

PATTERNS IN THE PARABLES: BLACK FEMALE AGENCY AND
OCTAVIA BUTLER'S CONSTRUCTION OF
BLACK WOMANHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This project argues that Octavia's Butler's construction of the black woman characters is unique within the pantheon of late eighties African-American writers primarily through Butler's celebration of black female physicality and the agency the black body provides. The project is divided into five sections beginning with an intensive examination of Butler's ur-character, Anyanwu. This character is vitally important in discussing Butler's canon because she embodies the attributes and thematic issues that run throughout the author's work, specifically, the author's argument that black women are provided opportunity through their bodies. Chapter two addresses the way black women's femininity is judged: their sexual activity. In this chapter, I explore one facet of Octavia Butler's narrative examination of sexual co-option and her subsequent implied challenge to definitions of feminine morality through the character Lilith who appears throughout Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy. Specifically, I explore this subject using Harriet Jacobs' seminal autobiography and slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as the prism in which I historically focus the conversation. In chapter three, I move the discussion into an exploration of black motherhood. Much like the aforementioned challenge to femininity vis-à-vis sexual morality, Octavia Butler often challenges and interrogates the traditional definition of motherhood, specifically, the relationship between mother and daughter. I will focus on different aspects of that mother/daughter relationship in two series, the Patternist sequence, which includes, in chronological order, *Wild Seed*, *Mind of my Mind* and *Patternmaster*. Chapter four discusses Butler's final novel, *Fledgling*, and how the novel's protagonist, Shori not only fits into the matrix of Butler characters but represents the culmination of the privileging

of black female physicality that I observe in the author's entire canon. Specifically, while earlier characters are shown to create opportunities and venues of agency through their bodies, in *Shori*, Butler posits a character whose existence is predicated on its blackness and discusses how that purposeful racial construction leads to freedom.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: GOOD HARVEST: <i>WILD SEED'S</i> ANYANWU AS OCTAVIA BUTLER TEMPLATE	20
CHAPTER 3: AUTHORIAL CONTROL AND SEXUAL CO-OPTION IN <i>DAWN</i>	49
CHAPTER 4: AMBIVALENT MOTHERHOOD IN THE PATTERNIST NOVELS	79
CHAPTER 5: BLACK BEAUTY & DESIRABILITY IN <i>FLEDGLING</i>	110
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	132
WORKS CITED	145

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning, one of the main goals of black women's literature was the reclamation of the African-American woman's identity from the racist caricature established by a hostile and uncaring world. Starting with Harriet Jacob's autobiography, which directly challenged the antebellum notion of the sexually lascivious female slave; black women writers have continued to address challenges to their identity and their agency, often focusing on their sexual mores and their maternity. From Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, which directly disassembles the stereotypes of the Tragic Mulatto as well as the licentious black woman, to Nella Larson's fictive exploration of black female racial identity in *Quicksand* and *Passing* to Ann Petry's examination of poor black mothers in *The Street*, the first half of the twentieth century is filled with examples of black woman writers using the novel to articulate and concretize their own identities. When the cultural upheavals of the various movements of the sixties and seventies shifted the social paradigm, black women writers continued to actively define their own space. Hazel Carby succinctly articulates the role of black women's literature when she says:

The novels of black women, like the slave narratives that preceded them, did not just reflect or 'mirror' a society; they attempted to change it. Viewing novels as weapons for social change, literary and cultural criticism needs to consider how these novels actively structure and shape Afro-American culture and political struggles. (95)

My overall goal is to examine Octavia Butler within that consciously active tradition in a two fold fashion. On the larger level, I want to continue to integrate

Butler's work into the larger African-American canon. There has been an ongoing effort over the last decade to place Butler's work within this context, and I will add to this goal by focusing on some of her lesser discussed works and how they work within a black literary framework. Specifically, the second part of my project aims to articulate how Octavia Butler's work celebrates black womanhood through her novels' interrogation of black female societal roles and through Butler's specific exploration of the agency of black female physicality. Octavia Butler's characters reveal that their black femininity creates rather than limits their options.

On a macrocosmic level, I will continue the ongoing effort to firmly locate Butler within the African-American literary tradition. As others before me have argued, I propose that the work of Octavia Butler occupies a space within the black aesthetic of the late twentieth century. Like many of her post-modern black feminist contemporaries who came to the fore in the late seventies and eighties, such as Alice Walker, J. California Cooper, Toni Morrison or Gloria Naylor, Butler's work addresses issues of race and gender and the manner in which power affects both. However, Octavia Butler has not always been counted among this number because she writes primarily science fiction that takes place in fantastic settings. Historically, one of the primary goals of the fiction of this generation of black women writers was to retroactively reclaim and restore historical black female imagery from the influence of centuries of slavery era sexist and racist construction. Because of this specific challenge, many of these texts exist in what Mahdu Dubey terms, a "postmodern Southern Folk Aesthetic" (79). Most of the writers in this group establish settings for their novels that allude to the historical settings of chattel slavery, rural and, chronologically, in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

Octavia Butler's most critically acclaimed and most popular book, *Kindred* fits neatly within this framework. In fact, I surmise part of the reason *Kindred* has received the success that it has, is that a large part of the novel is set in Antebellum Maryland on a slave plantation. However, like her other novels, *Kindred* does feature fantastic narrative elements. The story centers on a young black woman who has a telepathic link with her Antebellum age white ancestor and, inexplicably, time travels to his aid whenever he is in life-threatening danger and a great deal of the book takes place in this familiar setting. The truth of the matter is that wider audiences seem to be more accepting of *Kindred* because it takes place in a milieu that is much more common to readers of black literature. As Dubey points out, "Serious" black literature of the past thirty years has always taken place in context of a rural past. (79) *Kindred* inhabits this space and, thus, critics have been more willing to tackle the story itself. And, although there are similar themes and tropes throughout her canon, because her other work takes place outside of this comfort zone of the rural setting readers have grown used to with black novels, there has been relative silence around it.

Regardless, though it has received attention from critics like Marc Steinberg and Ashaf Rushdy and an acknowledgment of its specific groupings with other postmodern slave narrative, the overall acknowledgement of the importance of even *Kindred* within the wider context of the ongoing literary exploration of slavery is a relatively new one.

As Roger Luckhurst comments:

Ashraf Rushdy has placed *Kindred* within the general African-American project reconsidering slave history, its aim to 'produce the conditions of historicity by reconstructing the past to endow the present with new

meaning.’ Rushdy, though, severs *Kindred* from the rest of Butler’s work and accords no importance to the *earliness* of the text-1979, some seven years before Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Frances Smith Foster’s important work, *Witnessing Slavery*, was also published in 1979, but it was only the second edition, fifteen years later, that added the essay, “In Respect to Females...”, articulating the profoundly different female experience of slavery. Similarly bell hooks in 1981 angrily lambasted historians of slavery for reducing black female slaves to victimized silence...yet makes no reference to Butler’s pioneering revision and painful genealogical excavation of this ambivalent inheritance for African-American women.

(30)

The other work that has received a great deal of critical attention is Butler’s masterpiece, *Parable of the Sower*. In fact, this novel was my first exposure to the author. I read *Parable of the Sower* shortly after it was published in 1994. Then set thirty years in the future, Butler’s nightmarish world featured gated communities, privatized services such as fire and police companies, a bankrupt America slowly being snapped up by foreign countries, a dissolved middle class and many details that, over the years, I have watched come true in one form or another. It is a societal cautionary tale along the same lines as *Brave New World* or *1984* and, as time moves forward, has become chillingly accurate in its portrayal of race, class, gender and power in the modern world.

Still, rather than engaging in a rigorous exploration of the racial elements, the majority of the criticism surrounding *Parable of the Sower* focuses on those societal

aspects of the novel, specifically, addressing whether or not Butler's world reflects a dystopia or a utopia. Critics like Donna Andreolle, Claire Curtis, and Angela Warfield have had vigorous conversations about the framework of *Parable of the Sower* and the world contained within. Though Curtis and Warfield focus on the elements of Butler's world to argue that it is a dystopia, Andreolle approaches the issue from a different perspective, focusing instead on the actions of protagonist Lauren in the nascent community of Acorn saying that it represents a utopian mythmaking where, "the heroine/narrator undergoes violent separation from the remnants of civilization, an imploding Metropolis depicted as the urban jungle...[to become] architects of a new world order founded on a divine mission reminiscent of the original Puritan project" (116). I find Andreolle's reading particularly persuasive because it can also be applied to a number of Butler's other fictive communities. Besides *Parable of the Sower's* Acorn, "a new world order on a divine mission" describes the nascent Clayarks community growing among the fires of a disintegrating world of *Clay's Ark* as well as the dawning of the Patternist society after Mary destroys Doro at the conclusion of *Mind Of My Mind*. Though both the Clayark and Patternist cultures eventually devolve into something decidedly sinister, Butler maintains the same optimistic tone that Andreolle notes at the end of *Parable of the Sower* in the novels *Clay's Ark* and *Mind of My Mind*.

Still, while much of the focus has been on the societal aspects and implications of the novel, the issue of where *Parable of the Sower* fits within the black literary tradition has often been tertiary at best. There are some exceptions-Marlene Allen's "Octavia Butler's *Parable* Novels and the 'Boomerang' of African American History" comes to

mind-but rarely have critics located this novel in the African-American literary tradition as vigorously as they have *Kindred*.

This is a shame because, parallel to its statement on society, *Parable of the Sower* also functions as a character study of a young black woman in the tradition of Harriet Jacobs, Ann Petry and Nella Larson. Lauren Olamina is fifteen years old, the eldest of her father's five children and worried out of her mind about her future livelihood in a hostile world even though she lives in a relatively safe enclosed suburb twenty miles outside of Los Angeles, Robledo. Still, she knows it is only a matter of time before the enclave's walls will come tumbling down like Jericho. Because of the chaos swirling around her, she, in her words, "discovers" the philosophy/religion Earthseed which teaches that God is more of a natural force that can be manipulated more than an anthropomorphic father figure and that, ultimately, humankind's future is in space.

Through the classic epistolary form, Butler allows the reader to observe and empathize with Lauren's issues that are reflective of the ones that other black women writers of Butler's generation were similarly exploring. Lauren conflicts with her mother and both of them come to terms with the fact that there are two women in the house who are, in many ways, vying for the same man's attention. Lauren confronts the sexist expectations that, as a woman, her best opportunities lie with getting married. The issues of marriage and relationships, in general, are also ones that the character confronts. Lauren also struggles with being underestimated professionally. While her chosen profession is one of quasi-religious ambassador, Butler makes clear that the vast majority of the resistance she faces is due to her gender.

And through all of her journey, Butler directly articulates how the issue of Lauren's racial make-up as a specifically African-American woman informs all of these issues. Because of her size, Lauren's femininity is questioned throughout the text. Likewise, as society falls, racial prejudice rears its head, limiting the character's traditional American opportunity to become part of many of the communities staying off the chaos. And, during the darkest time in the character's journey, Lauren is raped and has her child stolen in a manner that purposefully mirrors the female African-American slaver experience. In short, *Parable of the Sower* is a late twentieth-century African-American text in the tradition of historically canonical black women texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while also mirroring the contemporary works that addressed the same themes of identity, opportunity, motherhood and sexuality such as *The Color Purple* and *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Ultimately, both *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower* have received the bulk of Octavia Butler criticism. Again, I believe *Kindred*'s attention is partially due to how easily it fits into the paradigm of contemporary African-American literature. Conversely, *Parable of the Sower*, while not fitting with that framework, elicits the type of criticism that other societal depictions of the future like *1984* evoke. Since I desire to expand Octavia Butler's overall critical lexicon alongside locating her work vigorously in the African-American canon, this project will focus on works that have not garnered as much attention as these two novels.

That is not to imply that, while critics have not truly explored Butler's notion of race, gender wise, feminists have also ignored the author's work. In fact, it is just the

opposite; the vast majority of criticism that has been written about Octavia Butler has been from a feminist and, specifically, a Second Wave feminist point of view. While the initial feminist movement focused on legal inequality towards women, the second wave concentrated on social challenges to women's freedom of movement specifically the manner in which women have historically been hampered in marriages, other romantic relationships, the work place, reproductive rights and as mothers and daughters.

This second wave approach has produced fascinating results with Butler criticism because the author's protagonists are certainly informed by familial issues. The relationships between mothers and daughters are centrally featured in both *Lilith's Brood* and the Parable series. Butler also has a unique perspective on what constitutes black female sexuality. The extraordinary abilities of *Fledgling's* Shori and *Parable of the Sower's* Lauren both inform the author's statement on sexual pleasure and, arguably, the interplay between sex and power lies in the center of Lilith's story in *Dawn*. Likewise, Butler addresses the challenges that women experience in romantic relationships as they strive for acceptance as equals. One of the most useful ways to frame any examination of Butler's character, Anyanwu, is by charting the evolution of her relationship with Doro. Finally, as many of her female characters are attempting to put together communities, either religious or pragmatic, the question of how a woman manages her personal life with her career is often at the forefront of any of Butler's work. As prophets, community leaders and saviors, the Butler protagonist is the ultimate career woman.

While the attention to the aforementioned subjects is productive, where I find the current feminist criticism lacking is in the manner in which race is all but ignored. Yes, issues of motherhood, the power dynamic of romantic relationships and careers are

acknowledged and explored but, without addressing the manner in which race informs those issues, the criticism is ultimately lacking. To be clear, I do not think the work of critics such as Robin Roberts should be discounted because of this. When, in “No Woman Born,” Roberts makes the observation that many of Butler’s female characters are healers and “provides a feminist role model through her concern for others” (141) without acknowledging the racial implications and historical slavery allusions of the character’s movements being limited because of concerns for her children, this gendered analysis can serve as the foundation for further racialized exploration of the role of Butler’s healers. Critics who have worked with Butler have made considerable contributions in exploring issues of power and definitions of femininity that are worthwhile regardless of their lack of the exploration of color. What I am advocating is not a replacement but, rather, an addition to the existing criticism on Butler’s work. While the “raceless” criticism is worthwhile, it serves to separate Butler from the pantheon of black women writers who emerged during the late seventies and eighties and threatens to stigmatize examination of her work vis-à-vis its place in the pantheon of her African-American contemporaries.

In many ways, the more current Third Wave of feminism advocated by younger scholars such as Rebecca Walker and Danzy Senna, as well as Butler’s contemporaries bell hooks and Audre Lordes seems to be a better fit vis-à-vis a framework in which to critique Octavia Butler’s work. The view of feminists in this newest incarnation of the philosophy from the late eighties and early nineties focus on the issues of race and social class in the manner that the aforementioned criticism does not. In Senna’s semi-autobiographical *Caucasia*, the author addresses the challenges she faces as a woman

coming of age in 1980's era Boston, but those experiences are informed and complicated by her race. In writings like, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde fully articulates the role of race in gender conversations and challenges the feminist movement to acknowledge how race is intrinsic to how gender functions in America. bell hooks has interrogated the space that black women have politically navigated in daily life privately and publically for decades in texts like *Talking Back*. The challenge is finding literary analysis of this type that focuses on Octavia Butler's oeuvre instead of the better known black writers who come out of this period. Again, outside of *Kindred*, Butler's canon has often been left out of discussion of the work of black women from this period.

Still, even within the context of Third Wave feminism which acknowledges issues of race and class more precisely than its predecessors, Butler's *personal* feminism stands alone in its pragmatism and messiness. Butler's protagonists are feminists only to the extent that philosophy allows them to prosper. Again and again in her texts, her characters make decisions that are problematic when viewed from the context of a "proper" feminist response. Paralleling the characters movements, oftentimes, the very fictive premises that Butler establishes are questionable and problematic. For instance, the entire concept of the symbiotic relationship between alien and human in the *Xenogenesis* or *Lilith's Brood* saga as well as Butler's hesitance to judge this relationship in any fashion are fairly disturbing and difficult to group with other novels that have so eloquently critiqued patriarchy and the challenges of women of color. In my estimation, however, this is why Butler's work needs to be included in the ongoing conversation defining and refining black female identity in black women's literature. Because she

approaches issues of power and femininity and social class in a different manner than her contemporaries, the contrast potentially prompts new avenues of conversation about the overall philosophy of what women, and specifically black women, are challenged by in the modern world.

Furthermore, Butler's sensibilities engage logistical intraracial pressure and challenges in a manner that many Third Wave feminists often do not address. For instance, when Rebecca Walker speaks to being in the "Never-Never Land of the Mulatto Nation" in the introduction to the canonical Third Wave text *To Be Real*, she laments having people challenging her blackness by asking "How could I be so black but look so white?" (4). While I, in no means, would dismiss the existential pressure such a question would cause in her life and it is fair to assume that both black and white people have challenged her being biracial, the implication is that it is the wider, white world that has attempted to hold her back with this challenge.

However, by focusing on the white world, she completely ignores the intraracial *privilege* she holds within many sectors of the black community *because* she is so light that she looks white. Traditionally, a large sector of African-American culture has viewed lighter skinned blacks as being more attractive than their darker hued compatriots. Whether it is the instances of brown paper bag tests that only permitted blacks lighter than the bag entrance to certain venues, the problematic casting in Oscar Micheaux films or, frankly, a casual viewing of who is permitted to be on camera on Black Entertainment Television, American history is filled with examples that demonstrate that someone who looks like Rebecca Walker is afforded certain opportunities because of her complexion. To not acknowledge this problematic aspect of

African-American culture in which skin tone is quantified, in a way in which Zora Neale Hurston does with Janie's hair in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as, ironically, Walker's mother does with the ongoing discussion of the dark skinned Celie's appearance in *The Color Purple*, is to cut off a vector of discussion that is desperately needed. This also speaks to the fact that, as much as many Third Wave voices champion diversity, it is a diversity fully imbedded in the larger white world.

In contrast, Octavia Butler addresses this concept of Eurocentric standards of beauty and the manner in which they are quantified many times in her novels. Butler examines issues of color, as well as, physical size and hair texture/length in *Kindred*, *Lilith's Brood* and the *Parable* books. As a woman who was physically large, with a short natural, Butler seems to make a point out of showing both the positive and negative sides of how physicality shapes black women's lives on both sides of the color line.

Regardless of any difference in approach to issues of identity vis-à-vis race and gender, Octavia Butler always stands with her contemporaries. When I see the fatal and twisted maternal love expressed by Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*, I see Butler's Anyanwu's problematic relationship with her own children in *Wild Seed*. When I see Walker's complex relationship between Mister and Celie in *Color Purple*, I see Butler's relationship between *Fledgling's* Shori and Wright. When I see the manner in which Toni Cade Bambara posits Velma's existential journey in *The Salt-Eaters*, I see Lilith's own journey in Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood*. Many of the same tropes and issues that black women writers in the late eighties and early nineties examined were also being examined by Butler. What makes Octavia Butler so remarkable within this context is that, while oftentimes her counterparts were looking backward and reclaiming the past

and adding their own voices to the story that has mostly been told by others, Butler was ever looking forward and outside the confines of traditional African-American experience.

Besides this furthering of the placement of Octavia Butler's work within a black tradition, I will specifically discuss the author's unique contribution to the canon within this context, specifically, her construction and celebration of black womanhood. Philosophically, Butler presents black womanhood as a singular existence beholden to neither the traditional notions of motherhood nor the Victorian notion of True Womanhood. Through the journey of characters like Anyanwu, Lilith and Shori, Butler privileges the individualism of black women in a way that complicates the more family and community oriented manner that black women are often valued. Likewise, Butler also champions the usefulness of the body in gaining that individual agency with her work. Eschewing the Cartesian mind-body split which often privileges the mind, Butler's work foregrounds the body. And, when Octavia Butler celebrates that body, it is black and female. Again, speaking to her place in the African-American literary canon, I argue Butler's strategy toward examining the role of the black body is by removing it from the constraints of American history. However, even outside of the black body's historical context, she is always articulating and exploring the ramifications of the legacy of slavery.

Within the context of this physical celebration, I will address the critiques of biological determinism that some have seen in Octavia Butler's work. The *Xenogenesis* or *Lilith's Brood* trilogy of novels has especially been accused of being an example of physicality defining actions. Roger Luckhurst points to the views expressed by the

Oankali about what the alien race regards as the human contradiction--our intelligence plus our hierarchal nature--as evidence of Butler's determinist beliefs. And critics like Ruth Salvaggio and Hoda Zaki parallel Robin Roberts' gendered view of Butler's female characters with Zaki going so far as saying that Butler "adheres to the notion that men are intrinsically more violent than women" (241). By their readings, Butler's exploration of the body implies limitation. These critics equate definition with a shutting off of possibility and I think that is a misreading of Butler's aim of, instead, celebrating the body.

Also, I believe that both readings do not fully take into account the manner that Butler constructs womanhood. For instance, though Zaki acknowledges Anyanwu's penchant for violence, she downplays *Mind of My Mind's* Mary's bloodthirsty ways as "arbitrary" and "authoritarian" and glosses over the exuberant joy the character displays when she finally kills Doro. She also fails to fully examine the complicated interplay Butler establishes between a character's knowledge of the body leading to both a propensity to heal and an ability to effectively kill. In contrast, Butler's characterization of Doro displays, not only a murderous monster but also a figure plagued by loneliness and attempting to construct a family while also cultivating a food source. Butler's women are dynamic and difficult to place in a traditionally gendered matrix and, oftentimes, represent multiple, contradictory attributes. They are mothers and nurturers but they are also comfortable as hunters and murderers.

Alongside the various ways she constructs the societal role of black women, I also believe Octavia Butler embraces and celebrates the physicality of the black female body. Rather than a limiting force in these characters' lives, Butler frames their black

womanhood as a liberating force. As Stacy Alaimo observes, Butler's black female body, "is not only a site of inscription but also an interpreter of codes. By describing the body as a place that is not only written upon but an entity that also reads, Butler stresses the body's agency and 'mind'" (53). Within the context of bell hooks' observation on how black women's plight differs from their white compatriots that, because of the specific combination of blackness and womanhood "being oppressed means the absence of choices," (5) Butler presents black womanhood as an avenue to gain choices not a challenge to be overcome. Butler herself states that "knowledge of the body can be used to empower and not necessarily to determine" (Mehaffy 57). In Butler's work, the black female body is not a physical feature that limits but, instead provides opportunities for agency in a hostile world.

My project is divided into five chapters that will examine these roles and bodies. In chapter one, I construct the framework in which I ground the project. Here, I lay out exactly how racialized themes reveal themselves in Octavia Butler's work, primarily focusing on the character Anyanwu in the novel, *Wild Seed*. This character is vitally essential in discussing Butler's canon because she embodies the attributes and thematic issues that run throughout the author's work. Specifically, Anyanwu personifies both the ambivalence toward feminist values as well as the brutal pragmatism that Butler's protagonists exhibit primarily through this facilitation of the body. Furthermore, since the character is immortal, Anyanwu provides a unique opportunity to observe Butler's values and philosophies over a long term. Thus, a full exploration of the character provides a blueprint outlining Butler's views on sexual morality and motherhood which buttresses a discussion of all of Butler's work.

Once that blueprint is outlined, chapter two will address one of the main ways that women and black women's femininity is judged: their sexual and moral identities. In this chapter, I will explore one facet of Octavia Butler's narrative examination of sexual co-option and her subsequent challenge to definitions of feminine morality through the character Lilith who appears throughout Butler's Lilith's Brood trilogy. Specifically, I explore this subject using Harriet Jacobs' seminal autobiography and slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as the framework through which I focus the conversation. Within the large context of placing Butler's work in the African-American tradition, this is an important subject because challenges to black women's worth vis-à-vis their chastity and morality are as old as the relationship between Europeans and Africans. Viewing women of color as overly sexualized beings fits into Eurocentric colonialist definitions and a pejoratively sexualized view of African-American women can be concretely traced to antebellum justification for rape. Instead of acknowledging their own lasciviousness, white enslavers would argue that they had been seduced by the sexually promiscuous female slaves. With Lilith and her alien captors/saviors, I believe Butler critiques this historic relationship between sexuality and power and highlights the ambiguity that many female slaves experienced.

Furthermore, this issue of the moral implications of sexuality is one that is specifically complicated by race and is one that Second Wave feminism has not always addressed. Concepts of sexual liberation have always been fraught with a certain level of ambiguity for black women because of this history of fetishizing and misrepresenting black female sexual practices. I show that Butler's highlights black female physicality as

a means of escape, I will show how, like Jacobs, *Dawn*'s Lilith finally uses the same body that limits her as an avenue for liberation.

In chapter three, I move the discussion into an exploration of black motherhood. Much like the aforementioned challenge to black femininity vis-à-vis sexual morality, Octavia Butler often addresses the traditional definition of motherhood and the relationship between mother and daughter. I will focus on different aspects of that mother/daughter relationship in the Patternist sequence, which includes, in chronological order, *Wild Seed*, *Mind of My Mind* and *Patternmaster*. Throughout these three books in the Patternist sequence, Butler constructs three generations of women and their problematic relationships with each other. Furthermore, I argue that the ambivalence toward motherhood that Butler demonstrates through those relationships alludes to the issues that black women have had with their children because of the historical challenges of slavery and the ongoing class driven challenge of work and careers. In this chapter, I examine those relationships and attempt to place them within a literary tradition of black motherhood that, oftentimes, due to various circumstances, questions the Westernized notion of traditional motherhood, specifically the manner that motherhood limits the movement of black woman. In the case of motherhood, I argue Butler frames the phenomenon as one of the areas where the black body limits the movement of black women. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Butler does not celebrate the sacrifices inherent in black motherhood.

Chapter four will focus on how Butler approaches how the physicality and beauty of black women is evaluated by Eurocentric standards. I focus on Butler's commentary on what constitutes an attractive woman and how blackness figures into the equation. In

her last work, *Fledgling*, Butler reinterprets the Western trope of the vampire to interrogate and explore not only the notion of beauty, but the manner in which society and racism continue to inform that notion. Like Anyanwu's shape changing ability, I believe Butler identifies Shori's black body as the main source of the character's agency. In fact, because the story surrounds the usefulness of blackness, I believe that what is implied with Anyanwu is made plainly manifest with Shori.

Finally, in chapter five, I encapsulate the entire work and come to my conclusions based on the analysis as well as explore the implications of the body of Octavia Butler's output. The final chapter also points to the path that critics can take moving forward as well as the lessons that Butler's canon teaches about the black novel in an increasingly fractured and complicated world. As identity in the twenty-first century becomes more complex and fragmented, I believe that the canon of Octavia Butler provides a strategy towards navigating the challenges of definitions of self.

Octavia Butler was one of the most remarkable African-American writers of the late twentieth century because of the way that she championed notions of what was possible for African-American women. Specifically, Butler explored concepts of race, gender and identity throughout her career, focusing on gender roles and the uses of the body in a way many different critical disciplines have only begun to discuss. I argue that Butler's challenge to identity definition has resulted in her work being pigeonholed in several categories that have not accurately captured the unique complexities of a black feminist reading.

This isolation from her peers is mainly because Butler was labeled a science fiction writer. Because of Butler's race and gender, the author's work has been

challenged by the traditional prejudice that has faced female writers of color by the academy. Additionally, Octavia Butler's subject matter is oftentimes outside the boundaries of what has been deemed acceptable by black writers, thus she has faced additional resistance. Still, her work is immensely personal and, through, that personal journey, says something about the experience of black women. As she says, "I write to create some context in which I can explore what I want to be" (McCaffery 58). The context she creates is one in which the African-American experience can be explored and black womanhood can be celebrated.

CHAPTER 2
GOOD HARVEST: *WILD SEED'S ANYANWU AS OCTAVIA BUTLER TEMPLATE*

Wild Seed's protagonist, Anyanwu is particularly useful in highlighting Octavia Butler's exploration of the social reality of black women. Chronologically, *Wild Seed* is the first of the Patternist series and serves as the narrative foundation for every story that follows. The term Patternist refers to the "Pattern" that connects the series' super powered characters and *Wild Seed* reveals the beginnings of the telepathic dynasty. *Wild Seed* and, to a lesser degree, *Mind of My Mind*, center on the relationship of the immortal, parasitic Doro and the shape changing Anyanwu, spanning almost three-hundred years. The two rage and love over centuries and across countries and oceans in a battle between Doro's lust for dominance as he creates the people that will eventually become the Patternists and Anyanwu's overall desire for freedom.

What I will focus upon in this chapter is the way Octavia Butler challenges the concept of black womanhood, interrogating traditional cultural definitions of mate and mother while championing the agency of the black female body, through the character of Anyanwu. Specifically, Butler highlights the usefulness of both the female body and traditionally defined gendered attributes. This initial chapter will also center on an analysis of Anyanwu's actions in both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind* because these texts provide an invaluable touchstone on which the majority of Butler's protagonists can be examined and critiqued. Her female protagonists' pragmatic approach towards social and physical adaptability, the way women navigate the motherhood/mate continuum in search of their individual freedom, Butler's celebration of black physicality and,

throughout, the location of Butler's work within the black aesthetic, can all be traced to the fictive construction of Anyanwu.

One of the major themes in the relationship between the characters Doro and Anyanwu is the way bodies are utilized to dominate and resist. This intertwining of the subjects of physicality and application of power is one that several critics have addressed. Particularly Michel Foucault describes the use of power in terms that parallel Doro's strategies towards creating the Patternists. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault, discusses the role of prisons in modern society and outlines the way discipline is used by institutions to force bodies into prescribed roles. Breaking discipline down into four parts, Foucault defines the characteristics as cellular, organic, genetic and combinatory. The first, cellular, illustrates how powerful institutions utilize the spatial placement of bodies to conform to purpose while the organic characteristic describes the practice of proscribing activities that are "natural" for those bodies. The genetic role is the practice of control, over time, the evolution of the bodies with the fourth, combinatory, speaking to the combination of many disciplined bodies into one singular force.

Importantly, Foucault not only presupposes a Cartesian definition of mind/body dualism but also posits the body as something that is used by powerful forces to hinder the agency of the individual saying, "Discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity,' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (138). Under

Foucault's definition, the body is a tool that the more powerful use against the powerless to deprive them of their physical agency and to rob them of their mental freedom. This philosophy also inherently foregrounds the importance of the mind; for Foucault, the mind is the stronger of the two in the Cartesian split thus it is easier for an aggressor to dominate through the avenue of the weaker body.

While Foucault argues that the "docile bodies" this method creates are useful in factories, Butler highlights the usefulness of these same types of bodies in Doro's ongoing eugenic projects. As an immortal, infinitely powerful and relentless being, Doro is the embodiment of Foucault's institution. Appropriately, Doro only sees the bodies around him as raw material to be shaped for his own purposes. Mirroring Foucault's strategy, Doro practices cellular discipline by establishing communities around the world and genetic discipline by instituting arranged marriages to breed qualities he deems favorable. Over several centuries, Butler illustrates how the character has colonies set up throughout Africa, the United States and Europe that focus on a variety of distinct abilities including telepathy, telekinesis and slowed aging. Initially, he only sees Anyanwu in these terms, referring to her as "wild seed" because he did not control every aspect of her bodily development and framing her importance only in terms of the value of her physical attributes and, almost immediately upon meeting her, begins to devise ways to use her body to limit her movement.

What ultimately occurs, however, is Anyanwu uses the body that Foucault argues would hinder as the vehicle for her ultimate liberation from the tyranny of Doro's plans. The primary gifts Butler infuses the character with are all physical ones, shape shifting and immortality; attributes that Doro is only interested in exploiting. The same traits that

Doro admires are the ones that Anyanwu uses to escape however. Rather than limiting her options, Anyanwu's body, intertwined with her mind, offers alternatives and options. As Butler uses Doro to exemplify Foucault's philosophy, she also utilizes Anyanwu to critique and refute it.

The primary strategy that Butler employs to explore those options in *Wild Seed* centers on Anyanwu's other extraordinary ability besides immortality; she is also a shape changer. Since the character's physicality is, literally, polymorphous, Butler shows how she is able to adapt efficiently to the threats of world around her. Between Doro and Anyanwu, the concept of adaptability is apparent in the way both characters' traits of immortality exhibit itself. Doro is able to thrive by parasitically inhabiting people's bodies and has stayed alive through the centuries by jumping from body to body. When one body is used up, he wills himself into another, devouring the victim's essence in the process. According to Butler, this aspect of Doro's power is what affects the character the most; it is not the "changing that diminishes him; it is the need to regard humans as food" (Govan 83). Again, reflecting Foucault, Doro only views bodies in terms of capital, whether in their usefulness of building a community or their use as sustenance. In contrast, Anyanwu is able to manipulate her body by shape changing, and ages-or not-at will. While Anyanwu's shape-shifting power is internal and reflects her amorphous nature as well as her ability to adapt to new situations, Doro's power is intrinsically destructive and does not allow him any space to grow or evolve as a person.

Physical adaptability aside, the nature of their respective powers also speaks to their individuality. Doro is a being that is totally dependent on others while Anyanwu is self sufficient. This fact informs the two characters' personalities. Butler explains that,

paralleling his view of humanity as prey, Doro's monstrosity develops because of his lack of companionship. Until he meets the similarly immortal Anyanwu, everyone eventually leaves him when they die (Govan 83).

However, I find it noteworthy that Anyanwu is able to maintain her humanity though, as an immortal, she has also been faced the mortality of ordinary humanity. From a gendered point of view, this aspect of their personalities inverts the stereotypical view that the male character would be more self-contained while the female character would need family and community. Physically, Butler establishes that, while Doro's abilities force him to surround himself with others, Anyanwu is able to stand alone. She can heal herself, she can feed herself, she does not need sustenance the way other humans do; Anyanwu's abilities afford her the option to always be capable of being an island unto herself. With Anyanwu, I believe Butler posits a black female body that is self-sufficient and is not necessarily defined by traditional gendered markers like motherhood or sexuality.

In contrast to my reading, however, critics have been tempted to frame the difference in the characters' abilities in biologically gendered terms, arguing that Doro's hierarchal, murderous nature mirrors male attributes while Anyanwu's fluidity and more emphatic ability is reflective of more feminine traits. In "Connections, Links, and Extended Networks: Patterns in Octavia Butler's Science Fiction," Sandra Govan says, "His is the more terrible power; he kills instantaneously whenever he takes a host body. But hers is the nurturing healing power of the archetypal earth mother" (83). Govan views the characters' attitudes towards others in this way, interpreting the male Doro's avarice and aggressive nature as a reflection of his gender while positing Anyanwu's

ability to empathize as a feminized trait coupled with her healing abilities. For Govan, though Doro and Anyanwu are powerful beings, it is their gender that defines the way they express that power.

Similarly, in her essay, “No Woman Born,” Robin Roberts opines

[Anyanwu’s] immortal body shows her the unity of all life and allows her to identify intelligent life in all its forms, including dolphins. Because of her powers, she provides a feminist role model through her concerns for others, her emphasis on equality, and her trenchant comments about racism and sexism. (141)

While Govan focuses on the healing aspect of Anyanwu’s nature, Roberts foregrounds the character’s empathic nature as proof of her connection to the natural world around her. Roberts also identifies Anyanwu’s ability to regenerate without taking others’ lives as part of what she views as a tradition of feminized depictions of immortality. Finally, referencing the predatory nature of the character’s abilities, she focuses on the underlying anxiety of loneliness that Doro experiences and contrasts that angst with Anyanwu’s ability to have companionship which Roberts positively refers to as “domesticity conventionally considered feminine” (141).

For the most part, I agree with Govan’s and Roberts’ reading of the character as an empathic figure but I question the framing of that empathy in gendered terms as opposed to a simple attribute of Anyanwu’s physical abilities. Though Anyanwu’s innate sense of self stays the same regardless of the form she inhabits, Butler alludes to a shift in the character’s values based on her form, not her femininity. This amorphous shift is specifically cited several times when she transforms into animal forms. The first time

Anyanwu changes into an animal form in *Wild Seed* is when she is attacked and transforms into a leopard. While in this shape, she undergoes a bloodlust that seems to be linked to the animal form; her exterior transformation seems to define her interior personality. Additionally, Butler writes that she changes on a genetic level as opposed to wearing a type of flesh costume. In response to Doro's questions about the specifics of her changes, Anyanwu tells him, "I was not a true leopard, though, until I killed one and ate a little of it. At first, I was a woman pretending to be a leopard-clay molded into leopard shape. Now when I change, I am a leopard" (80). Her empathy with leopards continues after the change as well. Even after she returns to human form, Anyanwu describes the bloodlust that she continues to feel. Anyanwu is not empathic because she is a woman; Anyanwu is empathic because her abilities allow her to become something other than herself. I think this is a small but crucial distinction. Yes, Anyanwu is able to make connections and form relationships between species and people fulfilling the tenets of the traditional Earth Mother imagery. However, it is through her ability to physically turn into these others that she is able to form the kinship. Again, Butler is arguing the primacy of the body not the socially mandated definition of gender.

The next sequence of animal transformation illustrates the importance of the body in shaping Anyanwu's psyche as well. The second time this breakdown of the barrier between human and animal occurs is during another early sequence in the book when Anyanwu takes the form of a dolphin for an extended period. Though she demonstrates a level of consciousness that continues to possess human characteristics, what is striking is how she begins to have sexual feelings towards one particular male dolphin. Butler eventually follows through with the implications of that arousal, when during Anyanwu's

years of running in the form of a dolphin, she so fully becomes integrated into their world that, eventually, she bears dolphin children.

This dolphin family is important because it is a specific instance where Butler explicitly reveals that there is a much larger change involved in the character's shape shifting than a simple transformation of form. Anyanwu, in many ways, actually *becomes* the form that she changes into. While this detail is evocative in relation to her change into animals, it also implies how destabilized identity in general can potentially be. If Anyanwu's interiority changes so much when she becomes an animal, what does it say about her change when she shifts race or sex or age? Doro says as much, revealing that, when Anyanwu takes an animal form, he is unable to track her with the telepathic sense he uses for all of his kin. As he says, it is "as though she died, as though he confronted a true animal—a creature beyond his reach" (89). Butler constructs a situation that not only challenges the concept that the mind and body are separate but also a character whose body is so crucial that it actively changes the mind for the betterment of the whole. This is a framework that eludes Doro because, again, he is an acolyte of the belief that the body is a weakness that can be exploited.

Stacy Alaimo also speaks to the way the characters of Doro and Anyanwu reflect the Cartesian notion of the separation of mind and body differently, focusing on the concept of the body as commodity. Like Foucault's identification of powerful institutions usage of bodies to further their own agenda, I see similarities in the way Alaimo describes Doro as a being who only focuses on how the various forms of physicality can forward his own agenda, whether it is body he is presently wearing or the bodies of his people. For Doro, literally and figuratively, the body is ultimately

disposable. Alaimo says Doro approaches bodies, personally, as “vestments” and, as a breeder and slave holder, “investments” disconnected from the more essential mind. It would never occur to Doro to view Anyanwu’s body or anybody as potential venue of freedom.

In contrast, with Anyanwu, Alaimo states “Butler radically challenges the oppositions between body and mind, nature and culture by creating bodies that know. Anyanwu’s body ‘reads’ the information embodied in other creatures suggesting that corporeality, like culture, is coded and that bodies, not just minds, have the power to interpret these codes” (53). Alaimo posits Anyanwu as a character that “occupies corporeality in order to recreate it as a space of liminality and resistance” (46). Within this context, Anyanwu’s ability to escape Doro because of her different approach to physicality is especially worth highlighting. The body that Doro views as disposable, Anyanwu uses to positively affirm her own agency. Anyanwu’s ability to elude Doro in animal form is also one of the first instances in the text where Butler fully privileges the ability to-literally and figuratively- adapt and change. Importantly, *Wild Seed* does not celebrate the adaptability for any spiritual reasons, however. Anyanwu’s penchant for transformation is only valuable because of its *usefulness*.

I think Ruth Salvaggio encapsulates the importance of Anyanwu’s practical evaluation of her physical adaptability very well. Discussing the character’s methodology in “Octavia Butler and the Black Science-Fiction Heroine,” Salvaggio says, “She is flexible and dexterous... She uses prowess rather than direct, confrontational power. In Anyanwu, we find a woman who learns to use her abilities to survive” (81). To Salvaggio, Anyanwu’s adaptability implies a fierce intelligence that is always

cognizant of her environment and pragmatically responds and shifts to maintain her independence regardless of the circumstances.

I agree with Salvaggio's interpretation of Anyanwu, especially her attention to the character's pragmatism. Anyanwu does not change because of some feminized mystical relationship to the cosmos or because she has some unworldly sense of self. Anyanwu does what she has to do to stay alive. In Anyanwu's mind, her powers are not extraordinary or representative of Govan's "earth mother" trope; they are just an aspect of her being that she uses to make her life more livable. Anyanwu does approach her powers and her life differently than Doro but to simply frame those differences in gendered terms misses some of the complexity of Butler's character.

This degree of pragmatism towards her ability transcends the gendered reading connecting femininity to spirituality and speaks to a more complicated definition of identity, gendered or racial. Responding to a character's racist accusation that she could not possibly be able to turn white since she does not, Anyanwu summarizes her view on the issue; "I'm content...If I have to be white some day to survive, I will be white. If I have to be a leopard to hunt and kill, I will be a leopard. If I have to travel quickly across the land, I'll become a large bird. If I have to cross the sea, I'll become a fish" (164). Within the context of racialized readings of the text, this detail is particularly remarkable because the only manner in which Anyanwu privileges whiteness, like any other potential shape change, is through its usefulness. With this character, Butler demystifies and disrupts the issue of race by focusing exclusively how it functions in affecting an individual's agency. Anyanwu has no wish to remain white outside of specific instances where the physical reality of race forwards her own agenda.

Another physical field that the characters Doro and Anyanwu battle on is motherhood. Repeatedly, Butler focuses on the restraining nature of motherhood primarily by framing the role within Foucault's observation of the way agency can be limited through physicality. Initially, Doro manipulates Anyanwu through her children by claiming he will leave them alone if she comes with him. Later, as they are on the ship bound for America, however, Doro discovers that he cannot track her in her animal forms so, utilizing what Govan calls, "a time-encrusted masculine ploy," and he plans to get Anyanwu pregnant as soon as possible, thinking that, while she could run, she couldn't do anything with children slowing her down. I agree with Govan's observation that this tactic is one in which men have always hampered the movement of women and, racially, reminiscent of the manner in which enslavers kept black women from running during slavery. In *Wild Seed*, motherhood is not depicted as sustaining but rather as an occupation that limits movement. Nevertheless, Butler again presents Anyanwu as a character that takes the seemingly weak aspect of physicality and utilizes it as a strength. Rather than allowing Doro hamper her movement through pregnancy, Anyanwu uses her complete control of her fertility as a bargaining chip to begin to force Doro to her own will. She refuses to bear any children unless Doro agrees to her own demands.

Still, this instance of "weaponizing" motherhood is what I view as an example of Butler's ambiguity towards both the physical and social aspect of the role. In many ways, Anyanwu commodifies and depersonalizes children as coldly as Doro for the sake of her own agency. This problematizing of motherhood is a theme that Butler returns to throughout her work. Ambivalence towards parenthood, in general, and motherhood in particular is continued in *Mind of My Mind*, where it is Anyanwu who first suggests that

Doro kills their descendant-and Anyanwu's adoptive daughter- Mary. As the book progresses, Butler establishes that, as a people, due to the nature of their powers, the Patternists were "a race that could not tolerate its own young" (134). So, in reference to Roberts' view in relation to the two immortals, while I would agree that Butler makes Doro and Anyanwu's paths to immortality different to contrast their identities, the issue of motherhood is one of the reasons I do not know if those abilities can be placed within a traditionally gendered framework, a subject I will explore further in the third chapter which focuses exclusively on the Butler mother figure.

Ironically, Butler complicates any simplistic gendered reading of the two characters through parenthood with her depiction of Doro's intimate relationship with his son, Isaac. While it is part of an ongoing character trait that Anyanwu loves and respects Isaac as a husband, what is particularly striking is how much the otherwise ferocious Doro also dotes on him. Doro respects Isaac's opinion so much that Isaac is the only one who is truly allowed to speak to him in any fashion. Doro also loves his son so much that he makes a point of saying that he is going to leave Anyanwu alive until Isaac is dead. The relationship between the father and son is actually the warmest relationships depicted in *Wild Seed*. While Anyanwu loves her children enough to sacrifice her freedom for their protection, Doro has a much closer relationship with Isaac than Anyanwu has with any of her children. Isaac plays a peculiar role in the relationship between Doro and Anyanwu because he is so loved by the both of them. Isaac keeps the two of them from each others' figurative and literal throat for the fifty years that he is alive during their long existence. He is a bit of a living covenant between the two- Doro loves him as a son and Anyanwu loves him as a husband.

The issue of biologically framed motherhood is the main reason I continue to find analysis of the character as an “earth mother” feminine ideal problematic. Yes, Anyanwu defines herself through her nurturing abilities and protective actions and, while she is certainly protective, there is no real instance in the text where Anyanwu is *shown* being intimately nurturing towards her children. Conversely, the text shows few examples of her children acknowledging the character’s sacrifices for them. In fact, what is most notable vis-à-vis Anyanwu as a mother is the emotional distance there seems to be between her and her children. When her grandson is introduced in an early chapter in *Wild Seed*, by her own admission, she doesn’t know him that well. As the text jumps forward fifty years, again, there is no textual evidence to show she is particularly intimate towards the children she has with Isaac and, when readers do see a momentary peek at the relationship between Anyanwu and her youngest daughter Nwewe, this relationship is characterized by intergenerational jealousy and, finally, death. Importantly, most of Anyanwu’s depicted emotional pain that arises from the sequence featuring Nwewe is the death of her husband, Isaac rather than her daughter.

With Anyanwu, Butler highlights that motherhood is not necessarily the most sacred relationship a woman has. Throughout both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*, Anyanwu’s most essential bonds are with her mates not her children. Karla Holloway’s urge to frame Anyanwu as one of the group of “ancestral mediators” such as Miss Lissie in *The Temple of My Familiar* or Aunt Pilate in *Song of Solomon* because “Anyanwu’s numinous bravery assures survival of her ancestors regardless of the fact that their lifetimes (and hers) are scattered across three continents” (48) may be arguable in *Wild*

Seed but is ultimately problematic in the follow up, *Mind of My Mind*. In this novel, Anyanwu finally chooses to side with Doro, her lover, over her family of descendants. For Holloway, Anyanwu, like Aunt Pilate and Miss Lissie, is defined by her longevity but she also connects immortality to familial connections saying, “their insistent survival is always linked to their ability to tell their own stories and to secure their generational continuity” (48). Anyanwu’s later ironic career as a historical fiction writer certainly represents the character telling her own story but as the one who warns Doro repeatedly to kill their descendant Mary and curtail the freedom of the Patternists, Anyanwu’s relationship with her family is more complicated than simply securing their survival. In fact, Butler demonstrates the way these familial connections limit the character’s movement.

Drawing a distinction between the emotionally fulfilling relationships depicted between Anyanwu and her unnamed first husband, Isaac and, finally, even Doro, the texts clearly articulates that children are a way to curtail Anyanwu’s freedom without depicting any reward she receives in return. This issue is made manifest, in one of the few examples of her children’s acknowledgement, as Anyanwu has a conversation with one of her daughters about how having children chains Anyanwu to Doro saying, “we’re your weakness, aren’t we? You could outrun him for a hundred more years if not for us” (242). I believe Anyanwu loves her children since she does sacrifice her freedom to protect them from Doro but I also find it noteworthy that the text is sparse on any intimate details that would reflect what Anyanwu receives from the children that she sacrifices her life for.

In contrast, Anyanwu is more nurturing of her mates than her children.

Anyanwu's love for her husband Isaac is noteworthy because she is depicted as a much more intimate mate than mother. As he gets older, Anyanwu uses her healing powers to keep Isaac alive and healthy much longer than he thought possible. At the age of twenty, she uses her ability to please her first husband, a man that she states "loved her more than any other" (*Wild Seed* 53). In an early example of her using her extraordinary powers to achieve ordinary goals, she "shapes her insides" to give her first husband ten strong children but, again, the children are only viewed as important as a gift to her mate.

The concept of a woman proving her worth and love by bearing children is an ancient one, but what makes Anyanwu's tribute noteworthy is the manner in which Butler presents it. Through her active ownership of the gendered performativity of motherhood, Anyanwu reverses Foucault's analysis of the body as imprisoning concept. When she deems a mate worthy, Anyanwu rewards that mate with access to the gifts of her body. Anyanwu marries her first husband in 1300's era Africa before she knows she is a shape shifter and is initially unable to conceive. Furthermore, as a side effect of her blossoming power, Anyanwu is oftentimes sick and this husband borrows money and sacrifices to save her life. By positing a husband who loves Anyanwu in spite of what his culture would perceive as weakness, Butler shows a very modern type of love; the type of relationship that the independently minded Anyanwu continually thrives in.

As motherhood demonstrates, Butler's Anyanwu approaches cultural norms in the same way she manipulates her physical body. Just as the character values the forms of animals, race and sexuality in terms of their usefulness, Anyanwu also evaluates societal practices of gender in terms of utility. In this dispassionate assessment of the roles of

race and gender, I believe Octavia Butler's social construction of Anyanwu reflects what Judith Butler identifies as the performative nature of sex, gender and sexuality. Judith Butler proposes that there is no set definition of the three and that what society views as natural classifications are, in actuality, the results of repetitive actions that society reinforces as proper. She goes on to say, "Such acts gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). Judith Butler, like Octavia Butler isolates and identifies the underlying artifice of gender formation.

Judith Butler's gender performativity provides a useful framework to view Octavia Butler's social construction of Anyanwu. *Wild Seed* reveals that Anyanwu was born in the late 1300's in eastern Nigeria and the novel follows her chronological growth over six hundred years. During this time, she moves from Central Africa to Oakland, California, becoming part of the American immigrant experience, behaviorally transforming from an African to an African-American. Noticeably, as the years go by, the character fully acknowledges the artifice of cultural norms and embodies Judith Butler's articulation of gender performativity. Anyanwu's framing of feminized adaption into survival skill is highlighted when she learns the American way of dressing and behaving after arriving in Doro's Virginia settlement:

Anyanwu watched carefully as the white woman placed first a clean cloth, then dishes and utensils on the long narrow table at which the household

was to eat. Anyanwu was glad that some of the food and the white people's ways of eating it were familiar to her from the ship. She could sit down and have a meal without seeming utterly ignorant. She could not have cooked the meal, but that would come, too in time. She would learn. ... New words, new ways, new clothing...She was glad of the cumbersome clothing, though, finally. It made her look more like the other women, black and white, whom she had seen in the village, and that was important. She had lived in enough different towns through her various marriages to know the necessity of learning to behave as others did. What was common in one place could be ridiculous in another and abomination in a third. Ignorance could be costly (110).

Significantly, the above demonstrates how cerebrally Anyanwu approaches and deconstructs the behavior and movements of her new European host. Besides again highlighting the character's practicality, the passage demonstrates how Anyanwu complicates Roberts' more feminized, empathically based framework that theorizes Anyanwu is successful in navigating the world because her, "immortal body shows her the unity of all life" (141). It is not only her body but her powers of observation and study that allow her to prosper in the new society. Yes, her body is the main tool she uses to gain her freedom but Anyanwu's keen mind is just as essential. Like Salvaggio, Thelma Shinn observes, Anyanwu is methodical and scientific in her approach to her abilities and that:

Anyanwu, not the male principle Doro, is the source of logic, reason, the analytical workings of the mind in *Wild Seed*. She has achieved her shape-shifting knowledge by careful, systematic inner quests, where she has studied herself down to the atoms...She can ‘clone’ an animal or fish only after she has eaten some of it and studied within her genetic makeup. She is both the scientist and the laboratory. (213)

I would note that Shinn’s observation that Anyanwu is both, “the scientist and the laboratory” can additionally be made about most of Butler’s female protagonists and all of the ones this project focuses on. There is no magic in Octavia Butler’s worlds. Anyanwu’s descendant, Mary inherits her powers but is proficient in the use of the pattern only through disciplined study and practice. Likewise, Butler outlines a specifically disciplined system of calculations and formulas that the Patternist culture uses in the far future. Outside of the Patternist novels, *Dawn*’s Lilith’s abilities arise through scientific means, specifically genetic manipulation of her body’s potential rather than a fantastic addition to her physical prowess. Likewise, in *Fledgling*, Shori’s physical advantages arise from years of focused bioengineering. In Octavia Butler’s novels, there is no magic and any spirituality can only be inferred. Just as the character ingests animal types and studies animal physical forms, Anyanwu acknowledges the artificiality of definitions of gender, deconstructs those definitions, and determines the usefulness of them.

Octavia Butler also uses Anyanwu to focus on the artifice of cultural identity. For instance, I think Butler’s evolution of Anyanwu’s use of the term “abomination” illustrates how the author tracks Anyanwu’s psychic journey from African to African-

American. Though she pragmatically wears the shape of a man many times, when Doro suggests that he take on a female form and they have sexual intercourse with inverted gender, based on her experiences to this point, Anyanwu insists that this is an abomination. And, of course, after Anyanwu is intimate with Doro, she calls the notion that she and his son, Isaac should get married, an abomination. Finally, though it is a small detail within the context of the other changes she must adapt to, I think it is noteworthy that Anyanwu also has to learn to overcome her specifically African resistance towards drinking cow milk, also something that she refers to as an abomination (116).

Reflecting the character's initial stance towards her native culture, Anyanwu learns English and a variety of European languages in the years that she has moved to the United States, but the novel makes clear that "...at home with her children, she often spoke as though she had never left home. She would not adopt a European name or call her children by their European names" (152). Eventually, though, she does adjust her attitude towards this decision and finally, takes the name "Emma" and her ethical base shifts as well. Gradually, Anyanwu's principles begin to adjust because of her changing circumstances.

This shift is evident through her transformation in attitude towards practices she previously referred to as abomination. In other words, as the years go by, Anyanwu begins to adapt to her new surroundings. While she swore switching genders for sexual purposes was an abomination and, is unable to maintain an erection, Anyanwu does, also, attempt to sleep with Doro as a man, while Doro takes the form of a woman. As time passes, a hundred years after she declares this action an abomination, Anyanwu goes so

far as to assume the shape of a man long enough to get married to a woman. Moreover, while it is a subtle detail, the text also makes note of Anyanwu's baking a Dutch pastry called an "olijkoeck" that, according to a recipe from a translation of the 1669 Dutch cookbook *De Vertandige Kock*, has the "abominable" milk as an ingredient. Most strikingly, over the next fifty years, though she is initially against being sexually intimate with both father and son, she eventually bears eight children with Doro and five with Isaac. And in a case of Anyanwu's accepting more changes than she, perhaps, wants to, one of the children that she has during this period is neither Doro's nor Isaac's but another of Doro's sons, Thomas (140).

Finally, by protecting her own agency, Anyanwu is even nurturing of her truest mate, Doro. In contrast to Anyanwu's adaptability, Doro remains static throughout his existence until the two meet. Whereas immortality allows Anyanwu to grow and evolve, Doro's long life, in many ways, is a type of imprisonment. He says as much, noting that loneliness and boredom are the only true enemies that he has. Of course, part of the loneliness that he experiences has to do with the nature of his ability. Doro is a predator. His very nature does not allow him to foster the relationships he desires. Because he is always the most dangerous being in any environment, there is never an impetus for him to bend or adapt. Hence, he remains the same. By jumping from body to body, Doro can potentially kill all of those around him and, though his body changes, there is no change to his mind. As his son Isaac notes when he tries to explain how he always knows Doro, regardless of his outward appearance, "you're you, that's all" (136). However, at the conclusion of *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu forces Doro into a new relationship by threatening to kill herself and leave him alone in the world. In life and death, Butler shows Anyanwu

will always control her own destiny. With this action, Anyanwu protects her children but she does something more pointedly life altering with the rigid Doro; “Anyanwu forces him to recognize love, to reveal love; through love, she forces him to change” (Govan 83). In forcing this change, which is a kind of healing, I would say that Butler does finally frame Anyanwu as a gendered being.

While I believe an overall gendered paralleling of her adaptability with Doro’s immovability is reductionist, Anyanwu’s final act of making Doro evolve in his dealings with his people represents what Joanne Blum defines as an example of the way, “masculine modes of perception limit and divide more stringently than feminine, and that learning to hear the feminine voice is central to cultural change” (62). Blum theorizes that female writers of science fiction are drawn to the genre because its nature “provides abundant space for challenging a wide range of cultural divisions” (61) and allows those writers to create fictive spaces like the Patternist culture for Octavia Butler to make societal observations. And, while Anyanwu’s ability to change herself represents the pragmatic more than the philosophical, her ability to change the behavior of those around her more accurately represents the exploration of gender roles that Roberts et al. observe.

Furthermore, this role as change agent specifically for Doro, as opposed to the community around her, fits into what I see as Butler’s construction of Anyanwu as primarily a companion of Doro rather than as mother to her children. As I will address further in chapter three, Anyanwu effects change in Doro far more dramatically and permanently than she does the surrounding community of their descendants. Once Anyanwu makes Doro respect her as an equal, their relationships flourish. These two characters belong to one another more than they do the world around them. The evolution

of the couple's relationship continues as time passes. *Mind of My Mind* takes place one hundred and fifty years later and, while Anyanwu, now referred to as Emma, is no longer the main protagonist, the novel contains further vital details in Butler's construction of Emma's personality as well as the continually evolving relationship with Doro that I believe is most important about the character. In the opening pages, Doro refers Emma as the very familial, "Em" when the character first appears in *Mind of My Mind*. Gone is the antagonism and tension that defined the relationship between the two in *Wild Seed*. In *Mind of My Mind*, having been together for two centuries, they appear as an old married couple.

Within a larger racialized context, Butler's construction of Anyanwu's transition into the "Emma phase" of life also highlights the author's placement of the character fully in the African-American tradition. Significantly, this is a conscious choice Butler makes. By the time *Mind of My Mind* begins, Emma is six hundred years old. Just as the character transcends notions of gender and has is not beholden to the gendered markers and norms Judith Butler outlines, she also has no real historical link to the culture of black Americans simply because she is older than everyone alive.

As Gregory Hampton points out, "Butler presents methods of imagining the body that allow us to understand how and why the body is restricted. Through her characters and narratives, readers are better able to explore the meaning of various identities such as race, sex, and gender. These terms are seen for what they are, arbitrary markers designed to give stability to that which is unstable and ambiguous" (248). Hampton's interpretation parallels Judith Butler's in its reading of Octavia Butler's approach to identity. Since the performativity of race, gender and sex are artificial and informed by

the ever changing culture around it, by definition, those identities are arbitrary. Because of her immortality, Anyanwu is free to define herself outside of the shackles of those norms.

Still, while her fiction acknowledges the capricious nature of these physical and societal characteristics, Butler often *chooses* to utilize African-American womanhood as her focal point. While she may destabilize-and expand- what the definition of blackness is, Butler works within a specifically racialized space and perspective. As Govan says, “Whether we focus on Wheatley, the eighteenth century New England “seed” village...the nineteenth-century ante-bellum Louisiana plantation Anyanwu creates...we ingest a wealth of historical and anthropological data which utilizes an Afrocentric point of view” (84). Anyanwu reflects this fidelity to a black perspective in her choice of physicality and action. When Emma and Doro consummate their relationship, she usually regains the shape that she was born with, regardless of the body that Doro, himself, is wearing because her body is part of who she is. Again, the practice of Emma’s changing back compared to Doro’s ever changing bodies reflects the innate existential philosophy of both characters. Despite the fluidity of both characters’ forms, they both cling to an essentialist notion that their interiority is ultimately the most well defined aspect of their identity. However, both characters have slightly different perspectives vis-à-vis this philosophy.

Again, Doro subscribes to a type of Cartesian essentialism that does not attach existential importance to physicality and certainly places no significance on race. In his mind, due to his abilities, Doro doesn’t assign meaning to his physical appearance, not even his original one. In an exchange about appearance and the importance of race with

Mary, Doro and Emma's descendant and the protagonist of *Mind of My Mind*, Doro says, "It doesn't matter because I haven't been any color at all for about four thousand years. Or you could say I've been every color...I'm not black or white or yellow, because I'm not human, Mary" (87).

Conversely, though she also has the ability to change forms, Emma keeps her sensibilities and identity linked to her original color and physicality. Physically, though she is able to change into any form, human or animal that she chooses, Emma privileges her original black body over all others. Similarly, when Doro wants to impress Emma or get in her good graces, he often appears in the form of a black man who resembles the men from Emma's original homeland and reflects her innate sense of aesthetics. Unlike Doro, Emma does not see physicality as simple "vestments" or "investments." For Emma, bodies and, specifically, black bodies are not the vehicles for control that Foucault sees and, while Butler acknowledges Judith Butler's performativity with the character, she also has Emma is in full control of her actions and revels in the opportunities to express herself through them through her physicality. This celebration of black physicality and attractiveness is an underlying theme in many of Octavia Butler's writing is a subject that I will explore in depth in the fourth chapter's examination of *Fledgling*.

Pointedly, as black physicality maintains its primacy in Emma's mind, she also acknowledges the importance of the African-American experience. As Mary begins to build her Patternist community and takes over the town of Forsyth, the telepaths begin to call those without powers, "mutes." However, Emma views the term as an epithet and judges it harshly commenting that, "I know what it means...I knew the first time I heard

Mary use it. It means niggers!” (155). I agree with Dorothy Allison’s contention that, for Emma, the term “nigger” is raceless and only refers to “the one who’s made slave/child/victim” (474). However, I would add that, compared to the worldview of someone like Doro who doesn’t identify with anyone, it is very significant and noteworthy that the shape changing Emma has enough of a black identity that she immediately judges the new telepath/non-telepath paradigm within this racialized context. The term, “nigger” is a culturally specific one that reveals Emma’s culturally specific perspective just as his lack of outrage reflects Doro’s lack of one. Butler eventually justifies Emma’s suspicions when she reveals that Mary has established a link with her and refers to Emma as the equally racially/historically coded term, “her property” (195). Emma’s show of fidelity with the plight of enslaved Africans demonstrates how, regardless of the extraordinary details of immortality, telepathy, telekinesis, shape changing, etc., as well as the lack of traditional markers of the African-American experience, the character is always spiritually located in the black aesthetic and celebrates the culture’s practices and mores.

I believe this exchange is the defining moment of Emma’s characterization. Although she is older than any African-American in existence, and, unlike *Kindred*’s Dana, has never experienced chattel slavery except as an observer, Emma identifies with this history and sees the American black experience as her own. Accordingly, Emma’s ability to transform her physicality focuses attention on the primacy of black physicality in concert with the experiences and demonstrates how one cannot be separated from the other. As Alaimo argues, “[Emma’s] transformations collapse the subject/object dichotomy central to models of objectivity and to the Cartesian subjectivity that gave rise

to these models” (55). For Emma, the mind and body are the same. And that mind/body is black.

Finally, Anyanwu/Emma’s character arc is an example of the manner in which Octavia Butler’s canon parallels more nominally accepted works in the black aesthetic. On a primary level, Anyanwu’s story represents an example of a postmodern slave narrative. Using Timothy Spaulding’s definitions of the form, *Wild Seed* strongly “sets out to correct the limited historical record on slavery and to critique traditional history’s reliance on objectivity, authenticity, and realism as a means of representing the past” (2). Strategically, through its use of science fiction conventions such as shape changing and immortality, Anyanwu’s journey is also an example of a text that “creates an alternative and fictional historiography based on a subjective, fantastic and anti-realistic representation of slavery” (2). By creating her own story, Octavia Butler, like Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed and Charles Johnson establishes her own authority in relaying the black experience

Anyanwu’s story fits into the eighties black literary experience in specific ways as well. For instance, the evolution of the relationship between Emma and Doro that is alluded to at the end of *Wild Seed* and made manifest in *Mind of My Mind* is, in fact similar to the evolution in relationship between Mister and Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Similar to Emma and Doro, Mister and Celie seem to come to an understanding about what each means to the other after years of an abusive, acrimonious relationship. Like Butler, Walker seems to point towards the complication of long term relationships and, specifically, the manner in which African-American couples relate.

Besides the implications of the change in relationship terms between Doro and Emma, there is a specific moment that is an example of intertextuality between *Wild Seed* and the postmodern slave narrative, *Beloved*. Both *Wild Seed* and *Beloved* outline a moment of tenderness where the women reclaim their motherhood by sharing their milk with their lovers, Sethe with Paul D in *Beloved* and, towards the conclusion, Anyanwu with Doro. The latter is complicated, however, by the fact that this reclamation of womanhood and motherhood is shared with the very person who has taken both female birthrights from the woman engaging in the activity.

This sequence of sensual breast milk sharing and the manner in which the lover/motherhood line is blurred and challenged also alludes to something that both novels have in common; the aforementioned complication and ambivalence that they show towards black motherhood. Previously, I have observed how, on one end of the spectrum, Butler constructs a protective but, ultimately, emotionally distant mother/daughter relationship for Anyanwu in both novels. The mother/daughter relationship between Sethe and Beloved in *Beloved* exhibits the same characteristics and, in analyzing that relationship, critic Andrea O'Reilly makes an observation that I believe is relevant towards critiquing Anyanwu and her connection to her daughters. O'Reilly writes, "The development of the child's selfhood is contingent upon the mother having a clearly defined sense of self from which to confer recognition... Under slavery black women are viewed as object and breeder; this denies slave women their own subjectivity, the very requirement for an attainment of selfhood in children" (153). Motherhood is a problematic proposition in the history of African-American women because, for most of their history in this country, they not only lacked the selfhood that O'Reilly speaks of but

they also found themselves hampered and crippled by the very role that brought other women the legitimacy of useful social status.

This concept of selfhood as prerequisite to motherhood is profound within the context of the construction of Anyanwu's character because so much of the story's text and subtext revolves around her identity. O'Reilly goes on to posit that a lack of selfhood leads to a blurring between the identities of mother and daughter. This phenomenon is certainly alluded to several times in the text of both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*. Besides the fact that both Nwewe, in the former and Mary, in the latter are literal daughters, the text in both note how much they physically resemble Anyanwu. Between this fact, the aforementioned master/slave relationship that she has with Doro and the manner in which the section is written, I would argue that *Wild Seed* and, specifically, the character of Anyanwu fit into the same tradition of post-modern slave narrative as any of Toni Morrison's or Alice Walker's work. All of these women explored the ramifications of the legacy of slavery, often times within a rural antebellum setting.

Anyanwu is an extraordinarily dynamic and important character in the context of black literature. With her, Octavia Butler has created a female ideal that interrogates and critiques Western womanhood while celebrating black femininity. As she critiques overall definitions of Westernized definitions of gender, Butler also utilizes Anyanwu to question motherhood and its role in limiting the movement of black women. This interrogation of motherhood speaks to a fundamental commitment to personal freedom that is often devalued in sacrifice to maternity. As she defends freedom, I would argue Butler also uses Anyanwu to champion black beauty. As a shape changer, when given the

choice, she always chooses the form of a black woman, demonstrating her allegiance to black physicality as well as an implicit celebration of the form's aesthetic value. With Anyanwu, Octavia Butler articulates her unique feminist positions and constructs the rhetorical framework to position her with other black women characters.

CHAPTER 3
AUTHORIAL CONTROL AND FEMININE CO-OPTION IN *DAWN*

In this chapter I will shift my focus to Lilith from the Xenogenesis or Lilith's Brood trilogy, specifically focusing on the first novel in the sequence, *Dawn*. In contrast to the powerful Anyanwu, I am mainly interested in the character Lilith because, within her environment, she represents one of the few relatively powerless black female characters in Butler's canon. I see a link between that powerlessness and a level of authorial ambivalence that is not seen in most of Butler's other works. Furthermore, I believe Butler's reluctance to form value judgments on Lilith's actions reveals essential truths about the way Butler approaches black femininity and the black body. The text is often opaque in its representation of Lilith's challenges and this opacity is reflected in the often divergent critiques of the novel. I believe an examination of those critiques speaks to this authorial ambivalence and that, ultimately, an overall examination of Butler's construction of Lilith is worthwhile because it illuminates why Butler is more comfortable and writes more directly about strong female characters. *Dawn* and the author's muted evaluation of Lilith, like the forceful clarity of the evaluation of *Wild Seed*'s Anyanwu, reflects how Octavia Butler's writing demonstrates more interest in active, powerful protagonists and the creation of new opportunities for black women rather than an examination of old realities.

Because she is so powerful, in the context of both personal freedom and control of her environment, Anyanwu does not represent the reality of the powerlessness that African-American women have historically faced. While she was arguably weaker than Doro, Anyanwu's immortality, her shape changing ability, her centuries' worth of

knowledge and wisdom still granted her a strong position in facing her challenges. As I argue in the first chapter, Anyanwu finally overcomes her obstacles because of the many tools she was born with.

In fact, most of Butler's protagonists possess attributes which help them face their various challenges. Though she is initially presented as one of Doro's many "brood mares," Anyanwu's descendant, Mary, is the first to control the powerful Pattern in *Mind of My Mind*. In spite of the collapse of the world around her, *Parable of the Sower's* Lauren uses the tools of literacy and the close knit community around her to support her efforts and allows her belief system, Earthseed, to prosper and eventually reach the stars. Though she is an amnesic, *Fledgling's* Shori possesses powerful vampiric abilities, even more powerful than her peers, as well as the advantages of her genetic mutations. Like Anyanwu, her abilities offer great protection against her adversaries. Even Dana, thrust into antebellum slavery in *Kindred*, uses her literacy, knowledge of the future, and the optimism that she will be transported home and, eventually, the influence over her white ancestor Rufus to good effect. Compared to all of these characters, Lilith's options, like her abilities, are unbelievably limited.

Dawn opens, in the near future, when civilization has been obliterated due to World War III. As humanity neared extinction, an alien race, the Oankali, rescued all of the survivors, took them to their orbiting space craft and placed the bulk of them into suspended animation. Although there are some humans who are allowed to stay awake and live out their lives on the Oankalian ship, the vast majority are destined to be returned to a reinvigorated planet Earth. To assist in humanity's survival, the Oankali awaken Lilith, grant her vast, extraordinary abilities such as super strength and increased

endurance and plan on training her to train others to survive on the newly fertile but, now, technologically free planet.

The Oankali are not helping for altruistic reasons, however. In return for their help, the aliens want to interbreed with humanity, a practice they refer to as “trading.” It is the only way they reproduce, going from planet to planet, breeding with new species. To make sure the practice is adopted by the new species they encounter, the Oankali utilize their advanced technology to control the fertility of species they trade with, making it impossible for the partner groups to reproduce amongst themselves. Furthermore, the Oankali have three genders, male, female and Ooloi with the latter projecting a pheromone, that makes it physically impossible for males and females to have sex with just one another. Making the matter even more complicated, this third sex resembles a five-foot tall sea anemone which visually repulses every human that is exposed to it. In other words, the Oankali give humanity a choice between extinction through the aliens’ forced imposition of infertility or a process of interbreeding, completely different and alien to everything humanity knows.

Like *Wild Seed’s* Doro, the Oankali reflect Foucault’s observation that a stronger institution uses the powerless’ physicality to bend them to their will. Butler explicitly states that the alien species manipulates human physiology rather than adding another element. The desire and revulsion humanity feels after coming into contact with the Oankali is already rooted in their bodies. With the Oankali, Butler creates an institution that can naturally achieve what Doro must manipulate through centuries and generations of effort.

The Oankali differ from Doro, however, because they do not seem as baldly predatory. Arguably, they are simply engaged in a sort of genetic *quid pro quo*; they are helping but that help comes at a cost. Also, the Oankali refer to humanity as seductive, implying that, once they come in contact, with humans, they also do not have any choice in the matter. This ethical dilemma of whether the Oankali are master or slave, savior or destroyer forms the foundation of the unique and complicated situation of the relationships between humanity and the Oankali in *Dawn*.

On the macrocosmic level, the issue of gender and sexuality is a deracialized one in the book. Superficially, *Dawn* can be critiqued as an examination of power inequities between two species. Still, Butler very specifically racializes *Lilith's* experience and to ignore that aspect overly simplifies the subtext of power. I believe Lilith is absolutely victimized by the Oankali, but it is not a case where Butler allows her to be “cleanly” identified as “victim.” As characters, including Lilith herself, observe many times, she is co-opted in a manner by the Oankali that make it difficult for readers to wholeheartedly feel a level of affinity with her. The reader is uncomfortable with Lilith as a victimized protagonist because, many times, Lilith acts as if she enjoys what is happening to her.

But I believe this unease with Lilith's victimhood speaks to the aforementioned racial specificity that Butler brings to the story and is what ultimately ties *Dawn* into a specific tradition of the African-American female slave narrative. Like all female slaves, most famously, Harriet Jacobs, Lilith does not have the luxury of maintaining her passive “purity” in the face of hardship. Lilith is forced to act and forced to make decisions based on only bad or worse options. To ignore this aspect of Lilith's relationship with the Oankali and her overall journey through the text is reductionist and limited, at best,

and, at worst misses one of the main points of the text: the oftentimes complicated relationship between oppressor and oppressed. I believe this complication and the general unease the text reflects in openly addressing the nature of that relationship has lead to the wide range of critiques of Lilith.

For instance, overall, Dorothy Allison applauds the relationship between species. Although acknowledging that the alien race has some slave master like attitudes towards humanity, Allison finally evaluates the Oankali sexual process as a liberating development because it destabilizes heterosexual normality. Furthermore, Allison views the relationship between the two species as a positive one because it removes the patriarchal authority structure. Finally, she suggests that Butler sees the Oankali relationship as “the answer to sexual violence-not abstinence or enforced celibacy, but a redefinition of sex and a rapprochement between the genders” (427). For Allison, the realignment of traditional masculinity to a subservient role, as well as, the sheer alienness of Oankali sexual mores are both details that trump any critique of Lilith’s particular predicament.

Although she focuses more on the implicit power inequity between the two races, Donna Haraway, like Allison, also views Butler’s construction of the human/Oankali relationship as a positive one due to the way it challenges and destabilizes normative roles of race, gender and the body. In “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” she says, “Lilith mediates the transformation of humanity through genetic exchange with extra-terrestrial lovers/rescuers/destroyers/genetic engineers, who reform earth's habitats after the nuclear holocaust and coerce surviving humans into intimate fusion with them” (149) . Tellingly,

though she acknowledges the aforementioned inequity with the word, “coerce,” she grants Lilith an arguable level of agency by attaching the verb, “mediate” to the character’s actions. And, in “Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies,” Haraway continues in this vein, focusing on the Otherness of the Oankali and their practices as Butler’s way of challenging societal norms.

Writers like Michelle Osherow focus on Lilith’s name and foreground the connection between her and the character from Biblical apocrypha. A feminist iconic symbol, Lilith was Adam’s first wife who left him because she was not treated as an equal and went on to have monstrous children. Osherow connects the two traits of feminized independence and monstrous children between the mythical Lilith and *Dawn*’s protagonist noting, not only her boldness but also her special powers, the way she is almost raped by a fellow human survivor (mirroring the mythical Lilith’s resistance of Adam’s attention) and her eventual perpetual exile from her home. However, Osherow goes on to point out the manner in that the two Lilith’s are different, focusing especially on the tension *Dawn*’s Lilith has between resistor to the masculine power structure and her role as matriarch and caretaker of the post-apocalyptic group of humans (76). Still, like Haraway and Allison, Osherow views the Oankali as a narrative element that offers an opportunity to critique patriarchal power structures rather than a power structure that should, itself, be challenged. For instance, it is very telling of Osherow’s view that, when discussing the attempted rape of *Dawn*’s Lilith, she does not mention the Oankali use of physical coercion. Ironically, I would argue that, since the Oankali are in a much more powerful position than humanity, the aliens do not have to resort to the level of physical attack that Butler’s human aggressors engage.

On the other side of the spectrum of opinion are the other group of critics who have focused on the power inequity between the two races. For instance, Eric White observes one level of the implicit historic commentary of the Oankali/humanity power inequity noting,

...the survivors of nuclear apocalypse, regardless of their own wishes, will be assimilated by the Oankali with the consequence that humanity as a distinct species will come to an end. If the behavior depicted here is typical of Oankali trade practices, then the aliens are merely imperialistic or piratical adventurers who roam the galaxy preying upon and ultimately abolishing the difference they crave in its specificity. (405)

For White, the details of the sexual relationship between the Oankali and humanity are not as important as the inequity of control displayed. They are not Allison et. al's harbingers of diversity and challengers to patriarchal norms. To White, the Oankali are relentless consumers and predators that threaten the definition of human culture. His use of terms like, "imperialistic," and "practical" also speak to White conflation of Oankali norms with the European tradition of colonial exploitation.

I think the dynamic between the Oankali and humanity is more nuanced than that of simply predator and prey. While, I agree with White's reading that, the inherent difference in power speaks to the lack of choice humanity has in the "trade" equation, like Roger Luckhurst, I think he is "reading the [Lilith's Brood] trilogy as race-blind science fiction" (31) and, because White does not really acknowledge race, he simplifies the Oankali/humanity relationships by using the term, "imperialistic." Certainly, the history of European imperialism and colonialism is fraught with racial implications but,

to put the connection between the two races in these terms is to deny what I view as the racial specificity of the imagery Butler employs. While White rightly points to Lilith's identity saying she was, "doubly marginalized as an African American in US society by race and gender (404)", he does not focus on how integrally race and gender inform the bond between Lilith and the Oankali.

Likewise, because the sexual coercion between human and alien is nonviolent, I think it is easy to misread the relationship between the Oankali and Lilith the way Dorothy Allison does, referring to "the Oankali's benign attitude toward sex and sexual variation" as an "answer to sexual violence" and the alien race as a species that "honor the act of procreation so greatly they are incapable of rape" (477). I believe Jim Miller's more complex reading that the Oankali are "both saviors and masters of the humans with whom they seek to join" (340) more closely captures the relationship between the two species though he also does not acknowledge the role race and gender plays in that relationship.

White is correct in observing that, by having the Oankali represent a technologically superior force that presents such unappealing options to humanity, as, specifically Western readers, we are forced to take the place of so many others who have been faced with Western invaders/colonists/explorers. Additionally, by having those options specifically pertain to fertility and sexuality, Butler creates a paradigm in which definitions of coercion, reproductive control, and, ultimately, sexual assault can be interrogated and challenged. The Oankali use terms like "trade partner" which imply parity between the two parties involved but Butler repeatedly shows that only one group in the "partnership" holds any true power. Within this context, the resulting struggles

between the Oankali and the remnants of humanity resonate in a disturbing manner because that struggle illustrates how the inequity of power directly affects how the weak enter into sexual relationships.

Octavia Butler's decision to make the main character a black woman also comments upon and complicates this power structure in very specific ways. Historically, African-American women have had to make pragmatic and compromising choices based on a limited and unfair set of options. Because of the constraints of slavery, black women often had to choose between dignity and survival when dealing with a seemingly implacable enemy. And, many times, these choices involved the very issues of reproductive rights, access to children and overall sexuality that Butler positions Lilith to grapple with.

To view the relationship between humanity and Oankali without truly engaging the implications of race and gender misses some nuance. Through specific imagery, Octavia Butler links Lilith Iyapo to this tradition of African-American slavery and is well aware of the intertextuality that Lilith's demographic forces critics to engage in. In her article "Dialogic Origins and Alien Identities in Butler's *Xenogenesis*," critic Cathy Peppers discusses this connection between Lilith and the slavery experience and the manner in which Butler makes it manifest:

From the beginning of *Dawn*, Lilith's perception of her situation echoes the discourses of both the slave narrative and sociobiology. Her "awakening" to discover that she has been taken from Earth to be kept captive on an alien ship orbiting beyond the moon reconstructs the African slave's Middle Passage. Like the African slaves in America, she is (at

first) denied access to reading or writing materials, those things "humans need...to help us remember" (§2.4:65). Hence, while the Oankali can tell Lilith the "stories of the long, multispecies Oankali history," the most Lilith can do is scratch Nikanj's name in the dirt with her finger (§2.4:64-65). And, like Harriet Jacobs describing the moral contradictions fundamental to life under slavery—"There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (55)—Lilith, too, realizes that "She was a captive. What courtesy did a captive owe beyond what was necessary for self-preservation?" (§2.4:67). She perceives the morality of "her job...to prepare [the other humans] to be the Oankali's new [reproductive] trading partners" as "impossible" (§3.1:117). (48)

I believe Lilith's story is similar to Harriet Jacobs but I do not think Pepper truly encapsulates just how dire Lilith's situation is. Like Pepper, I also believe Lilith's story connects her to the specific tradition of the female slave narrative characterized most vividly by Harriet Jacobs' memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Though there are narrative and thematic similarities between the two books, *Dawn* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ironically, a close comparison reveals that Lilith is in a more powerless position than even the enslaved Jacobs. Although her life is fraught with danger, Jacobs is surrounded by supportive family members, compassionate people in the community and, most importantly, Jacobs has more possibility to escape because, unlike Lilith, Jacobs has somewhere to run. Lilith's situation, in contrast, is one where she is surrounded by potentially hostile forces, suspicious humanity and, literally, no chance to escape. It is

this situation that finally results in what I view as Butler's reluctant evaluation of Lilith's actions and that makes the overall evaluation of *Dawn* a difficult task.

By foregrounding reproduction rights, Butler confronts an application of power with Lilith that does not affect many of her other female protagonists. For instance, because she was in full control of her physicality through her shape changing ability, Anyanwu's sexual agency was something that she was also fully in control of. In fact, regardless of Doro's threat of her children as blackmail, one of the few advantages Anyanwu presses early in her relationship with Doro is her ability to control her fertility. Likewise, other Patternist women like *Mind of My Mind*'s Mary and *Patternmaster*'s Amber as well. Outside of the Patternist saga, though she has no extraordinary abilities to control her fertility, *Parable of the Sower*'s Lauren uses condoms to decide when she is going to become pregnant

In contrast to most of Butler's female characters, there is a history of this issue's centrality in the lives of black women, which is why I will use Harriet Jacobs' seminal autobiography and slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as the framework in which I historically focus the conversation. Specifically, I will focus on how both Butler and Jacobs utilize authorial control to control their narratives. I see a pattern in the way both authors disseminate information to shape the reader's view of their protagonists. I will also use Jacobs' and her relationship to her enslavers to help illustrate the way power plays a central role in the predation and the resulting ambivalence towards the sexual predator. Jacobs' story is a useful tool for exploring these issues in *Dawn* because it is the first documentation of the sexual issues faced by black women and, thus,

provides the historical bearing to help place Butler's novel in the African-American tradition.

Jacobs' autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* epitomizes limited choices within the context of the abuse of sexual power. Born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1818, Dr. Flint, Jacob's master, began to threaten her sexually beginning when she was fifteen. At the point when she felt she could no longer evade his advances, she "voluntarily" entered into a sexual relationship with an unmarried slave owner, Mr. Sands, in hope of so angering her master that he would sell and bore two children. When Dr. Flint refused to sell her or her children, Jacobs hid in a small garret attached to her grandmother's house and eventually deceived her master into thinking she had escaped to the north. Her master finally sold her children, who were bought by Sands with the promise to Jacobs that he would free them though, this plan also had complications. Unlike the vast majority of other published slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs' story reveals an unflinching portrait of the toxic partnership of sex and power and that combination's effect on the female enslaved.

Like Jacobs' sexual relationships, the complexity of the relationship between the alien Nikanj and Lilith is a specific plot point that I believe is fully informed by race as well as gender in this manner. Throughout American history, one of main lines of defense that white rapists have used to justify their assault on black women has been the perpetuation of the myth of black lasciviousness. As Hazel Carby writes, "Sexual relations between black women and white men are often used as evidence of the existence of such complicity during the existence of the slave system." But more pointedly, Carby goes on to observe, "Thus the institutionalized rape of black women has

never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching” (39). Because of the implicit sexism and misogyny that have traditionally been intertwined in slavery criticism, the issue of sexual assault on black women has traditionally been muted.

In the case of *Dawn*, I believe the critical reticence to acknowledge this aspect of the relationship between Lilith and her captors parallels what Carby identifies as the societal reticence to contextualize historical black female sexual assault in the framework of acknowledging black oppression. Without that context, critics like Allison and Haraway misread the relationship between Lilith and her Oankali mates because Lilith is sexually aroused and satisfied in their relations. The fact that Lilith receives extraordinary physical attributes as a result of her liaison only complicates matters between the species more.

However, focusing on the material advantages that Lilith gains through her interaction with the alien species is the equivalent of stating female slaves were any less victims of rape because they were granted certain material perks such as food or clothing. Regardless of the nature of the act, if there is an inequity of power and the implication of dire circumstance if the lesser does not agree with said act, an assault has occurred. Responding to Eugene Genove’s similar claims about the relationship between white slave holders and enslaved black women in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Angela Davis succinctly sums up the true nature of this relationship noting that, “there could hardly be a basis for ‘delight, affection and love’ as long as white men by virtue of their economic position had unlimited access to Black women’s bodies. It was as oppressors-or, in the case of non-slave-owners, as agents of domination-that white men approached black women’s

bodies” (26). The Oankali, like Davis’ historic oppressors, not only had “unlimited access” to Lilith’s body, they had absolute control over her future.

In this context, the relationship between Lilith and Nikanj mirrors the one between Jacobs and Flint as well. Like Nikanj, Flint has complete power over Jacobs but attempts to seduce rather than forcibly rape. Thomas Doherty asserts that Jacobs frames her relationship this way to fit into the sentimental tradition of the nineteenth century novel. However, in that tradition, the heroine who resists the seducer is rewarded with heaven or marriage. As Doherty observes, “For the slave heroine, neither ending is possible if the author is true to her abolitionist mandate. Jacobs may appropriate the trappings of sentimental fiction but not its secure moral universe. Thus she offers the reader an alternative: personal autonomy” (86). Although the relationship between Nikanj and Lilith seems like a budding romance, like Jacobs, Lilith’s ultimate goal is freedom. Unfortunately, the terms of that freedom are based on both women’s sexuality.

Viewing women of color as overly sexualized beings fits into Eurocentric colonialist philosophy, but a specifically sexualized view of African-American women can be concretely traced to antebellum justification of their continuous sexual assault. Instead of acknowledging their own lasciviousness, white enslavers argued they had been seduced by the sexually promiscuous female slaves. Besides absolving the rapists of guilt, this rhetorical feint also had the effect of labeling black women as whores, a value that black women are, oftentimes, characterized in modern society to present day. Furthermore, as 19th century writers such as Harriet Jacobs observed, black women were implicitly judged by a standard in which they were unable to fairly meet due to their lack of power.

In chapter X of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs succinctly articulates the issues that Lilith will face: “I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by my new tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them...I had seen several women sold, with his babies at the breast” (85). Jacobs encapsulates the risk involved with an oppressor becoming sexually attracted to their slave and the lack of safety that attention entails and, again, this acknowledgement of the inequity of power between the two parallels Lilith’s situation to a certain degree.

Butler’s authorial movement and control also connects *Dawn* to the slave narrative tradition through the manner in which the author disseminates information. Traditionally, due to practical considerations of other slaves who might want to follow in their footsteps, slave narrative writers oftentimes kept certain details of their stories sketchy. Arguably, the most famous example of this authorial control is Frederick Douglass’ reticence to reveal the details of his escape at the conclusion of *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass* but, appropriately, Harriet Jacobs also practices this approach in her story, distinctively in issues that involve her sexual practices. Observe the deliberate handling of information when Harriet Jacobs describes her first sexual encounter with the lawyer and father of her children, Mr. Sands: “With all these thoughts revolving in my mind, and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, *I made a headlong plunge*. Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader!...I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day” (86). Even with an acknowledgment of 19th century societal norms regarding intimate details, Jacobs is coy about her sexual relations

with Mr. Sands to the point of being obscure. The text is so oblique that readers do not really know what has transpired until Jacobs reveals she is pregnant.

Jacobs practices restraint on other aspects of the story as well, specifically aspects that also touched on the taboo of sexual impropriety. Observing the lack of detail about Jacobs' Aunt Nancy, Jacqueline Bryant comments:

Although Jacobs shares her own experiences in the Flint household with the reading audience, she does not share the experiences of Aunt Nancy, who lives in the same household for years as a housekeeper and waiting maid...the reader can deduce that Aunt Nancy was an attractive black woman and thus a potential victim under the control of the obsessive Dr. Flint. Did Jacobs suppress her knowledge of Dr. Flint's sexual abuse of Aunt Nancy to protect the name of her dearly departed aunt? (62-63)

Jacobs continues in this oblique fashion throughout her initial courtship with Sands culminating in a moment that surprises the reader as much as the characters in the book. For Jacobs, her relationship with Sands is more important for how it allows her to distance herself from Flint than for the actual details. As readers, these priorities are relevant because we do not see any aspect of the development of Sands and Jacobs together until she is pregnant.

I agree with Gloria Randle, who, while discussing Jacobs role as a trickster character and the manner in which she maneuvers both within the text as a character and outside as the writer, says, "The reader, too, is surprised by the narrative trickster's *legerdemain*: [Jacobs'] announcement to Flint that, "in a few months I shall be a mother" is...subordinated to the exigencies of her battle of wits with Flint" (50). As the

“character,” Jacobs has very little control over her story. Flint, Sands, society all have more control over the fate of this woman. However, as the writer of the text, Jacobs has complete control over how the story is *told*.

Appropriately, the plot point in which Butler initially examines Lilith’s genetic manipulation/transgressive assault is through language. Lilith is allowed further access to the ship only when she is able to speak the Oankali language and she learns the language through the first instance of physical transgression. This detail is noteworthy because it, once again, buttresses the parallel between the traditional struggle of enslaved Africans and the situation that Lilith finds herself in. Throughout slave narratives and history, the notion of language as currency in which the enslaved is controlled, yet the same linguistic mastery is used as an avenue for freedom is repeated until any allusion to the forced learning of another language or culture can be seen as a codified reference. Furthermore, it is another sign of the ambivalent nature of her relationship with the Oankali. In many ways, Lilith has been co-opted by the Oankali; the oppressor’s language has become the language of the oppressed yet it is the avenue she needs to move. Describing Jacobs’ similar situation, Martha Cutter sums up Lilith’s plight: “The problem Jacobs faces in her narrative, then, is how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when language itself is a large part of her oppression. How can Jacobs use her literacy in a way which liberates her from the dominant discursive practices of her society? To speak in the ‘master’s’ language is to remain trapped within a system of discourse which denies her subjectivity” (209). Like Jacobs, Lilith must use “the master’s language” to facilitate her movement, regardless of how that language serves to compromise her because being compromised is better than being helpless.

Frances Bonner addresses Butler's reticence towards detailing Lilith's sexual history with the Oankali and how that decision reflects Butler interceding on her character's behalf in "Difference and Desire, Slavery and Seduction: Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*." Referencing the relatively explicit scene where Lilith's human mate, Joseph is introduced to Oankali sexuality, Bonner notes:

It is I think particularly notable that Butler presents this scene with the male rather than the female human and indeed does not show us the scene in which Nikanj first rapes/seduces Lilith at all. It occurs between the first and second sections of *Dawn* and is not even recalled in memory. It is however a most telling absence. With Lilith there to assure the reader that the sexual experience is pleasurable and something she is all too willing to engage in herself, rape more easily masquerades as seduction (58).

I agree with Bonner's assessment that, structurally, the narrative absence of Lilith's first sexual experience, as well as, the overall lack of clarity in detail, reflects a larger strategy that Butler employs with the reader. This slow parsing out of information is a tactic that Butler employs for aspects of the sexual mores of the Oankali for several reasons. Primarily, the author organically allows the reader to learn about the process at a rate that doesn't impede the necessities of a good story. If Butler had revealed all of the aspects of the Oankali sex life in one chunk it would have taken several pages and stopped the narrative momentum.

Butler is also employing a strategy that many of the slave narrative writers did, however, expressing a level of authorial control to assist in the shaping of the subject's

moral construction. The fact that Lilith has, in some ways, given in to the Oankali plan for humans and, almost in reward for that, been granted superhuman gifts, is a challenging one for readers to accept. When this is coupled with the detail that the granting of the gifts is a sexually gratifying act in itself, the situation potentially shows Lilith as little more than a Judas Goat, an evaluation that Butler attempts to downplay.

Lilith's cleaving to any level of sexual control within a powerless situation also mirrors how Jacobs chooses to be with Sands who is not that different a man than Flint but still represents her own choice. As Randle says, "Both men are 'civilized' members of the community; both perceive [Jacobs] as an object of sexual desire... But it is not only that Sands represents the lesser evil: He also represents... the difference between passive resignation and proactive rebellion. Choosing him, in effect, allows her to make a *choice*" (49) Jacobs still lacks any real agency as an enslaved woman but, within, that context, she still manages through resist as best she can. Like Jacobs, Lilith does the best she can to exercise some level of agency in the midst of dire circumstances.

Of course, when Lilith is introduced, she is as helpless as the rest of humanity. She awakens in an empty white room where a disembodied voice interrogates her about her background before the war. She is unable to leave the room and has no control over what she eats nor is she allowed clothing. At one point, a young boy is brought in to stay with her but, after an undetermined period of time, he is abruptly taken away. Eventually, the first male Oankali she meets, Jdahya, comes into her room and refuses to leave until Lilith gets used to his quite alien appearance. In fact, at one point of Lilith's "orientation," the Oankali male gets into bed with her and refuses to let her sleep alone. And while she is never sexually assaulted, the implication of sexual assault with this

particularized invasion of space is clear. Only when her captors decide she is ready is Lilith allowed to leave her room and continue onto her, at that point, unknown purpose.

As Peppers observes, if you remove the extraordinary elements from the above description, Butler could be relating the biography of an enslaved African woman in the 19th century. The absolute lack of control, the unknown quality of her captors, the combination of coercion and seduction that occurs; in many ways, much like in the case of *Wild Seed* or the better known, *Kindred*, Octavia Butler is once again constructing a post-modern slave narrative. In *Dawn*, however, Butler fully removes the philosophical underpinnings and societal implications of slavery from the constraints of history. Freed from those limitations, Butler is able to interrogate those issues from a fresh perspective. Like its literary predecessors, including her contributions to the field, *Dawn* is ultimately, about the application of power and control and, specifically, sexual control.

Specifically, vis-à-vis the concept of power, unlike other Butler protagonists, like Anyanwu, her abilities come from without, not within. When Lilith finally achieves a degree of extraordinary physical prowess, rather than serving as a source of autonomy, the abilities are a reminder that the character is beholden to someone other than herself. Within the context of the Butler protagonist, this is a major compromise of power for agency. Yes, she is more powerful than her human peers but Lilith is never so powerful that she can move outside of the purview of the Oankali. Yet, like Jacobs the writer, Butler never uses the character Lilith to comment on this inequity.

Reflecting Bonner's observation about the initial sex scene, Butler utilizes the male characters to make her most pointed critiques of Oankali power and sexuality. All of the male characters, including the African-American Paul and the Asian Joseph, are

the ones that point to an unspoken implication that runs throughout the text, the codified maleness of the non-gendered ooloi based on their position of power. Butler acknowledges this gendered observation, saying, “the men don’t like it because they feel they’re being made into women... That’s the way they see it because the men aren’t at the top of the hierarchy any more, biologically or sexually” (Mehaffy 63). In fact, throughout the novel, while Lilith uses the gender accurate pronoun, “it” to talk about the ooloi, every male figure bitterly refers to them as, “he.” Paul, another captured human who has grown into adulthood under the auspices of the Oankali, first addresses the issue before his assault on Lilith. After addressing Nikanj as, “he,” Lilith responds,

“Nikanj isn’t male,’ she said. ‘It’s ooloi.’

‘Yeah, I know. But doesn’t yours seem male to you?’

She thought about that. ‘No. I guess I’ve taken their word for what they are.

‘When they woke me up, I thought the ooloi acted like men and women while the males and females acted like eunuchs. I never really lost the habit of thinking of ooloi as male or female...

‘You wait until yours is mature,’ he said. ‘You’ll see what I mean.

They change when they’ve grown those two extra things.’ (90)

“Those two extra things,” Paul refers to are the sensory arms that the ooloi use to facilitate their changes and the effects. The text describes them as “elephantine, thick, gray and tree-trunkish.” The phallic allusions are pointed and concrete. The male characters, to a man, are uncomfortable with the implications of their having relations

with the ooloi. Further in the conversation, Paul sums up the feelings of all of the men in *Dawn*:

...you know they're not arms, no matter what they tell us to call them.

When those things grow in, ooloi let everyone know who's in charge. The Oankali need a little women's and men's lib up here (90).

I find the manner that Butler frames this conversation to be particularly noteworthy because it is the most pointed criticism of the Oankali's practices in the text. At this point in the exchange, while Lilith has certain suspicious feelings about Paul, there's no reason for her to disbelieve his observations. On the contrary, Lilith and the narration acknowledge that Paul is the authority of the two since he has known them longer and has more experience with the species. And while Paul's attempted rape and murder certainly change the way we view him, there is no real reason to question his reading of the socio-sexual critique of Oankali relationships and, specifically, the role of the ooloi. In fact, in what soon becomes a pattern, this male critique of their behavior may, arguably, be what drives most of the men in *Dawn* to act out in protest more dramatically than their female counterparts.

Another character, Gabriel captures the feelings of shame and helplessness the men feel during Oankali sex, saying, "Look at things from [his] point of view...He's not in control even of what his own body does and feels. *He's taken like a woman* [emphasis mine]...He knows the ooloi aren't male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn't matter. It doesn't fucking matter!" (201). The male characters are the ones who articulate the lack of sexual control that is only implied by Lilith.

The most dramatic example of this articulation occurs with Lilith's human mate, Joseph. Perhaps the most important and most sympathetic male character in the book is Lilith's lover, Joseph. Unlike Paul or most of the other male characters, Butler constructs Joseph as a confident, fairly evolved example of modern manhood. He is someone who would not ordinarily fall into stereotypical opinions of gendered power roles. Yet, as Bonner observes, the first instance we are shown of his sexual encounter with the ooloi, Nikanj is very disturbing:

[Joseph] pulled his arm free. 'You said I could choose. I've made my choice!'

'You have, yes.' It opened his jacket with its many-fingered true hands and stripped the garment from him. When he would have backed away, it held him. It managed to lie down on the bed with him without seeming to force him down. 'You see. Your body has made a different choice.'

He struggled violently for several seconds, then stopped. 'Why are you doing this?' he demanded.

'Close your eyes.'

'What?'

'Lie here with me for a while and close your eyes.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Nothing. Close your eyes.'

'I don't believe you.'

'You're not afraid of me. Close your eyes.'

Silence. (185)

The allusions to date rape are evocative and, seemingly, deliberate. Though there is no violence, Nikanj is forcibly coercing Joseph to have sex with it. Using the justification, “well, your mouth says, ‘no’ but your body says, ‘yes’” cannot justify the action. Importantly, Nikanj tells him, over and over, to “close his eyes” as if it knows that, visually and cognitively, Joseph cannot accept the action but, if it can manipulate his body without that sense getting involved, the rape can go more smoothly.

The dichotomy between human and alien sex is clearly marked as an identifying feature for the humans in *Dawn*. As Amanda Boulter says, “The humans insist...upon heterosexuality (and the relation between sexual pleasure and reproduction) as a defining characteristic of their nature as a two-sexed species. Among the humans deviation from the heterosexual norm is synonymous with the non-human” (175). Within this framework, the sexual assault is also an attack on the men’s basic humanity.

This certainly helps to place the behavior of Wray Ordway in an explainable paradigm. When the character is first introduced upon his awakening, he attacks and, according to the text, “might have raped” the character Leah if he were a bigger man. This is significant in a text that is thematically centered on the language of sexual assault because he is the first character who, unlike Paul, has not been culturally influenced by the Oankali and engages in a sexual assault. The fact that the potential victim, Leah, is soon sleeping with him after the assault also reflects Butler’s complicated views on sexual propriety and space. For humanity’s representatives in *Dawn*, sexual assault is forgivable, whether the assailant is human or alien. The only unforgivable sexual act is the alien one.

The other reason I find Wray Ordway's character so essential vis-à-vis the ongoing conversation about the Oankali is due to his eventual reaction to them. When, finally, all of the human couples are paired off with an ooloi, Wray Ordway is the only who succeeds in killing one of them. Within the context of the book and, certainly, within the framework of Octavia Butler's practice of creating large casts, it is a small detail. Still, it *is* notable that the one human is can be characterized as "The Rapist" is the one who viscerally recognizes what the Oankali do and manages to kill one of the class of alien who are, arguably, the most effective rapists in the text. The incident also alludes to an important aspect of Lilith's psyche:

...Under their influence, he accepted union and pleasure. When that influence was allowed to wane and Peter began to think, he *apparently decided* [emphasis mine] he had been humiliated and enslaved. The drug seemed to him to be not a less painful way of getting used to frightening nonhumans, but a way of turning him against himself, causing him to demean himself in alien perversions. His humanity was profaned. His manhood was taken away (189).

I believe Butler reveals a great deal about Lilith's developing view of her situation with the two words, "apparently decided." By stating that Wray made a conscious choice to be offended by the details of his new relationship, Lilith implies that she believes he had some sort of power to judge and that there is nothing, intrinsically, wrong with the way the Oankali bring people into their fold, as it were. This is an interpretation of the human/alien relationship that not only absolves the Oankali of blame but also speaks to the mental adjustments that Lilith is going through to live with her own decisions.

Her read of Wray's death also implies what her feelings are about her own situation and how she's coping with those emotions. When a person is victimized in a manner such as Lilith and options are limited to the point where nothing you do is a choice you would ordinarily make, the issue of shame comes to the forefront. While the victim is actually the one who is faulted, there is potentially the illusion of complicity that she has to address because, even though circumstances have led to a limited set of choices, a choice *has* been made, in the case of Lilith, going along with the relationship with Nikanj. And, in the victim's mind, oftentimes, that speaks to their values. Like Harriet Jacobs, Lilith chooses to frame her relationship in terms of choice. Whether or not this is true is left noticeably vague to the reader in the text.

Wray Ordway's initial assault is not the only incident where traditional, violent rape is attempted nor is it the only one that provides a peek into Lilith's psyche. Once a large group has been awakened, two factions emerge; one that follows Lilith and one that is against her. As the relationship breaks down between the two groups, the anti-Lilith faction attempts to coerce a woman in Lilith's group to join them. Ironically Jean, the woman that Lilith has previously saved from rape defiantly proclaims, "What the hell is she saving herself for?...It's her duty to get together with someone", once it's clear that there are exactly as many men as there are women, the unspoken alien consensus is that everyone pairs up. In the case of the potential victim, however, the group has decided that she's taking too long. Lilith eventually breaks up the assault, declaring in response, "There'll be no rape here,...Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else's body. There'll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!"(173).

The underlying irony of this entire incident, however, is that Lilith has the physical strength and overall authority to mandate such a non-assault policy because, through the transgressive Oankali genetic manipulation, *her* body has become the property of someone else. In the fight, Lilith uses the superior strength granted by the ooloi, Nikanj, during the sexualized genetic manipulation. And, in a broader sense, she has been placed in this leadership role only after she has become coupled with Nikanj.

By taking this moral high ground and undercutting the implicit argument for moral relativism, Lilith has placed her own actions into the spotlight and separated herself from her human peers. Furthermore, as her comments about Wray Ordway reveal, Lilith does not understand how others view her relationship with the Oankali. In the view of her fellow humans, Lilith has, voluntarily, submitted to a transgression that she has admonished them for forcibly attempting. This lack of awareness on her part complicates Lilith's relationship with the other humans because, in their eyes, she is not being victimized; she is a collaborator.

The conflict between Lilith and the other humans ultimately comes to a head in the climactic battle between the humans and Oankali at the end of the novel. After murdering Lilith's lover, Joseph, a group of humans strike out on their own, thinking that the space ship is, in fact, Earth. Due to the murder, the Oankali, alone with Lilith follow the rogue group and a battle ensues. In the midst of the fight, Lilith's Oankali mate Nikanj is mortally injured. To help with its healing, in the middle of the battle and, more importantly, in front of her human compatriots, Lilith strips so that Nikanj can link with her. In her own words, she says she stripped, "refusing to think of how she would look to the humans still conscious. They would be certain now that she was a traitor. Stripping

naked on the battlefield to lie down with the enemy. Even the few who had accepted her might turn on her now. But she had just lost Joseph. She could not lose Nikanj too” (228).

Lilith equating of Nikanj with Joseph is the most provocative aspect about her decision even more than the appearance of collaboration with the Oankali (along with the sexualized implications of her nudity during the course of it). Finally, Butler writes Lilith as accepting Nikanj, along with all the problematic sexual issues between human and alien. By the conclusion of the novel, Lilith has accepted Nikanj as her mate rather than as a sexual predator. The ambiguity of whether or not it was her choice to make, however, speaks to the complexity of the relationship that Butler establishes in the book but, ultimately does not matter and, as Boulter observes, “echoes the ambivalent feelings of those women slaves whose pregnancies were the result of forced matings or rape” (177).

I would argue this ambivalence also echoes Butler’s own complex feelings towards the text. As several critics note, part of Butler’s aim is to dislodge men from the top of sexual hierarchy and, through that destabilization, posit a healthier approach to intimacy and sexuality. Discussing her approach to writing *Dawn*, Butler is clear that she meant to have the Oankali/human relationships be healthy, saying she had to search for the word, “xenophilia” or, “love of aliens” to describe the Oankali.

However, Butler also acknowledges the effect of the power inequity between the two races. By dislodging men from a position of power, she implicitly acknowledges the Oankali possess a position of power and admits that, in retrospect, “I’m not sure I really managed what I set out to do. I wound up with a somewhat different hierarchal system,

chemically controlled as with DNA but, instead, pheromonal” (Mehaffy 54). Pointedly, Butler does not address how she feels about the dynamic between the Oankali and women, generally, and Butler’s final opinion, specifically, of Lilith’s connection with Nikanj is opaque at best.

This opacity is, finally, what puts Lilith at odds with other Butler female characters. Within her canon, Anyanwu is Octavia Butler’s most clearly drawn character that she uses to highlight and celebrate the power of the body and the agency of black woman. As I write in the first chapter, her body and its abilities provide options and opportunities to push back against challenges. Furthermore, I believe the majority of the Butler protagonists follow this archetype. With Lilith, however, Butler warns about and critiques the reality of black women in a powerless position. Lilith possesses fewer options and has to effectively navigate a hostile world without the advantages of the usual Butler woman and her fate reflects that lack of options.

Again, Carby’s observations are useful in framing Lilith’s fate in *Dawn*. Discussing, appropriately enough, Harriet Jacobs, Carby observes, “Jacobs’ narrative was unique in its subversion of a major narrative code of sentimental fiction: death, as preferable to loss of purity was replaced by “Death is better than slavery” (59). The next two books in the Lilith’s Blood trilogy reveal that large factions of humanity regard Lilith as traitor and, pointedly, a whore but, Butler frames Lilith’s journey as a success because like Jacobs, whether she remains virtuous or not is ultimately irrelevant. As Donna Haraway notes, “Butler writes not of Cain or Ham, but of Lilith, the woman of color whose confrontations with the terms of selfhood, survival and reproduction in the face of repeated ultimate catastrophe presage an ironic salvation history...Butler’s communities

are assembled out of the genocides of history, not rooted in the fantasies of natural roots and recoverable origins. Hers is survival fiction” (379). Lilith, like many black women in life and literature does not have the luxury of the full autonomy many of Octavia Butler’s protagonists display. More Harriet Jacobs than Anyanwu, at the end, the important thing is that Lilith survives, compromised perhaps but alive.

CHAPTER 4 AMBIVALENT MOTHERHOOD IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S PATTERNIST NOVELS

Interestingly enough, Lilith finally receives her reward for her sacrifices through her actions as a mother. Years after the events in *Dawn*, Lilith's ooloi child, Akin, eventually convinces the Oankali that humanity should be allowed to continue as a unique species, regardless of their perceived shortcomings. As a result, humans that do not want to participate in the Oankali breeding program are allowed to migrate to Mars. With this development, as well as the warm and intimate depiction of the relationship between Lilith and her children, Butler posits a traditional depiction of black motherhood where self sacrifice is rewarded with the acknowledgment and respect of children and community. However, this depiction is within the framework of Lilith's relative helplessness and, furthermore, represents one of the few examples of a positive portrait of motherhood in her works. I believe Lilith's affirmative experience with motherhood is unique to Butler's canon and mirrors the author's overall critique of the role. Lilith's more traditional experience with motherhood, where she is rewarded for her sacrifices, is predicated on the fact that the character had few other options for satisfaction in her life. In the majority of her canon, Octavia Butler depicts motherhood as a role which limits female agency and, more importantly, does not offer any reward or acknowledgement for that sacrifice. The issue of agency in relation to motherhood is one that frequently surfaces in *Wild Seed* and responds to the Foucault's observation of the physical body's role in limiting movement. In sheer pragmatic and practical terms, pregnancy, literally, slows a woman's movement down.

It is the lack of sacrificial acknowledgement that I find most provocative in Butler's texts. Many societal critics have observed how black mothers lack a degree of

power in their societal relationships but, at the same time, those critics often cite the respect that comes from that sacrifice, especially from daughters. Although “the demands of providing for children in intersecting oppressions are...so demanding that [black mothers] have neither the time nor patience for affection,” Patricia Hill Collins observes, “most black daughters love and admire their mothers and are convinced that their mothers truly love them” (187). Collins goes on to argue that, “For a daughter, growing up means developing a better understanding that even though she may desire more affection...her mother’s physical care and protection are acts of maternal love” (188). Butler’s depictions of motherhood differ because rarely do the children, especially the daughters, express that understanding of the equation of protection equaling love that Collins speaks of.

While I believe Butler has a general respect for black motherhood based on her frequently expressed affection for her own mother and the other women in her family, at the same time, I believe her work reflects how she struggles between this respect and an acknowledgement of how maternity and its direct connection to black female physical agency, works to hinder movement. In this struggle I see the ambivalence I speak of. What this chapter explores is Butler’s critique of motherhood but this ambivalence leads to that critique always being encoded and implied, rarely explicit.

Like sexual morality, the concept of motherhood is one that many black women have grappled with because it has served as a traditional prism that Western society has utilized to judge women’s worth. What I am interested in, however, is the manner in which motherhood works, thematically, within a framework that critiques and constructs images of black womanhood. Specifically, I contend that black motherhood has always

been a problematic proposition because, due to the history of black people in America, the relationship between black mothers and their children have been complicated and challenged by the practical aspects of black female life. Instead of serving as a source of joy and happiness, oftentimes, motherhood has restricted the agency of black women who already have limited options. While this is an observation that many feminists have made, generally, about motherhood, I would argue, because of their specific American social phenomenon, black women have been uniquely impacted by motherhood in regards to their existence as lovers, professionals and, ultimately, individuals.

Arguably, the often complicated relationships between black women and their children are a direct result of the emotional reverberations from slavery as well as the differences between the societally mandated nature of individualized American motherhood and the more communal nature of motherhood in Africa. Butler's penchant for featuring strong black women as protagonists, as well as her canon-wide habit of challenging Western notions of identity, fits neatly into an analysis of these issues.

In this chapter, I will focus on how Butler addresses motherhood in the Patternist saga, focusing on *Wild Seed*, *Mind of My Mind* and *Patternmaster*. I believe this series is the most useful for this exercise because it follows the bloodline of Doro and Anyanwu/Emma and serve as an illustrative example of Butler's depiction of intergenerational relationships. Within these texts, I will highlight the issues of incest as a specific detail that reveals the lack of influence Emma has on her kin as well as the issue of personal happiness and how those two subjects are informed by the mothers' individualism. I will use the topic of incest as a focal point of conversation because it is

the consistent feature in all three mothers' lives and the individual happiness of the mothers because their emotional states reflect their approaches to motherhood.

In these books, three mothers, Emma—who has changed her name from Anyanwu—Emma's granddaughter many times removed, Mary and Emma's descendant Ranshee, will serve as case studies for the issues I address. These characters are also useful because Butler addresses the theme of motherhood in different ways, dependent on which of the various mothers is the focus. Furthermore, since all of the examples of motherhood are related to one another, Mary and Ranshee finally serve as direct proof of the lack of effectiveness in Emma's mothering. I think Emma's ineffectual influence on the Patternist society is especially remarkable in an exploration of Butler's depiction of motherhood and challenges the matriarchal positioning of the character that critics like Dorothy Allison and Sandra Govan argue. Oftentimes, Emma is referred to as the matriarch of the Patternists but I believe that a close examination reveals that the race of telepaths is truly Doro's people.

As I touched on briefly in the first chapter, the occupation of mother is one of the main roles of Emma, the three hundred year old shape shifter, mainly in *Wild Seed* but, certainly in an overall maternal sense in *Mind of My Mind* as well. Butler's presentation of Emma's motherhood is complicated by the way the character's role as personal nurturer and individual is often subsumed by her larger role as communal protector. While both nurturing and protecting are aspects of motherhood, in the case of Emma, the urgency and danger of the overall context of her specific experience with motherhood often predicates a personal disconnect vis-à-vis her intimate relationships with her children.

This urgency overriding what is, ultimately, the luxury of a more nurturing relationship is one that is rooted in the African-American experience. Subsequently, because of African tradition as well as the brutal realities of African-American life, black mothers have often functioned as what critics have called, “othermothers” as well as, “community mothers.” Speaking of this phenomenon in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, Andrea O’Reilly draws together several definitions:

Stanlie James, in “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformations” defines othermothering as “acceptance of responsibility for a child not one’s own in an arrangement that may or may not be formal.” Othermothers usually care for children. In contrast, community mothers, as Njoki Nathani Wane explains, “take care of the community. These women are typically past their childbearing years.” “The role of community mothers,” as Arlene Edwards notes, “often evolved from that of being othermothers.” (5)

Black motherhood has always been informed by the pragmatic realities of the community. For a multitude of reasons, black women have served as mothers of various children as well as the overall community simply because someone had to step into the void. As O’Reilly points out, that role is often predicated and informed by a woman’s biological maternal status; as you grow older and your own children grow into adulthood, you might be called to raise others.

What makes Emma such a complicated figure, vis-à-vis, James’ construction of community mother, however, is the fact that Emma is immortal. She has, as Edward

notes, evolved from the position of othermother into community mother but, unlike women past childbearing age, her evolution is voluntary. I am most interested in Emma's philosophical movement between the roles of biological mother and matriarch to othermother, whose purpose was to protect her relatives from an evil, to community mother to, finally, an individual that consciously separates from her kin completely. I believe Emma's character arc reveals a unique figure that finally forgoes motherhood completely and helps to illuminate what I argue is Butler's ambivalence with the role. What does this transition mean as far as Butler's critique of motherhood vs. a woman's individuality in general and the boundaries between what that woman will and will not do? This question leads to an especially stimulating line of inquiry. In *Mind of my Mind*, Emma ultimately chooses to ally herself with Doro, the monstrous figure who initially serves as the most dangerous to her children. Mirroring that choice, I also question critics' positing of Emma as the matriarch of the Patternists. Through words and deeds, I will show how Butler presents the group of telepaths as solely *Doro's* descendants.

One of those descendants is *Mind of My Mind's* protagonist, Mary. Her motherhood is also on display and, though she is a mirror image of Doro, Mary's maternity also parallels some of the problematic aspects of Emma's. Like Emma before her, Mary quickly evolves into the role of community mother, distancing herself from her biological child. Mary's movement into community matriarch is also not predicated on her being unable to be either a biological mother or an othermother. On the contrary, when the opportunity presents itself, Mary also voluntarily eschews biological motherhood so that she can more fully concentrate on her burgeoning community albeit more in the role of ruler than protector. As Dorothy Allison observes, with the character

Mary, Butler shows, “how mothering can mimic paternalistic domination. When Mary...defeats her father, Doro, she becomes a tyrant herself, though a more benevolent one” (473). I agree that, after Doro’s death, Mary takes his place but I question how much Butler truly constructs the character as embracing of motherhood, community or otherwise, in the first place.

Finally, though her presence is limited, *Patternmaster*’s Ranshee’s approach to motherhood is vitally important because, chronologically set in the series’ far future, it concretizes Butler’s overall thematic approach to the subject of motherhood as well as explicitly shows Emma’s philosophical thoughts on motherhood made manifest. In the future, Emma’s lack of influence on Patternist culture is illustrative. Furthermore, like Emma and Mary before her, Ranshee makes decisions based on what she views as the proper behavior of a mother. Those decisions lead to dire consequences which represent Butler’s final word on motherhood in the series and the inadequacy of its effects on the Patternist society.

As I argue in the first chapter, Emma serves as a blueprint of Butler’s female characters. It is no surprise that her various relationships with her offspring offer insight into understanding all of Butler’s mother characters. In that chapter, I focused on the macrocosmic consequences of Emma’s motherhood, i.e. how children hampered her movements and limited her options. In this chapter, I would like to narrow my focus and examine the character’s specific relationship with her biological daughter, Nweke and her many times removed granddaughter that she helps to raise, Mary. I think Emma’s relationship with these two is especially significant because, throughout *Wild Seed* and

Mind of My Mind, they are the only two whose relationship with their mother that Butler spends time describing.

Nweke is a child Emma has during the late 1700's, apparently with her centuries old lover, Doro. As the text reveals slowly, however, Nweke was actually conceived with the body's original owner, Thomas, yet another child of the immortal, before Doro eventually takes it over. Importantly, because of this deception, Nweke has spent her entire life believing that Doro is her biological father. Like all of the children born to the members of Doro's family, Nweke goes through a sort of adolescence in which she receives her abilities in her late teens. Coinciding with this blossoming, Doro often visits the community to witness the transition and, when Nweke exhibits signs that she's going to be especially powerful, Doro definitely arrives to participate.

Within this narrative space, Butler establishes an adversarial relationship between mother and daughter, in which the two vie for attention from Doro through several rhetorical devices. First, mirroring Foucault's theory of the body as site for punishment and control, Butler describes the community Doro constructs and uses for breeding purposes, regardless of social mores on incest. As a practice, Doro systematically breeds "his" people, regardless of their relationships to each other. What this does is bypass any ordinary, symbolic Electra complex between mother and daughter and moves directly to a literal rivalry for the sexual attention of the family's alpha male between mother and daughter. This is exacerbated within the relationships between Emma and her various daughters because Emma has threatened Doro with withholding her help if he attempts to have sexual relations with their children. The daughters have no knowledge of the reasoning behind Emma's ruling. Their mother keeps from them that Doro is a monster

that she is trying to protect them from as long as possible. The daughters just view this decision as a move to keep them from Doro in the culturally mandated way that they have been raised.

The ignorance of Emma's daughters to this reasoning is a moment where Butler veers away from the dynamic of the black mother/black daughter that social critics have observed. While critics have noted that black mothers in literature do not necessarily show their love through traditional terms of affection, they do express love through their protective actions and, more importantly to the point of this project, the daughters eventually acknowledge those actions as testament to maternal affection. As Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Feminist Thought*, "Black daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environments have to come to terms with their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love...and the often troubled mothers in their lives. For a daughter, growing up means developing a better understanding that even though she may desire more affection and greater freedom, her mother's physical care and protection are acts of maternal love" (187-188). Traditionally, black motherhood's very foundation has been this understanding of sacrifice versus articulated affection.

This relationship that Collins describes presupposes a level of acknowledgement from the daughter about the reasoning behind their mother's emotional distance. While these women may feel a lack of overt affection as children, rarely do any of these daughters lack an understanding of the reasoning behind their mothers' actions once they also reach adulthood. However, there is no evidence that Nweke or her sisters know *why* their mother wants to keep them away from Doro. Along these same lines, Butler does not go into detail about why the character keeps Doro's true nature away from her

children. By keeping Doro's true nature away from Nweke and her sisters, Butler does not seem particularly vested in framing the relationships between Emma and her children in the traditional manner of the long suffering but honored person that Collins describes.

Butler also sets up a personal rivalry, framing it in physical terms. The author introduces the character, Nweke and notes that she and her mother, Anyanwu, resemble one another. Doro observes that, Nweke was "small and dark like her mother." Again, because Doro has established a community where the societal taboo regarding incest is not present, the physical similarity between mother and daughter intrinsically lead to friction between the two in relation to Doro.

This volatile combination of community practices allowing incest coupled with an established Nweke/Anyanwu physical similarity leads to Nweke openly challenging her mother's sexual position with Doro. After admitting to her father that she has used her nascent psychic abilities to share in the sexual encounter of her neighbors and kissing Doro, "not at all as a daughter should kiss her father," Nweke initiates a sexual encounter with him.

Interestingly enough, Doro has not had sex with any of the other daughters he has borne with Emma. Being a woman who grew up outside of the influence of the breeding obsessed Doro, Emma maintains a taboo against incest and has threatened to stop mating altogether with Doro if he ever sleeps with one of their children. The implication is the knowledge of Emma's taboo against incest has been passed on to her daughter. In other words, Nweke's attempt to sleep with her father is not only a literal challenge to Emma's sexual standing but also a philosophical challenge towards Emma's belief system as

Nweke rejects her mother's ethics. This rejection of Emma's value system is one that Butler eventually demonstrates as one all of the Patternists take.

After the two consummate their relationship, the following conversation, as well as Doro's own thoughts on the matter is also significant within the context of the subject of Emma's closeness to her daughters. The first thing Nweke says to Doro is, "I don't know what to think about her now...My sisters whispered that we could never have you because of her. Sometimes I hated her. I thought she kept you for herself" (151).

Nweke demonstrates that, not only is there a sense of personal rivalry between herself and Emma, but she also represents a broader generational rivalry as well. After finally acknowledging that her mother was, perhaps, just trying to protect the girls from their father, fearfully, Nweke asks Doro what her mother will think about their new relationship.

Unsure himself, the text notes that, "...[Doro] did not intend to leave until he found out. Until he could see that any anger Anyanwu felt would do his daughter no harm" (151). Provocatively, the line illuminates Doro's awareness that Nweke *could* possibly be in danger from Emma. Considering that Doro knows Anyanwu better than anyone, even Emma's potential anger towards Nweke reveals a great deal about what the people around her think of the character's attitude towards her children. The fact that Emma could potentially harm one of her children complicates her construction as a simple protective mother figure. Ironically, this is ultimately unfounded since, soon after, Emma confronts Doro about the incident and uses the word, "molest" to describe what he did to Nweke, demonstrating that her mother knows she was victimized.

The fact remains, however, that both Nweke and Doro did not know what reaction Emma would take over the action, and this observation speaks to what I view as the main complication in Emma's existence as a maternal figure, the lack of intimacy between her and her children directly due to the nature of her life as their primary protector. The fact that Nweke and Doro, himself, think that it is *possible* for Emma to hold this type of anger against Nweke speaks to the reality that, emotionally, Emma has had to distance herself from the very children she has to protect. There can be no argument that Emma loves her children at this point of her journey. In fact, it is her love for her children that has allowed Doro to control her movements throughout the text. Still, Emma lives in such a dire environment that she has had to sacrifice her own individual expression, maternal intimacy and nurturing ways to protect her children. While this is familiar feature in the depictions of black women's lives, significantly to this project, Butler does not make a practice of depicting Emma's children acknowledging their mother's sacrifice.

Appropriately, this complication is made manifest with Nweke because Emma's experience with Nweke's biological father reveals just how dire the situation is with Doro. The encounter that would lead to Nweke's conceiving began as another exercise where Doro was attempting to break Emma's spirit. In punishment for what he viewed as her overly willful ways, Doro forces Emma to heal and conceive a child with one of his more feral sons, Thomas. Due to his uncontrollable telepathy, Thomas is wracked by pain and headaches initiated by the noise of hearing everyone's thoughts around him. In response, he has moved into the woods and lives a brutal, filthy life, covered in sores and dirt as he attempts to drink himself to death to combat the voices in his head. He is

belligerent, racist and openly antagonistic towards Emma so that, initially, it seems like Doro has succeeded in punishing her by mating with Thomas.

Emma's nature, however, is to heal and, thus nurture. In other words, the character is continually the othermother. She takes what was meant as a punishment and helps Thomas regain his humanity. Once Thomas begins to respond to her healing ways, however, Doro uses the opening to finally punish her by killing Thomas in the midst of his healing process. As Emma thinks, "Never had Doro taken a patient from her in the midst of a healing, never! Somehow, she had not thought he would do such a thing. *It was as though he had threatened one of her children* [emphasis mine]. And, of course, he was threatening her children. He was threatening everything dear to her" (171).

Butler frames Thomas as one of Emma's children within the context of his healing because the character and his fate is the personification of a theme that pervades the entire text; children are the most effective weakness that can be exploited by enemies. The incident with Thomas also highlights another aspect of Butler motherhood: it consumes the individual and leads to personal unhappiness.

Again, this notion equating black motherhood with powerlessness is one that is reflected in other Butler texts as well. Both *Parable of the Sower's* protagonist Lauren as well as Lilith in the Lilith's Brood series are directly attacked through their children. Although both are strong, independent women, both have their children kidnapped by outside forces. In the case of Lauren, when the nascent community of Acorn is overrun by government agents, her daughter is kidnapped and placed with a foster family. Lauren, not only loses touch with her child because of the kidnapping but, the overall repercussion is the disintegration of her relationship with her brother and, finally, leads to

only real negative effect that her quest for space plays in her personal life; her estrangement from her adult daughter. Likewise, once Lilith overcomes her fear of birthing the Other, the entire second book of the series, *Adulthood Rites*, outlines the effects of her child's kidnapping by outside forces and, again, the complications it causes between Lilith and her child, as well as the egregious effect on the child. Like Emma, both of these protagonists live in a world that is so fraught with danger that the traditional valuing of motherhood as an opportunity for intimate relationship building is completely overshadowed with the realities of survival. Not only does the Butler mother simply not have the luxury of being a doting parent, often times those children represent the only weakness in her life and serve as the source of the most unhappiness.

Within this context, Emma's response to her situation is one that makes sense. Yes, her main goal is to protect her children but, to a certain degree, she is also trying to protect her own individuality and autonomy. Therefore, she does everything in her power to keep Doro away from her children as much as her own relatively weak position allows. She pressures Doro into not having sexual relations with her children and, instead of teaching them in no uncertain terms why this is necessary, she bears the brunt of their criticism and remains self contained. The fact that Nweke acknowledges that she and her sisters have discussed the embargo that their mother has placed upon them but do not view Doro as a monster speaks volumes about the strategy the character is employing to protect her children. Not only does Anyanwu avoid a traditional level of intimacy with her children to concentrate on protecting them, even this lack of empathy plays a role in that she does not allow her children to potentially see her as someone who also needs to be protected from Doro.

Arguably, Emma's reticence to reveal to her daughters the extent of their father's evil can also be seen as fitting into a tradition of mothers protecting their children from the truth of their father's shortcomings. While there is a long tradition of this, specifically in the black community, I believe Emma's actions function in a different manner. Historically, when mothers hide truths about fathers from their children, it is because the mothers do not want to disillusion them. In other words, even this action is another form of maternal protection. In the case of Doro, however, keeping the truth away from Nweke and her sisters puts them in danger therefore I believe Emma's actions function as another way to distance herself from her children

Still, although the character Emma does not take any type of retaliatory actions toward Doro over his sexual actions with their daughter, Butler's authorial strategy vis-a-vis Nweke's ultimate fate is noteworthy and further supports my reading of motherhood's malignant effect. After a tense dinner with her parents, Nweke goes into what Butler calls, "transition," the process in which Doro's people actually receive their powers. All of it goes horribly wrong and, in the midst of it, Nweke loses complete control killing herself and Anyanwu's husband Isaac.

I find this a fascinating choice of authorial intervention for Butler to make strategically, in relation to the implications towards her characters' motherhood. Alongside everything I have already analyzed, Butler, herself, forcefully posits the notion that her female characters cannot achieve happiness through motherhood and that those children will often serve as a source of misery. Paralleling the unhappiness that Thomas causes through his emotional opening, Nweke destroys the only man that, until this point in the narrative, Emma loves. In *Wild Seed*, one of the overarching themes seems to be

that individual efficacy and satisfaction will always be consumed by motherhood and motherhood only leads to unhappiness.

In discussing Emma's ultimate approach to her maternal role, it is significant to note that the character whose very nature is amorphous and ever evolving, ironically displays a trait of motherhood that reflects her Yoruba background. Discussing the female leadership roles in Yorubaland, Nigeria, the general location where Emma was born, Helen Callaway notes:

While most of the elders of the society are men...a small number, usually six are women, termed *erelu*, who represent the interests of the women of the town. These members have reached the stage of *agbalagba*-‘adult having adult’-meaning those old enough for the eldest of their children to have become adults. They have reached a specified stage in women's life-cycle, considered to be beyond child-bearing and sexual activity, a state (familiar in other societies) which confers responsibilities and powers not open to women during their reproductive years. (175)

For the Yoruba, a woman's primary role is to bear children, an occupation that oftentimes is inherently limiting. Only when that part of a woman's life is over can she move into other avenues of power. Paralleling this aspect of Yoruba culture, Emma's esteem and influence over Doro and her own situation rises as she stops bearing children. Again, I find it important that, due to Emma's immortality and shape shifting ability, Butler creates a situation where the character moves from the role of biological mother to overmother *voluntarily*. For Emma, motherhood not only leaves you vulnerable but,

reflecting the character's Yoruba background, it also hampers your ability to have political and existential agency.

This is a theme that Butler continues in *Mind of My Mind*, itself a chronological continuation of the Patternist series. When it opens, three hundred years have passed in the story and Emma has moved to the Bay Area in California and the never changing Doro places a young, abused Mary under the stewardship of Emma, with Mary living in a nearby apartment under Emma's watchful eye. In other words, Emma is, once again, framed as a parental figure, specifically, as an othermother, this time over someone who is her descendant many times removed. Importantly, the text makes clear that she has a choice in the matter and only accepts the role when she refuses to actually raise Mary as her child. I believe it is a significant detail that Emma's biological connection is framed in this fashion. As the text goes on to explore, though she is formally the matriarch of the race, it is not a role that completely defines her, quite the opposite in fact. When her, "child" Mary finally threatens to overtake Doro's role, Emma is the one who initially suggest Doro murders Mary.

Although her development is little more than a plot point to get Mary into the forefront of the novel, in a chapter about Butler's complicated mother figures, I would be remiss if I did not devote a few sentences to Mary's biological mother, Rina. Far from just being emotionally distant, Rina is actually a bad mother. Because of her powers, Rina suffers from cripplingly painful headaches and self medicates through drugs and alcohol until she becomes addicted. Because of this addiction, she is verbally and physically abusive to Mary, which is the impetus that causes Doro to get Emma to look in on them. While Rina is not a large part of the text, she certainly fits into the ongoing

continuum of Butler's problematic mother figures. I also find it significant that, once Butler establishes that Mary is able to stabilize the powers of crippled telepaths and bring them into the pattern, the author also creates an age restriction so that Rina is not able to be cured and share in the nascent community's intimacy with Mary. In Butler's fiction, there are no tearful mother-daughter reunions.

Once Rina is relegated to the background and Emma moves to the fore as the main matriarchal figure, Butler establishes early in the text that the complicated relationship between Emma and Mary mirrors the one between Emma and Nweke. Like Nweke, we are told that Emma was the primary mother figure in Mary's life. We also know that Mary's abilities are derived from her genetic relation to Emma. In fact, like her ancestor, the text notes how much Emma and Mary look alike, with Doro telling Mary that, "except for my eyes and coloring, I look a lot like Emma-like the young version of Emma, I mean." This detail visually establishes the rivalry between the two, much like it did with Emma and Nweke, with Mary's presence seen as a young replacement for Emma. Butler also informs the reader that the relationship between the two is strained at best.

And, like Nweke, there is nothing that implies closeness between Mary and Emma. The distance is seen most vividly when Emma attempts to protect Doro from Mary's rampage, officially siding with her lover over her progeny. In fact, the prologue explicitly establishes Emma's allegiances; the only reason Emma mentors and raises Mary at all is as a favor to Doro. Even then, Mary does not get to live with Emma. Mary is consigned to living with her drug addict mother while Emma looks in periodically. Comparing the relationships of Emma and Nweke and Emma and Mary demonstrates just

how distant Emma has become in relation to the issue of her progeny, specifically, her daughters and their safety from Doro.

This distance is especially related to Mary and Emma's relationship with Doro. When the story opens, Mary is already involved in a sexual relationship with Doro. Where it differs from Nweke's situation is that Emma already knows all about it. When Mary passes judgment on Rina for the latter having sex with her cousin, Emma pointedly tells Mary not to be so quick to look down on incest. The implication is that Mary is referring to Doro's penchant for interbreeding with relatives and the fact that, somehow, Mary does not consider what she and Doro engage in to be incest.

Compared to her reaction to Doro and Nweke, Emma's muted response to Doro's continued practice of incest in relation to Mary signifies something different going on with the character. Somehow, in the interim between the late 18th century and the late twentieth century where the text picks up her story, Emma doesn't seem to care anymore about the issue of incest. Furthermore, based on the fact that Doro had to convince the character to take care of Mary and her mother at the beginning of the book, as well as her opinions of Mary and various warnings to Doro, it is fair to say that her loyalties have shifted from her children to Doro. Considering the fact that Butler spends the entirety of *Wild Seed* framing Emma as sort of a preternatural ur-mother figure, this shift in loyalty begs the question of what exactly is going on with the character.

Additionally, this attitudinal shift in Emma also speaks to the primary issue of motherhood. Until the moment in the narrative, the role of protector is the only consistent aspect of the character. And, while she is an immortal, the passage of time has not seemed to inform this role. When Emma is introduced in *Wild Seed*, she is already

over three hundred years old and her entire relationship with Doro is predicated on her role as mother. She leaves her home in Africa *because* she is a mother. All of the other actions are informed by this motherhood. It is only at this moment that we note a change. Obviously, since the character is first introduced at three hundred years old, any critique of her behavior vis-à-vis her age is invented but it is fascinating, in the final stages of Emma's development, that Butler posits the love of a mate over any maternal instinct. If, as critical observers, we theorize that romantic love can last longer than motherly love, this speaks to an ongoing theme of maternal downplaying in relation to personal individuality that the author engages.

There is also another detail revealed during the early pages of *Mind of My Mind* that informs Butler's final evaluation of the character; Emma has become a writer and she is happy. In the prologue, after agreeing to let Mary and her mother move in next door, as opposed to with her because she "has raised enough children," Emma comments that she's just finished the trilogy of historical novels-based on her own life- she's been planning for a century and how the critics "marveled at her realism," wryly observing that she is a "born storyteller." I find the comment important within the context of the character just previously stating that she no long wanted to be a mother. By juxtaposing the two statements, Butler articulates the tension between the roles of motherhood and artist. One of the ways black female individuality has been overshadowed by motherhood has been in the lack of opportunity for artistic expression. Historically, creativity has always been subordinate to the responsibilities of motherhood for black women. As Collins notes, "Black women...pay the cost of giving up their own dreams of achieving full creative ability" (194). Both roles are ones that require hefty prices of time

commitment and psychological energy. Oftentimes, there is not enough of either for women to be both mothers and artists.

And, even the traditional avenues for black female creativity appear to be closed off for Emma. Collins acknowledges, “Historically, much of that creativity could be expressed through music, much of it within black churches. Many black women blues singers, poets and artists manage to incorporate their art into their daily responsibilities...” (195). However, as an immortal, Emma cannot participate in the black church because that is a very public organization. One of the earliest downsides to her long life that the character acknowledges is the distance she must maintain from the larger community because she must hide her immortality. This dichotomy that Butler shows, whereas Emma has become creative in lieu of being the mother figure that has defined her not only informs the critique of the character ultimately choosing Doro over her children but speaks to Butler’s notion of motherhood in general. To Butler, motherhood is simply one choice out of the many black women can make about their lives and, furthermore, it is a choice that they can change their minds about when something else becomes more crucial to their psychological well-being.

Mirroring Emma’s decision to opt out of motherhood in lieu of pursuing her individuality, the Patternist culture differs from normal society in the fact that none of the children live with their biological parents. The narrative rationale is that, because children are emotionally high spirited and chaotic in their thoughts, their presence is disturbing to the sensitive nature of their parents. Thus, until they come of age, all children are sequestered in a type of boarding school in the community. This is a detail that *Mind of My Mind* does not downplay either. Ada Dragan, a Patternist and educator

in charge of the school notes explicitly that, "...no matter how much Patternists wanted to insure their future as a race, they could not care for the children who were that future...First Doro and now Mary, was creating a race that could not tolerate its own young" (173). Notice that, by Dragan's observation, the race's mores and practices are traced back to Doro. Although the character does succeed in stopping Doro from feeding on his lesser powered children, when this observation is corresponded with Emma's earlier nonchalance vis-à-vis incest, it seems that there has been no lasting impression from the shape changer on the value system of Doro and his people.

Also, tellingly, the care of the children is left to very low powered Patternists such as the aforementioned Ada Dragan and non-Patternist, non-telepathic humans who are valued less than the main characters. Later in the text, Mary notes that Patternists "were allergic' to children of our own kind. We were more dangerous to them than their latent parents were." Based on the fictive rules established by Butler, this makes a certain amount of sense but, again, the detail goes towards solidifying a pattern in the authors work vis-à-vis parenting and, specifically, motherhood. If an adult has aspirations, children are to be protected and loved but that protection and love is often distant and abstract because ambition and children do not mix. As Collins notes, this tension that Butler posits between motherhood and power is one that other black women writers have addressed but in the Parable books, ultimately, the declarative value put forth in *Mind of My Mind* is that intimacy is reserved for adult relationships and the care of children is best left to people who don't really matter.

As the overall story shifts from its focus on Emma to Mary, this value judgment is illustrated specifically in the way Mary approaches motherhood. After the Patternist

community has been established, Mary's husband, Karl talks her into having a baby. According to Mary, before he asked, she never previously thought about being a mother. The character says that, because of the history of Doro's people, she never thought she would have the free will to decide whether or not to be a mother.

I thought about it then, surprised that I hadn't really thought about [children] before. But then, I had never wanted children. With Doro around, though, I had assumed that sooner or later I would be ordered to produce some. Ordered. Somehow being asked was better. (187)

The passage provides a telling peek into Mary's psyche. Obviously, as a member of the centuries old dysfunctional culture that the monstrous Doro has established, with its focus on breeding and gene lines, it is logical that Mary has ambivalent feelings toward having children. Still, as fellow Patternist Karl's enthusiasm for offspring shows (he even goes so far as to ask if Mary can make sure they have a son), this attitude is not necessarily representative. Although Karl is a white man, with all of the difference that perspective surely brings to the way he views parenthood, like Mary, he has no illusions about his standing in the world vis-à-vis Doro. Yes, Mary's feelings are informed by her experiences but they are not completely shaped by them and, like Emma before her-and most of Butler's female protagonists- Mary sees no happiness in motherhood.

This is appropriate within the context of the story since, as the head of the Patternist community, in many ways, she is already a mother; she's just another example of the community mother. This matriarchal role in a macrocosmic setting is similar to manner in which many of Butler's protagonists are framed within this dichotomy. Like

Emma before her and other Butler female characters, Mary can head a community as a mother figure but she finds being a biological mother an uncomfortable fit.

Still, even after she has accepted her new reality as leader, and the personal freedom that goes along with it, Butler frames the character as one with a decided lack of maternal feeling through the reactions of other people in *Mind of My Mind*. Once her son, Karl Jr., is born, Doro visits and asks to see the baby. Once Mary responds, “Why? Babies his age all look pretty much alike. What is there to see?” The text makes a point to show that both Doro and Karl frown at her emotionless attitude. Later, Doro explicitly challenges the attitude, directly asking Mary, “You don’t give a damn about him, do you?” Par the course, Mary answers, “He’s got all his parts...Healthy mentally and physically. I saw to that. Watched him very carefully before he was born. Now I keep an eye on [his nanny] and her husband to be sure they’re giving him the care he needs. Beyond that, you’re right” (189). Mary protects her son but she does not want to be near him.

Critic Frances Smith Foster acknowledges that Mary is a somewhat problematic matriarch to the nascent Patternist community. Foster notes that Butler’s female characters, including Mary, “are not the traditional literary Earth Mothers or Culture Bearers” because they excel in many different careers and, “when necessary, kill brutally, efficiently and, even joyfully” (47). Foster quotes Daryl Dance and says that Mary as “mother of the Pattern, she does give ‘birth and sustenance to positive growth and advancement among her people’ but goes on to acknowledge that Mary “recognizes that her desire to succor is intertwined with her desire to control” (45). Arguably, this desire to control enhances her ability to be matriarch but it problematizes an overall

characterization of Mary as simple mother figure motivated by love. Mary is much too complicated to fit neatly into the archetype and part of that complication is the fact that the concepts of motherhood and matriarchy do not go hand in hand.

This noncommittal attitude towards motherhood that Mary has certainly fits within the communal matriarch/biological mother paradigm that Butler establishes for the character but what is also notable is the manner in which one aspect affects the other. Soon after the above exchange, Doro goes on to ask Mary when she going to have other children for the purpose of stability. To Doro, since Mary is the leader of the nascent community, she needs to have as many heirs as possible to ensure her line would continue to rule after her death. Furthermore, Mary should have thought of this line of reasoning as leader and matriarch of the Patternists. However, the concept of having more children seems to be so foreign and unappealing to Mary that the unease of it overrides her more natural leadership inclinations. Like Emma before her, an intimate, traditional type of motherhood is anathema to her being but that seems to be the only attribute Butler shows Mary sharing with her ancestor, again, countering Collins' read of female characters relationships with their mothers, Emma's sacrifice is never acknowledged.

For the most part, Butler ends Mary's story at the conclusion of *Mind of My Mind* however, the author provides a few tantalizing details in a the novel, *Survivor* about the future of the nascent Patternist community as well as more proof that Mary's legacy encompasses more of the ruthless Doro's philosophies than Emma's. Set approximately fifty years after the conclusion of *Mind of My Mind* and very loosely connected to the events surrounding Doro's descendants, *Survivor* is the story of a group of missionaries

who have traveled to another planet and come into conflict with two factions of indigenous beings. They have left Earth to escape the plague of the Clay's Ark disease described in the other tertiary book in the Patternist series, *Clay's Ark*.

Several details that have led to the group having the opportunity to escape reveal a bit about the direction Mary has taken the Patternist society since the conclusion of *Mind of My Mind*, however. First, it is revealed that the more powerful Patternists have stayed behind, not to protect weaker, non-powered humanity but because, due to the nature of their powers, they cannot leave. Initially, the Patternists attempted to emigrate to another planet but they could not leave the proximity of the Pattern. Only when they had no choice, did they concede to help the rest of humanity leave (33-34). Secondly, the nature of their help speaks to how Mary's group has developed. Once the missionaries reach their destination, they begin to salvage parts from the ship and discover that the "engine" was, in fact, a deformed Patternist, programmed to use his powers to fly the ship and then to die once the destination was reached (36). One of the characters, herself an ex-"mute" slave, comments that the Patternists routinely destroy those they consider defective but seem to have found another use for them instead. Finally, I find it significant that, when that same character is questioned about why the Patternists didn't send their non-powered children with the missionaries, she says they refused because Patternist children were like, "the eggs that wasps sometimes lay that eat you from within" (35). The first two examples speak to the overall lack of influence Emma has had on the Patternist development. There is none of the sense of maternal protection of the weak or commitment to healing that defined the character and moved her to become involved with Doro in the first place. In Mary's leadership style, she fully embraces the eugenicist

views and values of Doro. And I believe the final description of Patternist children is also informed by Butler's ongoing ambivalence towards motherhood in general and children specifically. While, on a macrocosmic level, children lead to weakness, as a group of people, whether they be the first generation of mutant Clayark children in *Clay's Ark*, Lilith's alien hybrid progeny in *Dawn et. al*, or the aforementioned "wasp eggs" in *Survivor*, oftentimes children are just monsters waiting to be borne.

And, as *Patternmaster* reveals, this is a value that continues within Patternist culture. *Patternmaster* is set an undisclosed number of years after the events in *Mind of My Mind* but, clearly, time has passed and the Patternists have prospered and grown. The Patternists control all of California and, perhaps, a larger section of the west coast of the United States and are in the midst of an ongoing war with non-telepaths. Perhaps as an acknowledgement of Doro's foreshadowing, the plot revolves around a group of brothers and their fight for control of the Pattern. The Patternists' future points to a detail in the book's prologue, however, that provides fodder for this ongoing exploration into Butler's view on motherhood, specifically, her final statement on the effect of Emma's legacy for her offspring.

First of all, notions of marriage have changed considerably. Practices like incest, as well as, polygamy are a completely socially accepted concept in the world of the Patternists. When the book opens, the present leader of the community, the "Patternmaster" is a man named Rayal who is married to his sister Jansee. The narrative reveals the information as Rayal reminisces about his ascension to his present position. Discussing the fact that he had to kill two brothers and a sister, Rayal looks at his wife

and notes that, "...it could easily have been two sisters if my strongest sister had not been wise enough to ally herself with me and become my lead wife."

Again, the evaluation of incest in the Patternist community complicates and, ultimately, challenges the role of Emma in the construction of the value system of her descendants. The very first argument that Emma and Doro have is over incest; Doro wants her to sleep with his son but Emma already views herself as Doro's wife. Once she gets over this initial bias, she still maintains that the practice is taboo, going so far as to try and keep her daughters away from Doro, as she did with Nweke. It is only in the aforementioned early chapter of *Mind of My Mind*, in the late twentieth century, when we see that Emma has changed her mind over the practice. This is important because, initially, at the base of her reticence towards the practice is the belief that this is a way she can protect her children from Doro. While it is obvious from Emma's commentary to Mary that she has given this avenue of conflict up in pursuit of her own happiness, it is especially telling that, ultimately, none of the values that Emma put forward survive to the future.

The other way in which *Patternmaster* provides Butler's final commentary on Emma's motherhood is in the manner in which the future depicts the vocation. Following the direction of the nascent Patternist community, in the future, it seems that it is a widely accepted notion that motherhood is something that is abstract and removed from day to day life. When the novel begins, Jansee tells her husband that she wants to send someone to check on their sons and, jokingly, Rayal tells her that she's no better than a "mute mother," the implication being that wanting contact with your children is a weakness that should be left to lesser races. Appropriately enough, it is while the

couple's attention on their children, Rayal's enemies decide to attack the couple and kill them. Again, as she does with the depiction of the events leading to Emma's husband Isaac at the hands of their daughter Nweke, Butler presents a situation whereas Jansee's longing for traditional motherhood, not only limits her own growth but lead to the death of her and her husband.

In terms of independence and spirit, the supporting character Amber does seem to follow in the tradition of Emma, however. As Ruth Salvaggio points out, "though Teray, the good son destined to inherit the Pattern, is the figure in whom we must place our trust and hope, it is Amber who most dramatically personifies independence, autonomy and liberation" (79). Like Emma, Amber is a healer, the most gifted practitioner in the novel. She meets Teray when he falls under the control of his evil brother Coreensee. Amber is staying in Coreensee's kingdom or, his House but remains independent though he desires her. Ultimately, she falls in love with Teray and, as Frances Smith Foster observes, "the central conflict of the novel, the rivalry between the brothers is symbolized by their attitudes toward this woman: Coreensee desires to subjugate her...through ownership. Teray wants her to be free and hopes she will freely work with him" (44). As Amber is a reflection of Emma, with Coreensee, Butler mirrors the actions of Doro. Finally, Amber remains with Teray though she refuses to marry him and maintains her independence. It is also noteworthy that, while her power of healing, the attribute that defined Emma more than any other, is valued, by the end, its ultimate worth is based on the fact that Teray utilizes Amber's teachings to become a more efficient killer. Again, everything that Emma values becomes twisted in the Patternist society.

Similarly, the details Butler reveals about Rayal and Jansee's parenthood render the final verdict on the sociological experiment begun by Emma with the Patternists centuries before. Initially, Emma's involvement with Doro and his people, and the reason that she leaves her home in Africa, is predicated on the assumption that Doro will leave her family alone. Furthermore, part of her overall strategy seems to be an attempt to humanize Doro; perhaps the way to address a predator is to change his nature and, to do that, she has to go with him. In other words, as a matriarchal figure, Emma takes the position that the protection of her kin is more crucial than physical or emotional intimacy. As her story continues throughout *Wild Seed*, this seems to be a philosophy that she practices throughout the centuries. Yes, ultimately, Butler renders a complicated verdict on the efforts of her primal character.

However, it is worth noting that the concept of othermother and community mother has, in some ways, been fully integrated into the Patternist society. Hinted towards in *Mind of My Mind*, in the future of *Patternmaster*, children are completely being raised, not by their biological parents but by communal mothers. This fact is complicated by the implication that these foster mothers are enslaved, non-telepathic humans. Furthermore, the aforementioned values that Anyanwu valued so much toward issues like incest, etc., have completely been abandoned by the community she has spent so much time trying to protect. Emma's failure to protect Mary from the influence of Doro has led to a situation in which the entire community has taken on the monster's value system.

Still, sometime between the experiences with Nweke and the opening of *Mind of My Mind*, something changes. Sometime during this period, Emma goes from viewing

Doro as a predatory force to seeing him as her true mate. In line with that, her alliances shift from her family unit towards Doro as she becomes content to be more mate than mother. This shift is shown most dramatically at the conclusion of *Mind of My Mind* when, after Mary defeats her father in combat, rather than live in a world without Doro; Emma chooses to end her life. Ultimately, the character defines herself on her own terms yet Butler complicates this choice of self efficacy by problematizing her overall journey through motherhood and how effective she has been.

With all of the Patternist mothers, Octavia Butler posits a depiction of the vocation in which black women are, at best, uncomfortable and, as worst, in danger. Within the context of the depiction of black womanhood, the author challenges the stereotypical notions that Collins presents, as well as, with the character Emma, shows an example of a black woman who chooses her own self fulfillment over those of her extended family. Whether or not this is a decision that is a worthwhile one is a conclusion that Butler leaves to the reader but, most importantly, the writer adds another dimension to the ongoing conversation about the literary depictions of black womanhood.

CHAPTER 5
BLACK BEAUTY & DESIRABILITY IN *FLEDGLING*

Although there are some similarities between *Patternmaster's* Amber and Anyanwu, ironically, Anyanwu's truest daughter, in terms of one who reflects the themes Butler establishes, is not one of her genetic Patternists descendants. The character in Octavia Butler's canon that I believe the writer posits as one who truly represents an evolution from Anyanwu's principles is Shori, the vampire protagonist of the author's final novel, *Fledgling*. Similarly to Anyanwu, Shori utilizes the gifts of her body, specifically, her strength, resiliency and poison to facilitate her agency and expand her options in a hostile environment. Also, like Anyanwu and many of Butler's protagonists, Shori is a black woman. However, while Butler demonstrates the importance of black womanhood through Anyanwu's personal choices i.e. the shape shifting character's comfort in the black female form, in *Fledgling*, the author more forcibly links power with black femininity in her construction of Shori. I find this coupling of power and black female physicality remarkable because through this linkage of black femininity and capacity, Butler vigorously critiques what is finally desirable or, rather, what should truly be evaluated by society as beautiful.

Like motherhood, the subject of beauty is one that black women critics have contended with over the years and Eurocentric definitions of beauty have been one of the means that black womanhood has been defined by American society. In this chapter, I will examine how Octavia Butler utilizes elements of the vampire myth to challenge and critique Eurocentric notions of feminine beauty. Within the broader context of situating the author within the American tradition of black women writers, this challenge to

Western norms of femininity has been central in the journey of this group of artists. Throughout her career, Butler accomplished this goal of critiquing those norms of femininity in several ways.

The primary method that she uses is simply by having the protagonists physically appear different from the Westernized norm throughout her canon; the vast majority of Octavia Butler's main characters are black women. This fact is worth noting within the wider conversation vis-à-vis Butler's politicization of physicality because the repeated demographic choice reveals that the author is interested, not only in granting these women narrative primacy, but in showing those characters in contexts in which they have not often been explored. Specifically, within the framework of black women writers, Butler is one of the few who continually examines the role and voices of black women outside of the postmodern slavery tradition and within any type of speculative fiction at all. Any type of narrative that expands traditional roles is inherently positive but I also believe that, by privileging a black woman's point of view as the reader identified perspective in an unrealistic setting, Butler ultimately succeeds in normalizing what has been traditionally viewed as the Other. Within the realms of women's fiction, and, specifically, vampire fiction, this shift of viewpoint fits into what Judith Johns views as a burgeoning feminist tradition and represents, "the most significant revision of all...the change from narrative modes of alterity to modes of identification" (78). By granting these black women characters the centrality of being protagonists, Butler provides an opportunity for all readers to relate and acknowledge black female *humanity*. And, by situating those characters in the realm of the fantastic, Butler expands the boundaries of what those characters can do.

And, like she accomplishes with her other female characters, I also find it important that Butler separates the issue of beauty from sexuality with the character Shori. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the fact that these black women characters are attractive to their mates yet are not overly sexualized or fetishized challenges the traditional characterization of black women as objects of pure sexuality. Anyanwu, in particular, is ultimately valued by Doro for her companionship as both lover and friend more than for the physical attributes that initially drew him to her. Finally, and this is the aspect that I will focus on mostly in this chapter, Butler organically builds a critique of the historical Western paradigm of beauty by championing African-American features for purely narrative reasons utilizing the genre conventions of the vampire myth to further this goal. While I believe any celebration of black beauty is important within the context of a historically hostile environment, the fact that Butler elevates it outside of an overtly political context makes the action much more effective within the ongoing conversation because it removes the artifice of the self-conscious appeal.

While these are issues of black female physicality that Butler has addressed in several works, in this chapter, I will be focusing on her final novel, *Fledgling*, in which she utilizes the popular mythology of the vampire to explore issues of race and beauty. In Butler's version of the myth, vampires, or as they call themselves, Ina, are a separate race that has existed alongside humanity in secret for tens of thousands of years. As in the popular stories, the Ina people drink human blood and only function at night because of a weakness to daylight. To avoid detection, the Ina establish families of human familiars and graze on their blood instead of preying on unsuspecting victims. Unlike their mythological counterparts, however, they are not able to turn humans into vampires

through their bite and only reproduce through mating with one another. They are also long lived to the point of being functionally immortal.

Shori is not only one of the vampires in question but, as the title suggests, she is a young one, only in her early fifties. Because of circumstances that occur prior to the beginning of the novel, she has amnesia. As the novel begins, Shori and her family have all been attacked by a rival Ina faction, with everyone dying in the attack except her, though she suffers amnesia caused by brain injuries.

When the novel begins, Shori is confused, naked and floundering in the dark. This slave-like state also solidifies Shori's racial state within the context of the Western literary use of the vampire mythos. Traditionally, literature has utilized the image of the vampire as a metaphor of societal standing. In her article, "Women and Vampire: Nightmare or Utopia?" Judith Johnson examines how writers have reflected society's views through the image of the vampire. Johnson contends when discussing the royal backgrounds of characters like Count Dracula, that, historically, the "powerful social position of the typical vampire is no accident" because "aristocrats were conventionally considered bloodsucking leeches by the common people." Therefore, I find it appropriate to view Butler's establishment of Shori's initial helpless, impoverished state as reflective of an African-American state of being. Furthermore, the racist reasoning for the assault drives the plot of the novel and constitutes why I have decided to finally focus on *Fledgling*.

Shori is attacked by a rebel group of Ina who fear her appearance and hybrid nature. Physically, all of the Ina are described in the text as being very tall, very lean, and most provocatively within the context of racialized readings, sheet white

complexioned beings. In contrast to this description, Shori is an experimental vampire in that Ina scientists have spliced her DNA with that of an African-American, human woman. Because of that splicing, she appears to be African-American in appearance herself. The vampire reasoning is that, the more melanin a person has, the better able they are to function under the sun and that, conversely, because of their paleness, the Ina people are unable to walk in daylight. Thus, the novel reveals that, over the past hundred years, the Ina people have attempted to genetically alter themselves to more closely resemble black people, which they have succeeded in achieving with Shori. In the text, she is described as being dark brown with short kinky hair. Still, not all Ina are as enthusiastic about having their DNA spliced with humans, much less with African-Americans regardless of the reasoning behind the decision.

Within the context of a racial dynamic and the conversation over standards of beauty, I believe that Butler has performed a brilliant rhetorical move. Rather than engaging in the self-defeating game of competing beauty standards, one ultimately predicated on ever changing subjective standards, the author changes the terms of the debate entirely. *Fledgling* shifts the argument from aesthetics to pragmatism. Instead of arguing who is, “the fairest of them all,” *Fledgling* asks instead what physical characteristics will allow the main characters to survive the best. Like Anyanwu, Shori’s value is based on the options that are opened by her black female body.

Of course, Octavia Butler has employed the strategy of shifting the rhetorical framework of feminine physicality from an aesthetic to a pragmatic one in other works as well. For instance, she uses it with Lauren, the protagonist of *Parable of the Sower*. After her gated community falls to invaders, in a slowly developing apocalyptic Oakland,

Lauren makes a point of exploiting her large size and stature, as well as her short hair, to disguise herself as a man. In her mind, she is safer in the guise of a man than a woman in the lawless open territory. Likewise, Lilith's Brood's title character is able to camouflage her alien endowments, which give her inhuman strength, because of her size and height. Since she is already a large woman, Lilith's companions assume her strength is a feature of her size. Both are examples of Butler not only organically weaving nontraditional depictions of feminine physicality into her narrative but also championing those depictions. Butler is not interested in championing the physicality of black women for aesthetic reasons because, ultimately, any reasoning along these lines is based in subjectivity. By focusing on practicality, however, Butler is able to offer concrete and precise reasoning for a celebration of black looks.

Perhaps, Butler's most famous example of this ploy involves the protagonist of the author's celebrated novel *Kindred*. Time traveling Dana navigates the world of antebellum Maryland more easily because, like Lauren and Lilith, she is able to masquerade as a man. Ironically, unlike those characters who consciously decide to mask their gender, Dana stumbles onto the strategy when she initially finds herself transported in time. In fact, her white slave owning ancestor, Rufus, first makes the observation about her appearance: "You were wearing pants like a man-the way you are now. I thought you were a man...But this time you just look like a woman wearing pants" (93). This moment, when Rufus begins to sexualize Dana is also the first step towards the sexual assault he eventually attempts. Furthermore, I believe the exchange serves as critique on the manner in which donning a non-traditional, masculine appearance subverts Eurocentric definitions of beauty. To Rufus' 19th century values, a

woman cannot have short hair and be feminine while, in Dana's twentieth century home, specifically one in the late 1970's, she simply reflects a post Black Aesthetics movement sensibility and wears a natural. By showing Rufus' confusion and budding awareness of Dana's sexuality, Butler comments on the fluidity and artifice of definitions of beauty. Pragmatically, this is also a moment where the novel reveals the usefulness of Dana's nonsexualized exterior framework; once Rufus begins to be aware of Dana as a woman, his assaults shortly begin. Still, there is nothing intrinsically racialized about this critique until it is placed within a historical framework. This image of a black woman utilizing her nonstandard appearance, tall in stature, broad of shoulder, short-haired, to avoid rape in the slavery era South is quite evocative and, because of the specific context, directly references what Butler only alludes to with the other two characters.

In focusing on the practical side of appearance instead of standards of female beauty, Butler connects her characters' fictional actions to historically factual strategies of agency of women such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, both people whose legendary stories have been connected to issues of their gender. One of Tubman's most famous strategies involved traveling disguised as a deranged old man. In Truth's case, in response to early criticism about her stature, she once to bear her breast to local white women to prove she was not a man masquerading as a woman. Truth also most famously spoke of her masculine appearance and the inconsistency and hypocrisy of the Cult of True Womanhood by challenging her audience, in her speech at 1851's Women's Convention:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever

helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!
And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and
planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a
woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could
get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne
thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried
out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a
woman? (1)

Fledgling does not connect to the slave experience as directly as *Kindred* but Butler still acknowledges this connection by alluding to the travails of slavery era women in the opening pages of the text. The beginning occurs moments after the assassination attempt that causes Shori's amnesia. The character awakes in darkness, unaware of her surroundings, though she recognizes the rural area of a forest. She is naked, hurt and confused but, instinctively, knows that she is running away from some unknown danger and forces aligned against her. In setting, the first chapter very much resembles the experience of a runaway slave and connects Shori thematically with other Butler characters besides *Kindred's* Dana who have been "on the run" like *Parable of the Sower's* Lauren and *Patternmaster's* Amber.

Still, it is Butler's primary character, Anyanwu that I believe most closely reflects Shori. Specifically, the privileging of the body in *Fledgling* is an approach that Butler continues from her construction of Anyanwu. As I write in earlier chapters, Butler posits the shape shifting Anyanwu's black female physicality as a choice the character makes because she values her black womanhood over any of her other options. Rather than

viewing her black femininity within the larger Cartesian tradition of a physical challenge to be overcome for psychological agency, Butler continually presents the black female body as something to be celebrated in and of itself.

Furthermore, the specificity of the manner in which the character fits represents something new. Even with the fantastical elements of time travel, aliens and post-apocalyptic landscapes that inhabit the worlds of the aforementioned three protagonists, Butler's discussion of physicality is still firmly rooted in certain nonnegotiable truths of reality. These women look the way they do because that is how they were born. Although this is an admirable strategy, Butler's celebration of their physical appearance occurs based on the rhetorical cards that have already been dealt. Even Anyanwu's "default" form reflects her geographical, Yoruba origins. Until Shori, Butler's black female characters are black women because they were born that way.

Where *Fledgling* differs from other books in the author's canon is in the fact that Butler presents a community of fantastic beings who have lived for tens of thousands of years and visually reflect the Eurocentric standard of beauty but make a decision to become something else. These tall, thin, pale, blonde beings are *choosing* to be black and their choice is based on the internal logic of the vampire mythos; if the sun is the enemy, you have to find a way to address the obstacle. It is, on the face of it, an idea so elegantly pragmatic, it is difficult to accuse Butler of having an authorial disruptive agenda of simply repositioning an African-American aesthetic. Yet, at the same time, the political subtext of the plot is difficult to miss. Butler is clearly privileging blackness within this extraordinary context and challenging centuries of proscribed images of beauty within the context of historically loaded metaphoric imagery.

Although there is a passing acknowledgment in the text about possible otherworldly origins of the Ina and Butler, herself, is adamant that her vampires “[are] biological; [they’re] a different species, . . . a different intelligent species here on Earth, parallel with humans” (34), the fact remains that vampires are a powerful, historically loaded image. Though biological, Butler’s Ina are very much in European mythology’s vampire tradition. They drink blood, they have hypnotic powers, and they sleep during the day. Unlike the vast majority of the author’s other stories, which feature details that are regarded as traditionally science fiction ones such as aliens, outer space and time travel, mutants and post-apocalyptic scenarios, Butler’s final novel takes place in a wholly different, more Western mythological setting.

Race conscious critics of literature have observed a vein of bigotry in Western mythology based literature that is relevant to the ongoing conversation. The epitome of goodness always reflects a Eurocentric point of view while evil often times mirrors attributes of Others in the world. In other words, the tall, lighter skinned people are always the paragons of righteousness. Perhaps the most popular example of this phenomenon has been the recent adaptations of the forefather of modern fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, where the most highly esteemed race is the very pale elves with long flowing hair while the evil orcs are swarthy or dark, with matted, twisted dark hair. Commenting on the implications of this formation, critic John Yatt says, “the races that Tolkien has put on the side of evil are then given a rag-bag of non-white characteristics that could have been copied straight from a [British National Party] leaflet. Dark, slant-eyed, swarthy, broad-faced - it's amazing he doesn't go the whole hog and give them a natural sense of rhythm” (3). And while there is no historical evidence

pointing towards any particularly bigoted beliefs in Tolkien's personal life, it is difficult to ignore how literature derived from this tradition continues to skew towards this aesthetic value system of "Who is the fairest of them all?"

Within the specific realm of modern vampire stories, Butler is not the first to address issues of race, however. The most famous example in the past ten years is the series of Blade films. Like *Fledgling's* Shori, Blade is a sort of hybrid whose mother was bitten by a vampire while she was pregnant. The difference between the two characters ends there, however, because, unlike Shori, Blade is a hunter of pure-blooded vampires; as opposed to working towards harmony between the two races like Shori and her allies. Furthermore, unlike *Fledgling's* celebration of Shori's hybridity, I would argue the Blade films frame the title character as a sort of vampire Tragic Mulatto. Blade is torn between his human and vampire nature, continually morose and pitied by human and vampire alike. In fact this pity exhibited towards Blade is the only subject that both human and vampire agree on. Metaphorically, the films posit an adversarial relationship between the homogenous, Europeanized, traditional world of the vampire and the racially heterogeneous, Americanized, distinctly modern world of Blade and his allies that consciously serves as an intertextual response to the Tolkien racial values.

The author L.A. Banks accomplishes the same goal of re-evaluating race in the European tradition of the vampire mythos with her Vampire Huntress series. Protagonist Damili Richards is an African-American fully human "Neteru," one of a long line of vampire hunters, and battles a series of traditionally constructed vampires who can trace their lineage to Count Dracula. In a similar fashion to the Blade films, Banks structures the conflict with the racially diverse human hunters on one side and the European

vampires on the other and, in her own way, responds to the Tolkien value system by showing the benefit of a racially and culturally diverse community over a homogenous one. Still, like the relationship between the predatory pure blooded vampires and the noble human fighters in the *Blade* series, I find this approach somewhat reductionist and simplistic. Framing the conversation as a matter of “good” versus “evil” does not address the roots of the bigotry at play and ignores the deeper, self-evaluative facets of racial construction.

In that vein, Jewelle Gomez utilizes her novel, *The Gilda Stories*, to present an African-American vampire that both addresses issues of race and gender. A series of interconnected stories set in a one hundred and fifty year span, Gomez’ Gilda is an immortal black vampire who has various friendships and lovers throughout the ages and, as Johnson describes it, “becomes a kind of American Everywoman engaged in a pilgrimage through our history” (73). Gomez rewrites the rules of the vampire myth, making Gilda more protector than predator and more human than monster. Still, although Gilda is a black woman, her race and gender is only implicitly posited as a direct response to traditional definitions of beauty.

Where Butler succeeds brilliantly is in this area of self-evident evaluation. According to the plot of *Fledgling*, the Ina, *themselves*, have begun the genetic splicing process simply for practical reasons. By privileging this practice, the race challenges the celebration of pure blood lines and the notion that paler skin is automatically valuable. Furthermore, the sheer pragmatism evidenced by the race towards the project seems to make any observation of the societal implications of darkening their skin seem petty and

childish. For Butler, when issues of survival and continued viability are concerned, self-aggrandizing arguments over appearance are trivial.

Perhaps this attitude of general Ina indifference towards race is why a human points out racism as a potential motive for Shori's attempted assassination. Halfway into the narrative, Butler plays coy about motive for the attack. Both Shori, as well as, her newly found Ina compatriots are mystified about what could have led to the aggression against her family. During one of the many conversations the vampire group has, Shori's primary human companion, Wright, offers several possibilities including, superstitious human attacks and Ina jealousy and, finally, offers, "Or it's happening because Shori is black and racists-probably Ina racists-don't like the idea that a good part of the answer to your daytime problems is melanin"(153). While I find it particularly significant that the human Wright is the first one to bring up the notion within the book, even more fascinating is the Ina response to the possibility. Shori notes, "...the Ina weren't racists...Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them" (153). In other words, the majority of the Ina people believe the entire philosophy of racism and bigotry is beneath them because of its pettiness.

I think this explicit value judgment is particularly noteworthy within the genre of vampire mythology. The Ina are obviously positioned in the text to represent a superior race. They have super powers, they are long lived to the point of being functionally immortal, and everyone around them wants to be like them. For this group of individuals to point out how short sighted and ridiculous racism is fairly monumental. Within the fictive world, Butler has positioned the Ina as the wiser of the two races and that wise race sees, not only the foolishness of racism, but, also, the value of blackness. Of course,

a close reading of the statement does reveal a certain level of specism, however; the Ina seem to be saying that part of the reason that human bigotry is beneath them is because humanity is beneath them.

This is the point where Butler's decision to attach the evolution of the Ina to gene splicing, as opposed to some other type of fictional change in the group's phenotype that would allow them to maintain their racial purity begins to bear rhetorical fruit. Rather than focus on the fact that Shori's existence speaks to a time when the Ina will become black, the main component of her enemies' outrage is over the fact that they will become hybrids. In fact, the only example of a character referring to Shori as the racially charged term, "dirty little nigger bitch" is a hypnotized human who uses the term along with calling her a "goddamn mongrel cub." And, upon questioning, he admits that he has heard his Ina masters refer to her in those terms and is only repeating them. But, while, the implication is that there are racist Ina, upon further investigation, the same human says that the main source of his masters' venom is directed towards her being a hybrid and the implications for the continued purity of the Ina race. He says, "Ina mixed with some human or maybe human mixed with a little Ina. That's not supposed to happen. Not ever. Couldn't let you and you...your kind...your family breed" (179). Even in her depiction of the antagonistic Ina who have gone so far as to kill scores of humans in their attempt to assassinate Shori, Butler always frames appearance based racism as small and petty.

That is not to say there is never an instance of outright racism exhibited by the Ina themselves. One of the older vampires, Katherine Dunham, is against Shori and says, "You want your sons to mate with this person. You want them to get black, human

children from her. Here in the United States, even most humans will look down on them. When I came to this country, such people were kept as property, as slaves” (278). Still, a close examination of this statement reveals the complexity of Ina feelings vis-à-vis race. Certainly, it is a bigoted statement but take note of the relative emotionless tone of Dunham’s complaint. Racially, her biggest concern seems to be the potential social standing that will come from blackness but it is a detached, almost academic type of dispute. In many ways, the character reflects the same level of pragmatism and practicality towards race that other Butler characters like Anyanwu do. Dunham is not against blackness because of an innate hatred of the color, she is anti-black because her history has shown how race can impede movement and opportunity.

In fact, when the Ina bigots refer to Shori with any true level of vitriol, they are usually nonracialized ones that only reference the issue of genetic purity. Eventually, the Ina group who were against the splicing process make themselves known and have to defend themselves in an Ina tribunal court against accusations of the assassination attempt. When they are found guilty, one of the group launches himself at Shori yelling, “...black mongrel bitch...What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?” Again, while this is clearly a racist sentiment I would argue, more importantly, the venom of the rant comes from the idea that Shori is not a pureblooded Ina. And, most importantly of all, the text frames this renegade group and their philosophy as, not only bigoted, but shortsighted. As far as the majority of the Ina are concerned, this is not a matter of aesthetics or, even, sexuality. Shori’s blackness and her heterogeneity represent nothing less than the genetic future of the Ina race.

The provocative aspect of this linkage of blackness/heterogeneity and the future is that, not only does it dispute the aforementioned classic trope of honoring and glorifying the European notion of purity of bloodlines, I would argue that, in a sort of sentiment of nationalistic contrast, Butler is championing a very American notion. Within diversity there is strength and, compared to purebreds, the mutt is always the strongest and smartest of any group. This celebration of diversity is similar to the themes in both the Blade films and LA Banks' novels but Butler strengthens the argument by focusing on the genetic argument. In *Fledgling*, it is not just diversity of the group; it is diversity of the body. As she does in so many of her works, Shori's body is the venue for agency and opportunity.

I also think it is important to note that, though Butler foregrounds the pragmatic reasons for Shori's attractiveness to many of the other Ina, she does not shirk from presenting the only black vampire as a being that is sexually desirable to the people around her. Within this subject, Butler walks a rhetorically fine line within the context of the historical metaphorical use of the vampire and applying its historical meaning to black womanhood. Since the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the modern vampire has been understood to represent an undercurrent of forbidden sexuality. Maurice Richardson provided the first of many Freudian readings of *Dracula* in 1959, framing the work as a demonstration of the Oedipal Complex: Dracula represents the "bad father" who keeps all the women to himself and the young men in the story work to kill him to get their "mothers" to themselves (451). More recently, critics like Stephen Arata and Judith Johnson have reinterpreted the text as metaphoric of the late Victorian fear of sex with the Other reflecting their societal fear of the end of the British race, reimagining the

Count as a racialized foreigner than as a father figure (Arata 115, Johnson 75). For them, the vampire represented the anxiety brought about by the perceived threat of the immigrant worker arriving, intermarrying and sucking the “pure” English culture and citizenry dry. Although, the time and geographic setting is different than the traditional Victorian context, because *Fledgling* is vampire fiction and utilizes vampire tropes, Butler has to address the metaphorical weight of forbidden sexuality the image carries.

Judging by the various strategies she has employed throughout her body of work, Octavia Butler had no intention of linking black female sexuality with the forbidden. In the majority of her books, Butler presents black women as the protagonists and normalizes their sexual relationships with their mates. *Wild Seed*'s Anyanwu's emotional journey in her relationship with Doro is the centerpiece of the novel. Dana's fully developed and decidedly modern interracial relationship with her husband serves as a contrast to the sexist and racist way she is treated in the past in *Kindred*. Lilith spends three novels mourning the loss of both of her husbands in *Lilith's Brood*. And although she is an immortal, self sufficient being, Lilith behaves in a sympathetic humanistic manner when it comes to her mates

In response to this rhetorical conundrum, Octavia Butler elegantly acknowledges the history of forbidden sexuality vis-à-vis vampire imagery while sidestepping any racial implications by focusing on the other most notable physical attribute of Shori: her size and apparent age. In one of the most provocative details of the book, due to her size and shape, apparently, Shori resembles a prepubescent girl. Initially, when she meets her first human host, Wright, he believes she is a lost child and picks her up with plans to turn her over to the authorities. But, once he is bitten, regardless of her size, Wright very quickly

views Shori as a sexual being. The first bite takes him by surprise but, when Shori asks to bite him again, Wright wryly responds, “If I do, what will you let me do?” This sexually charged response marks the moment when Wright moves from treating Shori as a child toward sexualizing her to his eventual development as her mate. Butler does imply that part of the reason Wright is not put off by the character’s youthful appearance is the chemical reaction caused by Ina saliva. Characters note that a component of the codependent relationship between the two species is the fact that humans begin to yearn for the bite as they might become addicted to drugs. Still, even under the influence of Shori’s venom, Wright describes Shori as “jailbait...super jailbait” (18). Though he acknowledges that, visually, Shori looks like a child, Wright remains sexually attracted to her. With this development, Butler has performed a rhetorical move that serves two purposes.

First, Butler stays true to the historical vampire metaphor of forbidden sexuality by focusing on Shori’s childlike appearance. Traditionally, the vampire has represented sexual taboo but, in a modern age where female sexuality and interracial relationships are accepted in polite society, the historic imagery no longer evokes outrage. However, as Leonard Heldreth highlights in his discussion of another literary child vampire, *Vampire Junction*’s Timmy Valentine, “the most publically criticized and prosecuted sexual crime is pedophilia...Pedophiles have replaced the homosexual as the culture’s most insidious corrupter of youth.” Heldreth goes on to parallel the unease modern readers feel about the image of pedophilia with the unease Victorian readers felt in sexually charged scenes in *Dracula* (127). Likewise, by making Shori appear prepubescent, Butler maintains the

imagery of forbidden sexuality that is so inherently a feature of the mythology of the vampire but shifts the focus away from race to one of age.

Highlighting Shori's chronological appearance also allows Butler to circumvent the theme of black female sexuality as representative of deviance. By focusing the readers' physical reaction on Shori's prepubescent appearance rather than her fully realized feminine sexuality, *Fledgling* can concentrate on the essential theme of the pragmatic appeal of Shori's black physicality. Still, this rhetorical play between the different aspects of Shori's physicality is a fascinating dichotomy that Butler plays with throughout *Fledgling*. She continually downplays one aspect to highlight another. In the case of Wright, once he gets used to the reality of vampires, as well as the fact that, because of the way Ina age, Shori is, in fact, thirty years older than he, the issue of her appearance retreats. It stays in the forefront, however through Wright's penchant for commenting on the breast size of all the women around him and how he often notes that Shori is flat chested. In this way, Butler always reminds the reader that Shori has a childlike appearance and the forbidden nature of her physicality is based on that aspect of her physicality not her color.

The theme of Shori's attractiveness is not limited to Wright's desire for her. Shori is also attractive to the various Ina males around her. In fact, though she is still too young to mate and, as an orphan, she does not have anyone else to bring to the traditionally polygamist Ina relationships, all of the single vampires express a desire to take her as a wife because of the practical implications of her color and hybridity. In their minds, the chance to pass on the ability to stand sunlight, as well as, Shori's other great gift, the ability to function in the day, makes her very desirable.

Apparently, Ina also express desire through scent and, again, while Shori is too young to marry, the young Ina around her convey great interest throughout the text because she “smells” so alluring and, through extension, the general consensus is that her venom will be some of the most effective-and most addictive-that any of the vampires have come across. This issue of scent as primary motivation for appeal obviously falls well into the fantastic context of the story, further establishing the Ina as a fictional race but it is worth noting that Butler makes sure that, even within this criteria, black people are the most attractive.

To drive the point home of the appeal of blackness, Butler finally relates the topic of black attractiveness to the only other character in the novel Shori shares kinship with, the African-American human, Joel Harrison. The son of an older human symbiont, Harrison has left the Ina world to be educated in the human world and, now that he is finished, has come back and chooses to remain as a symbiont, eventually joining Shori. After the younger Harrison makes it known that he wants to join Shori’s family, she sits him down and engages in what we can assume is Ina courtship; Shori bites his wrist and is pleasantly surprised at the results:

He was delicious. I had intended to only taste him and get a little of my venom into him, but he was such a treat that I took a little more than a taste. And I lingered over his wrist longer that was necessary...

‘How have you managed to stay unattached?’ I asked. ‘Didn’t anyone here want you?’

He smiled. ‘Everyone wanted me.’ (164)

Like Shori before him with her Ina people, among his peers, Joel is the most desirable human character in the novel. And while the novel makes it very clear that Ina attraction to their human hosts is based primarily on scent and taste, I also want to point out that Butler makes sure that Harrison, like Shori is African-American. The purpose this ultimately serves is that, in addition to all of the commentary Butler puts forward regarding inherently racist assumptions about standards of beauty, by presenting Shori and, to a lesser extent, Joel Harrison as the most attractive people in the novel, the author also creates a reality where black people are, “the fairest ones of all.”

Octavia Butler very specifically critiques the implicit bigotry of the classic vampire tale. While it is hard to argue that the prejudice in these traditional tales is consciously rendered, the fact these stories have their roots in European folk tales and mythology intrinsically privileges those who also come from that racial and geographical background. Furthermore, these stories, specifically, keep minorities out of the narrative, at best, or relegated to an alien Other at worst.

By constructing a narrative that looks forward and takes place in America, Butler begins to provide a space for a variety of people to participate in the overall plot. Instead of the overall caste system that classic text like *Count Dracula* directly speak to or the Blade films and the works of L.A. Banks sub-textually address, Butler celebrates variety without simply repositioning the old binary argument and condemning notions of genetic purity.

And by championing heterogeneity, she also begins to philosophically provide a new space as well. Finally, with the character of Shori, the author takes the implicit value of the body she outlines with Anyanwu and fully articulates the usefulness of the body.

In *Shori*, Octavia Butler shows how the body provides opportunity and option but, more importantly, Butler shows that this agency reflects a sense of beauty that all can aspire towards. In the final analysis, it does not matter who is the fairest of them all, what truly matters is who can provide the opportunity for agency.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

“...the body is all we really know that we have. We can say that there’re always other things that are wonderful....But all we really *know* that we have is the flesh.”

-Octavia Butler (Mehaffy 59).

Octavia Butler died unexpectedly outside of her Washington home on February 24, 2006. Although her untimely death was tragic, *Fledgling* serves as a fitting end to her career as a writer who challenged preconceived notions of what black womanhood entailed and forcefully argued the possibilities that lay with them. I believe this postmodern vampire tale reflects the narrative concerns that encompass Octavia Butler’s entire canon. Octavia Butler was a writer who believed in exploring the possibilities and options afforded to black women and, specifically, she examined how those women’s options were made possible by the agency of the body. In this novel, Butler begins with the traditional vampire myth with its specific, European trappings and, rather than write her version with its own limitations, she instead chooses to expand upon the mythology. Butler creates new narrative space for additional options for the vampire race’s origins specifically focusing on an elder vampire’s musing about the potential biological origins of the race:

There’s a recently developed belief among some of our younger people that the Ina landed here from another world thousands of years ago...I suppose that idea’s no worse than one of our oldest legends. It says we were placed here by a great mother goddess who created us and gave us

Earth to live on until we became wise enough to come home to live in paradise with her. Actually, I think we evolved right here on Earth alongside humanity as a cousin species like the chimpanzee. (73)

In the above quote, where the vampire elder Iosif tells the amnesiac Shori about the various theories of their origin, Butler is careful not to contradict or privilege any theory over another. The elder's potential creation theories reflect traditional mythological tropes with its focus on a "mother goddess," a typical science fiction, otherworldly explanation and, finally, a more modern biologically based grounding, but throughout the novel no one hypothesis is ever proven to be right, leaving any final answer to the readers' imagination.

This passage reflects Butler's strategy towards celebrating options that is reflected throughout the novel. She is not interested in rewriting the vampire myth so much as she is adding to it. As Iosif's multiple explanations imply, nothing about Shori's existence invalidates that which has come before in vampire fiction. Shori has been bred to allow the Ina people the possibility to live another, new way but she does not necessarily represent the end of the old ways. One of the most incisive critiques of the bigoted vampires' resistance to the gene splicing Shori represents is the fact that no one in the broader Ina community is proposing forced participation. *Fledgling* makes clear that vampires have functioned and prospered for eons before Shori is introduced. Certainly many of the Ina people are interested in combining their families with the Shori's hybrid DNA, with all of the advantages that are implied, but there is never a point in the novel where it is stated or implied that the Ina who do not want to breed with Shori will go extinct. Butler certainly posits Shori as desirable and, through that example, champions

the desirability of black women. However it is never at the expense of anyone else. In *Fledgling*, Butler avoids zero sum scenarios, where one group has to lose for another to make gains. Instead she opens up additional avenues of agency that allow many types of people to participate. *Fledgling* is representative of the author's canon in this respect: Butler is never interested in replacing one type of racist and sexist hierarchal matrix with one that simply privileges another demographic. The author is always more interested in the possibilities that only occur in a heterogeneous environment.

This focus on multiple possibilities of agency and mobility is an approach that the author employs as a writing strategy as well. Octavia Butler's stories excel at highlighting possibilities. On its own merits, the practice of working toward expanding the limitations of fiction is a noble cause. However, when race and gender are factored in, it becomes an almost sacred one. Many of the works by Butler's contemporaries focus on the rhetorical battle for the right to define black womanhood. A side effect of this intertextual battle is, often, the terms of the redefinition are limited by what has come before. While it is obvious that Butler's canon dramatizes the historical challenges that black women have faced-whether those challenges are images of beauty, the concept of sexual morality or motherhood-Octavia Butler's work demonstrates what the possibilities can be.

The protagonist, Anyanwu is a prime example of the author illustrating how many options are available through character construction. As the title of the book reflects, it is essential that Anyanwu is the result of unstructured heterogeneity rather than the ordered and structured eugenic programming that the book's antagonist Doro prefers. From the outset, Butler privileges the product of options and the possibilities that occur when those

options come together. Appearing in two books in the Patternist series *Wild Seed* and *Mind of my Mind* Anyanwu has two supernatural abilities that, in many ways, reflect one another. Primarily, Anyanwu is a shape changer with the ability to transform her body into any animal form that she has encountered. Her other extraordinary ability is that she is immortal. In fact, when she first appears in *Wild Seed*, she is already three hundred years old.

I find this detail of Anyanwu's age incredibly important. When the reader is introduced to the character, Anyanwu is, by definition, outside of society's construct of black womanhood-and humanity, period- because she is older than humanly possible. Therefore, Butler has already privileged Anyanwu with a personality trait to transcend any societal expectations of her behavior. This liberating immortality coupled with the ability to change her physicality reflects a theme that, again, overarches Butler's entire work. Through her characters, Octavia Butler explored the notion that black women have a plethora of options and choices. They can be lovers and killers, mothers and daughters, communal and solitary. Specifically, with Anyanwu, Butler constructed this theme in two broad ways.

Physically, Anyanwu's choice to live primarily as a black woman also privileges black womanhood. She has the option to live as someone else if she desires, but chooses black womanhood. Throughout both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of my Mind*, Anyanwu demonstrates her ability to maintain different personas for long periods of time. During the late nineteenth century, she spends decades in the guise of a white man. Still, regardless of the societal hardships she faces, she always reverts back to her original appearance as a black woman because that is the way she feels most natural. The

conscious choice to embrace black womanhood is a theme that is also echoed most prominently in *Fledgling*. However, in that case, the protagonist Shori and the majority of her vampire brethren choose blackness because of the pragmatic aspects of having darker skin and the ability to function during daylight. For Anyanwu, there are no practical reasons of survival and mobility. Blackness just feels like home.

Philosophically, Anyanwu's choice of blackness is also noteworthy by her specific fidelity to American blackness. Although she is immortal and older than the social construct of African-American identity, Anyanwu chooses to align herself with American blackness when she feels like her way of life is being challenged in *Mind of My Mind*. When her lover Doro informs her that the telepathic Patternists refer to people without power as, "mutes," an enraged Anyanwu quickly parallels the derogatory term with "nigger." Like her physical choice to be a black woman, Anyanwu's *social* choice to align herself with African-American society speaks to a narrative commitment to a celebration of the culture.

Ultimately, this commitment is not one that reflects a limitation of choices for black women however. Throughout both *Wild Seed* and *Mind of my Mind*, Butler shows the manner in which black women can transcend societal expectations and deny the framework of the traditional binary choices for women. In her life, Anyanwu chooses to be mother AND leader, lover AND artist, community member AND individual.

Anyanwu also actively works to control her own destiny and make those choices. At the beginning of *Wild Seed*, she has already established her role in the West African community where she resides. Even when Doro forces her to participate in his eugenic projects, Anyanwu spends decades resisting and evading him until he finally submits to

her wishes. And when Doro's ongoing eugenic experiment with the Patternist community spirals out of control and finally becomes more than she wants to be involved in, it is only Anyanwu that decides the moment when she wants to die. In Anyanwu, Octavia Butler creates a black woman character who does not allow outside forces to decide her fate but, rather one who is in charge of her own destiny. Anyanwu is the ultimate example of what Octavia Butler achieved in her fiction: she forces readers to acknowledge that black womanhood transcends all, whether it is extraordinary challenges, expected gender role, or genre limitation. Many of Octavia Butler's other characters can be traced to this one extraordinary creation.

Importantly, Anyanwu is a fully developed black female character. Butler imbues her with hopes and desires, likes and dislikes, nobility and human foible. Through two books and a span of three hundred years, Butler meticulously crafts the growth and evolution of the character. When she rages over the fact that her descendant Mary is psychically "marked" her and makes the connection between the term, "mute" and "nigger," as readers, we share her anger because she has become real.

Butler brings that same level of meticulous craftsmanship to the creation of many of her protagonists. Rather than simple interchangeable ciphers utilized to move the plot along, the characters are recognizable as true black women characters. Whether Butler focuses on Anyanwu's aforementioned rage over the implicit racism of the Patternists, Lauren's non-dramatic pragmatism over issues like birth control and tampons in *Parable of the Sower*, or Shori's feelings of isolation and loneliness over being ripped apart from her home and culture, the Butler black female character resonates because they realistically reflect concerns and issues that black women writers have fought to address

for years. And Butler transcends by utilizing these characters in fantastic settings where their realism works in stark contrast to the science-fiction setting around them. In fact, Butler is so successful in constructing stories with all their aspects of the fantastic is because she imbues her characters with a degree of believability that allows the reader to have faith in the potential of black women regardless of the situation.

In the tradition of Anyanwu's transcendence and the manner that she challenged expectations of black women, I also find that Lilith of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* serves as an example of the way the author both acknowledges the traditional racial and gender dynamic that entraps black women while denying that dynamic any complete definitive power. In *Dawn*, Lilith is presented with limited choices and finds herself standing between two hostile forces, one human and the other alien, as she attempts to maintain her own selfhood. Finally, Lilith achieves her goal even if she sometimes has to go off by herself to express her independence. Butler truly shows the value of Lilith's efforts by positioning her children as the final key used to regain humanity's genetic future away from their alien saviors/captors. As she does with Shori and *Fledgling*, Butler creates a situation where she champions diversity and heterogeneity but, in the true spirit of the concepts allows her characters the freedom to choose to participate.

And she most often places black women characters in the center of the various cultures, community and worlds, again, highlighting the importance of those women. In connection to her ability to make these black women characters three dimensional and fully realized, I find this a noteworthy detail. As Madhu Dubey observes, many examples of contemporary black women's literature takes place in rural settings which is, arguably, a limited context. Butler not only liberates black women characters from that

setting, she also privileges their point of view and their importance by situating them in the middle of two worlds.

In her canon, Lilith is not the only character Butler uses to represent an emissary between two worlds. In the 2003 short story, “Amnesty,” the protagonist Noah is a translator between humanity and an uninvited alien race hoping to bring peace between the two species. Gan, the narrator of “Bloodchild” is a teenager who works closely with the alien Tlic official in charge of humanity and, as the favored person and eventual mate of the Tlic leader, is the *de facto* envoy between the aliens and his human family, also working towards a better understanding between the two races. In some ways, even the diseased Eli Clay in *Clay’s Ark* also serves as the intermediary between the alien virus he carries and humanity and, as the development of his nonhuman descendants the Clayarks show, eventually finds a way for the virus and humanity to coexist.

Lilith differs from other Butler examples of this ambassador role however because sexuality is intrinsically tied up in her position as the link between humanity and the alien Oankali. The Oankali travel through space and reproduce by gene splicing between the male and female genders of different alien groups. The mechanics of the act involve an Oankali being linking between males and females to produce hybrid offspring. As a side effect of the Oankali reproductive method, participating humans are no longer able to have physical contact with each other. Although the experience is sexually pleasurable for all involved, there is no intercourse in the manner in which we are used to discussing the act. Instead there are tentacles and psychic imagery and chemical reaction. Still, although, the Oankali do not have sex with Lilith, the vast majority of the other

humans in *Dawn* view the character as, not only a traitor to humanity but as “the aliens’ whore.”

The specific dynamic of the Oankali sexual mores are significant because their sheer alien-ness allows readers to examine cultural attitudes towards black female sexuality and physicality in a purely abstract fashion. Within this completely fictive framework, Butler is able to allude to the historical crimes committed against black women, during slavery, without being constrained by the specificity of a slavery setting. In this extraordinary setting, Butler absolutely interrogates the manner in which black women are judged by Western standards, the nature of power within a sexual relationship and the ambivalence victims within a exploitive relationship often feel towards their victimizers. However, by setting the story in an extraordinary environment, she also demonstrates that black women do not have to function only within historical frameworks to engage in this critique of hypocritical sexual morality. Again, Butler releases the old story of black women’s struggle with issues of sex and power away from the constraints of history. That is not to say that Butler is against stories that take place during slavery. On the contrary, the novel *Kindred* shows that Butler understands the narrative utility of the antebellum period. *Dawn* is just an example of Butler shining light on additional choices for black women characters while critiquing and exploring one of the most crucial issues for contemporary black women writers.

This attention to the many choices that black women have does not mean that Octavia Butler’s work did not reveal certain biases towards any of those choices however. Chapter three specifically focuses on the ambivalence the author shows toward motherhood in the Patternist novels mainly because the physical aspect of that choice

limits movement. Though she has many choices in her long life, Anyanwu finally chooses the life of Doro's lover over all. And Anyanwu's descendant Mary also spends her time in the novel, *Mind of My Mind* avoiding motherhood until she also has no choice in the matter. Finally, in *Patternmaster*, where Butler highlights the final stage of the race of telepaths' evolution as a culture, motherhood is presented as the role of lesser being. I see a pattern of Butler problematizing motherhood in the Patternist cycle where power ultimately is incompatible with maternity.

While I focus on the role of motherhood in the Patternist novels, it is a theme that Octavia Butler revisits in other books. In the novel *Parable of the Talents*, the protagonist Lauren Olamina's baby is kidnapped and the two are not reunited until the child Asha is an adult. While this kidnapping reinforces the theme that children can be used as a weakness to exploit in otherwise capable characters, the incident is another example of Butler sidestepping an opportunity to show a woman actively engaged in motherhood. This uncertainty Butler's writing reveals about the role in women's lives is a theme that is also repeated in the second novel of the Lilith's Brood series, *Adulthood Rites*. When the novel opens, like Lauren, Lilith has recently had a baby but that baby is kidnapped and, while the two are reunited before the child grows into adulthood, the reunion only occurs in the final pages of the novel so that, again, Butler avoids focusing on motherhood directly.

Ironically, I believe this canon wide critique about this one potential life choice of motherhood finally serves to liberate black women for other potential roles. Historically, a great deal of black women's identities has been tied up in motherhood. Whether it was the role of white children's caretaker or psychic damage done from having children taken

during slavery, the overall worth of black women has always been judged through the lenses of maternity. By concentrating on other aspects of black womanhood, Butler takes the focus from the role and speaks to other possibilities. Butler does not say what black women should not do so much as she demonstrates what they can accomplish when they are not hampered by motherhood.

Regardless, Butler never fully writes the role off either. Specifically, in *Imago* the final novel of the Lilith's Brood trilogy, Jodahs, that same child who was previously kidnapped from Lilith, helps to convince the Oankali to reinstate natural human reproduction. In the end, humans who have clung to the old ways are allowed to migrate to another planet and live as they want. Finally, though she had spent three novels, *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*, resisting motherhood, Octavia Butler allows for natural motherhood to flourish at the conclusion. Again, regardless of her personal feelings, Octavia Butler work reveals a person who believed in exploring, not limiting possibilities regardless of the role of the body.

Moving forward, the work of Octavia Butler still offers critics endless possibilities of inquiry. This project demonstrates the unique space the author's work occupies within the pantheon of black women writers of the late twentieth century. Like many of her contemporaries, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara, Butler interrogates issues central to the societal construction of black womanhood like motherhood, sexuality, etc. However, by locating her exploration outside of the traditional narrative context of what Madhu Dubey calls, the "postmodern Southern Folk Aesthetic," Butler creates critical and social opportunity to examine these black gendered issues in new and exciting ways. By expanding the definition of what

constitutes black literature, Butler provides potential pathways of criticism and inclusion other black writers who have followed her like newer science fiction writers like Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due and Kodwo Eshun.

Appropriately enough, I also believe that this reinvigorated locating of Butler within the African-American tradition also provides opportunity to re-engage the tradition of feminist criticism of the author. In fact, because Butler's work transcends many types of critique, a study of the author gives us a chance to engage in a conversation between disciplines that, sadly, does not occur often enough. For instance, when a feminist scholar like Patricia Melzer observes that, "[Butler's embrace of difference] destabilizes the discursive opposition of identity and difference (the basis for dualisms in Western thought) and constitutes the main hopeful element in Butler's writing," (69) the destabilization she speaks of can be used to critique race as well as gender.

Alongside the manner she constructs black womanhood, I believe Butler's attention towards the connection between sexuality and power can lead to new avenues of social criticism. For instance, I envision a line of study that links Butler's work in a novel like *Dawn* with the ongoing examination of the role lack of resources plays in some women staying in destructive relationships. Likewise, Butler's stories acknowledge the potent combination of education, social class and access to technology that have far reaching implications to our modern world. She alluded to the implications of societal phenomena like the use of Twitter among African-Americans, the culture shift of Facebook and the rise of telecommuting years ago. Finally, I remain interested in the parallel between Butler's approach to religion and spirituality and the way that approach

fits in, as well as, enhances the African-American canon. What is most valuable about Octavia Butler's writing-her articulation of technology's effects, her examination of the relationships between the powerful and the powerless, the role of race and gender in a postmodern world- forces us to confront our fear of change and think about our world in profound and sometimes frightening ways. In the midst of that unchanging and unknown vector, the body is all we know but, as Octavia Butler says, the body is all we need.

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