Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

Race, reproduction and colonization: the female body through Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild and Other Stories"

Relatrice
Prof. Renata Morresi

Laureanda
Marta Tieppo
n° 1190658 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2021 / 2022

Abstract

This dissertation is centered around Octavia Estelle Butler and her short story collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. As the first African American woman to win multiple of the most prestigious science fiction awards, the Hugo and Nebula Award, and then the MacArthur Fellowship, she is considered a pioneer in a literary genre that, for most of the 20th century, had been primarily in the hands of white men. The goal is to analyze the seven stories of the collection and provide a deeper understanding of Butler's approach to speculative fiction. Main point of interest and common denominator of the research is the female body, its more or less evident features, reproductive abilities and the interracial or interspecies sexual encounters in which they partake.

The first chapter provides a broad overview of the history of science fiction, from its origins in the Gothic of the 19th century to the New Wave of the 70s. It also gives an insight into the struggle of women writers trying to affirm themselves as active participants of the genre, the obstacles placed in their way and the major themes of their writings. The last section is dedicated to the exploration of a recurring issue in science fiction studies, meaning the apparent lack of participation on the part of black writers during the Golden Age of science fiction and the possible reasons why.

The second chapter is dedicated in its entirety to the analysis of *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. After a brief introduction to the collection, each section will be dedicated to the examination of the seven short stories, their main themes and underlying - even less obvious - meanings.

The final and third chapter is ground for a cross-analysis of the female body throughout the collection. A first section will be dedicated to addressing its visible and less detectable features, specifically by diving into the issue of colorblindness and how Butler touched upon the concept of race across her stories. I will then shift focus on the feminine characteristics of these bodies, especially in their reproductive capabilities and how they are employed, proactively used, and abused or entirely impeded. Lastly, a final section will be dedicated to the analysis of how the female body is situated in respect of the alien other, what relationships the two of them develop and what they mean in respect of the concepts of conquest, colonization and cohabitation.

Table of Contents

Abstract **3**

Introduction **7**

CHAPTER 1: SCIENCE FICTION **11**

1.1 Octavia E. Butler: blackness, feminism, and science fiction 11
1.2 Science fiction: from the European Gothic to the American Mainstream . 16
1.3 Science fiction and women writers: more than just a genre "for boys" 24
1.4 Black science fiction: the invisible writer and the silent reader 28

CHAPTER 2: BLOODCHILD AND OTHER STORIES **37**

2.1 An introduction to the short story collection 37
2.2 Bloodchild 38
2.3 The Evening and the Morning and the Night 48
2.4 Near of Kin 54
2.5 Speech Sounds 57
2.6 Crossover 60
2.7 Amnesty 62
2.8 Book of Martha 67

CHAPTER 3: THE FEMALE BODY 73

3.1 Butler's "radio imagined" characters in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* 73

3.2.1 The body and race: representation, colorblindness, and post-racial theories in Butler's work 74

3.2.2 The body and race: an analysis of the short stories 78

3.3.1 The body and sex: female cyborgs and monstrous motherhoods 90

3.3.2 The body and sex: an analysis of the short stories 92

3.4.1 The body in relation to the Other: colonization and cohabitation through the lenses of "histofuturism" 99

3.4.2 The body in relation to the Other: an analysis of the short stories 101

Conclusion 109

References 111

Summary in Italian 117

Introduction

The subject of the following dissertation is Octavia Estelle Butler's *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, a collection of science fiction stories and essays first published in 1995 by Four Walls Eight Windows and expanded in 2005 with a second edition that included two additional works, merely one year before the author's sudden passing. Probably not as renowned as her other books, such as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy or *The Parable* series, which helped solidify her fame as a science fiction writer on a much larger scale, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* represents a varied and intriguing assortment of sci-fi themes and flavors, ranging from futurism to ecologism, feminism, medicine, biology, aliens, religion, and dystopian futures: all in all, the perfect ingredients to concoct great speculative fiction.

Octavia Butler made history not only by becoming the first African American woman writer to ever publish science fiction, but also for being the first African American woman writer to win, through the novelette *Bloodchild*, title story of the forementioned collection, four of the most prestigious science fiction awards: the 1984 Nebula Award, the 1985 Hugo Award, the 1985 Locus Award and the 1985 Science Fiction Chronicle Award (Holden and Shawl 2013, 278-79). Despite these incredible accomplishments, it is not uncommon to find most science fiction readers squint their eyes with a glint of perplexity when hearing her name, as it has not gained the fame and traction that other canonical authors of the genre did, especially outside the scope of American soil. It does not take the eye of an expert to notice, almost at first glance, the reason behind her inability to break through and accomplish just as much as her colleagues: she wrote in a relatively new, yet booming, subgenre of speculative fiction, a field which at the time was entirely dominated by white men. Though every attempt to construct and determine the true canon of any literary genre might be an arduous and divisive task, anyone interested in science fiction can still be directed back to its most famous and successful authors and easily notice the pattern: the most common names when searching for a book that could be a good introduction to the realm of science fiction are probably always going to be Jules Verne, Herbert George Wells, Hugo Gernsback, soon followed by the so-called "Big Three", Arthur Charles Clarke, Robert Anson Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. Female science fiction voices, even if existent, prolific, and just as relevant as their male counterparts,

such as the example of Ursula Kroeber Le Guin, seem to be the exception rather than the norm. The main issue encountered while examining the subject does not seem to be a lack or an absence altogether of female science fiction authors, rather the fact that in order to stumble upon them one can not simply stop at a surface level and has to be prepared to dig much deeper; or, to put it in a way that would resonate with most of the science fiction readers out there, one has to be somewhat of a "nerd". The first hindrance in Octavia Butler's path as a science fiction writer can therefore be assumed to be her own gender, which put her at an implicit disadvantage in a context dominated by male authorship, but it easily gets overshadowed by the other key component of her identity: she is not simply a female writer, she is a *black* female writer. If female voices might have been perceived as a minority in the science fiction genre of the 70s, the existence of African American writers interested and invested into this type of fiction was even rarer. In a 1995 interview with filmmaker Julie Dash, Butler herself discussed how much science fiction was of little to no interest to African Americans. When asked if at the very first science fiction convention she attended she saw any other black person, she replied:

> One. I saw this one black man, and I went over to him and I said "Hi, are you a writer?", and he said "No, are you?", and I was too embarrassed to admit that I was this writer with tons of rejection slips and no published work, so I said no and we both wandered off to find somebody more important.[1]

As a writer, Butler is situated in an incredibly unique position. She writes in a marginalized genre which at the time had created for itself, through the establishment of magazines which specialized in science fiction alone, the fame of being a white male "ghetto" (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 218), by at the same time being positioned, as a black woman, outside of their bubble. The so called literary ghetto she joined was, at the time, dominated by the Euro-American tendency of seeing the universe as a continuation of the western conquest of the world. The space frontier, much like the Wild West of the 17th century, was considered by most science fiction authors as a fertile land ready for capture, filled with planets and galaxies to grab, conquer, and colonize. The alien served as a catalyst for conflict or for the utopistic unification of all humans under one banner: mankind – though, rather than being truly diverse, it was incredibly, overwhelmingly white –.

[1]Dash, Julie. 1995. *Julie Dash interviews Octavia Butler*. "40 Acres and a Microchip". Los Angeles.

Butler noted that most science fiction plots lacked one key thing: the perspective of the Other. All of these white male authors constantly represented and projected into the distant future the perspective of the western colonizer, conqueror, fighter, or explorer of the world that somehow always pushed through his hardships and ended up victorious, by subjugating others. In doing so, the reader was almost never put face to face with the harsh truth of the space frontier: if there was a colonizer, there had to be the colonized. Therefore, what if, for example, it was the human race which instead had to go through colonization at the hands of a much more advanced alien species? And what if they had no way to fight back and win their freedom? How would they deal with this new, horrifying reality, and how would they reinvent themselves in order to live and thrive?

Butler's writings explore such conundrums by taking to the forefront the lived historical experience of groups of people who had long been ignored or dismissed by most science fiction authors: those who had always been perceived by the Euro-American man as the Other, meaning people of color, those of African descent, natives, and especially women. Butler would later on further elaborate on this type of approach towards speculative fiction and define it as "histofuturism" (Streeby 2018, 721). Histofuturism allowed her to present to the science fiction reader a unique perspective, one which was grounded not in the victorious experience of the western colonizer but on the lived history of the colonized.

As it will become clearer in the later chapters of the dissertation, this work focuses on bringing to light this very approach throughout the short stories of Butler's collection. In order to do so, I have specifically tried to find a "fil rouge" that could allow a consistent and homogenous analysis of stories that present, in reality, the most diverging themes and topics. What I have focused my attention on, therefore, is the common denominator which recurs through the entirety of *Bloodchild and Other Stories*: the female body. After all, what could better represent the Other to a white male author than a black woman?

My work will be structured as follows: the first chapter is dedicated to the presentation of Octavia Butler, her work, and the literary genre itself. First, I am going to briefly introduce her life and biography. I will then delineate the origins of science fiction, how the genre developed and what it had become at the time in which Butler began to first publish her stories. I believe that getting to the essence of science fiction, especially what kind of culture it had cultivated and established in the America of the 70s, is essential

if we want to have a better understanding as to the kind of narrative that Butler herself was both joining and challenging at the same time. After this section, I am then going to briefly introduce female science fiction writers. The goal is to clarify why female writers were not considered as good and prolific as their fellow male colleagues, and on the other hand to deconstruct this narrative with proof of their commitment to the literary genre. The final section of the first chapter is going to be dedicated entirely to the relationship between science fiction, black authorship, and black readership. I will investigate the reasoning behind why African Americans appeared at first to be uninterested in the genre, and whether it is true that they did not contribute to it by taking into consideration several theories on the matter.

In the second chapter I am going to dive into the primary object of my research, the science fiction collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. Through this section I will provide full context for each short story from both editions, the one first published in 1995 and the latest installment from 2005. I will try to bring to light themes and topics present inside each short story.

After this broad analysis, the third and closing chapter of the dissertation is going to center around the analysis of the female body in the collection. More specifically, I will examine the female characters through the following lenses: first, how they are racially defined and characterized across the stories, by attempting to understand Butler's thought process in their creation and in her depiction of race, and whether it adheres to a form of colorblindness or rather to post-racial theories; then, how the feminine qualities of these bodies are used, abused or stigmatized, especially with regard to reproduction; lastly, how they become, though these very feminine qualities, become point of contact in between species, sites for the enactment of colonization, cohabitation and the reinvention of mankind.

CHAPTER 1

SCIENCE FICTION

1.1 Octavia E. Butler: blackness, feminism, and science fiction

Octavia Estelle Butler was born on June 22, 1947, in the racially integrated community of Pasadena, California. The only child of Octavia Margaret Guy, a maid, and Laurice James Butler, a shoe shiner, she was raised by her mother and grandmother after losing her father at the age of seven. She grew up in a working-class, racially mixed neighborhood during segregation, and in a heavily Baptist environment that she would distance herself from later on in life. A painfully shy and awkward child from a very young age, nicknamed "Junie", she immersed herself in reading and writing as an escape route from reality. She would describe herself as "comfortably asocial – (…) a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive" (Francis 2010, 11). Writing was what she liked to call a "positive obsession". As an enthusiastic reader of fantasy and science fiction, she did not let this obsession go even after her aunt had told her that "negroes can't be writers, they just can't" (Butler 2005, 127). Nor did she stop trying to get published after her first rejection slip, received when she was only a teen. Her passion and determination allowed her to establish herself as a trailblazer figure in a literary genre that, at the time, was perceived by the reading public and by its own fanbase as lacking in female and, especially, black voices.

Butler herself set the beginning of this passion back to the early days of childhood. She placed part of the blame on her mother, who had stopped reading her bedtime stories when she was six, hence forcing young Octavia to read on her own. By the age of ten, she was already making stories up in her mind and writing them on notebooks. She described sneaking in a bookstore in her hometown to buy her first book with the little money she had managed to save. It was 1957, and her mother had warned her that black kids might not be welcome there. She faced her fears anyway and came back with a book, the first she had ever personally chosen: a book on the different breeds of horses. It was during that time, thanks to the help of her science teacher, who accepted to type one of her stories

on her behalf, that she was able to submit her first story to a science fiction magazine and received her very first rejection slip. She did not get the same kind of help later on, once she enrolled in Pasadena City College. In her attempts to receive constructive criticism on her writing, one of the professors asked why she could not write anything "normal". It was not normality, however, that won her first prize in a college-wide short-story contest held in 1967. She had just earned the first few dollars, fifteen in total, that she had ever received as a writer (Butler 2005, 125-132).

In 1968, Butler earned an associate degree from Pasadena City College and enrolled at California State University, in Los Angeles, only to leave soon and begin taking UCLA extension writing courses. While attending the Open Door Workshop of the Screen Writers Guild of America, a program that was designed to mentor Latino and African-American writers, Butler met Harlan Ellison. It was him, impressed by her writing, that encouraged her to attend the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. At that 1970 six-week workshop she met Samuel R. Delany, the only other black science fiction writer she knew was around at the time. She was also able to sell her first two stories, *Crossover* and *Child Finder*, marking the end of an era in which she was limited to collecting rejection slip after rejection slip.

A few years later, Butler began working on what was going to become her Patternist series, a series of science fiction novels involving secret master races, telepathy, genetic engineering, selective breeding, and new world orders. The first three books, *Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind* (the prequel) and *Survivor*, published in 1976, 1977 and 1978, allowed her to earn enough money to leave all her temporary jobs and begin living off of her own writing. In 1979, she published her stand-alone historical novel *Kindred*, while beginning to release short stories to science fiction magazines, such as *Near of Kin*. With the publication the fourth and fifth book of her Patternist series, *Wild Seed* and *Clay's Ark*, released in 1980 and 1984, Butler began her rise to prominence in the science fiction field.

In 1984, her two short stories *Speech Sounds* and *Bloodchild*, published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, won her the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award, officially making her the first African American woman writer to receive these prizes. A year later, *Bloodchild* received even more praises and attention, and gained even more awards: the Hugo, Locus, and Science Fiction Chronicle Reader Award for best Novelette.

From 1987 to 1989, Butler was working and publishing the books of her Xenogenesis trilogy, *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*, which were going to be republished in 2000 as the collection *Lilith's Brood*.

By the 90s, she was at the peak of her fame. She published *Parable of the Sower* in 1993, which was nominated for the Nebula Award the next year, and in 1995 she was awarded the *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellowship*, becoming the first science fiction writer to receive this "genius" grant. That same year, she released the short stories collection, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. Nebula Award winner *Parable of the Talents*, the second book of her Earthseed series, came out in 1998.

Before the 90s came to an end, Butler was moving from Pasadena to Lake Forest Park, Washington, shortly after her mother's death. She spent the first few years of the 21st century taking part of numerous science fiction conventions as a guest of honor and collecting even more awards, such as the Lifetime Achievement Award in Writing from the PEN American Center. Her latest short stories, *Amnesty* and *Book of Martha*, were published online at SciFi.com in 2003, and her final book, *Fledging*, a science-fiction vampire novel, was released in 2005, the same year in which her collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* was expanded to include her last two works. A year later, on February 24, she passed away (Holden and Shaw 2013, 288-291).

One thing that makes Butler such a unique author is her intrinsic disposition to be placed, as a historic literary figure, at the crossroad of different fields going through different historical moments that, within her, intersect and overlap one another: at the core, she was a science fiction writer; but she was not just that, she was also a feminist writer of the seventies; and that was not all, as she was also a black writer during the Black Power movement and the neo-black nationalism of the early nineties. These three separate fields blended together in her writing, providing her with a unique perspective. In a way, she possessed the best marketing strategy: she did not have just one, limited, audience, but three; and she could cater to all of them at the same time. However, if her own identity could make her fortune, after over two decades of nonstop writing, publishing and publicizing, discussions about it could also become a sort of broken record, circular and limiting. During her 2004 interview with SciFiDimensions, Butler described having to respond to relentless questions concerning labels and racial identity as "very tiresome" (Francis 2010, 215). In the same year, while sitting down at the radio

talk show *The Tavis Smiley Show* for her then twenty-five years old book *Kindred*, she pushed back against the idea that black fantasy or science fiction writers had to deal with race issues all of the time, or at least write something "to help the struggle". As Butler herself put it, she had to focus on the things that seemed important to her (Francis 2010, 220).

Butler was, throughout her novels, laser focused on social issues and questions of social power, but without ever providing direct answers or solutions. Her literary work, despite being filled with feminist themes and addressing African American concerns, never openly defined what blackness or womanhood was, nor it ever inserted any clear or blatant agenda. She simply wrote, depicting what she saw directly in her own life, and speculated about what things might be.

Butler's go-to origin story for the reason why she decided to write science fiction involves *Devil Girl from Mars*, a British black-and-white movie from 1954 that she saw when she was about twelve years old. Whenever asked about it, she always described the movie as the source of a series of revelations which, like sparks ready to set ablaze what was going to transform into a life-long passion, began with "I can write a better story than that" and ended with "somebody got paid for writing that awful story". During her MIT speech on February 19, 1998, she also dove deeper into the matter. She addressed a crucial factor not only for herself, as a science fiction fan and writer, but also for the reading public, which can help us better understand the context wherein this literary genre reached one of its peaks in popularity: the Space Race. In the transcript of that speech, later on known as a stand-alone piece called *"Devil Girl From Mars": Why I Write Science Fiction*, we can find Butler giving the following remark about the effect that the Space Race had on the American public of the time:

> There were plenty of films--I don't mean science fiction, but the kinds of films they used to show in school--and they were available all of a sudden to make me aware of worlds that I might not otherwise have been aware of. And we had heroes who were astronauts; you know, all these guys who were flying through space, and it was OK. It wasn't stupid or crazy or that science-fiction garbage because prior to this, there had been the idea that comic books and science fiction could rot your brains. Anyway, all of a sudden science fiction was OK.[2]

That was not the first nor the last time Butler addressed science fiction in these somewhat harsh and dismissive words. One of the first things one might notice when

[2]MIT Black History. *"Devil Girl From Mars": Why I Write Science Fiction by Octavia Butler, 1998.*

listening to her interviews and conferences, is the different answers she was willing to provide when asked directly about what science fiction meant to her, as a genre, and how she felt about being a pioneer in it for the black community. During her 1995 interview with film director Julie Dash, when asked how she would define her own work, as either speculative fiction or science fiction, she provided another long-winded answer:

> I let the marketing people decide what to call it. I find it a really tiresome argument-- always to be arguing "is it fantasy?" "is it science fiction?" "is it speculative fiction?". The only thing that I guess bothers me is-- I've noticed that if it's completely impossible fantasy people are much more receptive to it. They're much happier to see all sorts of odd things that couldn't be than they are to see some sort of machine that's a little bit advanced and that could be. Because that's science fiction, it's for kids. So in that sense I'm bothered by it. I care about it. As to what I call myself-- I call myself a writer.[3]

She had a similar answer for her Balticon 34 interview in 2000. When being asked by the host whether she considered herself a science fiction writer, she replied with a vehement "no, no, on my business card it says writer". It might sound like a stretch, but there is an uncanny similarity between that statement of hers and the words of Langston Hughes in his 1926 essay, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. In its opening passage, Hughes recalls a brief conversation with a young black poet, one of the most promising of the time, according to him, who had said that he wanted to be a poet, not a "Negro poet". Decades later, we can almost hear Butler repeat the same phrase, only in a different context: she wants to be a writer, not a "science-fiction writer"; or at least, she wants to be known as such, and not be limited by any label. In a way, by trying to reject this specific quirk of hers, it sounds like she was trying to deny a part of her own identity. In addressing the problem with being defined in this manner, she stated that:

> In spite of the freedom that it gives you to examine any theme that you can think of, it's confining in a sense that a lot of people think that science-fiction is Star Wars. And you have to be fourteen to enjoy it. And if you're any older than fourteen, well, you should be reading literature… whatever that is.[4]

These replies, reiterated through time, seem to paint a specific picture, one that portrays Butler at least partially uncomfortable with different factors on the matter: first and foremost, the way in which science fiction was generally perceived by the American public of the time; second, the acceptance of being labeled a science fiction writer; and

---

[3]Dash, Julie. 1995. *Julie Dash interviews Octavia Butler*.
[4]Fast Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction. *Octavia Butler Interview: Transcending Barriers.*

third, whether she herself accepted, at least in part, to label her own work as science fiction, the "garbage" that could "rot your brain". As a woman who had dreamed of becoming a successful writer from a very early age and that could proud herself of having reached such an ambitious goal, she seemed to respond with a glint of sarcasm and snark whenever asked about it, either directed at the genre itself, at the interviewer or at any potential critic of the genre hidden in the public. She never openly rejected her love and passion towards science fiction, though, and in her 2003 interview with Museum of Pop Culture she provided her shortest yet extensive answer on the subject:

> Science fiction was fun because I discovered that I enjoyed reading popular science, and I really enjoyed… just speculating. We've all heard the idea that there are three kinds of science fiction: What If, If Only, and If This Goes On. And I didn't know that at the time, but somehow managed to sense it.[5]

It was not the first time she had mentioned those three different categories of science fiction. During her previously cited MIT speech on February 19, 1998, she had erroneously attributed this concept to Robert A. Heinlein. Actually, the person who had established these three categories was Isaac Asimov himself, who defined and explored them in the introductions of two books, *Soviet Science Fiction* and *More Soviet Science Fiction*, collections of Russian science fiction stories curated by Collier Books.

To better understand why Butler, a thorough enjoyer of the genre as reader and writer, was sometimes willing to attempt to detach herself from being labeled a science fiction author, it would be best to first take a step back, rewind, and look at this literary genre in its entirety, from its muddy roots to the lush branches it had grown in the context of the 20th century America.

1.2 Science fiction: from the European Gothic to the American Mainstream

Pinning down the origins of science fiction to a specific time in human history appears to be, at least at first glance, an arduous and divisive task. Some scholars can track its distinctive features further back than a millennium before the Scientific Revolution, to ancient Greece and Lucian of Samosata, with the tale *True Story* written

[5]Museum of Pop Culture. *How Octavia Butler Discovered Science Fiction*.

in 175 AD (Aldiss 1988, 33). The general consensus places science fiction underneath the much larger umbrella genre of speculative fiction, while some writers and scholars view it as mode that, depending in the way in which it develops, involves speculative fiction too (Aldiss 1988, 15). In this dissertation, I will not provide the whole, extensive history of speculative fiction in its every facet. I will only attempt to depict where science fiction originated and how it then developed and flourished on American soil, the literary field in which Octavia Butler thrived.

In *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, an expanded version of the 1973 book *Billion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss fixes the origins of the genre to a specific moment: the Industrial Revolution, a period of time spanning over the second half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century, in which human byproducts, such as technology, and human ideas, such as the theories on the evolution of species, were in the midst of radical transformation. Science fiction sprouted from the fertile ground of that sociocultural context, more specifically from the Gothic novel.[6] Aldiss does not simply reject the idea that science fiction could be several centuries – if not even millennia – old, but he also provides a clear and concise definition as to what this literary genre is. He states: "Science fiction is the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically cast in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode" (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 30).

To justify these gothic origins, it is worth noting the elements that science fiction and the Gothic novels have in common. The first gothic feature perceivable in science fiction is the choice of the location. If in the Gothic novel the setting is imbued with a distance, one that projects the reader in a misty, gloomy past decaying in front of the readers' eyes, science fiction constructs this distance by eradicating the readers from the present and pushing them directly into the future, either on the same Earth or in a galaxy

[6]The Gothic novel is a type of fiction belonging to the Romantic literary movement, originated in England and flourished during the second half of the 18th century. It was initiated by Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), but the genre was then re-elaborated and expanded upon by many other authors, such as Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, William Beckford, Charles Robert Maturin, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Bram Stocker. Characteristic features of the Gothic novel are its dark settings and an environment of fear, mystery, and horror. The name itself refers to the European Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages, a recurring feature of the settings of many Gothic novels. This type of architecture served in the novels as the physical reminder of a thriving past that was long gone, as it was now decaying and hunting the characters (Drabble 2000, 422-24)

far away. The second, and probably most prominent, feature that science fiction inherited from the Gothic novel is the sense of sublime, as defined by Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[7]

Just like the Gothic novel, science fiction may generate by its own nature a sense of horror, terror or wonder in the mind of the reader. Burke defined the passion produced by the encounter with the sublime in nature as "astonishment" (Burke 1823, 73), and we can easily assume that this is the same passion that could overcome a reader rapt with tales of horrific dystopic futures, marvelous technological tools which border magic or encounters with alien species.

Aldiss places the origins of science fiction within Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, anonymously published in London during January 1818. In the preface of the book, Percy Shelley described the content of his wife's novel as "not of impossible occurrence" and as scientifically plausible, hence giving credit to the scientific knowledge of the time, especially philosopher and doctor Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather. The novel was, at least in part, inspired by science. It is in the preface of the second edition, republished in 1831 and written by Mary herself, that a second and deeper recount of the novel's origins is presented to the public: by her own words, *Frankenstein* was both a gothic novel – as in its inception it was supposed to be a ghost story – and scientific fiction, stimulated by the many discussions that Lord Byron and her husband, Percy, had had regarding galvanism, electricity and Dr. Darwin's experiments. Ultimately, though, *Frankenstein* is not known today for being a ghost story, the end product of a challenge that Lord Byron had initiated with his friends and guests during a gloomy night of 1816, trapped inside the walls of an old castle in Switzerland. It is known for being the first novel in which marvelous scientific achievements are being described alongside the tragic, and especially horrific, effects they can produce. Through *Frankenstein*'s pages can see how, regardless of plausibility, humanity would face these incredible technological advancements, how they would deeply impact our life, but, most

[7]Burke. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* 45.

importantly, we can look into the duality of man and investigate, speculate on our own nature.

After Mary Shelley, science and scientific discoveries kept finding their way inside the novels of the mid and late 19th century. They can be detected in Edgard Allan Poe's works, imbued with both gothic atmospheres and scientific principles. Jules Verne, author of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Twenty Thousands Leagues under the Sea*, made such extensive use of modern science in his books that some of the things he described – Captain Nemo' submarine, for example – predicted technological inventions ahead of time, almost anticipating the same foresight that Isaac Asimov had about the future.[8] Not entirely constrained by realistic science and yet by no means of less importance, was the work of H. G. Wells, an author considered among the founding fathers of the genre and defined as "the Prospero of all the brave new worlds of the mind, and the Shakespeare of science fiction" (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 162). A futurist at hearth, H. G. Wells wrote prolific critique of social issues and was able to anticipate crucial themes such as nuclear weapons, space exploration and genetic science.

This British – and to a general extent European – literary tradition was going to be labeled for a brief period of time as *scientific romance*, first by critics and then in a more official manner by Charles Howard Hinton, who entitled his 1884 collection of essays as such. Though at first differing from the tradition born on American soil, it was about to converge and merge into it.

The literary world at the end of the 19th century was a kaleidoscope of changes and revolutions, not only in content but especially in format. The signing of the Education Act in 1870 began a process of mass education and alphabetization in England. It is of no surprise, then, that the founding of great newspapers, the rise of interest in journals and periodicals, and the exponential increase in number of published novels all seem to overlap in that period of time. A similar process had been happening in America, with the rise in popularity of the dime novel[9], a shorter and more digestible form of literature of easy access to the masses anticipating the huge success of even cheaper magazines.

[8]Isaac Asimov & Bill Moyers. 1988.

[9]The term dime novel derives from the 1860 series of cheap paperbacks released by Erastus and Irwin Beadle, called *Beadle's Dime Novels*. It was then used broadly to refer to the type of novel which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States, meaning a form of popular, serialized, cheap paperbound fiction. (Ashley 2000, 19-21)

Unlike the European scientific romance, at first addressed to an intellectual middle-class audience and only later on the lower classes, the American science fiction of the time was undergoing the inverse process, which started with the specialization of pulp magazines.[10]

The surge in popularity that awaited science fiction and its consequent "ghettification" (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 218) could not have happened without the first science fiction pulp. In 1926, Hugo Gernsback founded the first specialized science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*. Born in Luxembourg, Gernsback was first and foremost a man of science, technology, and innovation. After coming to the United States as an entrepreneur in the electronics industry and having written and published in electronics magazines, he rose to fame as a science fiction writer, editor, and publisher. His role in helping science fiction flourish into the mainstream was so great that, every year, the World Science Fiction Convention presents in his honor the "Hugo Awards", the literary award for best science fiction or fantasy. It was also thanks to him that, after unsuccessfully trying to baptize the whole genre as *scientifiction* – his preferred nomenclature for the literary genre, coined in 1916 – that the use of the word s*cience fiction* entered the mainstream. It is worth noting that there had been a few predecessors to *Amazing Stories* in Europe, but none of them made it to the same level of success: *Stella*, a Sweden magazine, only lasted four issues, and *Hugin*, founded by Otto Witt, a Swedish engineer and author, lasted four years in total, providing eighty-six issues to the public; *Der Orchideengarten*, an Austrian-German-Swiss magazine, had the same short life span, despite publishing all the leading European writers of the time. As Sam J. Lundwall, Swedish editor, publisher, and science fiction writer, stated in support of Aldiss' extremely critical view of Gernsback, the European science fiction tradition slowly faded as the one in America started to rise (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 251-252):

> It took me many years to realize that there actually was a European heritage of this literature, that the genre actually had originated in Europe – and, in a sense, I felt that the USA had stolen this heritage, transforming it, vulgarizing it and changing it beyond recognition. (…) We find hundreds of eminent science fiction works hidden beyond insurmountable language

[10]Pulp magazines first appeared in 1882 with Frank Munsey's *Argosy*, a revamped edition *The Golden Argosy,* a magazine that published children stories. After escaping bankruptcy, it not only changed its format, but also content and audience by shifting towards adult fiction. These changes revealed to be a success: *Argosy* went from publishing a few thousands copies per month to more than five hundred thousands. The word *pulp* derives from the material that composed the magazines that followed *Argosy*'s model, meaning around 128 cheap wood pulp papers with untrimmed edges. The combination of cheap material, cheap printing and cheap authors made these magazines incredibly affordable and accessible to the masses. (Ashley 2000, 21-27)

> barriers, hidden beyond all those British and US works which during the years have been all too easily available, to such a degree that everything else has disappeared from view.

Despite losing ownership of *Amazing Stories* in 1929, Gernsback moved to found a second magazine, *Science Wonder Stories*, and he set in motion the beginning of a prosperous, incredibly prolific era for the genre. In the years that followed, an increasing number of science fiction writers started publishing their works on pulp magazines, and, most importantly, an incredible number of readers, writers and fans began coalescing into communities. These communities became fandoms, brimming with incredible enthusiasm, and created local, national, and even international conventions. No other literary genre had generated so much activity before. The rapid increase of interest in the public and the copious work produced by writers and amateurs had, however, their first side effect. A new perception of the genre rose: published on these low-cost magazines, science fiction was no different from cheap entertainment; a kind of sub literature that deserved little merit, even, and lacked in originality. Jack Williamson, prominent author of the pulp era, described the science fiction of his time as "unliterary, if not anti-literary" as it was part of the popular culture (Cunningham 2002, 17).

If with *Amazing Stories* the mainstream science fiction that we know finally started to take root and germinate, it is only with the arrival of *Astounding Science Fiction* that the Golden Age sprouted into existence. John W. Campbell became *Astounding*'s editor in 1937, after his predecessor Orlin Tremaine had already transformed it into a leading magazine, a promising pulp into a crowded field of many. Campbell's abilities to make order in a genre that had become in the few decades it had enjoyed such a huge growth spurt, chaotic, stale, repetitive and lacking credibility, were what set in motion this shining age of renewal. As a demanding editor, he asked not only a certain degree of accurate science and plausibility from his writers, but also, and especially, skill and quality. These strict demands created what was going to be defined as "hard" science fiction. Under Campbell's directions, writers began to make once again such stark technological predictions with the scientific understanding of the time that they even prompted an FBI investigation regarding knowledge about the atomic bomb[11], then still under development

[11]The short story in question is *Deadline* by Clave Cartmill, published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1944. Through a vast research of material gathered from unclassified scientific journals on the use of Uranium-235, Cartmill was able to write about a process similar to the one undergoing at Los Alamos National Laboratory, called the Manhattan Project (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 278).

and top secret (Cunningham 2002, 19). In July 1939, new writers but soon to be science fiction giants such as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Theodore Sturgeon made an entrance. Campbell's contribution to the Golden Age of science fiction did not stop, however, at the demands of sticking to "hard science". Underneath his direction, we can find authors craving for space travel, alien species, stellar empires and intergalactic conquests, an unquenchable human desire for the unknown that was about to be directed towards the Space Race. *Astounding Science Fiction* was, overall, a massive collaborative work, "the first think-tank" (Aldiss and Wingrove 1988, 277), and it bore its fruits by enriching with quality content an incredibly active, preexisting community.

Then World War II broke out, and all the positive energy that had surrounded science and technological progress until that moment suddenly dimmed. The readers' attitude and the writers' tone changed swiftly, as a cloud of dark cynicism expanded on the previously enthusiastic pulp fiction field. Like Jack Williamson noted, "the old happy endings were lost in the mushroom clouds of atomic Armageddon" (Cunningham 2002, 20). It was time for writers to envision dark futures and refocus their works on social agendas, by addressing real and concrete social concerns, so figures like Ray Bradbury and George Orwell came to prominence.

When the fifties arrived, after the horrors of the war and several, terrific technological predictions made by many authors of the genre, science fiction had started to be taken more seriously by the general public. It had expanded beyond pulp magazines and reached traditional libraries. The space race was now in full swing. Space flight, which had been until then only a dream, had transformed into a reachable reality, into real projects and hardware, and the American public was now fully aware that it was not just the silly fantasy of some writers. In a sense, technological progress was tearing down the walls that had enclosed science fiction in its own ghetto, and it was doing so from the outside.

The New Wave of the genre that began in the sixties did not rise from the ashes of the Golden Age that science fiction had experienced in America. It came from the British magazine *New World*. Founded as a fanzine[12] called *Novae Terrae* in 1936, it had turned

[12]The term fanzine is used to describe non-professional, non-official publications produced by fans of the science fiction genre, who are not paid for their work. The word later on was expanded to include other communities and fandoms of different literary genre. Fanzines might circulate entirely free of charge or they might cost the bare minimum to cover for shipping or production expenses. (Ashley 2000, 209)

into a professional publication in 1946 and underwent a huge transformation in 1964 with the guidance of writer and editor Michael Moorcock. Moorcock had a vision not only for the magazine, but for the entire genre. No longer willing to publish any sort of content presented to him, of the most varied quality, he demanded that his writers met the same literary standards that already applied to all other forms of literature. In the editorial of his very first issue of the magazine, he called this agenda a "popular literary renaissance" (Cunningham 2002, 22). This renaissance brought a different flavor of science fiction to the public, one that was less focused on the campbellian "hard" science fiction of the Golden Age, and much more centered on the "soft" side effects of science. It was time for writers to dive deeper than ever into social issues, politics, religion, war, climate change, sex, and drugs.

If the science fiction pendulum had swung towards the United States for the first half of the 20th century, it was now swinging back towards the Old Continent, giving fame and prominence to authors like the much-cited Brian Aldiss, John Brunner and J.G. Ballard. By publishing both on *New Worlds* and at home, though, authors like Judith Merril and Harry Harrison contributed to the arrival of this wave on American soil. This renaissance prompted the creation of Science Fiction Writers of America, the nonprofit organization of professional writers that, since its founding in 1965 by Damon Knight, has been assigning the Nebula Awards to the best pieces of science fiction around the world. The short story anthology *Dangerous Visions* by Harlan Ellison, published in 1967, was probably the most effective tool in helping this innovation take root: among its contributors were both old and new writers of the genre, all adding to its renewal.

By the seventies and eighties, science fiction had officially entered the mainstream as we know it today. It was not simply a subliterate genre, consumed by enthusiastic fans removed from the majority of the American public. It had reached bookstores, colleges, and movie theatres. It was time for colossal like *Star Wars, Dune*, from the 1865 novel written by Frank Herbert, and for the rise of cyberpunk with *Neuromancer*, William Gibson's 1984 science fiction novel. It was overall a reformed, refreshed genre, which had proven itself durable throughout time yet changeable, and it could proud itself of having one of the most active fanbases in the world. It had reached another incredible peak in popularity, even if it had dragged along its past stigma of a pulp, "just for teenage boys" genre.

In short, the stage was set, and Octavia Butler was entering the scene.

1.3 Science fiction and women writers: more than just a genre "for boys"

After this brief overview of the stages that shaped the genre in the 20th century, it is worth analyzing a long-held assumption regarding science fiction: it is a male dominated literary genre, producing androcentric content for the pleasure of men only. Or, is it? Is Octavia Butler herself an exception, an anomaly, or was she following in the footsteps of many other female writers of her time?

Science fiction author Samuel R. Delany once shared a chat he had with a British editor around 1975. The two of them had ended up talking about women writers in the genre, and to that Delany reported that at one point the conversation went as follows:

> "Do you know anything of Joanna Russ?" . . . "Ah," he said. "When I was working for _____ [Books], two years ago, I rejected two of her novels—I didn't even get a chance to read them. My boss told me women science fiction writers don't sell." . . . "Doesn't _____ [Books] publish Ursula LeGuin?" I asked. Next to Heinlein and . . . Asimov, Anderson, Aldiss . . . for the last six months, Ursula has been the widest-distributed science fiction writer in the British Isles. "Oh, yes. In fact, it's the same editor who told me women science fiction writers didn't sell who bought her books." "Well . . . maybe the situation has changed. LeGuin is selling very well." "Oh well, I haven't read LeGuin, but *he's* supposed to be very good." And he then went on to refer to Ursula alternately as "he" and "she" over the next five sentences at least six times. (Russ 1983, 24)

This extract, rather than depicting the reality of the time, provides an insight into the myths that circulated around women writers and, especially, the ones who dipped their toes into science fiction, a literary genre that until then had grown a reputation for being a "male ghetto". What makes it even more absurd is the realization that these statements are alleged to have happened mid seventies, the decade in which women were more active than ever in the field and the remarkable case of "James Tiptree Jr" was happening under everybody's nose.

James Tiptree Jr. was the male pseudonym that Alice Hastings Sheldon, former CIA employee, psychology graduate, biologist, and writer, used to enter the science fiction field. To make things even funnier, she chose that penname from a jar of marmalade while shopping at the supermarket. After ten years of being known as Tiptree, Sheldon was found out by an investigative fan, Jeffrey D. Smith. While she was successfully publishing her work as a male writer, she had gained incredible success and acclamations, to the

point that Robert Silverberg, in addressing the rumor circulating about Tiptree's true gender, wrote in the introduction of Sheldon's own short story collection *Warm Worlds and Otherwise,* 1975:

> (…) there is to me something incredibly masculine about Tiptree's writing (…) his work is analogous to that of Hemingway (…) that prevailing masculinity about both of them- the preoccupation with questions of courage, with absolute values, with the mysteries and passions of life and death as revealed by extreme physical tests. (Russ 1983, 44)

From the moment it began circulating in those pulp fiction magazines during the 1930s and reached its first peek in popularity, science fiction started being perceived as a genre for men: it was handled by male editors and male publishers, written by male authors, and read by young boys. Though this myth has a foundation, it is oversimplifying the literary context of the time and, by consequence, not being entirely accurate. It is unmistakable that the genre itself was hugely produced and consumed by men, but there were instances of female science fiction writers who used male pseudonyms before Sheldon, especially to publish in pulp magazines. A few examples are Catherine Lucille Moore, who published for Campbell's *Astounding Science-Fiction* a series of works behind the penname of Lewis Padgett; Alice Mary Norton, who legally changed her name to Andre Norton for increasing marketability once she began publishing fantasy and science fiction in the thirties; Margaret St. Clair, who sold her work in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* as Idris Seabright and Wilton Hazzard. Publishing under male pseudonyms was not something new for female writers, and if we were to follow this trend back in time, we would inevitably stumble into Louisa May Alcott's A.M. Bernard, Mary Ann Evans' George Eliot or the Brontë sisters' Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (Gornick and Moran 1971, 476-78). As a matter of fact, hiding their female identity is probably one of the first practices that women writers had to employ in order to be able to ever publish their work. Even Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, novel that marked the starting point of the science fiction genre as we know it, did not reveal her name and was, at first, printed anonymously in 1818.

Until recently, the history of female writing has been one of oppression and denial. In her book *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ went through a brief yet detailed overview of the several tactics employed by male publishers, editors and writers to discredit women's writing throughout time. A science fiction author herself, she projected these issues into an alien species from Tau Ceti 8: the *Glotolog.* The Spotty,

Crescent-finned, Spiny, and Mottled Glotologs (the females) are described by Russ as, allegedly, lacking in central essence, the so-called *nerd*, while the Whelk-finned Glotologs (the males) seem to possess much superior central essence, defined as *super-nerd*, and this biological difference essentially "enables to constitute not only the artistic but also the social and economic aristocracy of the planet" (Russ 1983, 3). Though written in a parodic tone, the tactics described by Russ in the following chapters are all supported by historical evidence of the women writers' lives that came before her. From prohibition, to bad faith, to denial of agency, then pollution of agency, the double standard of content, false categorizing, isolation, anomalousness, and lack of models, Russ explores the major ways in which women's hard work had always been discredited.

The other way to look at the issue of the seemingly lack of women writers in science fiction, other than simply acknowledging what Russ mentioned, is to analyze the historical and cultural breach that has, for the longest time, separated women and science. American physicist and author Evelyn Fox Keller pointed out that the mythology surrounding science is inseparable from the one that envelopes the cultural construction of gender here in the west. Culturally speaking, women have always been thought to be emotional and affective creatures, whereas men have always been considered their rational counterparts. This preconception would make women and science, which is rationality at its finest, utterly incompatible (Cunningham 2002, 67). If science is rational and women are emotional, then they can not partake in its development, nor could they write about it. Since science is, in all of its declinations, deeply encoded in the genes of science fiction, it would be impossible for women writers to write it in an appropriate manner.

In the issue n. 25 of the fanzine *Aurora Speculative Feminism*, founded as *Janus* by Janice Bogstad in 1975, Jeanne Gomoll wrote an open letter to Joanna Russ and her book. In that piece, Gomoll addressed the preface of William Gibson's *Burning Chrome* and how much it shocked her. Bruce Sterling, author of that preface, had stated that the science fiction produced in the late seventies was "confused, self-involved and stale" and overall "not much fun of late" (Gomoll 1986). Gomoll rightfully pointed out that the decade discussed by Sterling was, as a matter of fact, the decade in which many women writers had participated in what was being described as the "renaissance of science fiction", so

much so that eleven women – whereas in the previous decade there had been none – had won for the first time in history a Hugo award.

The 1970s were, as described by Gomoll in her open letter, a time which saw a huge increase in female participation to the science fiction genre. In a short span of years, it saw the birth of feminist science fiction fanzines like *The Witch and the Chameleon* and *Janus* (later on *Aurora Speculative Feminism*), which earned three Hugo nominations; the very first women and science fiction panel in 1974; the founding of WisCon, Wisconsin science fiction convention, the oldest feminist science fiction convention to date, held in Madison on February 1977, and also nicknamed "PervertCon" by a portion of the fans who saw WisCon's encouragement of feminist, lesbians and homosexuals programming (Gomoll 1986). By the late seventies, many conventions had opened spaces for women panels, and it had become unmistakable just how big this surging wave of female science fiction production was.

The apparent nature of science fiction being a "male ghetto" started cracking and crumbling down at that time, with the arrival of the New Wave on American soil. It is in these decades that we encounter its most prominent female voices: Ursula K. LeGuin, Joanna Russ and the forementioned Alice Sheldon, to mention a few. The shift in tone of the genre as a whole, which was now centering itself more around a more nuanced version of science and a broader spectrum of social issues, allowed for the introduction of feminist topics and concerns among its publications. If at first, during the Golden Age of the forties, science fiction writers had to let themselves be assimilated into a masculine genre, they could now come out of the shadows and undress themselves of their masculine pseudonyms. Some critics, like professor Patricia Monk, viewed these women's work in a different light. She noted that women writers that rose to prominence in the sixties and seventies, despite having established themselves as female and feminist voices, were still subject to a degree of androcentric assimilation by what they published: they all preferred male protagonists for their works, just like the good old science fiction tradition; they all seemed to converge to similar plots like their male colleagues, meaning the action-adventure type of plot; and lastly, they had a tendency to repeat the stereotypical feminine images already widely portrayed by male authors, such as "the mother" and "the partner", female figures destined to be nothing but ornaments gravitating around the male

protagonist (Monk 1980, 19-21). Monk made also a point that was crucial for the female science fiction production of the New Wave, though. She wrote:

> There is a strong affinity between science fiction and games theory: a problem, apparently insoluble, is set up to be solved within given parameters, and once it is solved, another problem is set up. In the work of male writers, then, the problems are largely impersonal, concerning things not people, so that the potential for solving problems of identity is largely obscured. For the woman writer of science fiction, however, as for nearly all other women, there is a single problem whose immediacy and complexity demands priority over everything else. This is the problem of the nature of a woman's identity as a woman. (Monk 1980, 23)

We arrive then at the core of the women's writing of the time, and why the second-wave feminism issues appear more prominent than ever. Female science fiction authors made use of this shift towards "soft" science and social issues to challenge gender roles and stereotypes, mostly by creating societies in which gender did not exist or by playing around with the seemingly unalterable structure of the sexes. As authors and gods of their own stories, they could play around with ideas and speculate: what if women were dominant over men? What if there were no genders or people could freely change gender at will? What if it were the men who bore children?

The second wave of feminism which started in the sixties and lasted over two decades was happening outside of science fiction, but in science fiction stories written by women we can definitely see its clear reflection. The genre was, for women, one of the best playgrounds for free, boundless speculation.

1.4 Black science fiction: the invisible writer and the silent reader

If by looking at female science fiction writers during the Golden Age one might have the impression of having to look for lonely figures in an overly crowded field, searching for black science fiction authors before the New Wave is, apparently, an even more arduous task. At least at first glance, Butler's own words regarding the matter seem to ring true: "There was exactly one other Black science-fiction writer working successfully when I sold my first novel: Samuel R. Delany, Jr. Now there are four of us. Delany, Steven Barnes, Charles R. Saunders and me. So few." (Butler 2005, 134)

Mark Dery, author and cultural critic, called this lack of participation on part of the black community a sort of "conundrum". In his 1994 interview with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose, later on titled *Black to the Future*, Dery tried to investigate

this very question: why do so few African Americans write science fiction, when the genre itself seems uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists? He made two interesting points regarding the issue: first, that African Americans, due to their own history as descendants of abductees from another continent and for being at the receiving end of technological tools and experiments, should have a first hand knowledge of living a sci-fi nightmare; second, that science fiction itself and its "sub legitimate status as a pulp genre" mirror the subaltern position of the black community throughout American history (Dery 1993, 180). One thing to note regarding this conundrum, though, is that it should not be used to make conclusive general statements about the investment that the black community might have had with regard to science and speculative fiction. Much has been speculated about the lack of interest or contribution on their part, but a closer analysis of the matter reveals more activity than this general narrative would like to believe ever existed.

In 1929, an African-American man from Harlem named James Fitzgerald became the founding president of the very first science fiction fan club, the *Scienceers*. The meetings of this club took place at his home until April of the following year, when he moved on to join the American Rocket Society and focused on developing rockets for a space program of the United States (Carrington 2016, 30). After him came decades of radio silence, until a figure by the name of Carl Joshua Brandon entered the scene. By the fifties, the two largest organized groups for fans and readers of science fiction fanzines in the country were the National Fantasy Fan Federation, known as the NFFF, and the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, the FAPA; to the best of both groups' knowledge, there were no black members among them. In May 1956, FAPA's member Sam Martinez wrote:

> Right now, I wonder what kind of a squawk would be raised if a negro quite openly and unabashedly applied for FAPA membership? I'll bet the South would really rise!... Is there a single member of the organization who can honestly say they would greet him with open arms (figuratively speaking, of course) and completely without prejudice? What is the reason for this? The old argument of non-mixing the races, and keeping the hereditary strain pure, hardly would apply to fanzines. One doesn't have to have intercourse with another Fapan to enjoy their publishing efforts, though with some of the fem-fans in the organization, it might be fun trying. (Carrington 2016, 47)

Carl Brandon's reply came the following month, stating: "I probably wouldn't have written, after seeing Martinez's comment about what would happen if a negro applied for membership. I happen to be just that (…)" (Carrington 2016, 47). But Brandon was not,

as a matter of fact, a black fan, nor he was a science fiction writer. He was simply a hoax, a pen name created by Terry Carr in 1953, which had originated at first in Bob Stewart's fanzine *Boo!* as a fake reviewer and that had later on grown a life of its own. In the science fiction fandom of the fifties there was still no sign of African-American activity post Fitzgerald, and the one that appeared to exist was the creation of a white man.

Lack of physical presence, though, did not translate into lack of readership. In those same years, the front man of the Golden Age of science fiction, John W. Campbell, was boasting about the sales of his magazine in the following way:

> As our circulation records show, we have sales peaks near… the Negro districts of large cities. Seemingly, many Negro readers appreciate our attitude that it is important to be human; they seem to like our attitude that Man is important beyond the narrow limits of race or creed or color (Davin 2006, 195).

Campbell's words seem to paint a bright picture about the participation of the black community in the genre, even if only as passive readers. However, it was Campbell himself who then prompted "Mack" Reynolds to write a series of stories featuring black heroes, such as *Summit* and *Black Man's Burden,* probably to cater to this unexpectedly large black readership, while at the same time refusing to publish actual African American science fiction stories by Samuel Delany. One can not possibly detect direct racial sentiment in a fleeting editorial choice, but there is no need to look far enough to realize that racism was indeed directly involved in the Golden Age of science fiction. In 1963, Campbell wrote in his *Analog* editorial:

> I am strongly in favor of rigidly segregated schools, and I believe that you are, in fact, in agreement with me – that it is absolutely necessary for the continuation of the United States in the terms we know it that our schools be segregated considerably more rigidly than they are today. (…) I am not referring to racial segregation, however. I'm referring instead to the overlooked and enormously critical problem of segregation by individual student ability. (…) There is a never rigorously proven assumption that's thrown around in all racial arguments that all races show the same distribution curve of intelligence and ability. That has not been proven. There's adequate evidence to the contrary, available from a number of lines of analysis. (…) The Caucasian race has produced super-high geniuses by the dozen in the last five thousand years; the Oriental race has, also. The Negro race has not. (Harrison 1966, 12-19)

Both Martinez and Campbell' statements cast light on the issues that plagued the science fiction genre of the time. The 1950s and 1960s were buzzing with change, as the civil rights movement swept the land. The 1954 case of Brown v. Board of Education, which prompted Campbell's racist essay, was just the first step in dismantling the plague of segregation, officially ended with the signing into law of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Segregation was, however, an endemic phenomenon and not limited to the physical spaces that blacks and whites had to share, unequally but separately. The idea that blacks and whites could attend the same school and be provided with the same level of education was almost more radical and revolutionary than allowing them to simply be in the same spaces, because it entailed – as Campbell put it – that they had the same intellectual potential. If it were true that no black man or woman had this potential, then it was impossible for any of them to partake in the production of a literary genre that, at the time, was deeply intertwined with hard science. Much like the case of women writers, the black community as a whole was viewed as intellectually inferior, unable to grasp science and technology to the same level of the white man. Yet, not only the founder of the first science fiction fan club was an African-American man that was invested in rocketing and engineering, but also Campbell himself was aware, by the date provided, that he had a sizeable black readership invested into science fiction magazines, so much so that he had prompted writers like Reynolds to write stories that could cater to them.

The fact that this high level of interest did not immediately translate into direct participation on part of African Americans has the most disparate reasons, all seemingly correct and valid. First and foremost, segregation could had left a scar in the collective mind of the black and the white community, which had then created the illusion of black or white fields of work, separated and never overlapping. The segregation "of the mind", in a sense, would deter black writers from attempting to participate in a genre that was perceived as strict white territory (Davin 2016, 214).

Another potential cause to consider is the "blanching" of the science fiction genre as a whole, whether on paper or on a screen, as at the time it was severely lacking in variety and representation. The majority of televised representation of the future at that time, ranging from *Star Trek* to the *Star Wars* trilogy, featured an almost entirely, if not fully, white cast of actors, and represented futures entirely devoid of racial issues or conflicts. The fact that, on screen, race was completely de-emphasized and made irrelevant did not resonate with the black community of the time, nor it would with the one living today, which is demanding representation more than ever, and it would only reinforce the idea that science fiction is and always has been a white ghetto, produced by white men for the pleasure of white people (Rutledge 2006, 238).

Another factor for the presumed lack of participation or interest at the time of the

Golden Age of science fiction is the intrinsic distrust that African Americans, to this day, hold towards hard science, counterbalanced by their prolific activity with social sciences and social critiques. Science and medicine had been used from the very beginning of the transatlantic slave trade to justify the horrors that the Africans had to endure, by co-opting the authority of science and misusing it to fit any need: from the craniometry and phrenology of the 19th century to books such as *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, redacted in 1994 by phycologist Richard J. Herrnstein and political scientist Charles Murray, but predicted decades before by figures like Campbell, and still endorsed today by right-wing pundits or politicians (Rutledge 2006, 239). From the beginning of the slave trade, science had been misused to explain why an entire ethnic group of people would be biologically inferior in respect to a presumed dominant race. Centuries later, once slavery was abolished and time was ticking to mark the end of segregation too, science was still used in other forms to justify their intellectual inferiority.

In the preface of his 1922 book, *Book of American Negro poetry*, James Weldon Johnson wrote:

> The Negro in the United States is consuming all of his intellectual energy in this grueling race-struggle. (…) The colored poet in the United States labors with limitations which he cannot easily pass over. He is always on the defensive or the offensive. The pressure upon him to be propagandistic is well nigh irresistible. These conditions are suffocating to breadth and to real art in poetry.

Another possible cause for the lack of black science fiction voices before the sixties is, therefore, the socioeconomic conditions of the black community itself, which was for the large part so deeply concerned with the racial struggle to be able to set aside part of their free time to indulge in the same speculative thought, creative processes or activities that would lead other ethnicities to produce science and speculative fiction (Rutledge 2006, 240).

One last idea to consider in analyzing this subject is the diverging ways in which different communities and cultures could produce science and speculative fiction. Rather than dismissing everything by saying that there was no proof of black science fiction before Samuel Delany, we might have to approach the issue by taking into consideration the limitations of this intrinsically western and white point of view. The hard science that is situated at the core of the science fiction writings of the mid 20th century is, after all, the production of western thought. It arose from the Enlightenment, which elevated

rationality, the scientific method and scientific knowledge above any other mode of thought, especially religion. A closer analysis, though, brings to light the fact that religion had been a central theme in the life of the African American community as a whole from the early days of the African diaspora. When comparing white to black science fiction, therefore, it is also crucial to note that two different modes of science are pinned one against the other: the white, hard science fiction, characterized by a more traditional and anti-religious view of science, and the more spiritual, magical and interdependence-based black science (Rutledge 2006, 240-41). This step is crucial when analyzing, in retrospective, writings that would have not otherwise passed a western "sci-fi test".

Most of the African American speculative production that predated Delany and Butler by almost a century entailed dreams of racial utopias and newfound black nation states. Such was Martin R. Delany's 1859 *Blake, or the Huts of America*, a two-part novel narrating the travels and adventures of Henry Blake through the antebellum South, in an imagined successful slave revolt that Samuel Delany (not related) considered a strong example of "proto-science fiction", as it came really close to a science fiction alternate history type of novel (Thomas 2000, 383). Frances E. W Harper's 1892 *Iola Leroy* was a similar example of alternative history that, despite being perfectly plausible by our modern standards, appeared to be borderline fantastic for its times. To them followed *Imperium in Imperio*, by Sutton Griggs, written in 1899 and describing an African American secret society that planned to found a black state by taking over Texas, and Edward A. Johnson's 1904 *Light Ahead for the Negro*, in which a black man was transported in the United States of the future, or at least a socialist version of them (Thomas 2000, 383).

On a much more prominent fantasy streak, due to its African folklore imbued with magic and hoodoo, was the short story *The Goophered Grapevine* from Charles W. Chesnutt, also the first work from an African American writer to be published in the prestigious magazine *The Atlantic* in 1887 (Nevins 2012). Similar folkloristic elements could be found in Frederick Douglass' autobiography too, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* of 1845, in which Douglass described receiving from a fellow slave a magical root able to evoke spirits that could ward off future whippings (Rutledge 2006, 242). *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self*, a novel by Pauline Hopkins serialized in *The Colored American Magazine* from 1902 to 1903, made use of the Lost Race trope to

narrate of a hidden Ethiopian civilization dating back six thousand years and in possession of an advanced crystal-based technology (Nevis 2012).

Themes of race, probable futures and utopias kept on mixing even more in African American writings at the turn of the century. W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Comet*, a short story from the collection *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* published in 1920, dealt with a post-apocalyptic future in which there appeared to be a semblance of inter-racial harmony. *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free*, a 1931 novel from George S. Schuyler, is usually described as the first instance of black science fiction novel as we know it. And yet, despite making use of a depiction of incredibly advanced, fantastic technology, it directly addressed race and social issues. The plot described a machine and an actual scientific procedure able to turn blacks into whites; the treatment involved a "formidable apparatus of sparkling nickel. It resembled a cross between a dentist chair and an electric chair" (Thomas 2000, 384). Schuyler's novel, though satiric in its nature, contained not only these fantastic tales of race-shifting, but also accounts of real-life events that were not fantastic or far-fetched in the slightest for the African American man of the time: the lynchings. These horrors were suffered, in this case, by two white men that were believed to be two black men in disguise, at the hands of fellow white men.

After Schuyler's *Black No More* and two other stories published under the pen name Samuel I. Brooks, came almost another three decades of silence, interrupted by the arrival of Samuel Delany in 1962 (Thomas 2000, 386). It is worth noting that Schuyler's work arrived right at the beginning of the fall of the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Depression, which deeply impoverished the African American community and lowered even more their socioeconomic status. With the collapse of the economy in a racially segregated America, black unemployment rates skyrocketed to numbers never seen before, even higher than 50% in northern cities like Philadelphia and Detroit, as the "last hired, first fired" practice began to spread (Greenberg 2009, 27). This appears to give further credit to the hypothesis of the lack of black participation in the genre, or in any other artistic endeavor, as rooted in their day-to-day struggle, which in that moment was not only racial but also economic. Nonetheless, the Great Depression and its aftermath happened also during the same period of time in which science fiction was entering the American mainstream as a pulp fiction genre with Gernsback and, in a second moment,

Campbell. In short, while science fiction was transforming into that infamous white male ghetto thriving on pulp magazines, there was almost no account of black writers joining in. Delany noted that Harlan Ellison had an interesting point to make about this: of the early days of pulp fiction, dozens upon dozens of writers were known only as their pen names, which were the norm rather than the exception, in a career that was executed primarily by mail (Thomas 2000, 384). Just like the instance of women writers, there is therefore no way of definitely ruling out if, among the many names that cluttered the early pulp days of science fiction, there were absolutely no African American writer.

To conclude, much can be speculated about the lack of black voices in the Golden Age of science fiction. As described previously, the causes are numerous, convoluted and interconnected in such a way that they almost seem to generate one another, rather than ruling each other out. However, it is worth noting and remembering that, before these decades of assumed silence, black authors in America had already been writing their own utopian visions and speculative ideas at least from the mid 19th century, and that they were among the firsts to join in the ride for the New Wave of the sixties. Their numbers might have not been in the dozens, as Delany and Butler liked to point out, but their work helped pave the way for many more authors to come. With the advent of the Internet, social media and later on the expansion of the publishing industry to DIY self publishing, the demand for and actual number of black voices in the science fiction community has increased. It is unmistakable that, as of today, the social stigma associated to sci-fi as a white ghetto, or more broadly as a ghetto for nerds, has been slowly fading away, eroded more and more by the demands for diversity and representation coming directly from the reader base.

This steady but surging increase in popularity of the genre and black authorship did not come without its backlash. Speculative fiction writer Alaya Dawn Johnson stated in 2015 that the genre is now, probably more than ever, plagued with hostile dismissals of "identity politics" and "political correctness", and that appeals to marketability – as in appeals to "whiteness", as black authors or characters are not considered marketable – keep on preventing African American writers to join in the field to their full potential (Russell 2018, 271-72). Despite this being the case for the publishing industry, we should not overlook at the incredible success that black stories gather when being released to the public on the big screen. Such is the instance of *Black Panther*, the blockbuster movie

from Marvel Studio released in 2018. Created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee in 1966, superhero T'Challa cashed in 1.3 billion dollars worldwide, surpassing even *Avengers: Infinity War* on the domestic market (Abad-Santos, 2018). Not only do black characters sell, but they are also able to drag out of the shadows flocks of viewers that were always there, just sitting and waiting for something different to appear on screen. In front of such numbers, the question of marketability crumbles away with ease, and all that is left are old stereotypes and racial preconceptions of the 20th century, destined to be put aside by the coming generations.

CHAPTER 2

BLOODCHILD AND OTHER STORIES

2.1 An introduction to the short story collection

Bloodchild and Other Stories was first published in 1995 by the small independent New York publisher Four Walls Eight Windows, where Butler had placed her previous book, the 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*. The choice to entrust her work to a smaller publisher despite having slowly and steadily climbed the pinnacle of fame was neither random, nor unfounded. It was a period in time in which Butler had had enough with the constrains of labels. She was trying to distance herself from the restrictive cages of the science fiction genre where she had grown and thrived, further broaden her audience, freely go on tour to promote the way she pleased and market her work under the more neutral and less ghettoized term "speculative fiction" (Francis 2010, 72, 97). The short stories contained in the collection had established her reputation as an award-winning writer, from the very first piece of writing she was ever able to sell (*Crossover*) to the latest (*The Evening and the Morning and the Night*), and their varied assortment of themes perfectly depicted why she felt constrained by the science fiction stamp of approval.

The first edition of this collection included all the five short stories she had written until then, which are in chronological order: *Crossover*, *Near of Kin*, *Speech Sounds*, *Bloodchild* and *The Evening and the Morning and the Night.* It is worth noting that not all these stories fit within the campbellian rules of science fiction. On the contrary, some had nothing to do with it. The range of topics touched upon is particularly broad, from mental health to sex and incest, and even biology, medicine, and postapocalyptic futures. Each story was followed by an afterword written by Butler herself, where she described what was crossing her mind when planning and creating them. As she stated in the preface of the book, she did consider herself a novelist rather than a short stories writer, but the collection had helped her expand upon what each of those stories meant to her (Butler 2005, viii).

The book contained also two further essays by Butler: *Positive Obsession*, an article

that first appeared in the magazine *Essence* titled as the much-disliked *Birth of a Writer* (Butler 2005, 136), and *Furor Scribendi*, released in *L. Ron. Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future Volume IX*, an article that addressed wannabe writers to encourage them to persist and stick to their passion, no matter the hardships coming their way.

Shortly after the publication of the 1995 collection, barely a year later, the two editors of Four Walls Eight Windows went their own separate ways, and Butler decided to entrust her work to Dan Simon and his newfound publishing company Seven Stories Press (Francis 2010, 97). It is under this publisher that arrived the second, expanded collection of 2005. *Bloodchild and Other Stories* remained largely unchanged, except for the addition of the last two short stories that Butler had written and published on SCIFI.com in 2003.

What follows is the analysis of the seven short stories contained in the 2005 edition. The intention is to further explore the themes that Butler brought to light and dive deeper into their meanings.

2.2 Bloodchild

Bloodchild is not the first short story that Butler wrote, but the most awarded of the collection. It first appeared in *Isaac Asimov' Science Fiction Magazine* in 1984, a magazine founded in 1976 by Asimov and curated by editor George Schiters with the intent to bring hard science fiction to the public by virtue of Asimov's own fame, yet by opening and showing a welcoming attitude towards the New Wave experimental stories of the time (Ashley 2007, 328). It is no surprise, therefore, that Butler's story enjoyed a great success thanks to its platform. Soon after it was released to the public, it became the winner of four of the most prestigious science fiction awards: the Nebula Award for Best Novelette in 1984, then the Hugo Award, Locus Award and the Science Fiction Chronicle Award in 1985 (Holden and Shawl 2013, 278-79). Aside from the addition of *Amnesty* in the 2005 edition, it is probably the most blatant science fiction short story of the collection. As far as the genre concerns, at least at first glance, it checks all the canon tropes required at the time: humans left planet Earth and are now situated in another unknown galaxy, in a distant future, and they live in direct contact with an alien species. However, as the analysis will show, it does so in a much more revolutionary way.

What makes *Bloodchild* intriguing is that it contains the only male protagonist of all the seven short stories, and that he will experience first hand an alien pregnancy: the main character is Gan, a human boy that sets the stage from his first person point of view, and whose words prelude what is about to come: “My last night of childhood began with a visit home” (Butler 2005, 3). On this unknown alien planet, home is situated in a Preserve, where human families – called Terrans – live in apparent peace and harmony. The Preserve was created by the Tlic, the alien species of the story, in order to protect the humans from their own interferences. The space outside of it is not safe, not because the Tlic would kill the Terrans and wipe them out of their planet, but because the humans would be “courted, paid, drafted” with “desperation” on part of the Tlic (Butler 2005, 5). The use that the Tlic make of this alien species becomes clear in a matter of pages. The two coexist in relative peace on the planet, for a price: humans have to carry the Tlic’s eggs inside their stomach, essentially by giving birth to their offspring themselves. The only difference in the space inside and outside of the Preserve has nothing to do with this forced, contractual pregnancy, but only its method: outside of that safe space, the Terrans would be taken as hosts without care on part of the Tlic, even if unwilling, and their human families would be split apart in a way that resembles what humans already do with pets once they have to sell or give away a litter, whereas inside the Preserve there is a semblance of choice and respect, as families are kept together.

The plot, despite never providing exhaustive knowledge about the setting and history that brought the human species to such a foreign and distant place, is relatively short and simple: Gan, the protagonist, is about to receive the eggs of the Tlic that had chosen him as host from the moment he was born. The Tlic, named T’Gatoi, is one of the most powerful of her species. She is the government official directly in charge of the Preserve and the most important figure when having to deal with humans and their concerns. T’Gatoi has been friends with Gan’s mother, Lien, since childhood. She had also introduced Lien to her then husband, with whom she birthed four children, and he on his part had contributed to the human-Tlic relationship by carrying alien eggs in his body three times. Gan introduces the events of that day by stating that this visit home was his last night of childhood. It should be noted that Gan’s age is never explicitly pointed out, at any time, throughout the story, and that there is no indication that would lead a reader to think the system of age of majority or age of content is still operating in this scenario.

The only hint provided to the reader is that Gan is "right about the age for implantation" (Butler 2005, 22). His statement can therefore be interpreted in two ways: either the loss of childhood is foreshadowing the fact that he is about to "mate" with T'Gatoi, and that carrying her eggs is going to mark the beginning of his adult life, or that what he is about to witness is so heart shattering and consequential that he is about to lose the naivety and innocence he had always had regarding the relationship Tlic-Terrans, hence opening his eyes to a new, adult reality.

The beginning of the story involves a peculiar scene: T'Gatoi had brought two of her sister's sterile eggs to Gan's family, and all the humans but Gan's mother lay down under their influence, in a state of drug-induced bliss. Tlic's sterile eggs are not only able to drug humans, by making them drift and dream as if they were under the influence of some strong psychoactive substance, but they are also capable of prolonging their life. Before passing away, Gan's father had eaten enough to be able to live more than twice as long as he should have. The only person refusing the gift of a longer life is Gan's mother, who appears to be aware that Gan is about to become the host of T'Gatoi's eggs in a matter of hours, and has decided to grow old and die. Despite being the person who had chosen to give Gan to T'Gatoi, she seems unable to face that prospect turning into reality. Her choice has always been, after all, a façade: whether it is her Tlic friend or some other alien, one of her four children is destined to become a host.

This seemingly peaceful scene, depicting humans dozing off in the arms of T'Gatoi to a magical drug, is suddenly interrupted by an unexpected turn of events. T'Gatoi senses that something is wrong outside the house and she hurriedly gets out to find a sick human nearing death: a N'Tlic, as she calls it, meaning a human host carrying her kind's eggs. What follows is the gruesome scene of an improvised cesarian section operated by T'Gatoi herself with the help of Gan. Since the eggs were hatching inside the man's body, they were releasing a poison which was slowly killing him. But what was going to follow would have been even worse, if T'Gatoi had not intervened: the hatched grubs would have slowly eaten the man from the inside and carved their way out one bite at a time. Ultimately, the operation turns out a success, both for the man, which is saved, and for the Tlic's newborn grubs, which are all alive and healthy. But not for Gan, who has just witnessed with his own eyes what is going to happen to him. After killing a wild animal of the Reserve at T'Gatoi's order, he has to sit and watch her cut the other man open,

rummage through his intestines, pull out flesh eating larvae and position them inside the carcass of the animal so that they have something else to eat other than their human parent.

Shocked, disgusted, and terrified by the event, Gan ends up fighting over what just happened with his own brother, Qui, who had previously seen this sort of unnatural pregnancy go wrong, ending with a Tlic murdering her human mate by slitting his throat and allowing the grubs to feast on his body. It is in this mental state, and with the illegal gun he used to kill the wild animal still in his hand, that Gan and T'Gatoi face each other later that evening. The Tlic warns him that she will lay her eggs that night inside a Terran, and that if Gan is no longer willing to be the one, she will pick his sister, Xuan Hoa, who did not witness that horrific scene and who had always been willing, almost honored, to become a host for the Tlic. The story leaves the reader most baffled: after what just happened, Gan ultimately accepts to be the one to carry T'Gatoi's eggs, but not only out of coercion… but also out of jealousy, and a semblance of possessive love: "to keep you for myself" (Butler 2005, 28), is what Gan says once it is done and they both lay in bed, embracing like lovers despite their physical differences.

Bloodchild is, in itself, a confounding story. On one hand, it seems to point in a clear direction: the depiction of an enslaved mankind at the hands of a superior – at least for its longevity – species. On the other, its writer affirms that it is anything but a story of slavery. Butler defined *Bloodchild* as a coming-of-age story, one that transforms a young and naïve boy into an adult, a love story between two very different beings, and a pregnant man story (Butler 2005, 30). She stated multiple times that slavery had nothing to do with it, either by calling it a form of "symbiosis", defining it as "having to make a deal", or even "paying the rent" (Francis 2010, 31). Throughout several interviews, she rejected this interpretation of the story by assuming that readers and critics got this idea mainly because she is a black writer (Francis 2010, 66). Its origin story is also quite intriguing. Butler explained that *Bloodchild* served as a tool to better face and explore one of her oldest fears: the botfly. This insect lays its eggs inside wounds left by the bites of other insects, and its flesh-eating larvae grow under human skin. It is also highly advised to people that have botflies maggots inside of them to not squeeze them out, to let them grow and fly away on their own, otherwise they risk infections. Being as horrified as she was about this little insect, Butler felt the need to explore her fear through writing about it (Butler 2005, 30-31).

Despite her explanations, attempting to remove the sense that slavery and oppressions are deeply intertwined in this plot is seemingly impossible. One of the core believes that had propelled slavery in the United States for over two hundred years was the idea that humans can be treated as cattle, hence being bought, sold, used and abused, by denying their own agency, feelings and overall humanity; humans are no longer humans, but simply commodities to use, and of which to make profit. This is specifically how the story seems to establish how Terrans are treated by the Tlic, at least on a surface level. Humans are, many times, referred to as "animals":

> 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. That way they could be sure of getting another generation of us no matter how we tried to hold out. We were lucky that didn't go on long. A few generations of it and we would have been *little* more than convenient, big animals. (Butler 2005, 9-10)

In this passage, for example, we clearly see the first use that the Tlic made of the Terrans, and the way they were treated and considered. Gan, narrator of the complicated history between the two species, decides to specify that the practice of drugging up humans with sterile eggs and force them to reproduce to the benefit of the Tlic's own reproductive cycle has ended, and that things have changed. He does not say that human bodies are no longer used by the Tlic as hosts, but only that they are no longer forced to breed among themselves without consent; a practice that it is, to this day, widely used by humans to guarantee that enough livestock reproduces to fit our own nutritional values and gastronomic pleasures.

Of a similar note is the dialogue that takes place between Gan and his brother Qui, who despises the Tlic for the horrific murder he witnessed:

> "They don't take women," he said with contempt.
> "They do sometimes." I glanced at him. "Actually, they prefer women. You should be around them when they talk among themselves. They say women have more body fat to protect the grubs. But they usually take men to leave the women free to bear their own young."
> "To provide the next generation of host animals," he said, switching from contempt to bitterness.
> "It's more than that!" I countered. Was it?
> "If it were going to happen to me, I'd want to believe it was more, too."
> "It is more!" I felt like a kid. Stupid argument. (Butler 2005, 21)

The issue of the male pregnancy arises. By Gan's own words, the Tlic would prefer to impregnate female Terrans due to their body composition, which is the predisposition to store fat in order to "to protect the grubs". Studies have linked the predisposition of the

female body to storing fat primarily for childbearing, fetal development and lactation (UNSW 2009). In this story, however, the link between childbearing and fat storage is more sinister: the Tlic's eggs are implanted in the abdomen of male Terrans, which are not provided with the organs that would then make use of said fat to help develop a fetus or feed a baby. The primary use that the Tlic grubs could make of this fat is, therefore, eating it. That is the way, after all, in which they come to life:

> She found the first grub. It was fat and deep red with his blood— both inside and out. It had already eaten its own egg case but apparently had not yet begun to eat its host. At this stage, it would eat any flesh except its mother's. Let alone, it would have gone on excreting the poisons that had both sickened and alerted Lomas. Eventually it would have begun to eat. By the time it ate its way out of Lomas's flesh, Lomas would be dead or dying—and unable to take revenge on the thing that was killing him. There was always a grace period between the time the host sickened and the time the grubs began to eat him. (Butler 2005, 15-16)

There is almost an overlap between Terrans having to gain fat to "protect" the Tlic grubs and the way in which humans naturally use to fatten the animals that they plan to eat.

> "You're better," she said this time, probing me with six or seven of her limbs. "You're gaining weight finally. Thinness is dangerous." The probing changed subtly, became a series of caresses.
> "He's still too thin," my mother said sharply. (Butler 2005, 4)

In the instance of the Tlic, thankfully, fattening the Terrans does not serve to satisfy their own appetite, but primarily to guarantee the safety of the human host while they are carrying their eggs and provide a source of sustenance for the grubs as soon as they hatch. The line between human and animal blurs more and more across the story, especially from the moment in which the emergency c-section takes place, as the grubs are dislocated from one animal body, the pregnant human named Lomas, to another, the achti that Gan shot so that it could take Lomas' place and be eaten by the grubs. It culminates in the fight that Gan and his brother have about having to become Tlic's hosts, and leaves him feeling confused like never did before about the role he should have in his and T'Gatoi's relationship. Towards the end, when he sits with the gun in his hand, he has become fully aware of what could be happening to him if he accepts to carry T'Gatoi's eggs, meaning being potentially eaten alive from the inside and then cut open, gutted like what happened to the other human, Lomas, and the achti.

> "I don't want to be a host animal," I said. "Not even yours."

> It took her a long time to answer. “We use almost no host animals these days,” she said. “You know that.”
> “You use us.”
> “We do. We wait long years for you and teach you and join our families to yours.” She moved restlessly. “You know you aren’t animals to us.” (Butler 2005, 24)

Despite T’Gatoi’s words, barely nothing changes in the treatment of Terrans by the Tlic, if not on a surface level. Their attitude is different, but not the underlying actions. The first direct mention of slavery in the whole story comes from T’Gatoi herself, which replies to Gan’s words as follows:

> “The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived,” she said softly. “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 the Preserve when they still tried to kill us as worms.” (Butler 2005, 25)

It is curious how Butler subtly mentions slavery towards the end of the story, almost *en passant*. All of a sudden, the reader becomes aware of the fact that humans have not just left Earth, but that a part of them – the part that now lives among the Tlic – was forced to flee to escape death and slavery. This knowledge pushes the reader, at least in part, to reconsider what is being described, and why this arrangement would be better than the presumed slavery perpetrated by the hands of their own kind. T’Gatoi implies that what the Tlic did was an act of kindness towards an alien species that came from far away and tried to settle on land that already belonged to someone else. Under this light, the deal between these two species assumes the shape of what Butler herself defined as “paying the rent”. By accepting the Terrans on their planet, even after being attacked, the Tlic created a space where humans could live and thrive. The only price to pay is to rent out their bodies once in a while, even if the risk is as high as death. The deal seems to benefit both of them: the Terrans, as they are now able to live in peace far away from those who actually tried to murder and enslave them, and the Tlic, which have found a perfect host that is giving birth to much stronger and healthier grubs.

Though nuanced, the relationship Terrans-Tlic still depicts a huge imbalance of power and is far from being idyllic. It should resemble, if we were to accept Butler’s view of the story as simply “paying the rent” or some sort of “symbiosis” between species, a form of co-dependance: the Tlic provide the Terrans with a safe place to live, and the Terrans provides the Tlic with healthy hosts for their future generation. This is, however,

only the surface level of what is being narrated. It is not entirely clear whether humans are given a choice to leave the planet and go anywhere else, to establish a new colony on a virgin planet. If this were really a story about "paying the rent", the tenant of forementioned place should be able to leave on their own accord if they no longer found the price for their stay reasonable. From what is being described in the story, this is not what happens to the Terrans. Not only are they encaged in this Preserve to protect them from what the majority of the Tlic would do otherwise, as outside of it they would not afford the special humane treatment that T'Gatoi offers Gan; they are also not in the condition to negotiate whether to give their bodies to the Tlic or not. Not even Gan himself, narrating voice and T'Gatoi's protected mate, has the luxury of choice. He can either chose to get pregnant himself, or to use his siblings as shield and force them to carry out this dangerous, alien pregnancy.

It is also unclear, or left voluntarily unspoken, what the Tlic would do if the Terrans were to refuse this treatment and chose to leave. By T'Gatoi's own words, humans were essential in their reproductive cycle, as they were able to bring to term many more grubs than the wild animals that were used as host before, and on top of that much bigger and healthier than ever. Human bodies had become more than simple commodities: they were essential for the well-being and the preservation of their species. From this prospective, it is clear that the Tlic need the Terrans much more than the Terrans would ever need the Tlic. Their presence on the planet is not just a matter of "rent", but of literal survival, a new form of symbiosis that they can not live without. In this sense, it would also be legitimate to assume that the humans have much more power over the Tlic than what it is being shown. They simply have no access to it while they are being caged, detained and used, ultimately forced to live a life of which there seems to be no alternative. The choice they are given within the Preserve, which is to provide human hosts without families being broken up or people being forcefully taken away and treated like useful animals, can not really be defined as a free choice. It is a compromise based on coercion. Of a similar kind is the relationship between T'Gatoi and Gan, and the final moment when Gan accepts to carry her eggs. Gan is not given much of a choice: he can either capitulate or pass this responsibility unto one of his siblings. T'Gatoi is going to deposit her eggs regardless of the choice made, and she makes it perfectly clear.

It is crucial, however, to note that Gan's ultimate decision comes from a place of

possessive love and jealousy rather than sacrifice, and that it entails much more than the usual subjugation of a human by the hands – or rather, insect-like limbs – of a Tlic. Even while being forced to chose, Gan is able to assert himself as a "partner", as T'Gatoi's equal, by making her capitulate and allow him to keep the illegal gun he had just previously used on a wild animal. After being used in past conflicts between the two species, guns or weapons of any kind were prohibited in the Preserve. Despite trying to take it away from him, T'Gatoi is not able to remove the gun from Gan's hands and she is forced to accept the risk of having it not only around herself, but around her future children too.

Gan represents the narrating voice of the story, but also and most importantly a different point of view from that of his brother Qui and his mother, which constantly reminds the reader of these parallels between humans and cattle: regardless of how much freedom he truly has, Gan operates from a higher level of respect, affection, and love towards the Tlic than most of the humans that live in the Preserve. He feels jealous of T'Gatoi, the alien that was chosen as his mate from the moment he was born, and can not accept her to reproduce with one of his siblings. It has to be him.

> "But you came to me … to save Hoa."
> "Yes." I leaned my forehead against her. She was cool velvet, deceptively soft. "And to keep you for myself," I said. It was so. I didn't understand it, but it was so. (Butler 2005, 28)

He is aware that T'Gatoi is not a Tlic that is going to use him for his body as food for grubs, nor show little care for his life. She represents the sole figure that stands between her own people and their abuse of the Terrans, and that is willing to protect them in this Preserve, to treat them more like humans and less like animals by allowing them to maintain their families intact. T'Gatoi's biological imperative to reproduce and lay eggs inside someone, though forcing Gan back against a wall as a sort of ultimatum, is depicted more like an act of love rather than a violation of his free will, ending with him holding on to her in a hug as they lay together on the bed like lovers. Similarly, also Lomas and his Tlic mate, T'Khotgif Teh, seems to share a deeper bond than Tlic and host animal. Even despite being sick and nearing death, T'Khotgif Teh rushes to be by Lomas' side when she learns that he almost died due to the hatching of the grubs, almost by showing more care for him and his wellbeing than that of her own children. Despite the morally blurred mechanisms of the Terran-Tlic relationship, the reader gets the sense that life in

the Preserve is slowly changing and improving, and that there could truly be a cultural shift away from the use of human bodies as commodities towards more loving and respectful interspecies relationships.

To even further blur the line among the two comes one of Gan's last thoughts as he lays next to T'Gatoi after their mating, right before the short story ends:

> "I wouldn't have shot you," I said. "Not you." She had been taken from my father's flesh when he was my age. (Butler 2005, 29)

Gan does not limit himself to showing the possessiveness of a lover, but also reveals to feel towards her the familial bond of a brother, which prevents him from hurting her. This last revelation explains even better the conflictual relationship between Terrans and Tlic: as more and more Tlic are born from their human hosts, the deeper the bond between the two species gets. Despite never actually mixing their genomes and creating monstrous hybrids, Terrans and Tlic have entered a constant cycle of dependent reproduction which ties them together more and more, generation after generation. Their relationship is therefore not only one of owner and pet, of landlord and tenant, or master and slave, but of fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters.

Rather than dismissing in its entirety the question of slavery, freedom, and free will, *Bloodchild* places the reader in an uncomfortable position, forcing them to face an apparently obvious issue that is, actually, far more complicated and nuanced, and with no easy solution in sight. The plot of the story is anything but black and white, moralistic, or preachy. It shows just how well Butler can play with "what ifs" and bug the reader's mind with bizarre futuristic scenarios. Just how far can our apparently unlimited freedom as the dominant species of this planet carry us? What if we were to encounter another intelligent life form somewhere far away, and we were not able to conquer them, subdue them like we do with other species on this very planet, or even among ourselves, and we were to settle with compromises that severely limit our own bodily autonomy? In her afterword to the story, Butler ponders on the idea that humanity could not be able to recreate the British Empire in space, and that human colonies might actually find themselves alone, without reinforcements, in situations like the one described in *Bloodchild* (Butler 2005, 31-32). Rather than giving her own answer, she seems to prefer to leave the issue suspended, as food for thought, and let her readers speculate on these absurd, yet far away from being completely unrealistic, solutions.

2.3 The Evening and the Morning and the Night

The second story of the collection was first published in *Omni Magazine* in 1987, a magazine that, unlike *Asimov's*, was created with the specific intent of presenting true science and scientific news to the public. The plan came from publisher Bob Guccione as early as 1978, who had decided to allocate an incredible amount for the project: 5 million dollars, of which 3 were entirely dedicated to promotion. The idea was to create a magazine that could focus on science, parapsychology, science fiction and fantasy, and it was ultimately transformed into a magazine that dealt with popular science in all of its forms (Ashley 2007, 367-69).

This story is the latest that Butler wrote before the first publication of the collection of 1995. It won the *Science Fiction Chronicle* Reader Award and was nominated for the Nebula Award. Coming in stark contrast to *Bloodchild*, which opened the collection, *The Evening and the Morning and the Night* is actually set on Earth and has left the most mainstream science fiction signatures behind. No longer involved with alien life forms and far away planets, the science that enters the scene has everything to do with biology, genetics, and medicine. From the realm of the unknown and the absurd that was the first short story, *Bloodchild*, Butler brings the reader to a much more familiar and knowledgeable topic, which rings true and real to the public. It is, as she described it, the "most carefully developed story I've ever written from a hard science fiction standpoint" (Francis 2010, 22).

At the core of the story lies Butler's own genetic creation: Duryea-Gode (abbreviated as DGD), a hereditary but thankfully nonexistent disease that she constructed by merging three real different genetic disorders: first and foremost, the Huntington's disease, which is hereditary and dominant, meaning inevitable in case of carrying it; second, Phenylketonuria (PKU), a recessive genetic disorder causing severe mental impairment; and lastly, the Lesh-Nyahn disease, which does not only cause mental impairment but also self mutilation (Butler 2005, 69). The reader is introduced to the horrors of Duryea-Gode from the very beginning: the protagonist, a girl by the name of Lynn, has inherited the genes from both parents and is apparently doomed to perish by it. The sense of fatality is present from the very first paragraph of the story:

> When I was fifteen and trying to show my independence by getting careless with my diet, my parents took me to a Duryea-Gode disease ward. They wanted me to see, they said, where I was headed if I wasn't careful. In fact, it was where I was headed no matter what. It was only a matter of when: now or later. My parents were putting in their vote for later.
> I won't describe the ward. It's enough to say that when they brought me home, I cut my wrists. (Butler 2005, 35)

The choice of the first person narrator, much like in *Bloodchild*, allows Butler to force the reader to sit uncomfortably close to the protagonist's lived experience. She places them in front of Lynn's own horrific destiny and makes them ponder what they would do in her shoes. What would one person do, if they knew they suffered from a terminal, uncurable disease? The hypothetical rings much truer than the question of alien life and extraterrestrial encounters, as it is a reality for many people around the world.

In the way that Butler plotted it, DGD is unforgiving, horrific, and unescapable. Once the person carrying the disease starts "drifting", they begin to mutilate themselves and stop responding to their surroundings. Before it is too late, they have to be sent away and locked up, sedated and restrained, otherwise they are going to take their own life. Lynn loses her parents at the age of eighteen because of it: one day, while she is at school, her father started to drift, her mother tried to intervene and ended up being murdered before he was able to take his own life in an incredibly gruesome way: "He began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died" (Butler 2005, 36).

Lynn is aware of being doomed from the beginning of the story. She manages to major in biology thanks to a scholarship for people born with DGD, while renting a house with people suffering from the same disease and somehow managing to make it work like a well-oiled machine, regardless of all of the risks involved. There she meets a young man by the name of Alan Chi, a fellow double DGD that is destined to become her love interest. Alan talks to her about his mother, who is still alive, though locked up in this special, safe retreat for DGD patients called Dilg, and one day they decide to visit her. What Lynn discovers there sounds to her almost unbelievable, compared to what she had always known about the disease: first, she learns that the facility is run by DGDs like herself, despite all the risks that this might entails, and that some of them are much older than their presumed life expectancy; second, she becomes aware that the DGDs locked up in there are not restrained, nor are they mutilating themselves to death like they would normally do after "drifting". Instead, despite having lost control to the disease, they are

able to produce art, do research and develop incredibly advanced technologies. Alan's mother, who had previously mutilated her own eyes when the disease had began overcoming her, has become a sculptor and is also able to, though slowly and not without difficulty, converse with the two of them.

Beatrice, the nurse which has helped them navigate the Dilg facility and facilitated their conversation with Alan's mother, Naomi, then provides Lynn with crucial information: certain female DGDs, such as herself and Lynn, can produce a type of pheromone that allows to control the people who have "drifted" and succumbed, hence preventing themselves from hurting theirs or others' bodies. All of a sudden, Lynn and Alan realize why they had been able to live in a house with other DGDs without ever running into problems: unbeknownst to what was truly going on, Lynn had been controlling them on an unconscious, biological level. She was keeping them in check for all that time just by being present and telling them what housework needed to be done. The realization comes with a cost, though. The nurse proposes both of them to work, even run by themselves, a Dilg retreat such as the one they are visiting, but Alan is now viewing his relationship with Lynn under a different light. Rather than a fiancé, he suddenly feels like a puppet in Lynn's hands, and he refuses to be controlled. Though Beatrice tries to explain to him that DGDs retain their free will despite the pheromones emitted by these rare females, he is not willing to trust them. In the end, they are both sent home from the retreat to process this new, groundbreaking information, and to think about the nurse's proposal about managing their own retreat. The story ends with Lynn wanting to get as far away from there as possible, and seeing herself in Beatrice's shoes, almost perfectly mirrored in a person than is the same as her. But a final answer about their ultimate decision is never given to the reader and the matter remains suspended in the air, unresolved.

Coming almost in stark contrast to *Bloodchild*, *The Evening and The Morning and the Night* dives into matters which are almost perfectly within reach with the general public: illness, unavoidable genetic disorders and the hard ethical choices that normal people have to make when they gain knowledge of what they carry within themselves.

> I began the story wondering how much of what we do is encouraged, discouraged, or otherwise guided by what we are genetically. This is one of my favorite questions, parent to several of my novels. It can be a dangerous question. All too often, when people ask it, they mean who has the biggest or the best or the most of whatever they see as desirable, or who has the smallest and the least of what is undesirable. Genetics as a board game, or worse, as

> an excuse for the social Darwinism that swings into popularity every few years. Nasty habit. (Butler 2005, 69)

In a sense, much of this story is about the loss of control on a human level and the reinforcement of control by society. DGD, a manmade disease that came into existence as a side effect to a cure for cancer, is able to deprive the person of any control over their body and forces them to succumb to severely self-destructive behavior. It is a form of death sentence for the person that carries it, if not in its totality at least for their mental presence and consciousness: once the person affected by DGD begins to "drift", they lose touch with reality and become mentally impaired. For them, the future holds either that or physical death. It is an unavoidable ticking time bomb that they carry within their body, a terminal disease that for most of the story has no sort of cure. It is also, though, perfectly encapsulated and controlled by society, which has managed to contain it and survive; even, as the protagonist is going to discover later on, to find a workaround that can make it much easier on the people who are the most afflicted by it. In this sense, *The Evening and The Morning and the Night* does not fit within the margins of a typical postapocalyptic tale. The disease spreads not in an uncontrolled, unexplainable way, but through the usual means, reproduction. Hence, it is perfectly traceable and containable. DGD, despite its horrific symptoms, has left society prevalently untouched, without any crucial change in structure or broken foundation. It was made by humans, controlled by humans, contained by humans, and ultimately managed by humans.

It is treated by Butler as such a possible real life genetic disorder that it is not even afforded the treatment of an evil that must be eradicated at all costs: people born with DGD are not limited in their rights in any way and their bodily autonomy remains untouched, preserved, at least until they themselves lose control over it. Such is the case of their own right to keep on reproducing despite carrying it. The protagonist, Lynn, is constantly faced with this moral issue, of her responsibility as a woman to conceive and, by consequence, force her own children to carry it themselves and sentence them to its horrors.

> Two DGD parents—both religious, both as opposed to abortion as they were to suicide. So they had trusted God and the promises of modern medicine and had a child. But how could I look at what had happened to them and trust anything? (Butler 2005, 37)

Lynn is constantly torn about the choice that her parents made when they brought her to this world despite knowing how much she was going to suffer. So does her partner,

Alan, that shares her same fate and has even decided to sterilize himself.

> "My mother started to drift when I was three," he said. "My father only lasted a few months longer. I heard he died a couple of years after he went into the hospital. If the two of them had had any sense, they would have had me aborted the minute my mother realized she was pregnant. But she wanted a kid no matter what. And she was Catholic." He shook his head. "Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us." (Butler 2005, 41-42)

As he stated just a few paragraphs later, DGDs are not treated any less than other people, nor are their rights taken away. But the concerns for human responsibility and eugenics keep on creeping into the narration.

> "The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation," he said, "but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats." (Butler 2005, 42)

This topic is still heavily debated and contested to this day and is prominent in disputes about women's rights to abortions, fetal rights, religious believes, and eugenics. Both Lynn's and Alan's parents are described as religious people that could not terminate their pregnancy because of their belief, even despite knowing what kind of future they were gifting their children with, and both characters resent them for said decision. At the same time, when hearing their thoughts, their anger and concerns, the reader is faced with another fundamental question: would it be right, if religion were not in the picture when making such decisions, to wipe out an entire group of people from the face of the planet simply on the basis of a genetic disorder? Even if this made, in a sense, the human species "better" or in any way "stronger"? This issue is much more real than we would like to imagine, as it is for instance the case of Iceland and the decreasing birth rates of babies with Down syndrome due to access to early prenatal screenings and uncontested access to abortions (EDSA).

Much like people with Down syndrome, though, DGDs too compensate their mental and physical impairments with unexpected artistic and scientific talent. As a matter of fact, right behind the iron doors of the Dilg retreat is situated first and foremost an art museum filled with sculptures and paintings, all made by the DGDs patients who live there. It is the very first room that Lynn and Alan see, which completely throws them off of their own expectations regarding the place. Even the palmprint-voiceprint locks on the doors of the building were invented by DGDs who had already drifted, who were supposed to be completely out of control, mentally impaired and harmful to themselves and their surroundings, and yet so incredibly gifted.

Their visit at the Dilg retreat represents for both Lynn and Alan the first sliver of hope that they ever felt from the beginning of the story. A future which was presented from the very start as doomed and unescapable is all of a sudden brightened by the possibility of a life that does not end with brutal self-mutilation and complete dissociation from reality. This future, though, is only possible through the innate capacity for control that certain gifted DGDs have. The two characters in question who can do such thing are Lynn and Beatrice, both double DGDs. Lynn and Beatrice represent at the same time both the disease and the cure, or at the very least its next evolutive step. One thing to note is that they do not manage or control drifted, out-of-control DGDs by means of science and technology, such as by finding a cure which can be injected or fed, nor thanks to any form of therapy. The cure to DGD – or at least, the way to finally be able to manage it without people suffering – lies not in manmade science, but in biology.

> "It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. Men who inherit the disease from their fathers have no trace of the scent. They also tend to have an easier time with the disease. But they're useless to use as staff here. Men who inherit from their mothers have as much of the scent as men get. They can be useful here because the DGDs can at least be made to notice them. The same for women who inherit from their mothers but not their fathers. It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this." She looked at me. "We are very rare commodities, you and I. When you finish school you'll have a very well-paying job waiting for you." (Butler 2005, 61)

It is almost as if, in a way, where society failed in being able to control the disease, nature and biology compensated by transforming human life to better deal with this new reality and guarantee its survival. In this sense, Lynn and Beatrice are not simple women, nor diseased people: they represent the queen bees of almost an entire new species which operates at a very animal level, though by also retaining the incredibly high artistic and scientific capabilities of homo sapiens. They are, essentially, mutants among humans.

Almost by following in *Bloodchild* footsteps, *The Evening and The Morning and the Night* leaves all questions and matters suspended in a final scene that feels anything but resolutive. Now that the main protagonist has found her life long mission and has essentially transformed into a beacon of hope for DGDs, Butler lets the reader speculate about what is going to become of Lynn and Alan's relationship, about whether she is going to reconsider having children of her own or not, and what the next step would be for the DGD community as a whole, which are not destined to a life of suffering despite

their impairments and are far more talented in science and technology than the rest. What would be, for example, of people like Lynn and Beatrice, and their unusual mutation?

Through this story, much more on the realistic side than the most bizarre tales of science fiction, Butler invites the reader to look inward, at social issues that will probably remain unsolved, and ponder on some of the most divisive moral questions that, to this day, create divisiveness, hatred, and political action. Much like real life, though, she leaves the readers to come to their own conclusions, and does not guide them to any easy shortcut on the matter. Hereditary disease, personal responsibility, the right to life, the extent to which humans rights can go, freedom and bodily autonomy, the treatment of biological deviations from the supposed "norm" at the hands of society, how control is asserted and the balance of interpersonal relationships: though short, *The Evening and the Morning and the Night* brings a handful of the most hot topics on the table.

2.4 Near of Kin

Near of Kin was published in 1979 on *Chrysalis 4*. Not to be confused with the feminist publication *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture* by Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie launched in 1977, *Chrysalis* was an anthology series edited by Roy Torgeson, started at Zebra Books in August of the same year, which focused on exuberant, experimental fiction. It lasted for ten volumes over the span of six years (Ashley 2007, 347). Butler's story, appearing on its 4th volume, is one of the shortest of the collection. It is also not part of the science fiction genre, but its experimental nature, at least in the content narrated, is unmistakable.

The plot revolves around a single scene, taking place shortly after a funeral: a young woman sits in her mother's apartment while her relatives go through her things, and she converses with her uncle, Stephen, about what her life and her conflicted familial relationships were like. She had been abandoned by her mother, Barbara, at a very young age and, since her father had died before she was even born, she ended up being raised by her grandmother. The subtext of their conversation becomes slowly more and more obvious as the narration progresses: the girl had discovered that her uncle was, as a matter of fact, her biological father, and was trying to confront him about it. After toeing around it for a bit, she is able to make him confess the truth and promises not to tell anyone in

the family, not even the grandmother. What she ends up discovering is that her mother Barbara had left her in her grandmother's care due to the shame she had felt about her incestuous relationship, and her uncle – father, in reality – Stephen tries to convince her that she loved her despite everything.

This is, essentially, a story about incest. Narrated in the first person just like the previous two novelettes, Butler left its female protagonist nameless, constantly involved in a shift from external dialogue with her uncle and interior monologue, in which she processes what is said to her and elaborates it according to her memories and sensations. There is no semblance of shock in her when she finally gets to the truth, as she already suspected what had happened. There is also neither hatred, nor disgust, at least not towards Stephen. On the contrary, as soon as she realizes just how much he is in shock over the fact that she knows he is her father, she is the one preemptively letting him know she does not care and that she loves him. All of the drama and emotions that might be trapped inside a revelation of this magnitude, which goes against the norm for most cultures, are defused by the acceptance of the protagonist, whose only goal after her mother's death is to reconnect with her father.

What makes *Near of Kin* such a provocative story is not just the fact that Butler decided to depict incest in a positive, sympathetic light, but that what inspired her was the Bible itself. Growing in a Baptist family, she had become familiar enough with the Bible to be able to read it for what it presented, and not how it was supposed to be interpreted. Some of the unmistakable biblical incest stories that fascinated her were the case of the Lot's daughters, Abraham's sister-wife, and the never described but implied incestual encounters between the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve (Butler 2005, 85). The fact that a religious text used to dictate morality in most of the countries on Earth contains, in a non-condemning way, acts that would be considered highly immoral in most of these cultures, is in itself ironic, or at least intriguing enough as a concept to push writers such as Butler to explore it. Religion reappears in the story sporadically, when the girl thinks about giving away her mother's things to the Salvation Army, an evangelical movement founded in London in 1865 which focuses on charity work around the globe, but besides that single instance it is never clearly stated whether her or anyone in the family is directly affiliated to any church, creed, or belief.

Another point of interest in *Near of Kin* is the relationship between the protagonist

and her now deceased mother. Stephen attempts to explain repeatedly that Barbara had loved her despite having abandoned her to be raised by the grandmother, but she never comes close to believing it. As a matter of fact, she has her mind set on her own believes quite firmly.

> "(…) I think she liked having had a child—I don't know, to prove her womanliness or something, and to see what she could produce. But once she had me, she didn't want to waste her time raising me." (Butler 2005, 75)

In the revelation of how she was conceived, Stephen involuntarily reinforces her own idea on the matter.

> "(…) It was a believable lie—her husband was alive when you were conceived. He had left her, but the family didn't find out about that until later, never found out about the timing."
> "Did he leave because of you?"
> "No. He left because he had found someone else—someone who had borne him a live child instead of having a miscarriage. She came to me when he left—came to talk, to cry, to work out some of her feelings.…" He shrugged. "She and I were always close—too close." He shrugged again. "We loved each other. If it had been possible, I would have married her. I don't care how that sounds, I would have done it. As it was, we were afraid when she realized she was pregnant, but she wanted you. There was never any question about that." (Butler 2005, 82-83)

Barbara had had four miscarriages with her former husband before being able to get pregnant with her brother Stephen, and yet once her daughter was born she removed herself almost entirely from the picture. The protagonist has resented her mother most of her life for that: not for being born out of an incestuous relationship, but because she was being abandoned to her grandmother. In this sense, the only clear condemnation stated in the story has to do with Barbara's inability to take responsibility for her actions and be present in the life of her daughter as a loving parent, and not in having committed an act that goes against common morality.

The picture that Butler paints through this narrating voice depicts relief and love, a moment of acceptance and recognition that the protagonist seems to have waited for her entire life. It leaves the reader wondering where their own moral boundaries are, and just how far they can be stretched when presented with stories that leave behind the common paths of a moral code to explore uncharted, unusual territories.

2.5 Speech Sounds

This novelette debuted in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* a year before *Bloodchild*, in 1983, and was the winner of the 1984 Hugo Award for Best Short Story. It would be accurate to introduce it as the only post-apocalyptic story contained in the 1995 edition, though it was later on followed by *Amnesty* in this regard with the second release of the collection in 2005. *Speech Sounds* is set in a future Los Angeles and seems to elaborate on a concept that Butler was going to explore a few years later in the previously analysed *The Evening and The Morning and the Night*: the triggering factor of the apocalypse that completely altered the world of this story is not an alien invasion or a nuclear Armageddon, but a disease. It is an illness that does not kill humans, nor transforms them into flesh-eating zombies: it simply attacks the language centres of the brain and makes them lose the ability to speak, read and comprehend any written or spoken language.

Two main things set this story apart from the rest of the writings of the collection, right from its opening lines: first, it is clearly set in a precise location on Earth, the city of Los Angeles, hence it allows an American reader to almost immediately visualize with much clarity the scenery in which everything takes place and grounds them much deeper in reality than the previous short stories; second, rather than Butler's usual first person narrator, the reader is taken through the story by a third person point of view. The latter is a peculiar choice, considering the plot. Since the protagonist, when introduced, is supposedly no longer able to speak or read, it is almost as if Butler decided to underline the severity of the situation and the gravity of this impairment by taking away her voice and guide the reader through the help of another, external point of view.

The story begins with Valerie Rye, main character, once teacher of history at UCLA and freelance writer, traveling on a bus. The scene, though, soon devolves into palpable danger. A wordless fight made of gestures and grunts starts to take place in the aisle of the bus, and by its nature begins spreading among the passengers. The bus is hence forced to a stop by the driver, and Rye jumps out of it. In distancing from the bus with the intention of waiting for the fight to boil down, she nears a car and its driver, who reveals to be an ex-cop, LAPD. The man launches a tear gas grenade into the bus to break the fight, then him and Rye proceeds to help the remaining passengers get out and escape. Though she does not want to leave with him at first, a few moments later some of the

people fighting gestures at her menacingly and obscenely, and she decides to get in the car and leave.

She begins to trust him more once she realizes that he is following her directions towards Pasadena and not trying to drive away and take her for himself. Noticing a pendant he was wearing, possibly signifying a name that could have been “Rock”, “Peter” or “Black”, she decides to name him Obsidian, and then introduces herself as “Rye” by letting him see a pin in the shape of a stalk of wheat. It is while stopping to read a map and better plan the trip ahead that she learns that this man, newly rebaptized Obsidian, is still able to read. This realization blinds her with so much jealousy that for a moment she is on the verge of killing him. As she is seething with rage, he gestures in return whether she is still able to speak and she ends up admitting that yes, indeed, she has lost the ability to read but withheld her ability to speak. All of a sudden, the two finds themselves tied up in each other’s secret, a complementary form of the illness that had spread across the whole nation, and as the Rye’s rage subsides, they end up making love in the backseat of the car. This sexual encounter allows them to open up to each other not only on a physical level, so much that Rye admits to him of having had three children before that illness had killed them.

As they are on the road once again, traveling through Los Angeles, they stumble into another fight: a man, holding a knife, jumps out of a building to run after a woman and murder her. Obsidian tries to intervene and stop the murder, but the woman gets stabbed before he is able to shoot down the attacker. While Obsidian and Rye loom over the woman’s body, the man who had just been shot grabs Obsidian’s gun and kills him. In a matter of seconds, Rye finds herself once again alone, this time only in the company of three corpses. As she sits there, lost and confused at how fast things changed around her, two children around three years of age come out of the house from which this fight started, and they approach their mother’s dead body. She has just started to drag the dead in the car to carry them to a place where she could dig some graves, when one of the children, a little girl, screams coherent words and tries to prevent her from taking her dead mother away. Rye realizes that these two children are able to produce fluent speech. She is immediately overwhelmed with thoughts, possibilities about the disease having run its course or the children born after it being immune, and she decides, just like Obsidian had been for a short time her own protector, to take them with her and protect them. The story,

which had opened with silence, ends with Rye talking and reassuring them that they do not have to be afraid to speak to her.

As Butler admitted in the afterword to the story, the plot of *Speech Sounds* came to her from the real life experience of a bloody fist fight that started on the Washington Boulevard bus of a Saturday in the 1980s. She was on her way to the hospital for her weekly visit to a dear friend, which was unfortunately dying from cancer. It was, as she described, a time made of weariness, depression and sorrow, and these feelings were precisely what conceived the story (Butler 2005, 109).

> I sat where I was, more depressed than ever, hating the whole hopeless, stupid business and wondering whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate without using fists of one kind or another. (Butler 2005, 110)

And so was born the idea of a stroke-like disease able to deprive humanity of their ability to speak and read. The parallels to be drawn with *The Evening and the Morning and the Night* are numerous, but it is worth focusing first and foremost on the illness described in this story. The immediate thing that jumps to the reader's mind when this illness is introduced and described is its unmistakable vagueness:

> The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another. As it swept over the country, people hardly had time to lay blame on the Soviets (though they were falling silent along with the rest of the world), on a new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution.… The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and stroke like in some of its effects. But it was highly specific. Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death. (Butler 2005, 95-96)

Differently from Duryea-Gode, elaborated years later, the illness portrayed in the background of this dystopic world is not described in a deep, scientific manner. On one hand it fits its origin story, since it was inspired by a real life event unrelated to actual real diseases. It can remain nebulous and it does not require a scientific explanation, since it is symbolic in its nature. On the other, it perfectly fits the narrative of the story: since this disease takes language away from humans, this makes it by consequence not knowable nor researchable. Another peculiar feature of this illness that comes in stark contrast with DGD is that it was able to ultimately destroy society in its entirety. Unlike DGD, which was manmade, had a specific origin, it spread genetically in almost an orderly and predictable fashion and was therefore containable, the disease in Speech Sounds comes out of nowhere, without any warning sign, and sweeps Earth in its entirety. By the time

people realize what is happening, no one is able to research it and work on a cure. Either it kills people, or it takes away their ability to read, analyze and communicate. It decimates Rye's family, even her children, and destroys society as we know it, in its most fundamental social structures.

> (…) she thought of the man who lived across the street from her. He rarely washed since his bout with the illness. And he had gotten into the habit of urinating wherever he happened to be. He had two women already—one tending each of his large gardens. They put up with him in exchange for his protection. He had made it clear that he wanted Rye to become his third woman. (Butler 2005, 96)

Despite the description of what would be a habitual and very common bus ride in the very beginning of the story, the action described devolves soon into a dystopic nightmare. Even the scenario of streets blocked by wrecked, abandoned cars, and of people fighting to the death over what would be otherwise trivial matters, or even going as far as taking slaves for themselves, resembles the typical depiction of future apocalypses that is portrayed in tv shows and movies.

A feature that this illness shares with DGD, on the other hand, is the blatant inability to communicate that it creates. With DGD, the people affected by it were forced in a state of complete impairment that only a special female, able to control others through her pheromones, would help bypass. Though the illness described in this story does not mentally affect those that it hits, it still fries the language centres in their brains and takes away their capacity to communicate and interact. In their instance, there are no special humans, who have developed special skills or biological features, that can help navigate and ultimately fix it.

Much like *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*, though, *Speech Sounds* does not end in complete tragedy. Through Rye and Obsidian's ability to still be able to read or speak, and towards its last paragraphs with the depiction of little children being able to fluently speak coherent phrases, Butler leaves the door open to the hope for a better future.

2.6 Crossover

Crossover is the very first story that Butler was able to sell as a writer, and the closing piece of the 1995 collection. It was written while she was a student at the Clarion

Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer's Workshop in the summer of 1970, bought by Robin Scott Wilson and published in 1971 in his magazine *Clarion*.

The story is the shortest of the entire collection, the action narrated particularly limited. Its content carries the weight of real-life experience that has nothing in common with the marvellous wonders – or horrifying possibilities – of science fiction. As a matter of fact, it would be safe to say that story, much like and even more than *Near of Kin*, has nothing to do with the genre.

The main character of the story is Jane, a woman who works in a factory. After a bad day at work, in which she developed the worst headache she had had in three months, she goes to the liquor store to buy herself some alcohol. On her way there, she bumps into a drunkard, whom she avoids. While she is going back to her place, she notices a man with a familiar scar on his face standing in the doorway: it is her own boyfriend, who had been in jail and had just got out that day. They have dinner together, make love, and then start a conversation that ends almost in a shouting match. Having heard the commotion, the neighbour comes pounding on the door because of the noise. Immediately after Jane is able to send her away, she gets dressed to get out once again. She leaves her boyfriend in her apartment, goes back to the drunkard that had teased her as she was headed to the liquor store, and follows him to a hotel. The story ends with a scar-faced man coming towards them and Jane taking a sip from the bottle that the drunkard had given her, waiting for the image of her boyfriend to vanish from sight. It is only in the end, though several hints had been placed before, that the reader is able to confirm that Jane is, as a matter of fact, hallucinating.

Narrated from an external third point of view like *Speech Sounds*, *Crossover* leaves the reader feeling that this is much more a draft of a story than a real, fully developed and fleshed out plot. This might have to do with the fact that it was the very first short story Butler ever wrote, and that it was written while she was a student attending the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writer's Workshop. It does not have anything to do with science fiction, nor fantasy, but it is centred around issues of mental health and poor working conditions, both things which are perfectly within the reins of any reader.

Butler herself had to work several blue-collar jobs before she was able to establish herself as a writer (Butler 2005, 132). In her 1997 interview with Joan Fry, she described her working experience in the following manner:

> I remember working in a mailing house; I don't even know if those places still exist. They had both machines and people putting together pieces of mail for advertising. It was like an assembly line at a factory, only a little more complicated. You might be doing something with each piece of mail, not just putting them together. You did this over and over and over all day until your shoulders wanted to desert to another body. The only thing I could do to keep myself somewhere near conscious was to sing, very softly, to myself. I don't have the most wonderful singing voice, and the supervisor kept walking by giving me funny looks. Finally she came up and asked, "What are you doing? *Talking* to yourself?" (Francis 2010, 125)

In *Crossover*, Jane is essentially suffering both from the consequences of an exhausting job and of a deep, unescapable feeling of loneliness. The fight she has in her apartment with the imaginary presence of her boyfriend, who is actually still in jail, reveals just how much she is struggling on a day to day basis. From sleeping pills to alcohol, to thoughts of suicide, the struggle that Jane has to go through actually rings true to a much larger number of readers one would like to believe. Unlike most of the previous stories of the collection, *Crossover* does not end with any indication that there might be hope for Jane, for either a better future or a simple, minute change in the right direction. The sense of oppression, apathy and loneliness permeates the entire story, to its very last phrase. Much like the never-ending repetitiveness of her job in that factory and the looping of her hallucinations, which seem to stalk her in a way, Janes ends up repeating once again her own errors, tracing back her steps out of the apartment and going back to numbing her pain with alcohol. There is no hint at the fact that this might be the last time she does so before something changes and takes her away from this misery. There is an unwritten yet unmistakable sense of looping in the plot, as the reader can feel that the next day is going to be the exact same for her. She is stuck in an assembly line, both on a physical and mental level, from which she can not escape.

2.7 Amnesty

Coming in right after the two essays that Butler dedicated to her writing, her passion and how to become successful in the field, *Amnesty* is part of the 2005 expansion of collection under the revamped publisher Seven Stories Press. The story first appeared in SciFi.com in 2003, and it brings the reader right back into the science fiction horizon with a bizarre, thought-provoking alien-human encounter.

The protagonist is Noah Cannon, a woman that works as a translator for an alien species called "Communities", a life form composed of myriads of entities vaguely

similar to twigs, branches and moss, and that shares essentially no apparent common trait with humans. The Communities communicate not through verbal speech, but by enfolding the humans inside of themselves, assimilating them and using a system of touches and electric signals on their bare skin. From the beginning of the story, the reader becomes aware that Noah has learned to communicate with this alien life form during twelve years of captivity. Noah gets noticed by her contractor, a new Community she has been assigned to, that she is going to have to teach this new form of language to six new human recruits. She is also advised that these recruits are afraid and that she has to calm them. At her non satisfying reply, the Community engulfing her punishes her with an electrical shock. She endures, though, because she is determined to change both human and alien perspectives on their coexistence.

After this opening scene and voiceless dialogue, what follows is the introduction of these new six human recruits and potential employees. From the start, Noah notices that only two of them seem to be willing to sit next to her; the others prefer to keep at a distance. She soon begins to talk about the aliens, by providing answers to their many questions about the Communities and the working contracts they are about to sign with them. The conversation leads to the explanation of the history of the Communities on Earth.

This alien species arrived on a one-way ship and, being naturally drawn to the heath, settled in the deserts. They soon began abducting humans, and Noah herself was one of them. She was captured when she was eleven, during the so called second wave of abductions. Those first two waves served to the Communities to experiment on humans, and they did indeed end up with much suffering and many casualties. Noah had been lucky enough to be abducted after enough knowledge was gathered by the aliens to prevent further human death. She, along with the rest of the captives, was treated like a lab animal, hurt, and raped by other abductees. Much of the suffering she describes having experienced came at the hands of other humans, and not by the aliens, which only tried to study them and analyse their behaviour. Noah points out that all the Communities did to her, and to the other abductees, was to put them together for days or weeks in the same space and see what was going to happen. In the time she spent there, in one of those “bubbles”, the Mojave Bubble, she was able to help develop that new language, a form of communication consisting of touches and gestures. After being released twelve years

later, she was immediately captured by the military and treated, by her account, much worse than the aliens ever did. In a twisted, almost incredible way, she recounts being tortured by other fellow human beings so that they could get any information available out of her. Unlike the pain she experienced in the bubble to the aliens' experiments, this time it was caused by people who had every intent to make her suffer until they got what they wanted. It ended with her trying to take her own life and her jailers watching her do it. She was able to be released from that prison only after someone leaked her story to the press. After recovering and taking her time to study, Noah then went back to the Communities and began working for them as an employee.

The story ends with Noah describing the folding process to the recruiters, and mentioning one last curious fact that only military captors and aliens knew about: soon after the Communities had managed to elude a first coordinated nuclear strike and landed on Earth, there was a second attack to their first established colonies. Noah was inside the Mojave bubble when the nukes dropped from the sky. They never detonated, however, and half of the missiles were then returned to the senders unexploded, left scattered across the biggest human cities on the planet, even inside the Oval Office. According to Noah, the Communities kept the other half, along with the rest of weapons that they brought from their own planet and those that they build ever since they got on Earth. There was no point in attempting to go to war, then. She shut down the recruiters at the end of the story by reminding them that they, the humans, had already lost. It was over.

Amnesty was inspired by the 90s case of Dr. Wen Ho Lee. Dr. Lee was a Chinese American man working for the National Laboratory of Los Alamos, who was falsely accused of stealing secretes regarding the United States nuclear arsenal and spying for the Chinese government. His unjust incarceration planted the seed of an idea in Butler's mind, and so was this story created (Francis 2010, 204).

One of the first things that might catch the reader's attention is the fact that *Amnesty* is the second and only other story of the collection to include an alien life form. For better or for worse, humanity is forced once again to come to terms with another highly intelligent species, one that will not succumb to their rule like the animal kingdom and that could very well, on the contrary, dominate them. In the case of this short story, the setting easily alludes to the possibility of a post-apocalyptic scenario: the world as we know it is forever changed, the economy has almost unrecoverably collapsed, alien

settlements are being built in several corners of the Earth and there is still the threat of nuclear war on the horizon. Unlike *Bloodchild*, though, it is not the humans who are caged inside safe spaces called Preserves, but it is the aliens, these Communities, that try to preserve their own safe spaces and their autonomy inside so-called "bubbles". The relationship and interactions between the two species are also highly different:

> "Of course the Communities know we're intelligent," Noah said.
> "I mean I know you work for them," Michelle Ota glanced at her, hesitated then went on. "I want to work for them too. Because at least they're hiring. Almost nobody else is. But what do they think of us?"
> "They'll be offering some of you contracts soon," Noah said. "They wouldn't waste time doing that if they'd mistaken you for cattle." (Butler 2005, 156)

Both the Tlic from *Bloodchild* and the Communities of *Amnesty* make use of the human body, but in a much different way. With the Tlic, Butler makes sure to express just how much that alien species need human hosts for their own health and survival. Their constant entanglement, even if at first modeled as a carbon copy of what we consider slavery, changes generation after generation in a way that, towards the end, assumes the shapes of an enlarged and varied family; one made of seemingly unmixable beings, that have nonetheless become brothers and sisters in spite of their genome. The balance of power between Communities and humans remain, however, unaltered throughout the story: the Communities do not have any apparent use for the human body, nor of humans in general, and they limit themselves to hiring people as employees. The presence of a real, tangible contract between aliens and humans makes their relationship stable and unchangeable for the entirety of the story.

Despite having no apparent reason or need to make direct contact, the Communities still manage to entangle themselves with the humans and get something out of it.

> There was, somehow, the pleasure of being enfolded. It happened often when captives were not being tested in some way. It happened because the entities of the Communities discovered that it pleased and comforted them too, and they didn't understand why any more than she did. The first enfoldings happened because they were convenient ways of restraining, examining, and, unhappily, poisoning human captives. It wasn't long, though, before unoccupied humans were being enfolded just for the pleasure the act gave to an unoccupied Community. Communities did not understand at first that their captives could also take pleasure in the act. (Butler 2005, 172)

Differently from the Tlic, which had a reason to get physically close to the humans, the Communities gain out of it nothing but a pleasurable sensation, not needed nor necessary for either of them. Butler does not justify it in any way and the reader is forced

to speculate on their own of the possible reasons why this would be the case.

Two main themes seem to be central to the story: first, the use of language and communication, with its purpose; second, the issue of betrayal by members of one's own species, going directly against what would be common sense in a scenario such as this. The former appears to be the main focus of the story, or at least the thread tying up together the plot from beginning to end. From the very first scene the reader is introduced to a woman who works as a translator, immersed with her entire body in a non verbal dialogue with an alien being. Her job is to teach this new language to other humans, therefore expanding and improving the dialogue between the two species for a better, reciprocal understanding. It is quite interesting how Butler decided to depict and differentiate these two forms of communication, one verbal and the other physical: when Noah talks with the recruiters, Butler makes use of the main dialogue format employed in the publishing industry. The direct speech uttered by the characters of the story is separated by the body of the text and enclosed between inverted commas:

> "What have the aliens told you about their coming here, Translator," Rune Johnsen asked. (…) He wanted to look after his parents and he wanted to get married. Ironically, the answer to both those problems seemed to be to go to work for the Communities for a while. "You're old enough to remember the things they did when they arrived," he said. "What did they tell you about why they abducted people, killed people.…"
> "They abducted me," Noah admitted. (Butler 2005, 158-59)

When Butler describes Noah and the Communities speaking, instead, these norms crumble and the dialogue is merged with the text, almost by disappearing and hiding in the same way in which the human body gets trapped and enfolded by this alien species:

> Are you injured? her employer signed.
> No, she answered. Just aching joints and other sore places. Did I get the job?
> Of course you did. 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.
> Thank you. (Butler 2005, 154)

The use of different formats of dialogue is even more stark in moments where Butler pins the alien language against human language in a short span of time, such as:

> Calm them. The subcontractor repeated. And she knew then that it meant, literally, "Change them from disturbed people to calm, willing workers." (Butler 2005, 153)

Again, the "voice" of the Communities is introduced without the usual inverted commas needed for a dialogue, which are instead used for the insertion – or translation – of the human voice, regardless of whether it is spoken or thought. This makes the dialogue

alien not only in its nature but even to the common reader, which is not used to finding this sort of structure in a book.

This form of communication was invented by Noah and other abductees when they were trapped inside the Mojave Bubble, and it differentiates from the otherwise known types of sign languages because it requires the involvement of the entire body on part of the humans and the use of electric signals on part of the aliens, even to the point of shocking them as a punishment. Despite the first scene of the story, depicting Noah experiencing this exact form of physical abuse after she responded in a manner that was not liked by the Community employing her, the story then reveals that this alien species is not actually as evil as one would imagine. The true horrors described by *Amnesty* resides not in the alien invasion, which left humans almost in their entirety untouched and well, but in the abuse that humans do towards other humans.

> She paused remembering humiliation, fear, hopelessness, exhaustion, bitterness, sickness, pain.… They had never beaten her badly—just struck a few blows now and then for emphasis and intimidation. And sometimes she was grabbed, shaken, and shoved, amid ongoing accusations, speculations, and threats. Now and then, an interrogator, knocked her to the floor, then ordered her back to her chair. They did nothing that they thought might seriously injure or kill her. But it went on and on and on. (Butler 2005, 171)

In a landscape of postapocalyptic science fiction stories describing alien invasions and portraying humanity on the verge of extinction, yet fighting regardless of the circumstances and firmly united against a common enemy coming from the depts of the universe, *Amnesty* pushes the reader in another direction entirely. True evil and cruelty might be found in members of our own species, which can consider others of their kind enemies no matter what, regardless the lack of proof of wrongdoings and the use of a shared common language, which should help bridge differences and bring resolution to conflicts. Inspired by real life events, this story forces the reader to look inward, at the darkest behaviour enacted by our own kind. The encounter with the alien other, in this sense, serves as a tool for deeper introspection and reflection.

2.8 Book of Martha

The closing story of the collection is *Book of Martha*, published on SciFi.com in 2003, the same year of *Amnesty*. It is described by Butler herself as her “utopian story”,

and yet despite its categorization it is coloured by a glint of unmistakable cynicism.

The story revolves around a dialogue between God and Martha Bes, a middle aged writer, who wakes up from a dream to face her biggest challenge yet: fixing the whole world. She is invited by God to make a single change – and one only – to creation, in order to help humanity survive. If she does not help, God will destroy everything once more, just like he did before. After the change is done and humanity is saved both from God's wrath and from itself, Martha is supposed to go back to reality and live as the lowliest of the low.

> "This is what you're to do," God said. "You will help humankind to survive its greedy, murderous, wasteful adolescence. Help it to find less destructive, more peaceful, sustainable ways to live." (Butler 2005, 192)

As she and God begin discussing about what is supposed to happen, Martha ponders about the possible changes she would make to her own kind, with the knowledge that anything she freely chooses, if it were to go wrong, would not be fixed by God: first, she wonders whether she should make it so that people can not have more than two children per family; then, she wonders if it would be better to have people have realistic, powerful, unavoidable dreams that could leave one so satisfied and fulfilled they would not try to make the dream real in the world; a sort of personal utopia available to everyone in their sleep. God listens attentively and provides feedback on her ideas. Both suggestions, though, seem to produce bad outcomes one way or the other, and the latter is even worse for Martha who, as a writer, does not want to lose potential readers who approach books to fantasize and escape reality. Nonetheless, she settles in the end for the vivid, utopian dreams, and she accepts that she will have to look for another job as soon as it is done. She asks God to erase the memory of this meeting and of her own decision, and after one last warm hug she finds herself in her own living room, staring at the drapes of a window and wondering what she was trying to forget.

Deeply intertwined in the story is Butler's own experience growing up in a religious Baptist family. The biblical allusions do not stop at the portrayal of God as a character, but are also reflected in the title of the story itself, *Book of Martha*, which is supposed to allude to the scriptures of the Bible. God introduces the mission he's entrusting Martha with by mentioning three biblical figures:

> "I have a great deal of work for you," he said at last. "As I tell you about it, I want you to keep three people in mind: Jonah, Job, and Noah. Remember them. Be guided by their stories." (Butler 2005, 191)

Beginning from Noah, probably one of the most well known biblical figures, God reinforces the idea of what truly is at stake: the demise of humanity in its entirety, in case Martha were to fail, with the idea of a great reset, the erasure of the human species as we know it and a new beginning. The figure of Job could be said to signify humanity in its entirety, forced to suffer dozens of hardships due to a challenge started by God and Satan. In this case a parallel could be drawn between them and God and Martha, who plot together a way to fix what is wrong with humanity and generate by consequence even greater problems for everybody. On a different note, the figure of Jonah is in a way related directly to Martha: Jonah is known for having tried to escape his responsibility as a prophet of God, and having therefore almost died at sea. After being swallowed by a whale and having decided to finally serve God's will, Jonah was able to make the people of Nineveh repent themselves… only to then regret it and wish for all of them to be wiped out by God, despite his mission being a great success.

Book of Martha harmonizes Butler's religious upbringings and readings of the Bible, her own life experiences as a writer able to construct narratives around social problems and their solutions, her views on humanity with its most endemic issues, and a hint of cynic scepticism; all of this, presented through the lenses of speculative fiction. It is probably one of the most speculative pieces of the collection. From beginning to end, the protagonist is forced to ponder, brainstorm, and ultimately figure out the best solution to an issue that God himself is not taking accountability for. But she is doing exactly what most of the people do each and every day in their head, even if without the same level of pressure: think about that one solution that, if enacted, could be able to fix the entirety of the world.

Her thoughts, along with God's feedback, are in a constant state of motion and evolution. So is the scenery surrounding her as it follows her mental process, which goes from being endless greyness to a green, lustrous lawn, then the living room of her own little house in Seattle, Washington, and a dirt pathway at night, to finally her house yet again. Not only the scenery changes, but the image of God does so too. When it first appears to Martha, he does so in the semblance of the stereotypical, iconic image of God: big, powerful, and mighty, a "twice-live-sized bearded white man" (Butler 2005, 190)

seated on a huge chair which resembled a throne. A few moments later, as he nears Martha, he shrinks down in height and loses his godly halo. When he reappears to her in that dirt pathway, underneath a shimmering night full of stars, he does so in the semblances of a black man, human-sized, and wearing modern clothes. "At some point, you'll probably decide to see me as a woman" (Butler 2005, 208), he states, and as a matter of fact his next transformation is that of a black woman, one that resembles Martha so much that she thinks they almost look like sisters. It is worth noting that all these changes happen through Martha's will, who is in charge not only of the future and survival of her species, but also of what she sees and of God's appearance too.

> "What, exactly, do you want? A utopia? Because I don't believe in them. I don't believe it's possible to arrange a society so that everyone is content, everyone has what he or she wants." (Butler 2005, 202)

Butler admitted not liking utopian stories, and that attempting to write one would result in writing someone else's hell (Butler 2005, 214). In this instance, her character reflects her own thoughts and feelings almost as clearly as a mirror. It could be said, then, that the two hypotheses that Martha comes up with – one of which is the final solution – have an affinity with, or even overlap perfectly, Butler's thinking on the matter. Her two main answers to fix humanity and allow its survival are: first, to reduce birth rates and not allow families to have more than two children; and second, to allow everyone to live their own personal utopia each night, when they go to sleep. Her choices are, ultimately, what could truly be someone else's hell. There is a sense of unescapable fatality in all of this. If at first Martha tries to find a way to fix humanity as best as she can, she is driven away from these attempts by slowly realizing that any actual change in the way that humans operate would make them no longer "human". Almost by realizing that humanity's problems are in their nature unsolvable, she is left with one last possible option: slowing things down, giving people more time before they inevitably face their own extinction.

> "(…) I just want the dreams to slow things down a little. A little less aggression, as you said, less covetousness. Nothing slows people down like satisfaction, and this satisfaction will come every night." (Butler 2005, 205)

There is much consideration, on Butler's part, towards the interest of the collective and the wellbeing of the species, fully immersed in its habitat and environment, over the individualistic fulfilment of their own private needs and desires. But a mindset slanted

towards the wellbeing of the collective can not function as an ultimate solution, in a context in which one is trying to fix society for the better. People's own needs and desires, if repressed by the collective's interests, would end up generating discontent, frustration, and despair, and make them rebel even against things that exist and that were put in place for their own good. This is why, ultimately, Butler opts through Martha's words to help humanity by allowing each and everyone on Earth their own happiness, even if through the only possible utopia: one which is personal, private, and that resides in our own mind.

Martha's solution, even if seemingly perfect, comes at a price. For being the one that is going to make the world a better place and provide every human being with their slice of happiness, she subjects herself to a life of misery. She loses her job, her livelihood and goes back to being the lowliest of the lows. She still has access to those same vivid, lucid, utopian dreams that she herself planned for the whole humanity, but one can not but ask: is this really enough? Butler's choice in this regard is bittersweet, and yet it makes perfect sense. Can something be called a utopia if it entails one's suffering or loss of what they hold dear? Even if the reader considers that, at the end of the day, Martha is able to still take advantage of the dreams that everyone in the world has access to, her real life would still be anything but optimal. One is left wondering, then, what kind of utopian world would be one in which only the dreams are perfect, happy, and satisfying, perfectly fulfilling, as everything around them crumbles since nothing has truly materially changed and improved. The answer would be, obviously, that it is not a utopia at all.

CHAPTER 3

THE FEMALE BODY

3.1 Butler's "radio imagined" characters in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*

If a first reading of the collection might leave the reader swept up in a vortex of unresolved ethical conundrums stemming from provoking themes, a closer look to the collection can reveal that they do share, as a matter of fact, an underlying common denominator. Functioning as the main lenses through which the reader is able to experience and evaluate the events narrated, Butler's characters set the tone for their own stories through their own bodily perceptions and voices. Of crucial importance for a better understanding of the analysis that follows, which centers around the representation of the female body and employment of its features throughout the short stories of the collection, is Butler's perspective on the way she imagined and visualized her characters:

> I realize that I have been writing about people for years and I've never *seen* any of them. I have the kind of imagination that hears. I think of it as radio imagination. I like radio a lot, better than I do television; and, really, I have to go back and try to imagine what characters might look like because when I began writing at age twelve, I couldn't. What I had to do was go back and sort of paint the characters in. What would I like them to look like? (Butler, Keating, and Mehaffy 2001, 45)

This approach to the construction of characters seems at first to remove in its entirety the visual representation of bodies from the events narrated. As a stylistic choice, it allows to fully immerse any reader in the story, either through a dominant first person narration or through a third person which is unmistakably close to the protagonists' mind. In this sense, Butler's choice to remove the detailed visual representation of most bodies from her stories does not appear to be a loss, but rather a winning strategy in order to make her works even more universal. No reader sees how Gan from *Bloodchild* truly looks like, but everybody is virtually able to be dragged into the story by his prominent narrating voice, to then get in his shoes and, by letting him speak in tune with the reader's thoughts, relive his experiences. There is no real, in depth description of him: is he white, or is he perhaps black? Maybe he is something else entirely. Is he a grown up, a mature young man by our modern standards or is he a child? If he is young, as it is stated from

the beginning, just how young? Butler does not provide any hint throughout the narration to help the reader better define and delineate Gan's features, and yet doing so becomes almost unnecessary as the reader is taken along the journey. What Gan looks like soon becomes secondary, almost an overthought, as his narration, his thoughts, feelings, and conflicted emotions overwhelm and possess the reader. And yet, it is not his voice but his bodily experience, what he sees being done to another's man body, and what is going to happen to his own body, that is the crucial, focal point of the story.

This pattern repeats itself throughout most of the short stories of the collection: the body reveals itself to be the central focus of the plot, the site of actions and changes, not just for the person but for society altogether. It is a catalyst for events, connections, and communications, while remaining at the same time undefined, never perfectly depicted or detailed, and only broadly sketched in its most prominent feature: its biological sex. As most of the works of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* contain female characters, it is also impossible to not touch upon the way in which Butler explored their gendered identity, their sexuality, their sexual encounters, and reproductive capabilities. Lastly, of seemingly crucial importance for the events narrated is the way in which those female bodies interact with the *other*, considered as male or alien, either a genderless entity or a sexed species capable of disrupting what is commonly considered the natural order. The analysis that follows revolves around these three main focal points: first, examining the way in which Butler chose to depict, hint at or to completely remove from the plot the depiction of the most variable and external characteristics of the female bodies, meaning race; second, examining the only seemingly immutable characteristic of these female bodies, meaning that of being female, women and girls, and how it is not only displayed but also challenged through maternity; third, how these bodies come in contact with the other, primarily the alien, and how they become a site for colonization or cohabitation.

3.2.1 The body and race: representation, colorblindness, and post-racial theories in Butler's work

Living in an age in which, now more than ever, representation matters, one might approach Butler's stories expecting to immerse themselves into the tales of African American characters. For better or for worse, it is virtually impossible to separate the

issue of race from the work of one the two main authors that are acclaimed to be the first known black science fiction writers. It might then become almost a bit of a shock realizing that there seems to be incredibly little direct reference to race throughout the works collected in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. In the places where references can be found, they are sporadic, only briefly mentioned in passing, almost like an overthought or a detail that she remembered to add on a later draft. On the other hand, those that looks like the clearest and most definitive allusions to race and racial conflict, such as the condition of the human-alien relationship in *Bloodchild* and its resemblance to slavery, are instead immediately refuted by Butler herself, who claimed to be describing something else entirely (Butler 2005, 30). It is worth discussing this approach by analyzing in greater detail how she depicted the racial qualities of the bodies of her characters.

As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, one of the arguments used to justify the apparent lack of interest and participation from the African American community towards the science fiction genre would be, at least on a surface level, the lack of diversity and racial representation in the portrayal of the genre (Rutledge 2006, 238). The overrepresentation of whiteness and the underrepresentation of blackness is one of the most distinctive features of the genre during its Golden Age, and this norm only started shifting once the New Wave and the political revolutions of the Sixties and Seventies began to spread. The disparity in representation was probably able to reinforce the feeling of double-consciousness of which W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Carrington 2016, 17), meaning:

> this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Edward and Du Bois 2007, 8)

In his *The Conservation of Races* speech before the American Negro Academy, Du Bois riled against the minimization of racial distinctions if that meant being in favor of a "broader human brotherhood" (Edward and Du Bois 2007, 179). He pushed, instead, for the development of the Negro, which he considered subject to the same natural laws as other races, so that it could contribute to humanity without losing its core racial identity and risking being absorbed by the white population and culture. The underlying idea of the speech is not an erasure of racial differences as a whole, but instead their celebration,

a strife towards a new form of humanity "which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development" (Du Bois 2007, 185).

Schools of thought about race have evolved through the decades, some much further than what Du Bois proposed and others circling back to it. Sociologists like Paul Gilroy, for example, have moved beyond Du Bois' vision of the color line and consequent double consciousness in favor of a "culture line" produced by a cultural contact zone, an imaginary field that encircles what he defined as the Black Atlantic. The Black Atlantic proposed by Gilroy is a single yet complex unit of analysis viewed through a transnational and intercultural perspective (Gilroy 1993, 15). This concept can be positioned against cultural nationalism and ethnic absolutism, and it favors instead hybridity and creolization (Braziel and Mannur 2003, 51). In a later book called *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Gilroy would dive deeper into the matter by condemning "raciology" as a whole. He would then propose two alternative approaches to it: strategic universalism and planetary humanism (Gilroy 2000, 355-56). Another figure that put race to question is philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah, who specifically addressed Du Bois' *The Conservation of Races*. From his perspective, the concept of race should not be constructed by metaphor and metonymy, by structural oppositions – such as white opposed to black –, because oppositions themselves can not function without empiric referents. Race, biologically, does not exist, and Appiah states that what people have constantly called "race" is, in fact, the "biologizing" of culture, an attempt at creating a metonym for the concept of culture itself (Appiah 2010, 35-6).

Why talk about race or describe race if race, ultimately, does not exist? These theories are intrinsically related to the expectation of racial representation in works of fiction, especially in a genre that aims at portraying the sorts of possible futures humankind could face and, by implication, humanity itself. Science fiction, and even more broadly speculative fiction as a whole, enables the author to reflect images of the human species back to the reader. The reflection that was being cast back at the reader for most of the Golden Age was that of a blanched humanity, one where minorities were seemingly diminished, sporadic, almost nonexistent. Literary scholar Sandra Govan pointed out that white science fiction authors seemed to be under the impression that racial tensions, discrimination, and racism would fade out in the future, at least once humanity had united against the alien "other", and that this was the reason why they did

not focus much on representing black or colored people (Rutledge 2006, 238-9).

Despite her self-proclaimed "radio imagination", Butler had a clear idea over this matter and in 1980 she published the essay *The Lost Races of Science Fiction*. She began it by addressing several examples of the dismissal of racial representation she had heard throughout her career: first, the elderly teacher of her creative writing class who advised a student to not use black characters in his stories unless their blackness was essential to the plot; then a fellow science fiction writer who, during a convention, admitted to refusing to use black characters because their presence would change the story; this same writer later on also explain that, in order to not dwell on matter of race in their stories, they would substitute black characters with aliens. Both instances seem far removed from the egalitarian colorblindness of white science fiction authors to which Sandra Govan alluded. For Butler, this stereotyping was indicative of white writers not seeing black people as people, but as "problems":

> No writer who regards blacks as people would get sidetracked into justifying their blackness or their presence unless such justification honestly played a part in the story. It is no more necessary to focus on a character's blackness than it is to focus on a woman's femininity. (Butler 2016)

In another 1980 interview with Rosalie G. Harrison, Butler expanded upon this subject: she expressed that it seemed like the norm in science fiction was being white and that being black would intrinsically introduce an abnormality in the story, at least according to the mainstream. She also noted a peculiar event that occurred, which is quite telling about the way she viewed race representation:

> I've agreed to do an anthology with another writer. It's supposed to be an anthology about and by black people. He sent me six stories that he thought would possibly be worth including. But... they were not stories about black people. Except for one, they were all stories about racism. I wrote back to him about something I feel very strongly: racism is only one facet or aspect of black existence. A lot of white writers (and some black writers) see it as the totality of black existence. What I want to do is pull in some good black writers who will write about black people and not just about how terrible it is to be hated. (Francis 2010, 6)

These words should be kept in mind when reading *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, especially when looking for visual descriptions of racialized characters. This, along her "radio imagined" style of narration, is the way in which Butler decided to tackle racial representation in her stories: not through colorblindness, but a conscious desire to de-emphasize color as an intrinsic carrier of "problems".

3.2.2 The body and race: an analysis of the short stories

One of the first things one might notice when reading through *Bloodchild and Other Stories* is the almost invisible color palette with which Butler decided to paint her characters' skin. Visually speaking, most of them appear to be perfectly "radio imagined", incorporeal, shapeless, and colorless. Butler's focus, at least at first glance, seems to be placed anywhere but on the ethnicities of her characters. Subtle changes, though, can be perceived in the way she chose to depict their ethnicity when the reader approaches the collection in chronological order.

In *Crossover*, the female character Jane has no known or recognizable features. For most of the story she is both faceless and nameless. The only physical feature ever mentioned is one that does not belong to her: it is the scar that her boyfriend had on his face, main recognizable trait that keeps her on edge when she leaves work or the house, as it signals the beginning of a new hallucination. Despite Jane having no face or distinct feature, her lived experience is deeply rooted in her body and sensations: she is introduced from the beginning of the story as a welder, doing heavy and excruciatingly tiresome manual labor, and she experiences an excruciating headache, the catalyst of her following actions and, at the same time, their excuse: "It was her headache that drove her to make the shorter trip to the liquor store instead of going to the grocery store. *It was her headache*" (Butler 2005, 113). No reader can figure out if she is indeed a woman of color. Everything is left to the imagination, as if she were following the advice of her creative writing teacher and leaving race out of the picture, as a futile detail (Butler 2016).

Of a similar approach is *Near of Kin*, the second short story published in the seventies. Unlike the protagonist of *Crossover*, the narrative voice in this instance does not have a first name. She remains anonymous, faceless, and perfectly undefined in any bodily feature for the entirety of the narrative. This story, actually, has a brief description of the physical characteristics of a character, but it is the narrator's description of her uncle and actual biological father:

> He was fifty-seven now, slender, fine boned, still handsome. Everyone in my mother's family was that way—small, almost fragile looking. It made the women attractive. I thought it made the men attractive too, but I knew it had caused my male cousins to spend too much of their time fighting and showing o, trying to prove they were men. It had made them touchy and defensive. (Butler 2005, 76)

The clearest feature that the narrator's father has is his "slenderness" and "fine

boned" structure, that makes him look handsome but in a feminine way. A few lines later, this feminine and gentle presence is reinforced by the way in which the narrator decides to describe her uncle as "moving with that smooth, quick grace" (Butler 2005, 77). The scene follows with a close up of a photograph, probably one of the cheapest and easiest shortcuts that a writer could use in order to linger on the physical features of a character, and that Butler decides instead to tackle in the following manner:

> He came back with a picture from my mother's dresser—an enlargement of a snapshot he had taken of my mother, grandmother, and me at Knott's Berry Farm when I was about twelve. Somehow, he had gotten us together and taken us all out for a treat. The picture was the only one I knew of that contained the three of us. (Butler 2005, 77)

Once again, not only there is no indirect hint at the color of the skin of any character shown in the scene or in the picture, but also the protagonist and narrator does not seem to focus on it nor perceive it in any way. Though it limits the visual representation of their bodies, it makes these characters even more human: they do not perceive themselves as racialized; they just are, without need to focus on anything that would make them "other" compared to the norm (Francis 2010, 6). A few moments later, another character – this time the aunt – addresses the same picture in the following manner:

> "What do you have there? A picture. Isn't that nice. Barbara was so pretty then. She was always a beauty. So natural at the funeral …" (Butler 2005, 78)

Barbara, the narrator's departed mother, is only identified as beautiful and natural looking, but no further hint is provided to actually describe in detail the sort of beauty she possessed. In the mind of a reader, this "she was always a beauty" is left open to any sort of interpretation, able to fit any particular beauty canon or standard one might have. These are the only two physical descriptions provided in the story: that of the mother having been a natural beauty in life and of a father looking handsome despite his age, but in a soft, slender and feminine way that is genetically characteristic of every other male of the family. The broad strokes with which these two end up being portrayed are then able to almost compensate for the lack of visual description of the main character:

> "You're not devious," I told him. "You look as though you could be. You look secretive and controlled."
> "I can't help the way I look."
> "People tell me I look that way, too."
> "No, you look like your mother."
> "I think not. I think I look like my father." (Butler 2005, 80)

It is her uncle' softer and feminine look that gave away the secret hidden deep within this family:

> "I guess the easiest one to explain is the way we look, you and I. You should compare one of Grandmother's pictures of you as a young man with my face now—we could be twins. My mother was beautiful; her husband, from his pictures, was a big, handsome man—me … I just look like you." (Butler 2005, 81)

Eventually, the reader can roughly imagine what the narrator might look like by taking into consideration that she considered herself as her uncle's "twin". Not only does she implicitly describes her own broad features by alluding to look just like him, but in the same statement she also pins the two men's features against one another, almost as polar opposites: her mother's husband, who is handsome looking in a canonical and manly way, and her own biological father, who is instead feminine and graceful, not only in his physique but also in his movements and character. In a way, the suppression of the masculine qualities of her uncle almost transforms him into an hermaphrodite figure, one that embodies at the same time the father that he could never openly be and the mother that had refused to bond with her daughter for the entirety of her life. He is not simply a manly father figure stepping in to take care of his own daughter, but also this accepting, soft, and warm motherly figure that the narrator had dearly missed.

It is quite remarkable that, for a story that places the body and genetical features in plain view, Butler actually never provides detailed descriptions of their features. She makes several characters state just how beautiful they are, but refuses to go deeper into this proclaimed type of beauty. It can be defined, therefore, as a universal standard of beauty, devoid of any racial feature: not ethnic, just human. It is also worth noting that the two short stories just taken into considerations are the ones with the least amount of physical description of the collection.

Things change not drastically but rather subtly with *Speech Sounds*, the first short story of the eighties and also first to be published in the prestigious *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. Just like every other story of the collection, the reader meets the main character in *media res*, without introductions or allusions to features that might generally paint her appearance. The external point of view already encountered in *Crossover* puts even more distance in between the protagonist, Rye, and the reader, who is guided to look at the scene from afar, external to the events. What gives away just how prominent Rye's point of view is, though, is the fact that despite the third person narration, Rye recounts

the events almost as if she is, indeed, the suppressed first person narrator that this apocalyptic diseases prevented her to be. She does not need to describe herself or her physical appearance; she just *is*, acts and notices mainly what is external to her, in the surrounding environment. This appears even clearer when the reader encounters the first physical description of the story, which belongs to the secondary character Obsidian. From the moment he enters the scene, he is described as if it is Rye herself noticing him and taking in his features with one brief glance in his direction:

> The driver got out—a big man, young, neatly bearded with dark, thick hair. (Butler 2005, 91)

From this moment, even if with so little words, he becomes the character with the longest physical description in the whole story. He does not have a name yet, but the allusion to his physical features is somewhat hinted through the description of his beard and hair type, which could fit a racially charged image. For the paragraphs that follow, almost going in the opposite direction of the feminine male figure in *Near of Kin*, his character is portrayed in his most distinctively manly features: he has become "the bearded man", standing tall, firm in the face of danger, and armed. He is not just portrayed as manly, he is also physically threatening to Rye at first, as the danger of sexual assault is clearly taken into consideration. His sexual appeal rises throughout the narration, though, as he goes from being a threat to acting as a travelling companion, and Rye does not shy away from making love to him:

> It was too bad, though. Obsidian could not know how attractive he was to her—young, probably younger than she was, clean, asking for what he wanted rather than demanding it. (Butler 2005, 100)

"Obsidian" is the name that Rye decides to attach to him once they set on their journey together, and though the name is referred to his pendant, it also expresses much of his character, both in his external features and in his behavior, which had been smoothened and strengthened by hardships:

> The pendant attached to it was a smooth, glassy, black rock. Obsidian. His name might be Rock or Peter or Black, but she decided to think of him as Obsidian. (Butler 2005, 97)

The only reference that could be drawn to his ethnicity is the stone pendant that made Rye baptize this man as "Obsidian". Functioning as a name symbol, the reader can assume – though not one real description of his skin color is provided throughout the story

– that he is indeed a young black man. Of Rye's features, on the other hand, there is no reference or hint. All that can be assumed of her is that she is older than Obsidian, a grown woman who once had a family and children, but her physical appearance remains blank canvas in the reader's mind.

Bloodchild follows in the same steps, and it goes even further in removing stark references to ethnicity. There are only two races described in the story: the Terrans, viewed in this sort of colorblind, "radio imagined", universal representation of what humans could be like or look like hundred of thousands of years into the future, and the insect-like alien race, the Tlic. The first person point of view is therefore not interested in the slightest in focusing on intraspecies physical differences, nor does it give space to that sort of speculation in any passage of the story. It is entirely focused on pinning what is human against what is radically other than human, an alien life form. Despite this, Gan's body is clearly at the center of the narration. He opens the story by implying that the events described are going to forever alter his status and make him an "adult". If there is no statement to be found that could give away his actual, biological age, one could easily imply that it is the act of mating with his alien partner and the beginning of his alien pregnancy that transform him into an adult, as a sort of rite of passage. His body is also at the center of T'Gatoi's attention from the beginning for its fat composition, signaling that he is ready to carry her eggs and potentially feed the grubs once they hatch:

> "You're better," she said this time, probing me with six or seven of her limbs. "You're gaining weight finally. Thinness is dangerous." The probing changed subtly, became a series of caresses. (Butler 2005, 4)

Gan's viewpoint is the lenses through which the reader experiences the story, and for the majority of the time he is perfectly blind towards the color of his own skin or that of his family. Yet, there is one – and one only – instance in which he lingers upon this feature. It happens during the emergency c-section that T'Gatoi has to operate on Lomas:

> T'Gatoi glanced at me, then placed a claw against his abdomen slightly to the right of the middle, just below the left rib. There was movement on the right side—tiny, seemingly random pulsations moving his brown flesh, creating a concavity here, a convexity there, over and over until I could see the rhythm of it and knew where the next pulse would be. (Butler 2005, 14)

Gan could have easily removed "brown" from his own thought process and perception, as he had already done until that moment for any other human, but in this instance he chooses to colorize the body of this man. What follows is the gruesome and

raw depiction of an alien cutting and digging through the Lomas' stomach. Gan describes the act in detail despite being horrified by it, and admits to feeling as if he was "helping her torture him" (Butler 2005, 15). In this manner, by putting Lomas' body and what it is being done to it in the spotlight, Butler manages to concentrate in one scene and in one body a reference to blackness, torture, and exploitation. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a reader might get the impression that *Bloodchild* is indeed a story about slavery, and not of a coming-of-age or love story as she would describe it (Butler 2005, 30).

The Evening and the Morning and the Night opens up a different chapter in the way Butler chose to portray race. By following step-by-step the same strategy already used in *Speech Sounds*, the first character to be portrayed in a physical manner other than remaining just a name on paper is the love interest of the protagonist, in this instance a man by the name of Alan Chi. The narrative voice is once again completely uninterested in describing what she looks like, nor does she pay any attention to the way in which people around her look. In Lynn's male counterpart, however, Butler found a way to insert further details:

> His name was Alan Chi. I thought Chi was a Chinese name, and I wondered. But he told me his father was Nigerian and that in Ibo the word meant a kind of guardian angel or personal God. He said his own personal God hadn't been looking out for him very well to let him be born to two DGD parents. Him too. (Butler 2005, 40)

This passage provides for the first time not only an implicit assumption of Alan's appearance, but also part of his cultural background. Portraying him as at least half-Nigerian allows Butler to insert further descriptions of the man. She begins shaping him, coloring between the lines, and making him assume depth and substance:

> He extended a dark, square hand, and I took it and moved closer to him. He was a dark, square man—my height, half again my weight, and none of it fat. He was so bitter sometimes, he scared me. (Butler 2005, 41)

By describing his appearance and comparing herself to him, the narrator also paints out some of her physical features, which would otherwise remain unknown to the reader. Lynn remains another first person narrator that does not provide any real insight into her physicality. She is not focused inward, on herself, but on the people around her. Just like all the other main characters that came before her, she narrates her experiences without portraying herself experiencing them. As a matter of fact, she is so detached from any form of physical self awareness that she does not even provide her first name throughout

the entirety of the story: it has to be Alan the one who names her for the first time, during their visit at the Dilg facility. As a character, Lynn needs others in order to be portrayed or described, otherwise she remains a voice without a body. The last missing tassel is Beatrice, the old DGD nurse who, much like Lynn, has genetically mutated into something more than simply human. By learning towards the end of the story that these two women are biologically similar, the reader can ultimately grasp what Lynn actually is: she is Alan's height, double his weight, and at the same time Beatrice's future and old double, so much so that the two of them cannot share the same space:

> I couldn't look back at her. Until we were well away from the house, until we'd left the guard at the gate and gone off the property, I couldn't make myself look back. For long, irrational minutes, I was convinced that somehow if I turned, I would see myself standing there, gray and old, growing small in the distance, vanishing. (Butler 2005, 68)

With *Amnesty*, the first of the two additions that arrived in 2003 on SCIFI.com, Butler brings the body of her characters, in its entirety, much more at the center of her work. In this story, the protagonist in not only a medium through which the reader can witness and experience the unfolding of the events, but especially a new tool of interspecies communication. The removal of the first person narrator in favor of a third person point of view is what enables Butler to describe in much greater detail Noah's body. Since all of her characters until now have shown a degree of perfectly natural unawareness about themselves and their appearance, this stylistic choice seems the best in order to put not the outside events but Noah's physique at the center of the narrative.

Noah, much like every other protagonist before her, is introduced by means of this so called "radio imagination" (Butler, Keating, and Mehaffy 2001, 50). She appears from the beginning, yet she does so only through her name. For the entirety of the first scene, though her body is fully immersed in this peculiar alien-human form of communication, every single detailed bodily description goes to the Community, this twig-like alien species, and not her. Butler's eyes and those of the readers are focused on the "otherness" of this life form, not on what is common and familiar. One thing differentiates her from the other main characters, though. Noah is actually introduced to the reader with one small detail which had not been provided to anyone else before: her clothing.

> Obediently, she went to it, stood close to it so that the tips of what looked like moss-covered outer twigs and branches touched her bare skin. She wore only shorts and a halter top. The Communities would have preferred her to be naked, and for the long years of her captivity,

> she had had no choice. She had been naked. Now she was no longer a captive, and she insisted on wearing at least the basics. (Butler 2005, 151)

This detail, even if seemingly insignificant, is not provided by Butler at random. Since all of her characters never focus inwards, towards their own physicality, if they have no real or impending need to do so, the choice to add this description shows that the issue of nudity is something that is much active and relevant in Noah's mind. This is reinforced by another following passage, describing her sitting in front of her new human recruits:

> She herself was enjoying the rare comfort of wearing shoes, long black cotton pants, and a colorful flowing tunic. (Butler 2005, 157)

Once again, what wraps around the body is given priority over the actual description of the body itself, signaling to the reader that Noah has a much firmer grasp on her own physicality compared to every other character that came before her.

The apparent "bodilessness" (Butler, Keating, and Mehaffy 2001, 50) is applied to most of the six recruits that Noah has to prepare for the Communities. Unlike the highly detailed descriptions that she gave of the alien species in question, Noah does not visually perceive nor describes her fellow humans; or rather, the majority of them. Michelle Ota and Sorrel Trent, first to be introduced, are depicted not by any external features but by their attitudes: Michelle is shown to be one of the only two people who was not afraid of Noah, while Sorrel is immediately labeled as the one interested in alien spirituality. Both features have nothing to do with their bodies. Things change slightly as more of them interject the conversation, though. Rune Johnsen, soon after speaking up, appears again through the unusual visual clue of his "blond head" (Butler 2005, 157). So does Thera Collier, which is introduced right away as a "big, angry, red-haired young woman" (Butler 2005, 158), almost as if there is a ramping up of clarity in Noah's vision. The most unusual description is given to Piedad Ruiz, the first clear and stark exception to this group of humans. Not only is she introduced differently, with the pace of the narrative having to slow down for a moment as Noah searches in her mind for the woman's name, but she is also racialized as a Latina, and identified as a sort of "foreigner" among the others and described with greater details:

> Piedad Ruiz—a small, brown woman who spoke English clearly, but with a strong Spanish accent. She looked with her bruised face and arms as though she had taken a fairly serious beating recently, but when Noah had asked her about it before the group came into the

> meeting room, she held her head up and said she was fine and it was nothing. (Butler 2005, 158)

This makes the woman immediately stand out among all of them. Shortly after this passage, the last one among the six recruits is introduced with the same amount of detail:

> "So they kidnapped you, and now you work for them?" This was James Hunter Adio, a tall, lean, angry-looking young black man. (Butler 2005, 159)

In this section of the story, it suddenly appears clear that the only two characters that seem to evade Butler's "radio imagination" are racialized, painted in much greater detail, not only in their body structure but also in the color of their skin and their nationality. This is quite peculiar, especially considering that it is only after this exact phrase, by revealing the presence of a black person in the room, that Butler allows Noah to bring to light her own identity:

> Noah was black herself and yet James Adio had apparently decided the moment they met that he didn't like her. Now he looked not only angry, but disgusted. (Butler 2005, 159)

Following in the footsteps of all the other characters that came before her in the collection, Noah becomes self aware of her identity as a black woman through the interaction with another human, whose body can be used to either contrast, compare, or reflect her own. It is only when she sees another man and decides to focus on his features that she lets the reader perceive her owns. The peculiarity of this passage does not end there, though: the "and yet" she mentally utters to herself implied that Noah expected an implicit feeling of racial solidarity from James Adio. If until that moment the narrative had pictured humanity as one big homogeneous, raceless, and transethnically bonded category, almost as a concrete example of "planetary humanism" that would fit a post-racial global society (Gilroy 2000, 355), the slow yet rampant release of visual clues around Noah begins to fragment it once again into subgroups. The reader is therefore no longer thinking only about humans against aliens, but also about human against humans, ethnicities against ethnicities, and Americans against the infamous "other-than-American" embodied in the Spanish woman Piedad Ruiz. The illusion of the future human species as one entity is broken and racial solidarity no longer exists.

The last piece of the collection, *The Book of Martha*, is the story the departs the most from Butler's preferred approach to character presentation and in which issues of race shine the brightest. It differentiates from the rest not only for its content, but

especially for bringing race to the forefront in a way that no other short story did before. This becomes evident the moment the reader is introduced to Martha, the main protagonist, a few lines away from the incipit:

> Martha Bes looked around at the endless grayness that was, along with God, all that she could see. In fear and confusion, she covered her broad black face with her hands. "If only I could wake up," she whispered. (Butler 2005, 189)

Martha differentiates from all the characters and narrative voices that came before her because, from the moment she appears, she does not function as a nameless first person point of view, a camera capturing the scene, or a blank canvas with a name tag: she is immediately painted with features – a facial structure, in this instance – and colors: she is black, and she does not need the same interpersonal relation with another human in order to focus on her own physique and communicate it to the reader. Pondering whether she is dead or alive, she also provides her own age from the very start. Race does not play a role only in the protagonist, but especially in the entity that she recognizes as "God": throughout the story, the reader can see it change shape and color three times. The first time Martha lays her eyes on God, she sees the canonical western white old man:

> "Why," she dared to ask, "do you look like a twice-live-sized, bearded white man?" In fact, seated as he was on his huge thronelike chair, he looked, she thought, like a living version of Michelangelo's Moses, a sculpture that she remembered seeing pictured in her college art-history textbook about twenty years before. Except that God was more fully dressed than Michelangelo's Moses, wearing, from neck to ankles, the kind of long, white robe that she had so often seen in paintings of Christ. (Butler 2005, 190-91)

Interestingly, though, this vision replies to her in a telling manner:

> "You see what your life has prepared you to see," God said.
> "I want to see what's really here!"
> "Do you? What you see is up to you, Martha. Everything is up to you." (Butler 2005, 191)

First, God implies that the reason why she is visualizing an old white man, a "giant of a throne" (Butler 2005, 191), has to do with the fact that she has been prompted by her own western Christian culture to perceive God that way; second, she is also told that, in reality, the shape in which God is going to appear has to do only with her own imagination, and not because of any sort of objective observation. In doing so, Butler removes corporality and authenticity from this entity, but she also makes the entity totally dependent on Martha's evolving perceptions, which gradually move from a superimposed patriarchal vision to a much more personal reflection of herself, of matriarchal nature.

The first physical change of God is only one step removed from the iconic western representation, and it has to do with its race:

> She looked upward for several seconds, then looked at God and saw, somehow, without surprise, that he was black now, and cleanshaven. He was a tall, stocky black man wearing ordinary, modern clothing—a dark sweater over a white shirt and dark pants. He didn't tower over her, but he was taller than the human-sized version of the white God had been. He didn't look anything like the white Moses-God, and yet he was the same person. She never doubted that. (Butler 2005, 208)

The transformation is complete only after the second change:

> As they ate, Martha remembered the sparkling apple cider that she kept in the refrigerator for company. She went to get it, and when she got back to the living room, she saw that God had, in fact, become a woman. (Butler 2005, 209)

What is interesting about God's physical and racial change is the self awareness that it gives Martha. She admits that she thought she had already broken free from the "mental cage" (Butler 2005, 209) that life had built around her and her own perceptions, and yet the way in which she had envisioned God at first proves that cultural prejudices had imprinted on a subconscious level, regardless of whether she had accepted them or not. As a black American woman, though perfectly aware of her own identity and the social prejudices attached to it, Martha's thought pattern reveals that whiteness had always been the norm, the expected canon, while blackness was the abnormality and exception, an unexpected deviation (Francis 2010, 6).

Race plays a role not only in Martha's mental perception of God, but especially in the moment when she has to ponder what it means for her, once her mission is completed, to return back into society as the "the lowliest" of humans (Butler 2005, 193). Martha does not live in a distant future, on another planet, or in a world that has evolved as something far removed from what the reader knows. She lives in a seemingly carbon copy of modern-day America, which is why she admits to have already lived as the lowliest:

> I was born poor, black, and female to a fourteen-year-old mother who could barely read. We were homeless half the time while I was growing up. Is that bottom-level enough for you? I was born on the bottom, but I didn't stay there. I didn't leave my mother there, either. And I'm not going back there! (Butler 2005, 193-94)

The aggravating factors that made Martha live at the bottom of the American society were, in specific order: her economic status, her race, and her gender, all of which were a reflection of her mother's age, race, and cultural level. What is crucial about this passage is the way in which, for the first time in the entire collection, Butler does not shy away

from tackling what it means to be poor, black and female in her own country. Each of her features represent impediments towards a successful and prosperous life. In this instance, it is interesting to note that the worst thing that Martha experienced when she was the "lowliest" was not first and foremost being black and female, but being poor and homeless. In the hyper-competitive capitalistic society that is the 21st century America, race can be an element in pushing one down the societal ladder, but the bottom of society, as it is portrayed by Martha herself, belongs to those who posses little to nothing, regardless of the color of their skin or gender. The economic status functions as a point of contact in between different ethnicities, something that unites rather than divide, and it allows the reader to access an intersectional point of view on the matter. In replying to God, Martha states that she has already left the bottom level of society after being born in it, and that she has taken her mother along with her, but neither her nor her mother have evolved away from being black and female: they have simply reached higher economic brackets through Martha's successful career as a writer. In this sense, by openly addressing the issue of race and gender through this character, Butler seem to imply that they were aggravating but minor factors at play in the America of her time compared to income, which acted instead as the much greater and common enemy of all. It is crucial, though, to not erase her gender and ethnicity through these lenses of analysis: as Martha herself stated, she was born among the lowliest not simply for being poor and homeless, but also because she was born black an female. She does not only perceive class, but also race and gender. She represents, therefore, the "intracategorical complexity" of intersectionality (McCall 2005, 5), as her complex identity allows her to stand at a point of contact between traditionally constructed groups: the poor, the blacks and the females.

To conclude this section, if one were to consider the stories of the collection in chronological order, they would note that there seems to be a slight difference in the way Butler addresses race in these two editions. The first five short stories belonging to the 1995 edition range from not addressing the characters' racial features in the slightest, to hinting at it through metaphors (e.g. Obsidian in *Speech Sounds*), to revealing it in passing, but without placing any apparent weight on it. Inside them, race feels almost like an afterthought, a detail that *can* but does not necessarily need to be mentioned, as it is almost not perceived at all by the characters. When it is perceived, it serves mostly as a tool for self recognition of their own body, in order to give depth, shape and color to

otherwise blank canvas. The last two stories, added with the 2005 edition, seem to also place little emphasis on the issue too. However, in the few instances in which race is brought forth by the characters, the topic is more politically aware and slightly charged, and this is expressed either by accentuating elements which are racially and linguistically foreign to a community (e.g. Piedad Ruiz in *Amnesty*), by alluding to concepts such as racial solidarity (e.g. James Hunter Adio, *Amnesty*), or by recognizing blackness as a downgrade for an American citizen, an abnormality as she herself pointed out (Francis 2010, 6), as an aggravating factor towards lowering one's living standard (e.g. Martha's past in *The Book of Martha*). During an interview from 1988, years after her first five short stories had been individually published, she would state the following about writing and investigating aspects of the black experience:

> When I put together my characters, it doesn't occur to me to make them all black or all white or whatever. I never went to a segregated school or lived in a segregated neighborhood, so 1 never had the notion that black people, or any other ethnic or cultural type, made up the world. When I write, I'm very comfortable not seeing things in terms of black or white. If I feel self-conscious about something, 1 don't write about it; *I write it out*—that is, I write about it and think about it until it is so familiar that it becomes second nature— not like some of the early SF writers who include a black character to make a point about racism, or the absence of racism. I want to get to the point where these things can be in the story but are incidental to it. (Francis 2010, 13)

Overall, her approach towards the representation of race leads the reader in the direction of a post-racial Butler. Her attitude can explain both her "radio imagined" style of character portrayal and her intent of de-objectifying and de-problematizing black people's existence. Though akin to colorblindness, this choice was not in fact a manifestation of complete blindness towards race, nor a total dismissal of racial issues. It was, instead, a need to write simply about "people" and not, as she would put it, about "unbelievable, self-consciously manipulated puppets, pieces of furniture who exist within a story but contribute nothing to it, or stereotypes guaranteed to be offensive" (Butler 2018).

3.3.1 The body and sex: female cyborgs and monstrous motherhoods

A common denominator shared by almost all protagonists of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* is their sex. The only one male protagonist, Gan from *Bloodchild*, despite being the official representative of the opposite sex, ends up living through the most "strictly female" experience that exists: pregnancy. The female body seems to be central to the

collection, and yet for reasons that widely diverge from the celebratory norm; they are mainly two: the female experience as fluid, not bound by biological sex, and motherhood being a horrifying, dangerous experience.

In 1991 Donna Haraway, author of the renowned essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, would ascribe Octavia Butler alongside several other authors as a "theorist for cyborgs", a story-teller who explored what it meant to be embodied in high-tech worlds and who played around with the myths of identity and boundaries (Haraway 1991, 173). Haraway defined the "cyborg" as:

> (…) a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed 'women's experience', as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. (Haraway 1991, 149)

The cyborg stood for dualism, and not for dichotomies; for the blurring and transgression of boundaries and categories, not their reinforcement. Haraway's manifesto and concepts aim at pushing back against that form of feminism centered around identity politics, all seemingly "contradictory, partial, and strategic" (Haraway 1991, 155). Central to her ideas is Chela Sandoval's "oppositional consciousness", stemming from the breakdown of the term and concept "women of color", a refusal of identity categories and instead an acceptance of fluidity in between them, ultimately translated not in identification but in affinity and political kinship (Haraway 1991, 156). Sex and sexual reproduction, according to Haraway's manifesto, are just one reproductive strategy among many. Hence, sex roles are no longer intrinsically attached to a biological reality. They become obsolete, fluid, by falling outside of the realm of duality and biology.

The female body and its reproductive capabilities are not portrayed by Butler in a celebratory or positive manner, but rather as potential trouble sources, causes for deep anxiety. In her essay *Madri, Mostri, Macchine*, Rosi Braidotti analyzed how female bodies are usually portrayed in science fiction media as sites for the representation of horror, catastrophes, and monsters. She made note of several recurring themes across science fiction movies and novels, which are: artificial life produced by science, like the case of Frankenstein; alien insemination of the female body; sexual encounters between

women and machines, related to high-tech births; cloning; and lastly male pregnancies (Braidotti 2021, 48-50). On top of deconstructing the dichotomy male/female much like Haraway suggested, hence making the male and female experience more fluid and uncertain, Braidotti also explains what keeps science fiction so tightly related to horror and the gothic: horror thrives because science fiction is able to eliminate the walls in between species, between humans and the "other". The corrosion and ultimate destruction of such boundaries creates chaos, and by consequence panic. Identity and biology become blurred concepts, always tainted, threatened by the encounter with the other-than-human and their own resultant corruption (Braidotti 2021, 47).

Throughout the collection, Butler constantly forces the female body to encounter this type of monstrous or terrifying experiences. Either through gruesome alien pregnancies, the threat of propagation of horrific genetic diseases, the blurring of moral lines, the death of children or the death of parents, rape, incest, and forced controlled birth, the female body is constantly put in center stage as site for the deconstruction of categories and for the enactment of the gothic.

3.3.2 The body and sex: an analysis of the short stories

A first example of what Haraway meant by describing her as a "theorist for cyborgs" is Butler's desire to dismantle the moral dichotomy between right and wrong in a sexual encounter. Such is the theme in *Near of Kin*, the short story where Butler presents to the reader what the social norm would consider a monstrosity: the product of incest. She does so in a sympathetic rather than condemning way, by depicting a character who has long ago come to accept this reality and whose only desire is to be loved and accepted by her father. The underlying issue of the story seems not to be incest, as a matter of fact, but the fact that the narrator has been abandoned by her mother. Over and over, as she goes through her mother's belongings after the funeral, she keeps on underlying just how much she had never been present in her life, and the supposed reason why:

> I think she liked having had a child—I don't know, to prove her womanliness or something, and to see what she could produce. But once she had me, she didn't want to waste her time raising me."
> "She had had four miscarriages before you, you know." (Butler 2005, 75)

It is confirmed by her uncle that he and her mother got close when she had come to

him for comfort after her divorce; a divorce that happened because she was unable to carry a pregnancy to term with her then husband, who had left her for a woman that did not have such a painful issue. She was conceived that way, in the heat of the moment, only to be then abandoned and raised by her grandmother. There is no joy to be found in motherhood, in this story. The recurring losses and miscarriages had driven her mother to act on an impulse, out of desperation and egoism. The result is a product of sin, something so hideous that she could not face the consequences of her actions for the rest of her life:

> "She was always afraid you would find out," he said. "That was why she couldn't bring herself to keep you with her."
> "She was ashamed of me."
> "She was ashamed of herself." (Butler 2005, 83)

Though her birth would normally be established as a form of deviation, Butler blurs the moral lines and forces the reader to revaluate just how monstrous the protagonist truly is. Not only it is repeatedly stated that she was born from an act of real love and affection, but she is also redeemed almost entirely by the Biblical citations presented in the Afterword (Butler 2005, 85). By comparing her narrating voice to the biblical patriarchs, which were born out of incest too and, sometimes, enacting God's will, Butler shifts the focus of horror and deviation away from the protagonist to project it onto her mother and her actions. The real "moral wrong" presented by the story, if anything, dwells in the consequences of her mother's acts: first, a conception that is depicted as egoistic, self-serving, done mainly to establish self worth regardless of the consequences; second, a refusal to deal with the consequences of such act.

A character that is constantly facing the spectre of the consequences of her parents' actions is Lynn, from *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*. In her short story, she too is seemingly described as a monstrous offspring. She is not at fault for being born, but she constantly deals with the fact that she is the product of two genetically ill-fated individuals who decided to have children against their better judgment, by following their own religious beliefs:

> Two DGD parents—both religious, both as opposed to abortion as they were to suicide. So they had trusted God and the promises of modern medicine and had a child. But how could I look at what had happened to them and trust anything? (Butler 2005, 37)

Lynn's birth is once again a product of egoism, but also in this instance of blind belief that obscures scientific knowledge and common sense. Despite coming into the

world as the result of a free choice, she is given no choice of her own but to face a grim, dark future, one that should inevitably end with a gruesome, painful, horrific death. For most of the story, this knowledge will force her to ponder whether she, her parents or any other DGD should be allowed to have the option to reproduce or not. Ultimately, she expresses her feelings about the matter to her fiancé Alan in the following manner:

> "I don't want kids, but I don't want someone else telling me I can't have any."
> He stared at me until I began to feel stupid and defensive. I moved away from him.
> "Do you want someone else telling you what to do with your body?" I asked.
> "No need," he said. "I had that taken care of as soon as I was old enough." (Butler 2005, 42)

Both Alan and Lynn share the same disease and the same presupposed future, but despite their common feelings about the matter they come to different conclusions: Alan shows to have much more resolve, so much so that he not only believes all DGDs should be sterilized, he also follows his own advice and does it on himself. Lynn, on the other hand, despite wallowing a lot on the topic and agreeing with Alan, comes to the conclusion that she does not want her bodily autonomy to be impeded or controlled. In a sort of way, Alan becomes the speaking voice of a patriarchal system that, even if in this instance it is presented as the voice of reason, aims to control women's bodies and their reproductive systems. Lynn, despite going against what seems to be perfectly "reasonable", even ethical, realizes that despite the odds she does not want anyone to control her body, her potential reproduction, and future. In a quite ironical twist, the story would end with their roles switching: Lynn discovers that she is something more that just any other DGD and that she possesses the power to not only control others but also save them from themselves, while Alan, who had been previously so in favor of controlling everyone's bodies to the point of considering mass sterilization, refuses to accept this reality, to be under Lynn's power and influence, even if that would be good for him. Reproduction in this story is a danger to humanity, as it facilitates the spread of an uncurable disease, its horrible, monstrous consequences, and a new variation of the human species itself.

The issue of reproduction as dangerous and potentially evil, and not as the ultimate good or an uncontestable net positive for humanity returns in *The Book of Martha*. The story presents glints of the ideas that Butler already touched upon in *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*: mainly, the issue of the freedom of choice regarding reproduction and external impositions aiming at restricting it. This time, though, Butler's character

does not limit her authoritarian ideas to a focused group of people, deemed worthy of this treatment due to the necessity of eradicating a deadly genetical disease, easily erasable through birth control. Martha extends the same logic towards the whole human race.

> "You believe the population problem is the worst one, then?" God asked.
> "I think so," she said. "Too many people. If we solve that one, we'll have more time to solve other problems. And we can't solve it on our own. We all know about it, but some of us won't admit it. And nobody wants some big government authority telling them how many kids to have." She glanced at God and saw that he seemed to be listening politely. She wondered how far he would let her go. What might offend him. What might he do to her if he were offended? "So everyone's reproductive system shuts down after two kids," she said. "I mean, they get to live as long as before, and they aren't sick. They just can't have kids any more." (Butler 2005, 197-8)

Since God assigned Martha the task to "fix" humanity on their behalf, every idea she comes up with, including birth prevention, is taken into consideration as positive, an action whose downsides are minuscule in comparison to the much greater good, which is not simply fixing her own species in order to help it survive its adolescence, but especially saving it from what God would do in case nothing changed and Martha herself were to fail: the great reset, much like what already happened to the biblical patriarch Noah. Despite being viewed as positive, the issue of limiting free will with regards to reproduction is brought up by God in order to make her aware of the consequences of such action:

> God shook his head. "Free will coupled with morality has been an interesting experiment. Free will is, among other things, the freedom to make mistakes. One group of mistakes will sometimes cancel another. That's saved any number of human groups, although it isn't dependable. Sometimes mistakes cause people to be wiped out, enslaved, or driven from their homes because they've so damaged or altered their land or their water or their climate. Free will isn't a guarantee of anything, but it's a potentially useful tool—too useful to erase casually." (Butler 2005, 199)

As a black woman, Martha immediately takes offence to God's words, to the point of pondering whether she is in reality speaking to Satan:

> "I thought you wanted me to put a stop to war and slavery and environmental destruction!" Martha snapped, remembering the history of her own people. How could God be so casual about such things? (Butler 2005, 199)

Martha views uncontrolled, potentially unlimited birth and reproduction of her species as the issue that is making things worse. Motherhood, in this instance, is not simply a channel for the propagation of life, but the disease itself that is killing life, civilizations, and the planet itself. It is, quite simply, a cancerous cell, spiraled out of

control and potential cause of the extinction of the human race.

Reproduction is central in *Bloodchild* too, but in its instance it is painted in the exact opposite light. In this short story it is not viewed as evil, an excess that can and has to be limited, but rather as the ultimate good, a goal to pursue regardless of the consequences and through which to justify the exploitation of another species:

> "The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived," she said softly. "You know these things, Gan. Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people." (Butler 2005, 25)

Almost as the polar opposite of Martha, T'Gatoi, the alien Tlic that would later in the story mate with Gan, positions the reproduction and survival of her own species above anything else. Though she is presented as the only alien willing to fight for the wellbeing of the humans and the preservation of part of their rights, and she is recognized as the most political influent of her kind on this matter, none of her actions throughout the story suggest that she would truly put the wants of the humans above the needs of her species. Trough T'Gatoi, Butler explores the opposite situation that was presented in *The Book of Martha*: rather than trying to figure out how to stop a species from reproducing out of control and going towards its own destruction, she forces one to wonder at which lengths would anyone go to prevent extinction, be it male or female.

In *Bloodchild*, Butler plays around with gender and its stereotypical roles in a way that allows the female body to be depicted in its complexity, beyond any canonical moral line. She gives a female dominant alien species the power to impregnate male humans, by essentially enacting the role that we would assign to males, and to male humans the condition of powerlessness and subjugation that have been experienced by most females in a patriarchal society for most of their history. In doing so, she tears down the walls separating manhood from womanhood, removes preconceived roles and alters them. The story should not, however, be viewed solely through the inversion of these gendered stereotypical roles. It is worth noting that the Tlic have not entirely lost their own males, even if they are but a few and live much shorter lives compared to the females, and it is thanks to them that the females are then able to implant fertilized eggs inside humans. When T'Gatoi realizes it is time to implant one of her eggs inside Gan, it is because her eggs have already been fertilized by one of her species, and like any other oviparous female she has to depose them in a place fit for their growth and protection. Taking this

into consideration, it would be better viewing this story as a tale of two different kinds of motherhood: one is experienced by Gan, and it is so common that it can be considered almost stereotypical, inspired by millennia of human history in which the act of giving birth could represent the tossing of a coin, spinning between life and death; the other is experienced by T'Gatoi, and it is so matriarchal in nature that it feels alien to the average reader, not only because of its impossibility. Gan represents the first depiction of motherhood, one that has been engraved in most patriarchal societies. Despite being a male, he is depicted as the embodiment of the female experience: he is chosen at birth for the purpose of reproduction, a mark that is going to loom over him for all the years spent growing up alongside T'Gatoi, he is then forced to carry a pregnancy once he is deemed "ready" to do so – even if in his instance being ready has to deal with body fat percentage and not with sexual development –, and he is ultimately faced with the prospect of going through a traumatic, gruesome and potentially deadly experience: birth, the beginning of life which could cause the end of another's.

> "Terrans should be protected from seeing."
> I didn't like the sound of that—and I doubted that it was possible. "Not protected," I said. "Shown. Shown when we're young kids, and shown more than once. Gatoi, no Terran ever sees a birth that goes right. All we see is N'Tlic—pain and terror and maybe death." (Butler 2005, 28)

The second depiction of motherhood can be found in T'Gatoi herself, who is shown to act first and foremost in the interest and wellbeing of her own kind. She does everything in her power to facilitate the birth of grubs and then places her own biological needs before those of humans, regardless of their fears and desires. T'Gatoi's motherhood appears alien to the reader not only because she is portrayed enacting the role of a male, but especially because she acts in a way that feels authoritarian, domineering, and quite ruthless when it comes to reproduction. Throughout the events of the story she is constantly represented as kind and understanding towards the humans, gentle and willing to fight for humans' survival. She is that one prominent Tlic in a sea of many who sees them as more than cattle, and yet her actions remains of the same exploitative nature. Even towards the end of the story, when she confronts Gan about the emergency c-section she had to operate on Lomas and about the fact that she needs to implant her eggs that very night, whether he likes it or not, she does not provide Gan with the luxury of real choice: it is either him, or someone else in his family. There is no room for "no" as an

answer. T'Gatoi's type of motherhood is ruthless, since it comes from a place of fear and desperation, from a terrifying decline that could have resulted in extinction. It places the Tlic before the humans, the unborn before the living, and the survival of her species before the free will of another's. It is, in short, the exploitation of a female towards another, through the objectification of her body as an incubator. The nature of their relationship feels transactional, even if Butler depicts it as a love story between two different being (Butler 2005, 30). Regardless of their true mutual feelings, their sexual encounter is determined on the basis of an exploitative act, from one body that necessitated the help of another in order to reproduce, and in the case of this story the reader is aware that this does not happen on a one time occasion, but on the vast scale, as a mass phenomenon. Despite Gan choosing this outcome for himself out of love and jealousy, even when he was given the chance to let one of his siblings carry this alien pregnancy, most of the humans living in the Preserve are not given a choice on the matter and can only oblige with the Tlic's will.

To make their union even more monstrous and confounding, and to deconstruct even more the dualistic opposition of right and wrong, moral and immoral, female and male, Butler reveals the nature of their relationships only a few lines away from the ending of the story: T'Gatoi is, in a way, Gan's sister. She was carried by his father when he was Gan's age (Butler 2005, 29). Their physical bond does not only end in that of lovers, or of exploiter and exploited, but it transcends further moral barriers by resembling that of incest.

In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Butler places the female body and its reproductive role constantly at the center. Whether it is to blur the lines separating the two sexes and genders, or whether it is to force the reader to cross their own moral standings regarding sex and reproduction, she exploits the dark sides of the power of the feminine: the female is not always loving, caring, or unifying, it is also egotistical and self-serving, exploitative and dangerous. It is the point of contact with the alien, the immoral brother, or the diseased, hence reproductive ground for what is corrupted, monstrous and dangerous. The female body, already in itself considered by the Western culture as the "other" (Braidotti 2021, 86), a deviation and aberration stemming from the male body, possesses the power to create monsters, vessels of what is unfamiliar, unknown, and out of human reach and control. This, by itself, is terrifying.

3.4.1 The body in relation to the Other: colonization and cohabitation through the lenses of "histofuturism"

> Suppose some superior race should come from another planet, and find us as inferior and barbarous, according to their standard, as we consider the Indians, when measured by our standard. And suppose they should conquer and put us on reservations. Could we at once quit the life which is the outgrowth of all these thousands of years ? Changing everything but our color, — giving up our philosophy, religion, code of morals, customs, clothes, and means of obtaining food, — could we at once adopt a mode of existence so different from anything we ever heard of that we could not form the least conception of it? (Wilson 1882)

One of the most prominent themes of science fiction is the inevitable encounter with the Other. These encounters usually take place in an imaginary future, whether that means tomorrow or a day which is years, if not even centuries, ahead of the present moment. The Space Race and the always expanding, mysterious space frontier have sparked in the mind of many authors and readers much interest about the existence of alien life forms. The space frontier itself is, most of times, the common imaginary stage in which science fiction authors presented their visions about the future. These visions, their depictions of humans and aliens, alongside the various types of relationships stemming between the two, are part of the astrofuturistic tradition. The roots of "astrofuturism", conceived by the mind of American and western authors during the 1950s, lie within the Euro-American preoccupation with imperial expansion and utopian speculation (Kilgore 2012, 1). Space has become what the West was for Europe and then America in the past: a place in which exploration, exploitation, colonization and cohabitation are almost considered to be expected, an inevitable phenomena embedded into the human experience.

Most of the science fiction plots available on the market make use, with varying degrees of awareness, of the colonial narrative (Grewell 2001, 26). This type of narrative would usually fall into three general models: the first is called the explorative model and it is mainly concerned with the discovery and exploration of the alien wilderness, with specific focus placed on the torments, whether physical, physiological, or both, caused by it; the second is the domesticative model, centred instead on the establishing of human settlements, trading posts or colonies out in the universe, which by consequence include harsher conflicts with the aliens or the alien environment; the third and last model is the

combative mode, which is also the most prevalent as of today and revolves around direct conflict between the humans and the aliens (Grewell 2001, 28-9).

Produced by a primarily white spectrum of Euro-American authors, this type of fiction has not only always deemphasized or completely ignored race and racial issues, but it also channels the lived experience of the triumphant western colonizer, who, despite every hardship thrown their way and every alien encounter or attack, always managed to survive and thrive, or even rebuild their civilization from the ashes. Missing from this type of science fiction is the other face of the same coin: the experience of the colonized.

The production of black futuristic fiction and most notably its absence was observed by critic Mark Dery, who coined the word "afrofuturism" in his 1993 interview. As the living descendants of the colonized, he believed that African Americans should have been naturally inclined towards the production of science fiction, a sub legitimate literary genre which mirrored the subaltern position of the black population throughout American history. He defined "afrofuturism" as:

> Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century technoculture; and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future. (Brandwyn and Dery 1994, 180)

Butler herself had coined a word in 1981 to address the writer of this genre of fiction: the figure of the "HistoFuturist". By departing from a specifically racial constructed concept and aiming for a much more universal word, she defined the "HistoFuturist" as a figure able to research, archive, and work over the human and technological past or present, so that they could ultimately speculate about possible futures (Streeby 2018, 722). The purpose of joining archive-making and speculative fiction was to focus on different subjects, to shift the gaze towards less considered part of the world, and therefore to take into consideration populations and groups of people who had been ignored by most historians. She believed that these people's contributions had been long coopted and that their supposed deficiencies had been magnified; sometimes even their own humanity had been denied (Streeby 2018, 722). This type of knowledge production served as a counter-narrative, a form of radical speculation that provided alternatives to dominant histories and ways of knowing.

It is within Butler's writings, therefore, that the other face of the coin can be found. She writes about possible futures, but not from the perspective of the Euro-American

colonizer that is going to get things go their way regardless of the circumstances. Through the lived experiences of her characters, Butler uses her histofuturistic perspective to paint the picture of a colonized humanity, neutralized regardless of its utopistic unity, unable to fight back and only left with the option to submit cooperate, and coexist with its colonizer.

3.4.2 The body in relation to the Other: an analysis of the short stories

The last focus of this dissertation is the use that Butler makes of her characters' bodies to challenge western science fiction mainstream themes. They do not exist in a vacuum, simply as marionettes playing out their own plots: they exist in constant relation to the "other", whose encounter defines and alters them, even to the point of becoming catalysts for evolution. Butler depicts them as sites for interspecies interactions and, by consequence, revolutionary societal changes. These changes, ultimately, can be hard pills to swallow for western white readers who would like to find the human, at the end of a story, mostly unscathed, unchanged in its essence, and victorious. For the purpose of this analysis, I will focus mainly on three stories of the collection: *Bloodchild*, *Amnesty* and *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*. In the first two, the "other" is the canonical alien species to be found a science fiction tale, whereas in the latter the "other" is represented by an evolution – or rather, deviation – of humanity itself. In these three short stories, Butler makes use of her histofuturistic approach to speculative fiction, especially with regards to the diasporic experiences of afro descendants, to portray possible futures for our species.

Starting from *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*, the story presents a form of alienness and otherness that is endemic to humanity itself. In this sense, the alien does not come from a galaxy far away, but from our own labs and our own genes. The genetical disorder described by Butler came to be as a side effect for a cure for cancer, hence it is entirely manmade. After altering the human genome, it began to spread, birth after birth, severely affecting the human population. Those who carry this gene, the DGDs, can be defined as a deviation from what would be considered perfectly human; a mutation that, though dormant for many years, is going to manifest later on and bring the person to self destruction in the most violent and horrific ways.

The story revolves around the fear of contamination, the loss of racial purity and

consequent degeneration of the species, from an optimal status to an unnatural one. Though the story in itself is not racially charged on a surface level, as it was made clear in the first section of this chapter, subtle hints give away just how prominent the fear of racial corruption is:

> I didn't like the way people edged away from me when they caught sight of my emblem. I'd begun wearing it on a chain around my neck and putting it down inside my blouse, but people managed to notice it anyway. (Butler 2005, 38)

DGDs are branded, their bodies have to be identifiable and separated from the collective, not much for their own good but for the survival of the rest. DGDs' bodies experience the horror of mutilations and, in most cases, death, even if they are self procured. Despite not experiencing the full extent of segregation, they conduct separate and parallel lives with respect to the majority of the population: their food is different, downgraded to being labeled as "dog biscuits" (Butler 2005, 38), their access to drugs is severely limited, and so are the jobs opportunities, housings and schools.

For the entirety of the first part of the story, Lynn describes the horrors of this "otherness" she has to experience because of who she is and the way in which she was born. The disease represent an immutable characteristic, one that does not discriminate on gender, ethnicity or nationality, and it can not be cured nor fixed. Its horrific nature makes even DGDs themselves, such as Alan, consider the prospect of wiping it out through strict birth control, an act of blurred morality aimed at restoring and preserving the health of the human species. DGDs are humans until the moment the disease takes control over them, makes them "drift" and then ends their lives. When that happens, if by any chance they are able to be saved before they kill themselves, they have to be separated from society and end up being locked away either in wards or retreats.

It is only during the second part of the story, beginning with the visit of Lynn and Alan to the Dilg retreat, that the narrative starts to shift. Hidden away in a place of complete isolation from the rest of humanity, the DGDs of the retreat live within a structurally different model of society. All the bodies trapped inside the facility are in their appearance broken, mutilated, or disfigured; and they are, at first glance, just bodies, as any semblance of rational thought, will or desire seems absent from them. During their visit, Lynn's world gets turned upside down: broken bodies with no hope for recovery or a return to normalcy all of a sudden become the source of the highest technological

achievements. Not only have they avoided certain death, but they are able to live, create and produce. What was so horrific and unavoidable about them has unexplainably been domesticated. The Dilg facility represent a new world within a world. Inside it, humans have become something other than just human: they are a newborn species in itself, aggregated in a new form of society of matriarchal nature.

> "It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. Men who inherit the disease from their fathers have no trace of the scent. They also tend to have an easier time with the disease. But they're useless to use as staff here. Men who inherit from their mothers have as much of the scent as men get. They can be useful here because the DGDs can at least be made to notice them. The same for women who inherit from their mothers but not their fathers. It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this." She looked at me. "We are very rare commodities, you and I. When you finish school you'll have a very well-paying job waiting for you." (Butler 2005, 61)

Lynn and Beatrice represent the pinnacle of this species, a branch of the *homo sapiens*. Like queen bees of their respective hive, they are able to control other DGDs, keep them from harming themselves and maintain order. During the visit at Dilg, there is an increasing progression and development of their interactions: at first, they appear normal, but then the friction between the two rises more and more. At the end of the story, it is Beatrice herself who suggest to keep in touch by phone and not in person, as both females can not suffer to be too long in each other's presence and would be more comfortable speaking from a distance, from the safety of "their own territory" (Butler 2005, 68). Their bodies, feminine and dominant, are at the center of this new structure of power, as an alternative to the preexisting patriarchy. Though at first it might appear to work the same way, their matriarchal power functions differently: they do not impose order and behavioral control from above, through force, punishments or threat of reprisal, but through influence and guidance:

> "I'll be under your control or Lynn's," he said.
> She shook her head. "Not even your mother is under my control. She's aware of me. She's able to take direction from me. She trusts me the way any blind person would trust her guide."
> "There's more to it than that."
> "Not here. Not at any of our retreats."
> "I don't believe you."
> "Then you don't understand how much individuality our people retain. They know they need help, but they have minds of their own. If you want to see the abuse of power you're worried about, go to a DGD ward." (Butler 2005, 66)

Their power is, in its essence, peaceful and accommodating. It put order in a household of chaos and potential extreme violence, even when Lynn was operating it on

an unconscious level and was not aware of its existence, but it did not dictate or force human behavior. As Beatrice said in response to Alan, it "offers DGDs a chance to live and do whatever they decide is important to them" (Butler 2005, 66). It reveals to be not only an alternative but also a direct competitor to the patriarchy, as people under its influence are able to create and develop scientific tools that are many steps above the average genius. The female body in this story, in essence, is a crucible of multiple symbols: it is deviated and corrupted, a monstrous entity capable of spreading disease throughout society, hence threatening its survival instead of being its champion; it is both a horrific mother and a caring, accepting, loving savior figure; it is not just a complementary counterpart to the masculine, but its rival and valid alternative; it represents a new form of power, able to save even the weakest of humans, those who were lost and abandoned to their own fate, in order to give them a future.

With *Amnesty* and *Bloodchild*, the focus shifts away from an endemic source of corruption to an external one, that of the alien "Other", perturbator of societal structures and enabler of radical changes much more than the Duryea-Gode disease could ever be. The acknowledgement of the existence of the Other and the meeting of human and alien bodies, in their instance, allows Butler to project the lived diasporic experience of the afro descendants into the future that awaits humanity as a whole, as a homogeneous unity. Both stories should be compared and contrasted to better bring to light the histofuturistic approach that Butler chose.

In *Amnesty*, Butler portrays humankind experiencing the aftermath of an alien invasion. After having attempted, unsuccessfully, to fight back against this unknown species with the employment of the arsenal of nuclear weapons, humanity has swiftly lost the war and is having to learn to live alongside this weird plant-like species. Though the two seem to live in separated spaces, with the Communities residing inside their own enclosed habitats, the "bubbles" they built across the deserts of the planet, and the humans living in their own cities, the two species share one point of contact: work. The alien invasion caused the economy to crash and the Communities have become the most well paying employers. Though they are not enslaved, the humans have been colonized. In order to survive and get paid enough to bring food to the table, the best course of action is working for the aliens.

Butler's histofuturistic view portrays a picture of the human race which is the

photographic negative of what can be found in the mainstream futuristic science fiction novel. Humanity is broken apart, as it is anything but united against their common enemy. Layer upon layer of human interactions, the reader can find several examples of betrayal throughout the text. The first, at a lower level, is the subtle hint of racial betrayal that the protagonist, Noah, discovers upon interacting with James Adio:

> (…) James Hunter Adio, a tall, lean, angry-looking young black man. Noah was black herself and yet James Adio had apparently decided the moment they met that he didn't like her. Now he looked not only angry, but disgusted. (Butler 2005, 159)

The second and more overt type of betrayal happens not on a racial but on a species level. Noah recounts being tortured by the humans, not by the Communities, which on the other hand simply happened to hurt humans in their attempt at understanding the species, by accident and not by design. This fact destabilizes the reader and forces them to look inwards, at the horrors perpetrated by their own kind, rather than justifying human evil behavior with the illusion that a common, alien enemy might help unifying the species and justifying any action taken against it.

Not only is humanity broken apart and unable to unify, fight back, or demonstrate any form of utopian solidarity, it is also forced to face the fact that there will be no change in their current status: they are no longer in charge of managing the whole planet, free to do with it whatever they desire. They have been defeated, colonized, and forced to share land and resources with the Other, and nothing they can do will change this fact:

> "They're here to stay," Noah said more softly. "There's no 'away' for them—not for several generations anyway. Their ship was a one-way transport. They've settled here and they'll fight to keep the various desert locations they've chosen for their bubbles. If they do decide to fight, we won't survive. They might be destroyed too, but chances are, they would send their young deep into the ground for a few centuries. When they came up, this would be their world. We would be gone." (Butler 2005, 167)

Willing or not, humans are therefore forced to accept this new form of cohabitation. Point of contact in between the two species is once again the human body, which becomes a source of knowledge through experimentation, a tool for a new form of labor force for the Communities, and a channel for interspecies communication. The protagonist, whose body is the stage in different moments in time for both colonization and cohabitation, for torture and betrayal coming from side of the humans and for communication with the aliens, is fully aware of this reality:

> I want to make them think. I want to tell them what human governments won't tell them. I want to vote for peace between your people and mine by telling the truth. I don't know whether my efforts will do any good, in the long run, but I have to try. (Butler 2005, 155)

One last interesting factor to consider about *Amnesty* is that Butler depicts a bodily change happening in the humans and in the Communities through their interactions. The two species do not simply clash, coexist and continue living without being altered by entering in contact with one another: they slowly begin to discover that they need each other for pleasure and feeling well.

> "And we are the drugs. The Communities feel better when they enfold us. We feel better too. I guess that's only fair. The ones among them who are having trouble adjusting to this world are calmed and much improved if they can enfold one of us now and then." She thought for a moment. "I've heard that for human beings, petting a cat lowers our blood pressure. For them, enfolding one of us calms them and eases what translates as a kind of intense biological homesickness." (Butler 2005, 180)

This biological change through interspecies interactions is better described in *Bloodchild*, a story in which Butler pushes even further the boundaries separating the colonizer and the colonized. In *Bloodchild*, the human body is specifically used not for communication or labor of any kind, but for reproductive purposes, as it is able to nourish an alien species back to health simply by becoming their incubator. What Butler depicts in that story is, virtually, a newborn society, the product of a colonization that already took place time ago and that saw the two species develop a symbiotic relationship. Much like the United States of today, whose population is the product of constant migratory influxes and crossing of ethnicities, the society portrayed in *Bloodchild* is that of a humanity which has been colonized, conquered, and used, and it has been ultimately absorbed by the colonizers and their society. Though the two species remain separated biologically, as they do not actually mate and produce hybrids, they have become as one, part of the same societal structure. This is especially evident in the language changes happening to humans and Tlic alike once they join and become parents of the same brood of grubs. The pregnant humans cease to be addressed as "Terrans", they become "N'Tlic" (Butler 2005, 10); not the same as Tlic, but recognized as part of their family and society, as *N*'Tlic. The Tlic that become parents once the eggs hatch, instead change their name in a different manner: T'Khotgif, the mother of the grubs that Lomas carried, becomes "Ch'Khotgif" once they are finally born (Butler 2005, 23).

These changes, though seemingly small and circumscribed to the language realm, are actually symbols of a greater, deeper change taking place in the species themselves.

The Tlic, by taking humans as hosts for reproduction, absorb the human otherness within the structure of their own society, so much so that they cease to call them Terrans altogether and instead call them like one of their own.

> "You use us."
> "We do. We wait long years for you and teach you and join our families to yours." She moved restlessly. "You know you aren't animals to us." (Butler 2005, 24)

The Tlic have essentially taken the humans in, to the level of familial relationships, and the friction present in the story has to do with the status of these humans, the inner struggle regarding their freedom and the abuse of their bodies.

This theme is especially close to the lived, historical experience of the black female body during slavery. Being capable of bearing children forced black women to be the cornerstone of the slave system: first with the passing of the 1662 Virginia legislation and its *partus sequitur ventrem* principle, which legalized chattel slavery as an inheritable status passed from mother to child; later on, during the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, with the increased scrutiny and exploitation of black women's fertility, which was the owners' last resource for increasing the number of their slaves (Cooper Owens and Fett 2019). They were not only forced to reproduce in order to provide further slaves, but they also had to take care of their owners' white children, from which stemmed the popular figure of the "mammy". Being labelled as the "welfare queens", black women still suffer today from the effects of stereotypes built on top of their own reproductive systems, which branded them as strong and even capable of feeling less pain. This dangerous belief has made the mortality rate of black women in the United States three times higher than that of white women during pregnancy and child birth (Clouser 2022).

What *Bloodchild* and *Amnesty* have in common is that both Noah and Gan, representing sites in which mankind has to forcefully meet the Other, have to deal with the effects of colonization and try to come up with ways that can help them and the rest of humanity cope with this uncomfortable reality. They do not plot revolts, counterattacks, or acts of vengeance. They both know that there is nothing they can do to change the situation, for they are not on the side of the winners. The act of colonization, as shown throughout history, does not always end up in a successful and swift decolonization. For millions of people, especially those of African descent, taken away from their homeland to the new, horrifying life that awaited them on American shores, there was no chance of

freedom and no way to change their condition. All they could do was cope with their new reality and devise plans to reinvent themselves, reinvent culture, art, relationships and language.

The power of Butler's histofuturism lays within this, in her ability to portray through science fiction not the usual mainstream tropes of the victorious Euro-American hero, colonizer of the universe, but a glint of the historic reality of the diasporic people who had to reinvent their lives through hardships, through challenges and oppression.

Conclusion

Octavia E. Butler channels, in a literary genre at the time dominated by the white western male writer, the experience of people who were the living embodiment of the Other. For decades, science fiction had been the primary genre into which the Euro-American writer could project their dreams of the space frontier, an unknown, dangerous, seemingly infinite land to explore, seize, and conquer as it pleased. Butler's contribution to the genre does not end with being the first African American woman to officially enter this white male ghetto and to win prominent awards and prizes. She was crucial for her ability to insert into the mainstream science fiction narrative her histofuturistic vision, a new and fresh perspective which allowed the readers to view science fiction tropes like space conquest underneath a new light: what if mankind was not, unlike the historic experience of the West, victorious in its colonial space conquest? And what if meeting the alien Other entailed a new uncomfortable status for all human beings, all of a sudden forced with to have to reinvent themselves, their society, and their culture?

Butler's self-coined histofuturistic approach towards speculative fiction aims at portraying the ugly sides of these hypotheses. She does so by projecting into distant futures the diasporic experience of the black population, whose descendants had to learn to live with the uncomfortable reality of colonization, displacement, loss of culture, family bonds, and history, and ultimately cohabitation with their colonizer. Their history allows Butler to insert the colonized, diasporic narratives of long forgotten groups of people into a mainstream which was otherwise completely blind towards them.

The collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, though containing unique and diverging themes, can be approached by following an underlying "fil rouge": hidden within the events of the short stories and their prominent narrating voices is the lived experience of the black female body, the concrete embodiment of the Other. This body represents a point of contact in between species, the human and the alien, what is known and what is unknown, colonizer and colonized. It is by its nature a site in which lines cross and blur, where identities die and are reborn, transformed and anew.

From an external perspective, Butler writes her characters in a way that can be perceived as post-racial, almost universal, as she aims at de-problematizing the depiction

of black characters inside the genre, but she does so never with a colorblind intent or a blind spot towards racial issues. Rather than attempting at washing away their colors, she tries to destigmatize their portrayal in a literary genre that was frozen in a skewed Euro-American perspective and that was not used to seeing the potential full scale of human representation. She is able to depict blackness in a way that feels egalitarian and non problematic, simply by virtue of showing that colored characters can exist in distant futures and that they will face the same issues as the rest of the world population.

On a more intimate level, she uses the feminine qualities of the black body to make her characters catalysts for change, mediators in between species that are tied up in a power struggle, and of which their reproductive system is the center. Butler attributes to the black female body not only just the status of oppression, control, or source of racial corruption and horror, which are all seemingly canonical conditions of the African American women in the imagination of the white man. She also gifts them with the abilities of structural social change, the possibility of a shift towards a matriarchy, of empowerment and freedom, even rebirth and renewal of the species. Through them, she describes the reinvention of a people after its brutal clash with the white Other, a human experience which has been deeply engraved in the history of people of African descent.

References

Primary sources

Butler, Octavia E. 2005. *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. Seven Stories Press. New York.

Secondary sources

Abad-Santos, Alex. 2018. *2018 belonged to Black Panther. And it could change Marvel's future*. https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/12/11/18119694/black-panther-success-2018-marvel

Aldiss, Brian and Wingrove, David. 1988. *Trillion Year Spree. The History of Science Fiction*. Paladin, Grafton Books. London.

Appiah, Anthony. 2010. *The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race*. Critical Inquiry, Vol. 12, No. 1. "Race," Writing, and Difference. Autumn, 1985. pp. 21-37

Ashley, Michael. 2007. *Gateways to forever: the story of the science-fiction magazines, 1970-1980.* Liverpool University Press. Liverpool.

Ashley, Mike. 2000. *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science Fiction Pulp Magazines from the beginning to 1950*. The History of the Science-Fiction Magazine Volume I. Liverpool University Press. Liverpool.

Asimov, Isaac & Moyers, Bill. *World of ideas.* YouTube, 10 April 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj8oJYZwfPc&t=14s

Asimov, Isaac. 1962. *More Soviet Science Fiction: Five Far-Out Tales of the Future by Russia's Top Science Fiction Writers*. Collier Books. New York.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2021. *Madri, Mostri, Macchine*. Castelvecchi. Roma.

Brandwyn, Gareth and Dery, Mark. 1994. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture.* Duke University Press. Durham.

Braziel, Jana Evans and Mannur, Anita. 2003. *Theorizing diaspora: a reader.* Blackwell Publishing. Malden.

W.E.B. Du Bois. Ed. by Brent Hayes, Edward. 2007. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press. USA.

Burke, Edmond. 1823. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions*. Thomas McLean, Haymarket. London.

Butler, Octavia, Keating AnaLouise, and Mehaffy Marilyn. 2001. *"Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment.* MELUS. Vol. 26, No. 1. Varieties of the Ethnic Experience (Spring, 2001), pp. 45-76. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/3185496

Butler, Octavia. 2018. *In 1980: Octavia Butler Asked, Why Is Science Fiction So White?* GARAGE MAGAZINE ISSUE 15. September 4, 2018. https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/d3ekbm/octavia-butler

Carrington, André M. 2016. *Speculative Blackness. The Future of Race in Science Fiction*. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. London.

Clouser, Gillian. 2022. *Blackness, Maternal Mortality, and Prenatal Birth: The Legacy of Slavery*. Yale School of Medicine. https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/blackness-maternal-mortality-and-prenatal-birth-the-legacy-of-slavery/

Cooper Owens, Deirdre and Fett, Sharla M. 2019. *Black Maternal and Infant Health: Historical Legacies of Slavery*. Am J Public Health. 10.2105/AJPH.2019.305243

Cunningham, Jesse G. 2002. *The Greenhaven Press Companion to Literary Movements and Genre: Science Fiction.* Greenhaven Press. San Diego.

Dash, J. 1995. *Julie Dash interviews Octavia Butler*. "40 Acres and a Microchip". Los Angeles. Video, 4:27, 29:38. https://juliedash.tv/2016/04/18/julie-dash-interviews-octavia-butler/

Davin, Eric Leif. 2006. *Partners in Wonder. Women and the Birth of Science Fiction. 1926-1965*. Lexington Books. Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Delany, Samuel R. 1998. *"Racism and Science Fiction"*. The New York Review of Science Fiction. Issue 120, August 1998. https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html

Democracy Now! *Remembering Octavia Butler: Black Sci-Fi Writer Shares Cautionary Tales in Unearthed 2005 interview.* YouTube, 23 February 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0UgiE8vYuI&t=617s

Drabble, Margaret. 2000. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature. Sixth Edition*. Oxford University Press.

EDSA. http://www.edsa.eu/down-syndrome-in-iceland-virtually-disappearing/

Fast Forward: Contemporary Science Fiction. *Octavia Butler interview – transcending barriers.* YouTube, 23 June 2018. Video, 1:15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG68v0RGHsY&t=193s

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

Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Verso. New York.

Gilroy, Paul. 2001. *Against Race. Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line.* Belknap Pr. Harvard University Press.

Gornick, Vivian and Moran, Barbara K. 1971. *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*. Basic Books. New York.

Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. 2009. *To Ask for an Equal Chance. African Americans in the Great Depression.* Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. United Kingdom.

Grewell, Greg. 2001. *Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future*. Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature. Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 25-47. https://doi.org/10.2307/1348255

Haraway, Donna. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature.* Routledge. New York.

Harrison, Harry. 1966. *John W. Campbell. Collected editorials from Analog selected by Harry Harrison.* Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York.

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

Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. 2003. *Astrofuturism. Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia.

Lyons, Martyn. 2013. *Books: a living history*. London: Thames & Hudson.

McCall, Leslie. 2005. *The Complexity of Intersectionality*. Signs. Vol. 30, No. 3. Spring 2005. Pp. 1771-1800. The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1086/426800

MIT Black History. *TRANSCRIPT: "Devil Girl From Mars": Why I Write Science Fiction by Octavia Butler, 1998. https://www.blackhistory.mit.edu/archive/transcript-devil-girl-mars-why-i-write-science-fiction-octavia-butler-1998*

MIT Black History. *TRANSCRIPT: Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, 1998*. https://www.blackhistory.mit.edu/archive/transcript-octavia-butler-and-samuel-delany-1998

Monk, Patricia. 1980. *Frankenstein's Daughters: The Problems of the Feminine Image in Science Fiction.* Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal. Vol. 13, No. 3-4, OTHER WORLDS: Fantasy and Science Fiction Since 1939 (SPRING/SUMMER 1980), pp. 15-27. University of Manitoba. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24780258

MoPOP. *POP+ Write Out of This World: How Octavia E. Butler Discovered Science Fiction*. mopop.org, 12 May 2020. https://www.mopop.org/about-mopop/the-mopop-blog/posts/2020/may/popplus-write-out-of-this-world-how-octavia-e-butler-discovered-science-fiction/

Nevins, Jess. 2012. *The Black Fantastic: Highlights of Pre-World War II African and African-American Speculative Fiction.* Gizmodo, September 27, 2012. https://gizmodo.com/the-black-fantastic-highlights-of-pre-world-war-ii-afr-5947122

Poe, Edgard Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition (1846)*. Graham's Magazine. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/POE/composition.html

Russell, John G. 2018. *Darkies Never Dream: Race, Racism, and the Black Imagination in Science Fiction*. The New Centennial Review. Vol. 18, No. 3, What's Left of Marx? (Winter 2018), pp. 255-278. Michigan State University Press. https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.18.3.0255

Rutledge, Gregory E. *FUTURIST FICTION & FANTASY: The Racial Establishment.* Published in *Callaloo* 24:1 (2001), pp. 236-252. University of Nebraska–Lincoln. September 2006. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=englishfacpubs

Shawl, Nisi. 2018. *A Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction*. http://www.nisishawl.com/CCHBSF.html

Streeby, Shelley. 2018. *Radical Reproduction: Octavia E. Butler's HistoFuturist Archiving as Speculative Theory.* Women's Studies. An inter-disciplinary journal. Volume 47, 2018 - Issue 7: Octavia Butler, Part One. https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2018.1518619

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

Wilson, George S. 1882. *How Shall the American Savage Be Civilized?* The Atlantic. November 1882 Issue. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1882/11/how-shall-the-american-savage-be-civilized/633409/

UNSW Sidney. 03 March 2009. Newsroom. Steve Offner. *Hormone link to fat storage*. https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/health/hormone-link-fat-storage#:~:text=Women's%20ability%20to%20store%20fat,despite%20eating%20proportionally%20fewer%20calories.

Summary in Italian

Questa tesi s'incentra sulla raccolta di racconti brevi *Bloodchild and Other Stories* di Octavia Estelle Butler, pluripremiata autrice e prima donna afroamericana a ricevere i più prestigiosi riconoscimenti della letteratura fantascientifica. Definita un'apripista nel genere letterario per la stessa comunità afroamericana, ha rappresentato per decenni una figura anomala in un settore che, almeno fino ad allora, aveva dato l'apparenza di appartenere quasi esclusivamente all'uomo bianco.

Bloodchild and Other Stories fu inizialmente pubblicato da Four Walls Eight Windows nel 1995 e conteneva cinque racconti brevi che ricoprivano un lavoro letterario di quasi due decenni: *Crossover*, *Near of Kin*, *Speech Sounds*, *Bloodchild* e *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*, opere che avevano già visto la luce in diversi giornali fantascientifici. La raccolta venne espansa nel 2005 con l'aggiunta di due ultimi racconti, inizialmente apparsi online su SCIFI.com: *Amnesty* e *Book of Martha*.

Oggetto principale di questa analisi è l'uso che Butler fa del corpo dei suoi personaggi, connotandoli da un punto di vista etnico e poi di genere, per trasformarli infine in punti d'incontro e di relazione, veri e propri palcoscenici su cui poter mettere in scena immaginari di colonizzazioni e coabitazioni con l'Altro alieno. La ricerca si è dunque suddivisa in tre livelli, uno concatenato nell'altro: in primis la rappresentazione di un'alterità razziale rispetto all'immaginario bianco in un genere letterario che al tempo di Butler non includeva la rappresentazione di *people of color* (POC) nella sua narrativa; in un secondo livello, la rappresentazione del femminile e delle sue capacità riproduttive, viste attraverso un'ottica maggiormente critica e pungente; nel terzo ed ultimo livello, la rappresentazione di come questi corpi diventano il fulcro di dinamiche interrelazionali con l'Altro, alieno o "più che umano" che sia.

Il primo capitolo funge da lungo excursus attraverso la vita dell'autrice e del genere letterario stesso. Dopo aver introdotto Butler e le sue opere, segue l'esposizione dello sviluppo della fantascienza, dall'immaginario gotico dell'Europa ottocentesca al mainstream Americano, con la sua prima Golden Age degli anni Trenta e la successiva New Wave degli anni Sessanta. Su suolo Americano, la fantascienza aveva lentamente costruito se stessa, pubblicazione dopo pubblicazione, come genere ghetto, principalmente fruibile attraverso riviste fantascientifiche gestite autori e fan stessi.

Questo ghetto, di natura essenzialmente bianca e maschilista, ha lentamente dovuto cedere alle sempre più frequenti incursioni di autrici che mettevano in discussione i bias sessisti dell'epoca, radicati e solidificati da secoli di credenze storiche che vedevano la donna e la scienza come due sfere separate, mai in grado d'intersecarsi. Ancor più spiccata è, invece, la presunta mancata partecipazione da parte della comunità afroamericana durante la Golden Age degli anni Trenta. Segue dunque, come ultima parte del capitolo, un'analisi delle potenziali cause che possono aver giocato come deterrente nel tenere lontani autrici e autori di colore, ma anche un breve excursus che dimostra quanto, in realtà, fossero comunque produttivi e partecipi nella tradizione della *speculative fiction* già da metà Ottocento con opere prevalentemente utopiche.

Il secondo capitolo s'incentra sull'analisi dettagliata della raccolta *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, prendendo in considerazione ogni singola storia, la rispettiva trama e le tematiche che se ne possono evincere, così da poter gettare le base dell'analisi che seguirà nel terzo capitolo. La raccolta in sé si rivela essere un assortimento dei temi fantascientifici più disparati, dalla soggiogazione della razza umana da parte dell'alieno insettoide alla realtà postapocalittica di un modo trasformato dalla malattia, ma tra questi più canonici appaiono anche allucinazioni, incesti, conflitti interiori e morali che costringono i personaggi a rivalutare la realtà circostante, e visioni utopiche che a tratti rasentano la distopia.

Per ultimo, il terzo capitolo prende in considerazione il corpo femminile e l'uso che Butler ne ha fatto attraverso le storie, dispiegandosi in un'analisi su tre livelli: razza, riproduzione e relazione con l'Altro. Di fondamentale importanza in quanto chiavi di lettura sono due concetti essenziali per l'autrice stessa: in primis, la dichiarata "*radio imagination*", un processo artistico tipico di Butler che elimina la visione i personaggi in fase di progettazione e scrittura, e che propende dunque al "sentire", mettendo in primo piano la loro voce e il loro pensiero piuttosto della forma, dimensione o colore del corpo; in secondo luogo l'HistoFuturismo, un termine coniato da lei stessa nel 1981 che vuole indicare un tipo di ricerca capace di unire archiviazione storica a *speculative fiction*, maggiormente incentrata sul vissuto di popoli e gruppi minoritari che sono stati tendenzialmente ignorati dalla maggior parte degli storici.

Sul primo livello di analisi, ossia riguardante la rappresentazione fisica e razziale dei corpi dei suoi personaggi, si può notare che, passando in rassegna i racconti brevi in

ordine cronologico, vi è una lieve differenza tra le due edizioni: la prima del 1995 vede Butler sorvolare quasi interamente sulla questione del colore della pelle o di connotati etnici, talvolta non menzionandoli affatto o, in altri casi, toccandoli per vie traverse con giochi di parole e metafore; nell'edizione del 2005, invece, l'autrice connota i suoi personaggi molto più chiaramente, andando persino a toccare temi vicini al vissuto della comunità afroamericana, come la solidarietà razziale (o mancanza di essa). Sul secondo livello di analisi, riguardante il genere sessuale e la riproduzione, Butler gioca con l'immaginario di una maternità mostruosa, che solitamente travalica i confini della biologia, della scienza e soprattutto della moralità, mettendo in scena rappresentazioni di uomini incinti, gravidanze aliene, figlie di rapporti incestuosi, donne che tramite la procreazione propagheranno malattia e, per ultimo, la riproduzione stessa, incontrollata, come male che affligge il mondo e ferisce l'umanità e il suo habitat. Nell'ultimo livello di analisi, ossia la relazione con l'Altro, Butler rimette in gioco questi due primi livelli, specialmente la riproduzione, e fa uso del suo approccio HistoFuturistico per mettere l'umanità futura non nelle usuali condizioni del bianco colonizzatore occidentale, ma piuttosto in quelle delle popolazioni che hanno vissuto sulla loro pelle la colonizzazione, uscendo perdenti dallo scontro e dovendosi riadattare, spesso reinventando del tutto la loro vita.

Octavia Butler è dunque in grado di rielaborare il vissuto storico degli afrodiscendenti su proiezioni di larga scala, abbracciando l'umanità intera in un approccio universalista, nel quale la rappresentazione di persone di colore è deliberatamente non accentuata e problematizzata. Fa uso delle qualità femminili dei corpi di colore per mettere in scena realtà storiche già avvenute ma riformulate con tocco fantascientifico, come lo sfruttamento riproduttivo delle donne afroamericane, la negoziazione, l'ibridazione o meticciato e conseguente riformulazione della società stessa tramite la creazione di rapporti familiari con l'Altro. È, in sintesi, un'autrice che forza il lettore fantascientifico a fronteggiare una scomoda realtà: se anche fossimo in grado di spingerci al di fuori della nostra galassia, a incontrare nuovi mondi e specie aliene, non è detto che ne usciremmo vittoriosi come i coloni del passato. Potremmo, proprio come è già accaduto a molti popoli nel corso dei millenni, uscirne vinti e non avere possibilità di rivalsa.