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### **Octavia E. Butler's Dawn and "Bloodchild" : From Human to Posthuman**

Nicole Fields

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## Abstract

Octavia Butler authored many science fiction novels and short stories, almost all of which have been associated with race and/or slavery. I argue that two of her works, *Dawn* and “Bloodchild,” are not specifically about race and can be approached from a posthuman perspective. I discuss the place of black literature in the Western Literary tradition, and I highlight the literary reception of Butler’s work. Since her novels and short stories have been compared to slavery, which I argue against, I point out the disparity between the lives of the characters in Butler’s texts and historical accounts of the slave experiences.

In this paper, I rely on the definition of Philosophical Posthumanism, as explained by Francesca Ferrando. Furthermore, I utilize this component of posthumanism from which to approach both texts, since the theory is inclusive of post-anthropocentrism and post-dualism, both of which are relevant to my critique of the humanistic tradition of Othering and setting strict, dualistic binaries to which humans conform.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* and "Bloodchild" : From Human to Posthuman

by

Nicole Fields

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

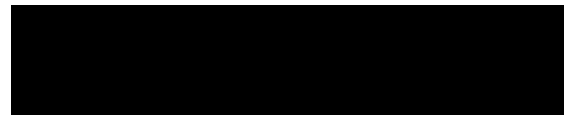
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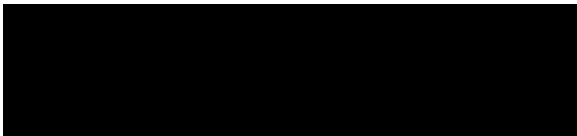
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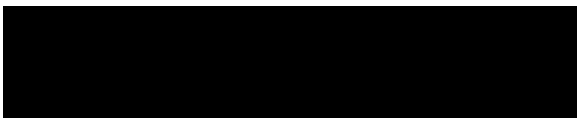
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Montclair State University

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## Introduction

Since the days of slavery, Black Americans have had to employ writing as a tool in order to fight for freedom and civil rights. Hence, much of the earliest writings of Black Americans functioned to humanize the African and to describe the barbarity of the institution of slavery. Early black authors did not have the privilege to focus their writings on topics other than systemic racism, for writing was a revolutionary tool used by Black Americans during slavery to fight against the institution. Because legalized, racial oppression lasted for centuries, black authors have written about it and continued to address its aftermath. The consequence is that blackness becomes the signifier of race and of slavery; in turn, critics often approach black literature through a lens that does not allow for any other interpretation, except that of a metaphorical slave narrative, as in the case of Octavia E. Butler's fiction.

In reading criticism on Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and "Bloodchild" (1984), I find that readers interpret most, if not all, of her works as slave narratives. Although Butler examines race in many of her writings, these two texts do not seem to focus on racial oppression. However, the slave narrative is attached to Butler's stories, anyway. It seems that most of Butler's literature has been read through a singular modality because of her race. I propose that instead of challenging one system of oppression, such as slavery, racism or colonialism, Butler dismantles dichotomies, such as master/slave, masculine/feminine, us/them, human/nonhuman and the dualistic logic that contributes to those binaries. There is a difference between that which challenges racial oppression and that which disrupts the dialectic upon which systems of oppression are constructed. The works on which I focus are more about the decentering of the human and interspecies symbiosis than about racial oppression. I explore the reception of Butler's works and how blackness has been the signifier of difference and of slavery, thereby,

situating her texts within a binary in which they are Othered and reduced to one mode of analysis. In what follows, I examine Butler's works through the lens of posthumanism to illuminate how her texts disrupt anthropocentrism and dualism via interspecies symbiosis.

### Literary Reception of Butler's Writings

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. comments on the position of race in literature when he writes: the question of the place of texts written by the Other (be that odd metaphorical negation of the European defined as African, Arabic, Chinese, Latin American, Yiddish, or female authors) in the proper study of "literature," "Western Literature," or "comparative literature" has . . . remained an unasked question, suspended or silenced by a discourse in which the canonical and noncanonical stand as the ultimate opposition. (2)

The commentary above discusses the role that race plays in Western Literature. Texts written by the Other have been automatically placed in categories, which are suggestive of difference when juxtaposed to canonical works. Since this has been the practice, Butler's literature is already situated in a tradition where her texts are Othered, and the history of Butler's blackness is attached to her narratives.

Gates explains the history of the categorization of black literature in the following excerpt:

Writing stood as a complex "certificate of humanity" as Paulin Hountonji put it. Black writing, and especially the literature of the slave, served not to obliterate the difference of race; rather, the inscription of the black voice in Western literatures has preserved those very cultural differences to be repeated, imitated,



and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference.

(12)

Thus, when the word “black” precedes the word “literature,” it automatically signifies difference. I find this signification of difference problematic because it reduces the black narrative to a story of racial oppression, thereby, maintaining oppositional binaries that situate blackness as the historical Other within the context of Western literature. Such binaries encourage literary approaches that limit Butler and her diverse narratives to critical analyses that illuminate the black experience as it relates to whiteness. Because of the history of slavery and the dichotomies in which blacks exist, readers traditionally approach black texts through a lens of difference and Otherness, which can obscure interpretations that extend beyond race, as in the case of Butler.

For example, in an interview with Charlie Rose that aired on PBS in the year 2000, Rose asked Butler if she was trying to create a “new black mythology” in reference to *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, and he asked her if she wanted to say anything “essential” about race. Butler replied that she was not trying to create a new black mythology, and her reply about any commentary that she may have had on race was, “Hey, we’re here” (Butler/Rose Part 1). Rose’s question was in reference to the religion of Earthseed, which is a creation by Lauren Olamina, the main character of those texts. Earthseed is a religion that is rooted in the survival of all humanity, not just one race of humans. Furthermore, Earthseed does not establish any sort of race-based ideology. Butler confirms this when she says that both books are an autobiography of a “fictional character who creates a new religion and sets humanity’s feet on a different path” (Butler/Rose Part 1). Rose’s reference to a black mythology was the result of his attempt to compare Earthseed to Greek mythology. In his narrow perception of Butler’s stories, Rose did

not address Butler's statement about setting humanity on a different path because he did not perceive the text outside of the black/white dichotomy.

In a 1996 interview, Butler discussed racial themes in her novels and short stories with Stephen W. Potts. In reference to "Bloodchild," Butler stated, "But so many critics have read this as a story about slavery, probably just because I am black." Butler goes on to say that "the only places I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so." Potts mentioned *Kindred*, and Butler confirmed that he was correct. She also mentioned other books that are about race, such as *Mind of My Mind* and *Wild Seed* (Butler/ Potts 1996). These two examples display how Butler's writings have been mostly categorized as stories of racial oppression, whether the texts invite such readings or not.

In an analysis of "Bloodchild," Elyce Rae Helford wrote that her "reading of 'Bloodchild' through metaphors of slavery would not necessarily sit well with Butler" (265). She explains that she "can sympathize with a resistance to having all of one's novels and short stories reduced to explorations of enslavement." Nonetheless, Helford argues that a "reencoding of race, whether as part of a metaphor for enslavement or 'symbiosis,' replaces a former philosophical and cultural tradition of denial of race issues" (266). Helford's interpretive practice conforms to the Western literary tradition of placing black literature in a separate category, in which "black" is automatically Othered and indicative of the history of enslavement. In doing so, Helford views the symbiotic relationship between the T'lic and the Terran as an indirect metaphor for slavery, when it can be viewed as a story of symbiosis that rejects anthropocentrism and heteronormative, gender binaries. The characters also have racially ambiguous names, which appears to be an effort on the part of the author to divert attention away from race.

Similarly, many critics also read *Dawn* as a slave narrative, even though there is no racial oppression in the plot. In an essay written by Cathy Peppers, the author compares Lilith's awakening in *Dawn* to the slave experience of the Middle Passage (51). She also refers to Lilith as "Butler's African American Lilith," and she goes on to say that Dawn is a "re-creation of the black woman's 'choice' under slavery . . ." (50). This statement is an indication of how the most subtle mention of race signifies slavery. In *Dawn*, Butler uses skin complexion as a descriptive element. For example, the first time that the color of Lilith's skin is mentioned is when the narrator describes a young boy, Sharad, who was placed in a room with Lilith. Sharad had "long, straight black hair and smoky-brown skin, paler than her [Lilith's] own" (Butler 10). Another example of a reference to skin complexion is when Lilith meets Paul Titus, "a human being – tall, stocky, as dark as she was, clean shaved" (85). The descriptions of the people of color do not seem to have any other function, except that of writing brown characters into existence. An author cannot create a black heroine without describing her complexion.

I highlight the references of Butler's stories to slavery because I want to exhibit how Butler's race influences the reception of her work by various readers, specifically the works that do not explicitly allude to racial oppression or slavery. I do not wish to make the point that readers should not or cannot approach Butler's texts as slave narratives, but "it is worth insisting . . . that attacking the abuses of something is not the same thing as dismissing or entirely destroying that thing" (Said 13). In other words, Butler's work should not be interpreted as stories of enslavement simply because she is black.

Metaphors for Slavery in *Dawn* and “Bloodchild”

Readers use metaphors as tools for their interpretations of *Dawn* and “Bloodchild” as stories of racial oppression; however, the metaphors do not seem representative of the slave experience. In “‘To Live and Reproduce, Not Die’: Surrogacy and Maternal Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*,” Marlo D. David writes,

Lilith’s confining and disorienting imprisonment at the beginning of *Dawn* parallels the African experience during the Middle Passage, which also bears striking parallels to a number of other narratives within the genres of science fiction and speculative fiction. In doing so, Butler maintains readers’ awareness that the unfolding story has a racial dimension that should not be ignored, even if it is not explicitly invoked. (124)

The beginning of *Dawn* does not seem to resemble or allude to the experience of the Middle Passage. Lilith’s awakening is as follows:

She sat up swayed dizzily, then turned to look at the rest of the room.

The walls were light-colored – white or gray, perhaps. The bed was what it had always been: a solid platform that gave slightly to the touch and that seemed to grow from the floor. There was, across the room, a doorway that probably led to a bathroom. She was usually given a bathroom. Twice she had not been, and in her windowless, doorless cubicle, she had been forced simply to choose a corner.

She went to the doorway, peered through the uniform dimness, and satisfied herself that she did, indeed, have a bathroom. This one had not only a toilet and a sink, but a shower. Luxury.

What else did she have?

Very little. There was another platform perhaps a foot higher than the bed. . . .

And there were things on it. She saw the food first. (Butler, *Dawn* 5-6)

While awakening in a foreign place amongst a foreign species is traumatic, Lilith's experience does not share in the violence and inhumanity of, for instance, Olaudah Equiano's experience on a slave ship. Lilith awakens in a clean space with food on a table-like object. Her environment indicates that whomever confined her to the room means for her to be comfortable and healthy. She does not share the space with other people, and she is not made to sit in her feces and urine because she has a bathroom. There were instances when she did not have a toilet, but the ship absorbs waste. Therefore, she does not experience unsanitary conditions. The accommodations in Lilith's suite are humane compared to the vessel in which Africans were constricted.

Equiano, renamed Gustavas Vassa, was a Nigerian, who was sold into slavery at a young age and later wrote an autobiography from which he described his temporary residency on a slave ship in the following passages:

I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I have never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. . . . (*Great Slave* 28)

Even though both experiences take place on a foreign ship without the consent of those taken, the metaphor does not compare in brutality to the actual experience of the Middle Passage. While the humans in *Dawn* are saved from a war-torn, uninhabitable Earth, caused by human

destruction, the Africans were stolen from a very fruitful and productive culture. Africans were not in danger of starving or dying, and they were stolen specifically for exploitation, not preservation. There was no mutual benefit between the slave traders and the slaves. Despite the pecuniary benefit of selling slaves, many died during transport because of the poor conditions on the ship. Slave traders would transport about 700 slaves and arrive to their destination with only 372 of the Africans initially forced onto the ship (Franklin and Moss Jr. 45). “The filth and stench caused by close quarters and disease brought on more illness, and the mortality rate increased accordingly” on slave ships (45). However, the humans that are saved on the Oankali ship are preserved and relieved of their health problems. The only likeness that exists between Lilith on the Oankali ship and Africans on a slave ship is the color of Lilith’s skin.

David also suggests that Lilith’s position as teacher is reminiscent of slavery and motherhood when she writes, “*Dawn* provides an imaginative opportunity to extend the slave narrative tradition by reorienting the largely male voices of prominent enslaved writers . . . toward the concerns of black women, specifically their reproductive exploitation” (David 130). Again, the comparison of slavery to Lilith’s experience does not seem reminiscent or even implicitly similar. The details of Sojourner Truth’s life shed light on the horrors of slavery for black women.

In the introduction of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Margaret Washington summarizes Sojourner Truth’s early life as a slave:

Separation from her parents was the beginning of young Isabella’s trials in the *Narrative*. The first of many beatings came from her second owners, who were vexed by her inability to speak English [Truth spoke Dutch]. . . . Within two years, Isabella [Truth] was transferred three times. She grew to womanhood on John I.

Dumont's New Paltz farm, where she often did the work of at least two people. She was a field hand, milkmaid, cleaning woman, weaver, cook, and wet nurse." (*Narrative* xiv-xv)

The duties of a female slave rendered no benefit to the black woman. Whereas, the work that Lilith is assigned is beneficial to the humans and the Oankali. Lilith's work is explained to her by Kahguyaht when it tells her that her duty is to "teach, to give comfort, to feed, and clothe . . . and interpret what will be, for them [humans], a new and frightening world" (Butler 111). The Oankali assign Lilith the position of teacher, where she is tasked with helping to acclimate the rest of the humans to the conditions on the ship and persuading them to learn how to survive on the new Earth, which will not have all of the conveniences that existed before its destruction.

When readers use Lilith's experience as a metaphor for slavery, they often omit the violence that slaves regularly suffered at the hands of their oppressors, as is described in the following excerpt:

One Sunday morning, in particular, she [Truth] was told to go to the barn; on going there, she found her master with a bundle of rods, prepared in the embers, and bound together with cords. When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds. . . .

(*Narrative* 15)

In addition to the labor and violence that female slaves experienced, they were not allowed to mother their children. Labor was the priority. Therefore, Truth, like many other black women, resorted to creative ways of tending to her children while working in the fields by placing "her infant in a basket, tying a rope to each handle, and suspending the basket to a branch of the tree" (*Narrative* 25). Furthermore, black women were dehumanized to the point where the "rape of a

female slave was regarded as a crime but only because it involved trespassing” (Franklin and Moss Jr. 141).

As I have depicted above, Lilith’s experience among the Oankali shares very little resemblance to that of a black, female slave. Her experience is absent the violence and denial of personhood and motherhood that female slaves experienced. Also, there is no reproductive exploitation in *Dawn*. Lilith will not be separated from her offspring, and her children will not be exploited by the Oankali for labor. Reading *Dawn* as a narrative that parallels the lives of black women during slavery minimizes the brutality of racial oppression. It attaches the history of the black, female slave to Lilith simply because of her complexion, thereby, limiting the text to one analytical approach. Moreover, the relationship that the Oankali have with the humans is not that of master/slave. It is symbiotic and of mutual benefit to both species.

### Posthumanism

*Dawn* and “Bloodchild” are texts that do not only critique one form of oppression, but challenge the dialectic from which systems of oppression are employed. The works are not so much about race as they are about the system that creates dichotomies and promotes oppression. Both texts dismantle dualisms and disrupt the notion of anthropocentrism via symbiotic relationships between humans and another species. Approaching the works as posthuman texts serves to disrupt dualistic relationships while offering alternative ways of being human. The following passage further explains this idea of posthumanism:

It [posthumanism] does not rely on oppositions, but can be appointed as an empirical philosophy of mediation, which offers a reconciliation of existence in its broadest significations. It does not employ any frontal dualism or antithesis, demystifying



ontological polarizations through the postmodern practice of deconstruction. (Ferrando ch.10)

As posthuman texts, both stories decenter the hierarchical constructs of the human by challenging the “cultural logic of universal Humanism,” in which “Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart” (Braidotti 15). In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said wrote that his “issue within the discourse of humanism is of an epistemological cast. It derives from a supposed opposition between what is designated as traditional and canonical and the unwelcome interventions of the new . . .” (22-3). It is the logic of humanism that categorizes black literature as other and confines it within the traditional, humanistic binary.

Butler’s texts actually critique and challenge the humanistic dialectic upon which oppositional binaries such as black/white, man/woman, oppressed/oppressor, and masculine/feminine are constructed with the introduction of the Oankali, a three-gender species. By creating a necessity for humans to merge with the Oankali, Butler challenges traditional, human gender norms that usually exist as strict, dual opposites of each other, as in the case of the male/female genders. Introducing humans to a third gender, the ooloi that is neither male nor female, complicates the human notion of gender, which is delineated when Lilith wonders how “did these people manage their sex lives . . . How did the ooloi fit in?” (Butler 51). Lilith’s confusion with the ooloi is a symptom of the gender binaries that humans create. Such dualistic logic is the system that is responsible for oppression.

Butler implies, through her critique of humanism, that the dialectic of racism, sexism, and gender oppression must be dismantled in order to save humanity. Such critique is illustrated when Jdahya, a member of the Oankali species, tells Lilith that ‘You are hierarchical. . . . We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones’ (Butler 39). Jdahya’s

statement conveys that humans create hierarchies that lead to conflict within their own population. The construction of hierarchies stem from the humanistic ideology that there is a standard human being from which all others are to compare or attempt to emulate. The Oankali challenge this ideology because they are a different species, and they plan to procreate with humans, which disrupts the standard notion of the human. An example of this is when Nikanj informs Lilith that it made her pregnant with Joseph's child. Lilith exclaims, "But it won't be human . . . It will be a thing. A monster." Even though Nikanj assures Lilith that the "child that comes from your [Lilith's] body will look like you and Joseph," Lilith does not believe it (247). This indicates that interspecies procreation is not acceptable to humans because the offspring may resemble another species, thereby, rendering the child nonhuman. However, the Oankali offer humans a different existence, one that relies on the pluralistic idea of the human.

Interspecies symbiosis decenters the human in relation to the nonhuman and is a critique of the "dualism that has been employed as a rigid way to define identity" (Ferrando ch.10). Therefore, the human characters must relate to a nonhuman species as equals instead of beings that are ranked lower than them in a human-constructed hierarchy. This entails reciprocating services and accepting a different species as mates and family members, which deconstructs oppositional thinking and proves to be very difficult for the human characters.

The definition of posthumanism from which I approach the text is explained by Francesca Ferrando as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism. She further defines the theoretical approach in the following statement:

Posthumanism implies the understanding of the plurality of the human experience; the human is not recognized as one but as many, that is human(s) – thus undermining the humanist tradition based on a generalized and universalized

approach to the human. Post-anthropocentrism refers to decentering the human in relation to the nonhuman; it is based on the realization that the human species has been placed in a hierarchical scale and has been granted an ontological privilege in the large majority of the historical accounts on the human. Post-dualism relies on the awareness that dualism has been employed as a rigid way to define identity, based on a closed notion of the self and actualized in symbolic dichotomies, such as ‘us/them,’ ‘friend/foe,’ ‘civilized/barbarian,’ and so on. (ch.10)

As the definition depicts above, posthumanism is an all-encompassing analytical approach, which is why I chose it for *Dawn* and “Bloodchild.” Both texts examine human/nonhuman relationships, gender, and dualistic binaries, all of which can be challenged by the components of posthumanism. The theory invites a discourse on artificial life, which speculates on the embodiment of life or lack thereof. It questions the concept of life and whether it can exist on a molecular level within cellular automata. Where embodied life is concerned, posthumanism defines the “human,” and it recognizes that some people have not been considered human. In turn, the philosophical approach redefines the human in plural terms and welcomes a variety of the human species into the sphere of the post-human, which is a progressive human, but still human. Such examination of the human condition allows for the inclusivity of different races, sexes, genders, religious affiliations, and sexualities into the posthuman realm, which is an extension of the human and a reorientation to the human condition.

Where animal life is concerned in relation to the human, posthumanism critiques the treatment of animals in a way that decenters the human and dismantles any oppositions which humans construct between animal and human. The “human experience” of the animal does not inform us about the animal, “but about the formulation of human systems of knowledge”

(Ferrando ch. 13). The theory also examines the dualistic logic that contributes to discrimination and the hierarchies that are created by the human. Such examination is inclusive of other schools of thought, such as critical race theory, postcolonial studies, feminism, and postmodernism, to name a few. It is because of the multiplicity of approaches within the umbrella of posthumanism that I chose to use it as a theoretical apparatus for analyzing Butler's texts. The approach is just as futuristic and hybrid as *Dawn* and "Bloodchild."

### Dualism and Anthropocentrism in *Dawn*

On the subject of anthropocentrism, Ferrando states that the "centrality of the human implies a sense of separation and individuation of the human from the rest of the beings" (Ferrando ch. 19). In *Dawn*, Butler illuminates the anthropocentric thinking patterns that humans exhibit when they encounter beings that are different. After a 250-year sleep that was induced by the Oankali, Lilith awakens on a space ship and encounters Jdahya, an Oankali male, for the first time. She is unable to look at his physical appearance without fear and repulsion. Her reaction is evoked by the unlikeliness of his body to the human body. Throughout the encounter, Lilith tries to find similarities to the human body when she observes that Jdahya seems to be a "tall, slender man . . ." with "no bulge, no nostrils . . ." yet "still humanoid" (Butler 13). Lilith perceives Jdahya's appearance through comparisons of how different or similar he is to humans. She asks Jdahya if he is male or female, and he tells her that he is male. Lilith's reaction is, "Good. 'It' could become 'he' again. Less awkward" (13). Even after Lilith is comforted by knowing the sex of Jdahya, she still does "not want to be any closer to him" because of "his difference, his literal unearthliness" (13). When Jdahya tells Lilith that the Oankali rescued all of the survivors of the war, Lilith looks away because she is disgusted by his tentacle-like sensory organs. Once Lilith

gains the courage to look at Jdahya again, he tells her that humans have tried to kill him during some of the first encounters. Through the repulsion exhibited by Lilith and the humans that have tried to kill Jdahya because of his difference, Butler uses her narrative to shed light on the human “notion of ‘difference’ as pejoration” (Braidotti 15). Lilith’s disgust towards Jdahya represents the humanistic attitude that all other beings are beneath that of the human, which also leads to the construction of binaries that exist within oppositional relationships.

Historically, the concept of the human has consisted of many different categorizations which have led to “exclusionary practices” such as sexism, racism, and homophobia, “along-side other forms of discrimination,” that have defined the human (Ferrando intro.). Butler delineates the dualistic binaries constructed by humans in various scenes throughout the text. When the humans are awakened, Lilith is assigned the task of helping “them learn to deal with” the Oankali and teaching the humans how to survive on the new Earth (Butler 32). However, the humans exhibit violent behavior towards each other, and they forcibly encourage one another to pair with the opposite sex. They also refer to the Oankali as their “captors,” which implies that they perceive themselves to be prisoners (119,143). The dichotomy that the humans construct between themselves and the Oankali contributes to the resistance and the violent behavior that the humans exhibit towards their perceived nonhuman captors.

They also start re-creating the same binaries that existed on Earth amongst themselves. For example, Lilith and Joseph are placed outside of the human category because Lilith is perceived as a traitor to the human race in her role as teacher and liaison between the Oankali and the humans. She is also excluded from the group because the Oankali enhance her physical abilities so that she is capable of protecting herself from violent humans. Once Lilith defends herself from an attack by Jean Pelerin, Jean starts telling the other members of the group that

Lilith is a man because of her physical strength, and Van Weerden adds that he does not think she is “human at all” (Butler 147). Since Joseph is Lilith’s intimate partner, he is excluded as well. Joseph is also Chinese, and one of the humans does not like the “shape of his eyes” (159). By pointing out Lilith and Joseph’s differences, the rest of the humans can justify excluding them from the group. Once individuals are excluded from the human group, they occupy the nonhuman position within the binary, which subjects them to hostile and inhumane treatment.

In addition to recreating dichotomies, Curt Loehr, one of the first males awakened, perpetuates hierarchical behavior moments after he regains consciousness when he asks, “‘Who’s in charge here?’” (Butler 141). This indicates that Curt wants to establish a system of rank, and it also suggests that he is accustomed to operating within a particular social order that places certain humans above others.

Once a certain number of humans are awakened, they begin to band together and adhere to very similar human constructs that existed on Earth. They start to point out differences and to force women to mate with men, which perpetuates the male/female dichotomy, where the male exerts dominance over the female. An example of this dominance is when two men try to rape Allison Zeigler because “she had not yet found a man she liked,” and she allied with Lilith. During the attempted rape, there is a standoff between two groups of humans, the ones that want to prevent the rape, and the ones that want to allow it to occur. In the course of the conflict, Curt yells, “‘We pair off ! . . . One man, one woman’” (Butler 176). The rape demonstrates how humans use dominance in order to reinforce heterosexuality, which functions within a male/female binary. While resisting a merge with the Oankali, they begin to reconnect with strict definitions of what it means to be human, and any behavior that is not consistent with traditional, human constructs is met with aggression.

The same hostility is displayed towards the ooloi, the neutral gender of the Oankali. Instead of mating in male/female pairs, the Oankali have three-way relationships, where there is a male, female, and a neutral sex. Such sexuality is inconsistent with human binaries, and it leads Peter to physically attack his ooloi once he is no longer under the influence of the “ooloi-produced” drugs because he thinks that his “manhood was taken away.” When Peter becomes sober, he begins to think of his interactions with the ooloi as “profane” and “perverse,” which leads him to strike his ooloi several times before the ooloi administers a deadly sting in defense (Butler 192-3). Peter’s behavior suggests that there is no room for growth or change within human constructed dichotomies, and that such constructs contribute to acts of violence and attempts at dominance in the human group. His actions are also indicative of the strict gender roles that humans have created for themselves and the unwillingness to unlearn such confining ideas of sexuality, even though the humans enjoy experiencing pleasure from the ooloi.

There is also a reluctance for the humans to acknowledge the neutral gender throughout the narrative. When Lilith meets Paul Titus, he refuses to acknowledge Nikanj’s neutral gender by referring to it as male. He explains to Lilith that he thinks of the ooloi as either male or female (Butler 89). Joseph also refers to Nikanj as a male, despite Lilith’s attempts to correct him more than once (170). Paul and Joseph’s behavior is a direct result of the rigid dichotomies in which gender exists for humans and their failure to allow gender to exceed the strict, dualistic binaries, such as man/woman.

Despite all of the efforts of the Oankali to preserve and to help humans survive, the humans resist cohabitation with the nonhuman species. The Oankali have rescued humans from death, healed their illnesses, and made Earth habitable again, yet they still have difficulty accepting a mutually beneficial relationship with the Oankali because of the physical differences

between the two species. Even though the ooloi provide intense sexual pleasure to the humans and are a highly intelligent species, humans continue to fear the Oankali because of their appearance. This fear is displayed when Joseph encounters Nikanj for the first time. He expresses to Nikanj that he does not understand why he is so afraid and that Nikanj does not 'look that threatening' (Butler 186). Lilith also has moments of fear. Before she lies down to have sex with Nikanj and Joseph, she sees a "totally alien being, grotesque, repellant beyond mere ugliness with its night crawler body tentacles, its snake head tentacles, and its tendency to keep both moving, signaling attention and emotion" (190). Joseph and Lilith's response to the ooloi indicate that the issue is the difference in appearance, not the inability to enjoy intimacy with a different species. Moreover, they both perceive the ooloi within the human/nonhuman dichotomy, which makes the ooloi aesthetically, undesirable because of its dissimilarity to the human form.

Although Joseph enjoys intimacy with the Oankali, he struggles with his perceived human identity, which he thinks should be very different from the Oankali. His attitude is evident when he tells Lilith that he thinks Peter was right for trying to kill his ooloi, even though he died in the process. He states, "He died human! And he Almost managed to take one of them with him!" (Butler 196). Joseph's statement indicates that the humans think of themselves in such opposition to the Oankali that they would rather die than to merge with another species. Such is the dilemma that the human characters face in the text. They struggle with the concepts of hybridity and plurality, which conflict with anthropocentrism. Lilith and Joseph's reaction to the foreign creature informs readers more about the human than the creature itself, for their reaction is the result of "human systems of knowledge," where hierarchies and dualism position nonhuman creatures as the "antithesis of 'man' (Ferrando ch.13).



From Human to Posthuman in *Dawn*

Though some may postulate that *Dawn* is a metaphor for slavery, I suggest that readers closely focus on the role that the foreign creatures play in the lives of the human characters. For if *Dawn* is a slave narrative, then the Oankali function as oppressors. However, there are various details throughout the narrative that indicate a different role for the foreign species. For instance, Jdahya explains to Lilith that the Oankali have a “symbiotic” relationship with the ship, in that it serves their needs and they serve its needs. Lilith also asks if the ship is plant or animal, and he tells her that the ship is “both and more” (Butler 35). The relationship that the Oankali share with their environment is one of mutual benefit, and the life forms that exist on the ship, including the ship, are of a hybrid nature. The Oankali are in the practice of preserving that from which they benefit, unlike humans. Had humans practiced symbiosis, they would not have destroyed their planet with war because they would have understood that all species and humans rely on one another for survival.

Therefore, in order for the Oankali to merge with humans, they must introduce them to the concepts of symbiosis, hybridity, and plurality, all of which require humans to redefine their identity and to unlearn their “hierarchical” thinking patterns, which Jdahya has pointed out to Lilith as a flaw in humans (Butler 39). The foreign species is already hybrid, since it is their nature to blend with different life forms. Nikanj explains to Lilith that, ““Six divisions ago . . . we [Oankali] lived in great shallow oceans . . . We were many-bodied and spoke with body lights and color patterns among ourself and among ourselves . . .”” (63). Their notion of being is unconfined to a particular form, as explained by Nikanj. The idea of different selves is an element of posthumanism that the humans must realize in order to coexist with the Oankali. There

is not only one way of experiencing a human existence, which is implied when Lilith asks Jdahya if he thinks that destroying their culture will make them better. He states, ““No. Only different”” (34). This suggests that humans do not have to cease being human when change occurs.

However, the idea of change frightens humans to the point where Peter attempted to kill his ooloi because he thought that his identity had changed since his gratifying, sexual experience with an ooloi. Curt was also driven to kill when he witnessed that Joseph, a human, had enhanced healing capabilities. All of the violent acts exhibited by the terrestrials is a direct reaction to their strict, unbending notions of human identity, which is the flaw that the Oankali challenge.

Furthermore, Jdahya introduces Lilith to the idea that sex and gender can be plural. During Lilith’s first encounter with Jdahya, she asks if he is male or female, and Jdahya replies that it is ““wrong to assume that I [Jdahya] must be a sex you’re [Lilith] familiar with”” (Butler 13). Lilith’s question is indicative of the binaries in which humans exist. On the contrary, Jdahya’s response is post-dualistic in that it rejects the notion that there are only two genders and implies that gender is fluid, along with sex and sexuality. Plurality and hybridity conflict with the strict binaries in which humans confine themselves, which leads to their difficulty with accepting diversity and difference, even within their own species, as is demonstrated throughout the text. Butler juxtaposes the human with the posthuman by utilizing the Oankali to represent the components of posthumanism in order to critique the humanistic dialectic from which humans operate. The interactions between the foreign species and the terrestrials is a constant oscillation between the human and the posthuman. The role of the Oankali appears to be that of a guide into the posthuman sphere for the terrestrial characters.

### Symbiosis and Gender in “Bloodchild”

As in *Dawn*, the symbiotic elements in “Bloodchild” decenter the human via symbiosis with the T’lic, and it “offers a speculative account of what life might be like for the billions of domesticated animals whose lives and deaths are fully constrained by human economic and effective circuits” (Magnone 109). Through the text, Butler suggests that humans re-evaluate their treatment of domesticated animals by situating humans on another planet, where they are no longer the dominant species. In addition, the narrative directs attention to the challenges that humans confront in their relationship with the T’lic. Over the course of the story, the terms of a parasitic relationship shift to a mutualistic relationship by way of symbiosis between humans and nonhumans. In addition to decentering the human, Butler provokes a discourse on gender with the introduction of the unconventional, performative gender of the T’lic female.

In “Bloodchild,” the humans, known as the Terran, have fled Earth, seeking refuge from slavery and death. They reach another planet, where the dominant species, the T’lic, is a large, worm-like insect that is highly intelligent. The T’lic must implant their larvae into an animal and cut the offspring out of the host when the larvae grow to maturity. In exchange for habitancy on the T’lic planet, the Terran are obligated to host T’lic eggs. After years of conflict and fighting, the Terran and the T’lic have joined as family members and use humans, preferably males, to host eggs so that human females may birth their own offspring. Gan, an adolescent, Terran male, has been assigned the duty of hosting the eggs of T’Gatoi, their T’lic family member. The nature of the relationship between the humans and the T’lic is one that decenters the human in relation to the nonhuman because the Terran are obligated to reciprocate for their stay on the T’lic planet. This changes the dynamics of the interactions that humans typically have with nonhuman

species. As a result, the Terran exhibit resentment and conflicting feelings toward the T'lic because the Terran are no longer at the top of any human-constructed hierarchies.

This behavior is displayed when Lien, Gan's mother, says to T'Gatoi, "I should have stepped on you when you were small enough" (Butler, "Bloodchild" 7). Lien's statement functions as a reminder that insects like T'Gatoi were beneath humans on Earth and could be exterminated for this reason. Within the human ranking system, "insects often suffer the status of the particularly despised. Known as pests, vectors of disease, and figures of filth and decay, insects are frequently figured in human . . . discourse as eminently alien and thus fundamentally killable" (Magnone 111). Lien's statement further suggests that her position within T'lic society is in conflict with human constructed-hierarchies. However, human hierarchies do not exist in T'lic world, and the Terran must live within a different social order than was practiced on Earth. The issue that the Terran have with the T'lic is that humans have always ranked higher than insects in the human pecking order. Although the Terran may have ranked lower than some humans on Earth, since they fled Earth from enslavement, they still exercised their perceived superior status to insects by displaying such little regard for insects that they could step on them without just cause. Lien's statement is anthropocentric because it suggests that within the human-constructed binary of human/insect or human/nonhuman, the Terran is the superior of the two species.

The text critiques anthropocentrism when Butler demonstrates what humans could experience if they were treated in the same way that they have treated animals over the centuries. When humans first arrived as refugees on the T'lic planet, the T'lic saw them "as not much more than convenient, big, warm blooded animals. . . ." Gan explains that "they [T'lic] would pen several of us [Terran] together, male and female. . . . That way they could be sure of getting

another generation of us. . . . A few generations of it and we would have *been* little more than convenient big animals” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 9-10). The description of humans inside of a pen displays the objectifying nature of imbalanced relationships. It also alludes to the treatment of domesticated animals such as pigs and chickens. The image of the Terran confined to a particular space for the purpose of reproduction provokes one to rethink the treatment of animals as livestock, and it “functions as an implicit critique of the ways humans conscript animals into abusive systems” (Magnone 113).

Furthermore, Butler continues to draw similarities between the relationship that humans have with domesticated animals on Earth and the one that they share with the T’lic when Gan describes how T’Gatoi interacts with his family. He explains that T’Gatoi considers his house her “second home” and that she comes in the house, sits on a couch that is specifically made for her body, and calls him “over to keep her warm,” because the T’lic enjoy the temperature of human bodies (Butler, “Bloodchild” 4). The image of a Terran warming a large insect automatically calls attention to human-centered relationships with domesticated animals. T’Gatoi interacts with her human family in such a way that “she manages them with the affectionate . . . attitude a human might display toward a beloved pet” (Magnone 115). T’Gatoi’s attitude is depicted when she uses her limbs to push Gan onto the floor and says, ““Go on, Gan . . . Lien, come warm me”” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 5). In this scene, the Terran are treated similarly to the way in which humans treat domesticated animals, especially in the way that T’Gatoi gives verbal commands to Gan and his mother, Lien.

In the relationship with the T’lic, the Terran no longer occupy the dominant part in the human/nonhuman binary. Humans practiced the same anthropocentric behavior as was carried out on Earth when they first arrived on the planet by attempting to kill the T’lic, but the

dynamics on the T'lic planet place humans in a vulnerable predicament. The Terran do not occupy a space in T'lic world where they can dictate the terms of survival. Instead, humans are in a position of servitude, where they become “more serviceable for the dominant Tlic; like domesticated animals on Earth” (Magnone 108). The relationship of reciprocity and service between the T'lic and the humans is one that is more balanced than previously experienced by humans with any other species on Earth.

Although it may seem as though the T'lic completely dominate the Terran at many points in the narrative, the T'lic and the Terran eventually progress toward a more balanced relationship. Both species begin to grant the other personhood. However, the process toward a stabilized relationship, where the Terran are no longer treated as livestock and the T'lic are not seen as insects, does not occur without discord. As previously mentioned above, Gan describes how, at first, humans were caged and treated like livestock because of their reproductive capabilities. Such treatment of the Terran substantiates Gan's feelings that the Terran were nothing more than “convenient, big animals” to the T'lic (Butler, “Bloodchild” 10). On the other hand, T'Gatoi explains that in the beginning, the T'lic saw the Terran as “people,” even though the Terran tried to kill them as “worms” (25). Gan's description of being a “warm blooded animal”, Lien's reference to the T'lic as an insect that she should have “stepped” on, and the T'lic-enforced caging of the Terran confirms that both species, initially, dehumanized each other.

The relationship between both species gradually changes, though. From the initial arrival of the Terran on the T'lic planet to the joining of Terran and T'lic families, the terms of the relationship between both species shift from parasitism to mutualism, where the Terran perform the duty of a symbiotic partner with the T'lic. Mutualism is a relationship that benefits the parties involved; whereas, parasitism “benefits one and harms another” (Magnone 107). When humans

are the beneficiary in parasitic relationships, they inhabit a space of dominance in human-constructed binaries. In the narrative, Butler demotes the human to a role that is not dominant and not totally subordinate. This implies that in order to dismantle the human/nonhuman dichotomy, the Terran cannot play the role of the beneficiary in a parasitic relationship; instead, they must occupy a position of servitude, which changes the dynamics of the relationship between human and nonhuman species. In doing so, Butler situates the human characters in a mutualistic arrangement, where humans must pay for their habitation on the T'lic planet, thereby decentering the human.

The shift from parasitism to mutualism can be seen by the language that the Terran and the T'lic use in reference to one another and by the change in the dynamics of their relationship. By the time the T'lic and the humans join as family members, the Terran are referring to the T'lic as people/person. For example, Gan recounts how his mother told him that “It was an honor . . . that such a person [T'Gatoi] had chosen to come into the family” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 5). This indicates that at a certain point in the relationship with the T'lic, humans began viewing the T'lic as more than large insects.

At the same time, the Terran were no longer treated as livestock once they became family members with the T'lic. Another example of the shift in the relationship between the two species is when Gan exercises agency over himself when he says to T'Gatoi, “I don't want to be a host animal. . . . Not even yours.” T'Gatoi's reply is, “We use almost no host animals these days. . . . We wait long years for you and teach you and join our families to yours. . . . You know you aren't animals to us” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 24). This scene depicts the change that occurs in the relationship between the T'lic and the Terran over the years. T'Gatoi allows Gan to choose whether he wants to host or not, which is an indication that T'Gatoi respects Gan as a person

who is no longer perceived as an animal that “can be seized and used at will” (Magnone 107). When humans first arrived, they did not have the privilege or personhood to reject hosting T’lic eggs. Thus, the relationship between the T’lic and Terran moves from parasitism to mutualism at the point in which the two species regard and treat one another as persons. This shift is an indication of the process that must take place in order to move from the anthropocentric to the post-anthropocentric via interspecies symbiosis.

As much as “Bloodchild” is a story of interspecies symbiosis, it is a provocation for a discourse on gender. Butler reorients human gender constructs by situating terrestrial characters in a foreign environment, where interspecies symbiosis requires the Terran males to conform to a gender role that was reserved for female terrestrials on Earth. Butler suggests, through the framework of the narrative, that gender constructs are fluid and mutable, thereby, “radically incredible” (J. Butler 180). In doing so, she also challenges human notions of biological essentialism.

Such notions of biological essentialism are exemplified throughout the text when the characters discuss the responsibility of the Terran male to host T’lic larvae. The male Terran are chosen to host T’lic larvae so that human females can birth their own offspring. Even though the T’lic do not assign human males to host because of any specific link to gender roles, the act of birthing is still associated with human females, as is demonstrated when Gan and his brother, Qui, discuss hosting. Qui states with “contempt,” that ““They don’t take women”” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 21). Qui’s statement implies that human males find it problematic that they must perform an act that has historically been carried out by human females. However, the performance of gender between the sexes is different within the T’lic species, since neither male



nor female T'lic gives birth. Therefore, the T'lic do not share in the same gender constructs as humans, and they do not accommodate human, cultural practices of gender either.

Before the arrival of humans, the T'lic utilized an animal, regardless of sex, to host their larvae. With the arrival of the Terran, the T'lic exhibit the same objectivity, with regard to gender, in choosing to impregnate human males, which disrupts human notions of practicing gender. The act of impregnating human males also challenges biological essentialism in that it defies the “biology-is-destiny formulation” and makes a “distinction between sex and gender” (J. Butler 9). It also suggests that sex does not determine gender or performative acts associated with a gender, which is why Terran males can host T'lic offspring.

Although the assignment of human males as host is an objective choice and has nothing to do with any perceived notions of gender on the part of the T'lic, Gan struggles with his duty as host to T'Gatoi's larvae because he witnesses a birth-gone-wrong with Bram Lomas. He even resorts to agreeing with T'Gatoi, temporarily, to use his sister, Xuan Hoa, since, as T'Gatoi states, “It will be easier for Hoa. She has always expected to carry other lives inside her” (Butler, “Bloodchild” 26). T'Gatoi's comment is a reflection of human gender constructs. Since neither the male T'lic nor the female T'lic carry offspring, T'Gatoi is relying on what she has learned about humans. Therefore, she assumes that the process will be easier for Hoa, since she has the anatomy to carry human fetuses. Gan confirms such gender constructs in a conversation with Qui:

“She wouldn't take you, Qui. You don't have to worry.”

“She would . . . if anything happened to you.”

“No, She'd take Xuan Hoa. Hoa . . . wants it.” . . .

“They don't take women. . . .”

“They do sometimes . . . Actually, they prefer women. . . . They say women have more body fat to protect the grubs. . . .” (20)

The dialogue between the two brothers is riddled with biological essentialism in that Gan thinks it necessary to calm his brother’s fears about the possibility of ever being chosen to host. He assures Qui that their sister would do it willingly if for some reason Gan became unable to host. This also implies that they think the female body is biologically equipped for any birth, even a birth as gruesome as Bram Lomas’s birth, which entailed a T’lic cutting the torso area of a Terran male in order to extract the grubs. The brothers think it more fitting for the female body to endure the surgery. Throughout the story, T’Gatoi, Qui, and Gan speak for Hoa. The reader never knows exactly what Hoa wants or expects, except from the statements of unwilling participants and T’Gatoi, who’s procreative ability is contingent upon inserting her larvae into a warm-blooded body. T’Gatoi does not mention Hoa, until Gan refuses to host, which suggests that T’Gatoi is desperate for a host at that point. So, how accurate are the statements of the characters who assume Hoa would welcome the duty to host?

The references to Hoa throughout the text are not an accurate representation of Hoa’s expectations upon her own body. Instead, the statements are a reflection of gender as biological determinism. Judith Butler explicates the construction of gender when she states:

the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny. (J. Butler 14)

Butler challenges normative cultural expectations on gender by impregnating her male characters, and requiring them to do the work for which their female counterparts are believed to be *better suited*. The characters' statements are a reflection of those "laws" that were once practiced within the human population before they fled to the T'lic planet. The symbiotic relationship between the Terran and the T'lic challenges the human notion of the fixity of gender constructs and proposes that gender is not immutable or a biological determinant, since Terran males are successful at hosting T'lic offspring. This suggests that the male and female can perform acts that were once assigned to only one of the genders.

The idea that gender is not a biological determinant is further played out in Gan's account of receiving T'Gatoi's larvae. Gan takes his clothes off and lies beside T'Gatoi on a couch in his bedroom when T'Gatoi starts "the blind probing of her ovipositor." He further describes the "puncture" as "painless . . . easy going in," and T'Gatoi "undulates slowly against" Gan's naked body (Butler, "Bloodchild" 27). As phallic as T'Gatoi may seem to a human, with her probing ovipositor and her undulating movements, this scene suggests that the act of penetration is neither male nor female and that any gender can be the recipient of penetration, which has been culturally assigned to the male sex as a performative gender act. Although T'Gatoi is female, she has a phallic body part that inserts genetic material, and she performs an act that is associated with the male body, while still maintaining her female pronoun. Gan's pronoun remains masculine throughout the text, which also indicates that persons who identify as male can receive penetration. Hence, the narrative framework of "Bloodchild" insists that "gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived," and that "gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (J. Butler 180). The T'lic introduce new ideas of practicing gender to the Terran males. The female T'lic performs both masculine and feminine

gender acts that have been culturally assigned to either one of two human genders. The creation of the female T'lic encourages a reading of gender that is inclusive of nonconforming gender identities. The narrative also suggests that anatomy does not dictate gender or the performance of it.

### Conclusion

“Bloodchild” and *Dawn* advocate for the plurality of the human, while calling for a halt to anthropocentrism, as it relates to nonhuman species. Both texts also offer perspectives that surpass the boundaries of a single literary approach and open the doors to different aspects of posthumanism. In addition to the various literary approaches that the texts invite, they reimagine gender by complicating the human notion of the gender binary. In doing so, Butler comments on the fluidity of gender, while illuminating nonbinary gender identities and expressions.

Overall, these particular texts are revolutionary in that they demand an end to the mistreatment of humans and animals and to the logic that contributes to such practices. Furthermore, they suggest that we reinvent our notion of the human for the benefit of all beings that inhabit the planet. Otherwise, practices of discrimination and the misuse of resources, especially those that come from animals, could lead to destruction and war.

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