvious time-space travel connection to *Kindred*, and more importantly, to the notion that white supremacy takes a physical, violent toll in the past and the present on African Americans. Further, early in the movie, nodding
directly to Butler’s influence on such speculative, science fiction narratives that take social and historical issues into account—unlike Back to the Future, for example—CJ and Sebastian’s high school teacher, acted by none other than Michael J. Fox, is seen reading the novel Kindred during what appears to be a silent study period. What makes this scene even more compelling, however, is that CJ is shown, in contrast to her white professor, reading Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes. Here in this movie and in Duffy’s and Jennings’s graphic novel adaptation of Kindred, and the several adaptations currently in production, is indeed a twenty-first-century “Octavia Butler, Level 2” (Okorafor iv).

NOTES

1. In 2015 Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon, in a mother-daughter collaboration, adapted Butler’s Parable of the Sower into an opera, Parable of the Sower: The Concert Version, performed at the Under the Radar Festival in New York City. Currently, Ava DuVernay and Charles D. King are producing a television series based on Butler’s novel Dawn, though no specifics are available regarding when and where the show will air. Also, Viola Davis’s and Julius Tennon’s JuVee Productions are working on a series based on Butler’s novel, Wild Seed, for Amazon Prime Video, which Nnedi Okorafor is cowriting with Wanuri Kahui.

2. A Marvel character who first appeared in 1966 in Fantastic Four #52 but was recently, and internationally, repopularized with Ryan Coogler’s film; and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s (writer) and Brian Stelfreeze’s (illustrator) new issues of a Black Panther comic.

3. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the “graphic novel” in discussing Kindred because the cover of Duffy’s and Jennings’s adaptation uses that word. However, I, like many comics scholars, prefer the term “comics” because unlike “graphic novel,” which alludes to a fictionality and narrative not represented in every so-called graphic novel, comics “describes the entire field of production” (Singer 19). Therefore, a preference for comics will be used, except in cases where I specifically reference Duffy’s and Jennings’s graphic novel adaptation.

WORKS CITED


I often tell my students I wish I’d known that Octavia E. Butler existed when I was a younger writer. I wish I’d happened upon *Kindred* in 1979, when I was in junior high school, or *Wild Seed* in high school, or *Dawn* when I was in college. If I had, I might have avoided the long detour in my artistic development when I started writing “canon” characters, that is, white men, instead of exploring myself in my imagination. In elementary school, I’d written about black girls suffering the Middle Passage, or with magical animals, or stowing away on space ships—but by grad school I was writing about the white men who had dominated my course assignments. I had lost my own face in my fiction.

I finally started hewing closer to my own experiences when I started writing *The Between* in 1992, but I still did not know about Octavia Butler. *The Between* originally was rejected by a contest and a major agent and I’d put it in a drawer for a year, so I was unpublished and midway through my second novel *My Soul to Keep*, about an Ethiopian immortal named Dawit, when a friend of mine asked me, “Have you read Octavia Butler’s novel about an immortal African?”

My first reaction, I admit, was mortification: Had all of my months of writing time been wasted? I ran out to pick up Octavia’s novel *Wild Seed*, which had been published in 1980 while I was knee deep in Stephen King—and my world was rocked. I immediately devoured the rest of her *Patternmaster* series with the joy that only comes from discovering a writer who was writing exactly what I wanted to read—and my immense relief that her African immortal, Doro, was nothing like mine.
Almost as soon as I learned of Octavia’s existence, in 1997 I was invited to join her on a panel at Clark Atlanta University for a groundbreaking conference called “The African-American Fantastic Imagination: Explorations in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror.” (I’d also recently learned about the existence of another participant, science fiction writer Steven Barnes, whose television episode of *The Outer Limits* made me eager to meet him too.) As a young writer who had not grown up in science fiction and fantasy communities, sadly I was not familiar with pioneer Samuel R. Delany (*Dhalgren*), Octavia’s former teacher at Clarion, who was also on the panel, and Jewelle Gomez (*The Gilda Stories*). But on the basis of my newly published first novel, I was fortunate enough to share the stage with these giants in the genre who had paved the way for me—including Octavia.

We posed for photos in Atlanta that I would see displayed on Octavia’s wall in her house in Lake Forest Park, north of Seattle, three years later. Steve and I, married by then, had been asked by *American Visions* magazine to interview Octavia. After the loss of her mother and the MacArthur Genius Grant, Octavia had bought a house walking or bus distance from her Tuesday and Thursday errands to the post office, bank, and grocery store, since she never drove. As Steve and I approached her walkway, we’d heard Motown blasting through her windows because Octavia liked to listen to music as she wrote. Her walls, predictably, were crammed with books.

We did not know then that it would be our last visit to Octavia’s house. At the time, we were traveling on an unofficial circuit with authors like Nalo Hopkinson and Walter Mosley for the growing number of black speculative fiction events around the country. One we attended in Seattle with Octavia—perhaps our last one together—was called Black to the Future. That day at her house in 2000, we discussed the publication of Sheree Renee Thomas’s *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, wondering if black speculative fiction was about to widen its impact. Steve mentioned that *Dark Matter* was getting film inquiries, and Octavia said, “But you know Hollywood!” And all of us laughed because, indeed, we did.

In 2006, I got a phone call from a writer I knew who said she’d heard from someone in Octavia’s neighborhood that she had collapsed, and Harlan Ellison later confirmed to us that she had died. The devastation was multifaceted: she was Octavia, my burgeoning friend and Steve’s longtime one; she was Octavia, the matriarch of our growing black speculative fiction movement; and she was Octavia, the author whose vision we so desperately need and whose voice had been silenced so soon.

It was years before I could bring myself to teach Octavia’s books after she died, but in forcing myself to lecture about *Kindred* at the Antioch University
Los Angeles MFA residency where I teach. I also honored her memory while I was the distinguished visiting scholar at Spelman College between 2012 and 2014, where I met Dr. Tarshia Stanley, cofounder of the Octavia Butler Reading Society. I had a generous speakers’ budget, so I planned an Octavia Butler Celebration of the Fantastic Arts to commemorate the 1997 event that had brought us together in Atlanta.

I invited Steve, Samuel R. Delany, and Jewelle Gomez, the original attendees, but also Nalo Hopkinson, Brandon Massey, and Sheree Renee Thomas—editor of Dark Matter (2000) and Octavia’s former student. The following year, I hosted an Octavia Butler Celebration of Arts and Activism, and those panelists included Nnedi Okorafor, dream hampton, Adrienne Maree Brown, artist John L. Jennings, and Junot Díaz.

In both celebrations, we spoke not only about our relationship to Octavia’s work and the rise of black speculative fiction but about how Octavia’s legacy and vision could motivate the real-life worldbuilding necessary to create the kind of world Octavia wished for us.

I have taught Octavia’s work steadily since then as a lecturer on Afrofuturism and Black Horror in the African-American Studies Department at UCLA. My Afrofuturism students learn about the dangers of hierarchy and the challenges of leadership and denial in Dawn, or how the near-future dystopia Parable of the Sower grows nearer every day and how “The Only Lasting Truth is Change.” In my Black Horror class, students see the visceral price of slavery and the moral dilemmas in the graphic novel version of Kindred, by Damian Duffy, illustrated by John Jennings, with Dana traveling through time to face off against Rufus in living color.

Year after year, new sets of students are moved and inspired by Octavia’s work, particularly by her black women protagonists who, time and again, must fight against forces of violence and oppression to try to save their piece of the world. Some of my students are so inspired that they write their own fiction. My black students cannot say they did not see their faces reflected in Octavia’s work.

With Octavia, they saw that and so much more.

*****

Octavia was a vegetarian, she told us, not because she objected to eating meat but because she could not stomach the torture of animals. So, on the day of our interview in 2000, she served us vegetarian lentil soup (some of which she spilled on her shirt, interrupting our interview/conversation with the epithets “Oh shoot, oh garbage, garbage, garbage”) and fresh French bread.
Steve had known Octavia for twenty years or more; he lived four or five blocks away from her when they both lived in LA, and he often drove her to book signings and lectures. She also came to his house for dinner. During that precious conversation we all shared, we talked about a range of subjects: her advice to new writers, her experiences as a teacher, “The Race Panel” at science fiction conventions she and Samuel R. Delany were weary of headlining, the publication of *Dark Matter*, the future of black speculative fiction, and what scared her the most.

As someone who was new to Octavia’s life and mostly in awe of her, I observed the easy humor she shared with Steve, laughing with him almost girlishly. At one point, when Steve pointed during our questions that readers had commented on her “bleakness of vision” and tilt toward pessimist, she said, a la Miss Piggy of the Muppets, “Moi?”

But once our laughter died and Octavia said, “Oh, goodness,” her smile vanished and her brow furrowed as she considered the question, rolling from humor to disquiet. “Well, look at us,” she said, her voice’s pitch rising with her passion. *Look at us.* Look what we keep doing. We keep marching to the brink and then drawing back. And the horrible thing is, there are some things you can’t draw back. Even now, the Russian ship goes up to the Arctic and says, “Gee, there’s no ice here” where you would expect to find ice, and I listened to several programs in which people said, “Well, maybe it’s natural.” Or “Well, this happens occasionally,” and nobody says global warming, except maybe the reporter who’s asking the questions. I didn’t think of global warming because in the North Pole there was not that much ice, I thought of global warming because of the whole family of stuff that’s been happening. It’s not a matter of “Global warming will kill us,” because it won’t—but it will kill a whole lot of people. And it already is killing a lot of people in Africa. But we’ve got so many indicators, and people find them inconvenient, so they look at each one separately and say, “Well, you can’t tell anything by this.”

We just don’t seem to be—well, we’re not really that long-term. We’re longer term in terms of any other animal species as far as thinking goes, but we’re not...long term enough for our technology. It seems what our technology is going to do is what every other species does—which is basically turning the Earth into as much of ourselves as we can before we crash.

“...What I’ve been harping on in the past five novels is: ‘How can we make ourselves a more survivable species?’"
Toward that end, Octavia’s body of work forces us to wrestle with the inconvenient, as both readers and scholars. When she believed we had come back from the brink of nuclear war, she published *Dawn* to create an alien species, the Oankali, who might (or might not) save us from ourselves and turn us into something new and better. Headlines and current events were enough to propel her to write *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*—this time by creating a religion to help guide us through our dystopia and a protagonist, Lauren Olamina, to show the importance of empathy in leadership. In *Kindred*, her most famous novel, she created a protagonist, Dana Franklin, who wrestled with her own moral quandaries as she literally walks through the history of slavery.

Her prose is poetic in its precision, but there are no easy Octavia E. Butler novels, and the essays you have just read are a testament to her depth and breadth of vision. And now that the *Parable* novels feel more like prophecy than fiction—and “mainstream” culture is opening its eyes to the power of Butler’s work and the black speculative arts—one can’t help wondering what Octavia might have written in the more than dozen years since she has been gone. What might she have said about President Barack Obama? Or his successor? It was my driving creative drumbeat as I wrote my novel *Blood Colony* during the George W. Bush era: What might Octavia write?

When we talked to Octavia that day in 2000, she spoke about two novels she never finished.

One, *Parable of the Trickster*, was meant to close out her *Parable* trilogy, with Earthseed followers making plans to go to space. After two years, she was unable to finish it. “When I got the idea for *Parable of the Trickster*, I thought I had it, and I thought I had it, and I thought I had it, but I didn’t have it. I had a clear ending for it…. It died many times.”

In “‘There’s Nothing New/Under The Sun,/But There Are New Suns’: Recovering Octavia E. Butler’s Lost Parables” in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* (June 9, 2014), Gerry Canavan writes about her opportunity as the first archivist at the Huntington Library to see the unfinished drafts of Octavia’s *Parable* series, which was meant to span five books. She writes about many fits and starts, all circling back to where the series had begun. Canavan writes:

So of course we discover that achieving Earthseed’s Destiny, despite Lauren Olamina’s dreams, hasn’t solved the problem of the human at all, only extended our confrontation with the very difficult problems that drove its development in the first place—only removed them to some other world where they can take some other form. The Destiny was essentially a hyperbolic delaying tactic, a strategy of avoidance; even achieved, it’s
worthless in its own terms. The fundamental problem is still how to make a better world with such bad building blocks as human beings.

Because wherever we go, there we are.

I asked Octavia if writing was getting more difficult and she said indeed it was. She once had been able to write a novel in a year, or faster, but by then it was taking her five years. “When people used to say that when I was a kid I would say, ‘How is that possible? How can you learn your craft and then it becomes more difficult?’” she said. “But it’s true, because your trunk is empty, and you have to keep filling it.”

But, she added, five years is embarrassing. It’s not a matter of steady progress. The only reason I guess I can deal with it is, it’s a lot like the ways I used to write papers when I was in school. I’m a bit dyslexic, and when I was in elementary school, I was always the one who had to stay after class and didn’t finish because I wrote very, very slowly. But I went on writing slowly, as I got older. One of the things I had to learn was to tell in a few words what others took pages and pages to tell. Another thing I had to learn was how my mind worked. … I would sit there and worry about it until maybe half the time was gone. I would get almost nothing done. I would scribble “Death” on the paper, you know. “Kill, kill, kill.” Finally, when it looked like I wasn’t going to make it, then it would click into place and I would start writing furiously. But knowing that about myself has helped me with these novels. It still doesn’t take more than a year to write a novel—it’s just that it takes a long time to get to the point of being able to write a novel.

At the time of our interview, Octavia was writing a new novel-in-progress she was happy to talk about, but she loathed the working title: Mortal Words. (“I hate it. It’s not a good title. It lies there dead,” she said.) We described that day’s conversation at length in American Visions: The Magazine of Afro-American Culture (October/November 2000). Octavia spoke about how meaningful her MacArthur Grant had been in helping her create a character who has received a gift.

As I wrote in American Visions:

If the [MacArthur Grant] hadn’t happened, I might not be able to write this novel, because my character in the novel receives a gift that is a really major gift. She’s so powerful that I had to invent some Kyroptonite for her. But I didn’t know how she would handle it until I looked back at the MacArthur. I need her to handle it and stay sane. I don’t need her to go nuts, especially since I’m using my own life and those years. … All of a sudden I was given something I absolutely never expected and barely realized existed.
But, like Parable of the Trickster, Octavia never finished this novel. The next time I heard from her, it was to ask me to read Fledgling—her last novel. I never asked what had happened to the previous novel—I was just so happy that Octavia was writing horror the way only Octavia Butler could. I was thrilled to see that she had overcome her writer’s block to take her fiction in new, exciting directions.

And then she was gone. Except we all know that she isn’t—not really. Octavia lives on in classrooms and in the imaginations of the untold number of readers who share her vision and passion for their fellow flawed humans.

“The only lasting truth is Change.” May Octavia help us all change for the better.
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