

ANARCHY OR LIBERTY: THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN THE SCIENCE FICTION
OF OCTAVIA BUTLER

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of
Southwest Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements

For the Degree
Master of Arts

By

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San Marcos, Texas
May 2002

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the course of this thesis, I received assistance from various people in the research, review, and support of this work. Their aid was given freely to broaden my research.

My thesis committee aided me in the research and revision of the content. Dr. Patricia Evans and Mr. Tom Grimes directed me to various texts held in the SWT Alkek Library holding, University of Texas library holdings, and through specific publishers. These works included criticisms, biographies, and articles. Dr. Evans, Mr. Grimes, and Dr. June Hankins also reviewed and commented on drafts of the thesis. Their efforts have been invaluable to the completion of this thesis.

Through my own research and travel, I met with the author, Octavia Butler. In March 2000, I attended the Twenty-First Annual Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Octavia Butler, the guest speaker, gave readings, listened and offered input in panels and discussions, and answered questions in an open-forum interview. In the forum, I pursued questions regarding my thesis argument and support materials. Her answers helped direct my current and future investigations and writing.

The rest of the research, writing, and preparation of this thesis was performed by myself.

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INTRODUCTION

THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM

Freedom. It is being free of restraints. It is liberty from slavery, detention, or oppression. It is a concept that drives human beings to seek for something better, something beyond them, a dream of the way things could be, a rejection of the way things are.

People would like to believe they do or could exist in freedom. However, no one can truly be free because each person has a different idea of what freedom is. Where one person may see himself or herself as unfettered, others see him or her as enslaved. As Wendy Wheeler states in *A New Modernity?* some may truly believe they are free because they can to do things in their society; but, in truth, they are still restrained by the laws of that society:

We have, indeed, been freed in some senses: freed from the grip of tradition and superstition; freed from an all encompassing religious intolerance; freed to say and do more or less what we want, and to make whatever we have the energy to make. But then there is, famously, the other side, in which we experience our freedom as also a kind of alienation and rootlessness. (1)

Freedom is an ideal that can never truly be created or sustained; it is an endless cycle perpetuated by human nature and the nature of freedom itself. People cannot fathom or accept the anarchy of freedom; they need to have the ability and opportunity to enjoy all parts of their lives while safe and secure against oppressors. They need laws, but only when convenient; otherwise, laws impede their “God given freedom and rights” (Hoffer i). As Eric Hoffer states, “The aspiration toward freedom is the most essentially human of all human manifestations” (“Freedom’s Nest: Eric Hoffer Quotes”). And like human beings, freedom is a fickle, superfluous concept, mutable by the hearts and minds of those who hold it.

Butler investigates the concept of freedom through the lives of her characters in dystopic worlds of natural and supernatural design. Various critics have stated that the grand stage of Butler's science fiction represents a dichotomy of opposites, dystopic and utopic, in which she reveals humanity as politically juvenile, as needing the aid of aliens, as inept in helping themselves through their current cultural systems, and so on. In their arguments, humanity begins as an oppressed and terrorized people and changes into a liberated and gratified community. However, I do not accept this generalization. In Butler's works, I have found a redefinition of freedom, not as a movement from pain to pleasure, slavery to emancipation, but as a betterment of life and liberty as perceived by the masses. The protagonists and characters never gain or regain freedom; they remain indebted to the will and laws of the world and people around them. Their situation may have improved, giving them greater liberties, but they are not truly free.

The desire for something unattainable is the heart of the problem Butler reveals in the human condition and society. Through her leaders, with their political agendas, and the acuity of the populace, Butler's protagonists and their followers seek a thing they can never have. Her human beings need and at times require freedom. Her leaders seek out a resolution for their people, but they soon have the painful revelation that freedom is not practical or obtainable. In the end, leaders degenerate from saviors to tyrants, dictating new laws for their people, redefining freedom to keep them in line. Butler delves deeply into the question and problem of freedom, and, although some critics assert that her works reveal that people can fight for and attain freedom, it is not true freedom, but a trade up from unacceptable oppression.

In this thesis, I investigate the quest for and fear of freedom in Butler's *Wild Seed* (book one of the Patternist series), *Dawn* (book one of the *Xenogenesis* series), *Parable of the Sower* (book one of the Earthseed series), and "Bloodchild."

In Chapter 1, "The History of Science Fiction," I introduce and detail the history of the science fiction genre from its roots in the late 19th century to the late 20th century. Chapter 2, "Feminist Science Fiction and Octavia Butler," defines and describes feminist science fiction from its beginnings in the 1960s to the turn of the 21st century and introduces the life and work of Octavia Butler. Chapter 3, "Tyrannical Saviors," examines Butler's presentation of the leaders who would be the saviors of their world, leading their people to freedom and prosperity, but who ultimately become tyrants. In the chapter, I detail how they begin as visionaries, seeking to end the oppression they witness around them and against others, but in solving the troubles, they realize freedom is nothing more than the acceptance of rules by the majority, a comfort zone of right and wrong that the government does not over- or under- step. In the end, the leaders become the oppressors they have hated, continuing in an inevitable cycle of savior-tyrant. Chapter 4, "Idyllic Ignorance," explores Butler's presentation of the enslavement of people through ignorance and knowledge. Many leaders realize the trap they are in as one of ignorance: someone else is holding the reigns to control the populace. They seek to learn, to break free from this ignorance. In the end, they realize there is no escape; knowledge and experience only enlighten people to their imprisoned state. Chapter 5, "Unbinding Gender Roles," investigates Butler's presentation of people's freedom from the binding roles and views of gender they have labored under for centuries. Men and women in these works realize and fight against the prison of gender roles; however, in seeking freedom from these roles, they lose their social and communal identity.

Although society would seem to benefit from the gender revolution, it deteriorates as humankind does not understand or have the ability to adapt to a world where only human beings, not men and women, exist. Finally, they find themselves imprisoned by a strange gender of neutrality.

Through this thesis, I will define the failed attempts of Butler's protagonists to gain freedom. Butler does reveal that change can be made, for the better or worse, but freedom is not truly attainable.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION

“Science fiction not only allows us to escape our assigned space and time and step into other dimensions. It lets us examine our mundane, earthbound problems from a fresh, original viewpoint.”

Edward James, *Science Fiction in the 20th Century*

The origins of science fiction begin as far back as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, published in 1818. It is the fantastical and horrific tale of one man creating his own being with the dead pieces of human anatomy he studied as a doctor. This work inspired the birth of science fiction by blending hard science, philosophy, and fiction in one novel. Later that century, the dubbed “Fathers of Science Fiction”—Jules Verne and H.G.Wells—began writing and publishing stories that developed the emerging genre.

Over the course of his life from 1828 to 1905, Jules Verne wrote sixty-three novels of the genre that has come to be known as “science fiction.” In these works, he considered the strange and wondrous world around him through the adventurer’s eyes. Page after page, he pondered how someone might travel and explore the strangest of destinations, including the moon, the depths of the ocean, and the earth’s core. Verne is best known for the novels *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. As study continued in the earth sciences, physics, and astronomy, readers came to see that his science is indeed fantastical: people cannot reach the center of the earth without burning up in jets of magma; the coldness of space and the lack of a hospitable atmosphere would not allow human beings to travel by balloons and barrels to the moon. But his vision began sparking the technical and scientific minds of authors who also

wondered about the world around them and within them as well as worlds beyond our solar system.

Another writer recognized as a father of science fiction is H.G. Wells. During his life, from 1886 to 1946, he wrote numerous novels, novellas, and short stories, covering a range of themes such as time-travel, alien invasion, biological mutations, future communities and worlds, and dystopia (anti-utopia). Of these works, he is best known for *War of the Worlds*, *The Time Machine*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. His work is a mix of creative storytelling and good science. Unlike Verne, Wells studied science and technology, incorporating them into his writing. Most of his works consider such radical ideas as Darwin's theories of evolution, particularly the merging of humans and animals into new and powerful hybrid creatures (an early predecessor of modern genetics), and the natural selection. Two works that explore these theories are his novel *The Island of Dr Moreau* and novella "A Story of the Stone Age." Together with Jules Verne, Wells created a body of work that helped introduce and build the genre of science fiction.

After this healthy start of a new genre, science fiction faced its greatest test and problem, the introduction of cheap pulp paper for printing. With cheap printing, and cheaper paper, fans and eccentric investors started companies and introduced the world to science fiction costing a few pennies to a nickel a book. Armed with a popular idea, facing a hungry, young male audience, and financially freed from expensive printing, publishers of these magazines printed any story they could purchase at low rates that included sauced up versions of adventures like those in Verne's and Wells' works. And the Pulp Era was born. From 1928 to 1956, magazines such as *Amazing Stories* (started in 1926), *Thrill Book*, and *Astounding Science Fiction* found their way into the mainstream. In *Science Fiction and the*

20th Century, Edward James states that myriad types of stories began to surface including tales of extraordinary voyages, of the future, and of emerging and theoretical sciences (13). The advent of the pulp age was a godsend as well as a threat to the success of science fiction. Writers who previously wrote stories for themselves had a chance to be published and read. However, the pulp age also opened the doorway for writers who simply needed money and would write whatever would sell to get it. It was a testing ground for the genre and serious writers alike. Amazingly, some writers did get their start in this forum and continued to have prosperous careers well into the 1950s and beyond, such as Robert Heinlien, Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950, known for *A Princess of Mars*), and E. E. “Doc” Smith (1890-1965, known for *Lensman* and inventing the “Space Opera”) (Roberts 72). Through the efforts of these writers, and their forefathers, Verne and Wells, the loosely defined area of writing slowly gained critics with their views of what science fiction, later dubbed “sci fi” and “SF,” should be. In the 1920s, Hugo Gernsback offered one of the first distinctive definitions of science fiction as “a narrative work dealing with events and characters remote from ordinary life” (quoted in James 52). According to Gernsback, science fiction should be “seventy-five per cent literature interwoven with twenty-five per cent science...a scientific romance” (quoted in James 52). This definition held through the formative years of science fiction, encompassing what later would be called “fantasy,” as the writers who began and survived the age of pulp furthered the themes of science fiction to include the threat from the stars, aliens, robots, and so on. And during World War II and the height of the Pulp Era came a new age: the Golden Age of science fiction.

The Golden Age began in the late 1930s and early 1940s, specifically with works published from 1938 to 1946. The Pulp Era was still in high gear, but during this time a set

of new writers emerged with novels, novellas, and short stories that greatly changed the public, literary, and critical views of science fiction. Isaac Asimov, Clifford Simak, Theodore Sturgeon, Robert Heinlien, and A. E. Van Vogt started refining and redefining the genre. Of these writers, the one who best captured the interest and serious consideration of critics and the public and paved the way for other writers was Isaac Asimov, who revolutionized the form and introduced many of its present characteristics. He wrote epics about preserving and rewriting society and culture. He faced the problems and benefits of technology. He considered the limits of humanity for human beings and their creations, such as robots, in a world where both can think and converse at comparable levels. He reinvented science fiction and influenced later writers who appeared in the next age of science fiction (Roberts 75).

With the evolution of the genre, critical analysis and continued speculation continued and evolved with it, revealing new characteristics within the genre such as predictions of the future that arose from the shocking leaps in current events and scientific discovery. And as the state of published writing changed, so too did the definition of sci fi. In 1942, John W. Campbell offered a new definition of science fiction that continues well into the works of the late 20th century: “The new sf would be interested not so much in amazing inventions and heroic scientists as in the societies and cultures of the future” (quoted in James 57-8). Campbell states “science fiction is an effort to predict the future on the basis of known facts, culled largely from present-day laboratories” (quoted in James 56). Science fiction changes from Gernsback’s definition, from a discussion about machines and great ideas to their effects on culture and the world. With this new definition, science fiction writing truly began to diversify and become a separate literary genre.

After the short Golden Age of science fiction and the winding down of the Pulp Era, another group of authors emerged in the New Wave. This age began in the 1950s and continued onward into the 1960s. During these years, people and society were dealing with the aftermath of the World Wars, the witch-hunting campaigns by McCarthy, and increased internationalization. During this age, science fiction gained popularity, as a genre for literature and soon for the movie industry and television. And from this age of continuing and new authors, new works gained cult follows, including J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-50), Robert Heinlien's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). With the introduction of Tolkien began the trek of fantasy as a sub-genre within sci fi, a sub genre that remains in an endless debate according to science fiction (James 178). Each work represents the author's awareness of the changes in the world around them, such as the view of the United States as a world superpower, the increased awareness of racism and equality, and the introduction of women in the workplace and universities with non-homemaker goals. Writers became skeptical of these changes and various others during this time, in particular governments, the future, and the applications of science. And these science fiction works were epics concerned with these aspects of life (Roberts 89). During this age, their skepticism and paranoia opened a new arena of questions and revelations for future writers.

With the beginning of the 1960s, a change in sci fi took place. Science fiction welcomed a new set of writers and audience: women. Male writers such as Ray Bradbury and Harlan Ellison continued to join the genre, but women were the recognized new authors of an age. During the 1960s, a shift occurred in America, an evolution of the fears and paranoia of the 1950s, in which Americans did not completely trust their government or see their country

as the greatest beacon of light on the planet. People became politically involved at a younger age, social roles were changing, and education—along with drugs, social attitudes, and the influence of other cultures—proliferated into the mainstream. The major shift in SF during this new age was the writing of utopias and dystopias by both men and women. Women writers were not new, but they never had numbered as highly as they did starting in the 1960s.

Women were typically not a part of science fiction, as an audience or as authors. Science fiction, from its earliest inception by Shelley, Verne, and Wells and throughout the first half of the 20th century, was the realm of men. As Adam Roberts asserts in *Science Fiction*:

“Golden Age” SF... was almost exclusively male; it was written by men, purchased by men or boys; its conventions were shaped by the passions and interests of adolescent males, that is to say its focus was on technology as embodied particularly by big, gleaming machines with lots of moving parts, physical prowess, war, two-dimensional male heroes, adventure and excitement. (91)

Because these stories were written with the man in mind, women typically did not read them, or if they did, they did so “with a sense of themselves as alienated or at least sidelined spectators” (Roberts 91). However, with the increasing sense of self and changing attitudes women felt and shared in the 1960s, their interest and interaction with science fiction changed. Why did women suddenly find science fiction compelling and interesting? The change occurred for two significant reasons: the introduction of women writers and a change in the genre.

First, women started reading science fiction because women writers entered the publishing field of the male-dominated genre. The slow establishment of SF written by women brought a feminist touch to an otherwise cold and masculine genre. Writers such as Marion Zimmer Bradley (Darkover novels), Andre Norton (*Witch World* novels), and Ursula Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed*, and *Earthsea* trilogy) carved the niche for women readership. Each of these writers began by writing works following the traditions of their “Golden Age” male contemporaries, and then progressively created their own versions of SF as their confidence and readership grew (Roberts 94). Through their writings, a new sub-genre of science fiction had emerged called Feminist Science Fiction. These writers began to pull women into the science fiction audience.

Secondly, women focused on the genre because the genre itself changed with a growing emphasis on the affective, the personal, rather than the physical and the scientifically probable. The change in science fiction began not as a woman’s written word, but as a man’s: Gene Roddenberry’s. In the 1960s, a series he wrote gained syndication for television. It was called *Star Trek*, tracking the missions of a crew of men and women, including minorities, across the galaxy, to boldly seek new life and new civilizations. The series continued on television for years and spawned novels, movies, and other series, including *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, and *Enterprise*. With the first series, women and men were introduced to a story about the main goal of the Federation of Planets to explore everything, but it also revealed the inner workings of the crew and their personal relationships. Each episode detailed more of their lives together as co-workers and friends, following a dream across the galaxy. As Roberts remarks, the series changed the genre and attracted the female audience:

Star Trek represented, in the first instance, human interaction and the social dynamic as being at the heart of the SF story; and, in the second instance, and less obviously, because *Trek*, unusually for a 1960s US TV show, was interested in representing this difference. The encounter with the alien is at the core of *Star Trek*, and of most SF; and questions of difference, of alien-ness and otherness, were also powerful and relevant to the female perspective on the old patriarchal world. This is why the show built up, and maintains, so large a female audience. (95)

Science fiction became more than an impersonal, masculine approach to storytelling and exploration. It was, coupled with newly emerging women writers, reaching a turning point to include new types of writers and audiences and sub-genres.

As other genres of literature have matured and refined, so too has science fiction. Authors (male, female, young, old, and minority) have pushed beyond the bounds of common SF and have entered new realms of speculation and investigation, creating sub-genres and distinctive styles. Science fiction authors use the conventions of science fiction to evaluate the world around them, drawing upon its ability to leap logical reasoning as found within human imagination and few other genres. By leaping beyond logic to the fantastic and the rules of physics and other natural sciences, authors studied the effects of null-gravity, the use of telepaths in law enforcement, and the substitution of virtual realities for the “real world” upon common and sometimes uncommon humankind.

Throughout the years, the sub-genres of science fiction have revealed entire avenues of investigation and differing subjects according to the science studied and the age of social change and reform. Yet, the basis of these works and literary periods of SF remain consistent with Campbell’s definition of SF as the study of the future and its cultures. These sub-genres

included diverse types of SF from hard-core SF based on raw data and proven theories of science and mathematics to works bordering on fantasy and dreams. Forming in the 70s, New Wave was a form of SF influenced by 60s revolutionary idealism, new information, rapidly rising technology, and sexual freedom. New Wave authors include Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss, Theodore Sturgeon, Ben Bova, James Tiptree, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Still emerging into the 80s with the essential works by William Gibson, cyberpunk entered the list of sub-genres charged with young aggressive themes, anti-Establishment mentality, and advancing technologies meshed with the animalistic human body and mind. Cyberpunk authors include William Gibson, Arthur C. Clarke, Kim Stanley Robinson, Bruce Sterling, Greg Bear, John Varley, Larry Niven, and Jerry Pournelle. And beginning in the '60s and into the 21st century, another sub-genre formed of apocalyptic and utopic works that dealt with the future in extremist and various other stances. Utopic/dystopic writers include Ursula Le Guin, Samuel R. Delaney, Joanna Russ, and Octavia Butler. These examples represent a few of the differing areas of developing science fiction literature defined and categorized by content, style, period of history, science, discovery, and technology.

For most of the 20th century, men have written the bulk of science fiction, starting in 1895 with H.G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine* (James 12). These novelists spanned the globe from America, Britain, Austria, and France, with works written in their native tongue and translated for foreign markets. With increasing movements towards equality in the 1960s and 1970s, women have joined their male contemporaries as science fiction writers, increasing and diversifying the spectrum with novels, novellas, short stories, and screenplays. Of these sub-genres, one that has changed radically and continued to grow and diversify is Feminist Science Fiction.

CHAPTER 2

FEMINIST SCIENCE FICTION AND OCTAVIA BUTLER

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

Octavia Butler, “Positive Obsession”

During the early years of SF, women were practically ignored beyond the role of sex interest in pulp stories and serials. And as writers, women were practically non-existent. Readers could count the number of female SF writers on one hand. These authors typically started writing and publishing as spouses or wrote under a male pseudonym. Others took a false male identity to write, such as Alice Sheldon writing as James Tiptree, Jr. But with the 1960s, the number of women science fiction writers exploded.

The 1960s was a time of extreme social change in African American and women’s rights, in sexual liberation, and in influence of electronic media. During this age, science fiction branched beyond mainstream literature into mainstream television, gaining the interest and support of women. In this environment of groundbreaking social changes, women writers began publishing science fiction. With the introduction of women writers, a new sub-genre of science fiction was born:

Women’s science fiction, or feminist science fiction, is a more recent development than the genre as a whole, but today constitutes one of the most exciting and most vigorous aspects of the mode, in terms both of actual SF texts and of criticism. . . . It is. . . a development that dates primarily from the 1960s, one that has grown up in

dialogue with the more male-oriented SF of the Pulps and the Golden Age. (Roberts 91)

The first women writers to begin publishing in the 1960s reflected the style and themes of their male contemporaries from the Golden Age. As their experience increased, they expanded their writing to use literary styles of other genres they had loved, studied, and perhaps written. Women began investigating more socially and culturally relevant subjects because they viewed science as “tied to cultural difference” (Donawerth, *Frankenstein’s Daughters* 7). As Donawerth states, “[women] can see this sense of embodiment and connection to other life (rather than an abstract discourse of science)” (*Frankenstein’s Daughters* 7-8). In their vision, women saw science as an integral part of society, culture, and personal identity rather than the investigation of noble gases and the sound barrier. They also explored their own themes beyond those of men, including reproduction, nature, and women’s experience as warriors, explorers, and other predominantly male roles of power and influence. These first women writers include Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Margaret Atwood.

In the 1960s and 1970s, not only the writers and readership of SF changed, but also its form. After mastering the themes and forms previously used by their male predecessors in the Golden Age, women writers began researching new themes and new forms:

One of the contributions of these writers has been to question the masculinist discourses of traditional science fiction. Their novels have contributed to the breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions about gendered identities: Themes such as representation of women and their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, and language and its relation to identity, have all been tackled, explored,

and reappropriated by these writers in a dialectical engagement with tradition.

(Baccolini 16)

Of the themes and forms, the prominent theme was otherness, and the form was a variation of the utopia/dystopia, which they wove together to tell their tales.

To begin building these narratives, women started with a theme close to their own history in a patriarchal society: otherness. Women gained their insight into science fiction through two main influences: male writers and *Star Trek*. And through these, they read about and avidly watched the introduction of and interaction with the alien. With every episode, they watched the intrepid crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise interact with aliens that were humanoid, or plantlike, and at times even godlike. Women found a bond with these aliens through their otherness. Throughout history, men have classified women as the minority. They viewed women as inferior to men, deformed from men's perfected forms. They were not man, though they were like him. Women, in effect, became the other. As the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir stated well over half a century ago, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but relative to him...He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (quoted by Donawerth 43). Over the centuries, as women gained ground in their fight for justice and equal rights, they became able to further contemplate their sex, minds, bodies, and souls. And science fiction became the promised land for exploration.

Within science fiction, women readers were introduced to aliens, creatures and peoples who were similar to, yet unlike, man. Every episode of *Star Trek* and works they read by their contemporaries brought these two disparate groups together to share. Women

understood and related to the otherness represented by the aliens, and into the radically feminist 1970s, wrote tales about themselves and these sister peoples:

It was this issue of difference, where 'alien' becomes an encoding of 'woman,' that featured prominently in the work of the 1970s new wave of radical female SF writers. This was a much more populated era of women's SF in terms of the number of women writing SF. (Roberts 96)

Women writers such as Le Guin, Russ, and Butler wrote novels and short stories about the interaction and relatedness of the other as woman and alien. One example is James Tiptree's work "The Women Men Don't See." Although the short story has a man's name attached, Alice Sheldon actually wrote the tale in which women choose to live with aliens over men as they see a kinship with the "other." In effect, they gain a more powerful place in the alien community than they had in the patriarchal one. In these stories, women could change the previously detrimental status as "other" into a powerful alliance with the alien and springboard for adaptation and change in otherworldly situations.

With the theme in place, they then added a background, or form, for the fiction as a mixture of utopia and dystopia with an evolved view, edge, and use. Women authors including Le Guin (*The Dispossessed*) and Russ (*The Female Man*) began with the utopia. The utopic story describes an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects, where all things good and wonderful will happen before the entire world deteriorates into a hell on earth (Ketterer 38). However, with the state of rebellious affairs in the United States and their station as "other" in patriarchal society, women writers could not easily create a utopia (Moylan 10). Although they strove for equality, they realized they were far from achieving it. In a sense, they accepted and believed in the concept of utopias,

but found fault in their practice. Works published during the 1960s and early 1970s exhibited a morphed utopic form which Tom Moylan calls the “critical utopia.” In the rebellious and antagonistic culture of the 1960s and 1970s, he notes a rediscovery of the utopia by women writers with a hardened, more realistic view and use of it. Within the chaotic social climate, the worlds of these works reveal a land, society, and people who can exist only within a place that holds the idea of utopia as a dream or ideal rather than as a fact of their world. According to Moylan, women found something inherently wrong with the utopia and included it in their “utopic” stories only as a dream or influencing concept. In *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, he termed this the “critical utopia”:

A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving its dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the ordinary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives. (10-11)

This form infused women’s writing through to the 1970s.

As the number of women writers and their published works increased into the equally turbulent 1970s, the idea and use of the critical utopia radically changed to include the dystopia. A dystopia describes a world in which the condition of life is horrific from deprivation, oppression, or terror; it is a world of “the postmillennial theory of apocalypse” where “we all die first” (Ketterer 38). Women writers could not accept the dystopia at face

value or without its counterpart of utopia. They changed the dystopia into what Raffaella Baccolini termed the “critical dystopia.” In her article “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler,” she details a dystopia with a utopia at its core:

But most of all in the science fiction works...the utopian impulse is maintained at the level of form. Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope within the story, utopia (in the sense of utopian hope) is maintained in dystopia only outside the story: It is only if we consider dystopia as a warning, that we as readers can hope to escape such a pessimistic future. . . . (18)

Unlike the far-away dream of the utopia in the critical utopia, the critical dystopia contained a form of utopia either at its core or as an outside goal to attain, waiting beyond reach.

Various women writers incorporated this final form in their science fiction, as the stage to enact their tales and investigations, including the themes of otherness, women’s bodies, sexuality, and gender roles. These writers include masters such as the previously mentioned Le Guin and Russ. But another, more intriguing woman author soon found her way into this group of feminist SF writers in the 1970s, bringing her own distinctive and unique perspective through the critical dystopia: Octavia Butler. In *Science Fiction*, Adam Roberts remarks on the changes he studied in the types of authors in science fiction from the 1960s through to today:

One of the most significant aspects of the development of the genre has been the growth of authors of colour; another is the rise of women authors of SF, so much that it is probably fair to say that the present-day giants of the field are Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler. (Roberts 83)

Butler is “the first African-American woman to gain popularity and critical acclaim as a major science fiction writer” (Hine 208).

Octavia Estelle Butler was born on June 22, 1947, in Pasadena, California, to Laurice and Octavia M. (Guy) Butler. She was an only child in the small family, the only one of five pregnancies that her mother carried to term. Early in her young life, her father, a shoeshine man, died, leaving her mother, grandmother, and herself to live in a friendly, racially mixed neighborhood in Pasadena. Unlike many African-American children, Butler “never personally experienced the more rigid forms of a segregated society” (Smith 144). The unifying factor of their neighborhood was the struggle to make ends meet, engendering a harmony in their small community.

In school, Butler was shy, spending her time in study and on the playground alone, typically daydreaming, and silently suffering from dyslexia. Because Butler rarely made friends, her school and personal life were difficult. But in time, she triumphed over these problems through her writing, which she began when she was ten years old “to escape loneliness and boredom” (Locher 104). Her stories were fantastical, and soon she sought out books that reminded her of these tales. By the age of 12, she finished her first story after watching the movie *Devil Girl from Mars*, a science fiction movie that disgusted her. She realized she could write much better stories dealing with space travel, aliens, and the all-American hero. And with that “B-movie,” Butler found the genre and passion that captured her imagination and lifetime goals: science fiction.

Beginning with serials such as *Amazing*, she hungrily ate the words, spending her free time between school and chores reading and writing worlds of wonder. She worked hard at

home, helping her mother and grandmother take care of and support her family and home.

She relates these early years in her essay “Positive Obsession”:

I believed I was ugly and stupid, clumsy, and socially hopeless. I also thought that everyone would notice these faults if I drew attention to myself. I wanted to disappear. Instead, I grew to be six feet tall. . . . I hid out in a big pink notebook—one that would hold a whole ream of paper. I made myself a universe in it. There I could be a magic horse, a Martian, a telepath. . . . There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these. (128)

But no matter what her hands were doing, whether washing dishes or folding laundry, her mind was ablaze with the flights of fantasy and limitless depths of science fiction. And as she matured, leaving home for college, she continued to imagine and write her stories.

After high school, Butler sought out her dreams by going to college. In 1968, she received an Associate of Arts degree from Pasadena City College. With this degree, she attended California State University, Los Angeles and later the University of California, Los Angeles. Through these institutions of learning, she gained further degrees and schooling in the art of letters and literature. However, Butler has credited her success to nonacademic programs, including the Open Door Program of the Screen Writers Guild of America and the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. In these workshops, she refined her ideas and writing, hoping to have a work accepted and published.

According to Butler, the road has been a long one of hard work, in-depth research, and endless submissions. Throughout the years of courses and seminars, she worked odd jobs, writing and submitting stories when she had a free moment. She worked long hours, sometimes holding down two to three odd jobs, to pay for her schooling and living. As she

states in “Positive Obsession,” “After college I did office work for a while, then factory and warehouse work...I got up at two or three in the morning and wrote. Then I went to work. I hated it” (132). Tired but determined, she submitted various stories and received many rejections. But she never faltered. She had sold a few stories to colleagues and teachers, but she had not yet been published. And in 1970, she met a monumental SF writer who gave her insight and support: Harlan Ellison. Ellison read her works in a seminar and saw a life and intensity in her stories that he knew would one-day warrant publication. Encouraged to push onward, she finished revisions of yet another story and made her break, publishing “Crossover” in 1971, the first of many works weaving African-American history, futuristic societies, and a highly intellectual exploration of the alien perspective.

Over the years, she has published a number of novels and short stories. These works include three series, a novel, and a collection of short stories. The Patternist series includes *Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Patternmaster* (1976), *Clay's Ark* (1984), and *Survivor* (1978). This series depicts societies run by people with supernatural abilities, primarily telepathy. Her Xenogenesis Trilogy includes *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). In 2000, the three were reprinted in one book called *Lilith's Brood*. This series details the near destruction of humanity through nuclear war and gene-swapping by extraterrestrials. Her current Earthseed series, also called the Parables, includes *Parable of the Sower* (1994) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). In an interview with Amazon.com, Butler stated her plans to write about six novels in this series, describing the genesis of a simple, humanist religion, started in the dystopic landscape of a nation suffering from extreme global warming and searching for a new home in the stars (“Octavia E. Butler Plants [an] Earthseed”). Her other works include *Kindred* (1976) and *Bloodchild and Other*

Stories (1995). *Kindred* is a novel close to her heart and her grandmother's experience as it details the life of a modern African-American woman sent back in time to replace her grandmother on a plantation during the Ante-bellum south. Her short story collection includes "Bloodchild" and "Speech Sounds," two of her best-known works. Today, she continues to write science fiction full-time and has been hailed as one of the best women writers, added to the list of greats including Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ.

These works have gained Butler several awards. In 1984, she won a Hugo Award for her short story "Speech Sounds." Her novella "Bloodchild" won two awards: the Nebula Award in 1984 and the Hugo Award in 1985. The Nebula and Hugo awards are considered science fiction's highest awards, granted by SF writers and readers. In 1995, Butler won a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, or "genius grant," funding her work with \$295,000 divided over 5 years for her synthesis of science fiction, mysticism, mythology and African-American spiritualism. She then won another Nebula nomination for *Parable of the Sower* in 1993 and a Nebula award for *Parable of the Talents* in 1999. And in 2000, she won the PEN International Lifetime Achievement Award. Throughout her writing career, she has conducted numerous interviews with critics and chat sessions online with fans. Her work has been used in university courses and introduced to online viewers through the Sci Fi channel's website as a webcast (Seeing Ear Theatre production of *Kindred* in February 2001). She has been well received by the critics, having articles and books published regarding her works. Rosemary Stevenson best summarizes their reactions: "Butler's work is both fascinating and highly unusual...character development, human relationships, and social concerns predominate over intergalactic hardware" (208).

With the printing of her first work in the '70s, Butler ventured forth with other women to seek out her own questions and answers through the worlds and characters created by her mind and pen. Like her contemporary female writers, her works include novels, trilogies, and short stories in science fictional worlds and situations. Each of Butler's pieces has been based in the distinct form of the critical dystopia. Various critics, including Raffaella Baccolini, Donna Haraway, Jane Donawerth, and Hoda M. Zaki, and readers have classified her works as survivalist literature and slave experiences. However, in various interviews she has discounted this description of her work. In an interview with Amazon.com, she also mentions an argument she had with a student after a seminar about pigeonholing her work as a "slave narrative" ("Octavia E. Butler Plants [an] Earthseed"). In her works, she has sought to refine her views and explore the future of humankind, the problems humanity faces through its trials and tribulations, and tell a good tale:

I'm not writing for some noble purpose, I just like telling a good story. If what I write about helps others understand this world we live in, so much the better for all of us.

Every story I write adds to me a little, changes me a little, forces me to reexamine an attitude or belief, causes me to research and learn, helps me to understand people and grow...Every story I create, creates me. I write to create myself. (Stevenson 210)

She seeks enlightenment and answers to the problems humanity faces and avoids making a political statement for a particular group or agenda. Looking over her works through the years, she envisions her stories as a voyage of enlightenment ("Octavia E. Butler Plants [an] Earthseed").

One aspect of her work that many critics note is her use of the critical dystopia. Whether the writer comments on her use of strong feminist characters or changing gender

roles, critics describe her works as dark worlds, on the brink of destruction, their inhabitants searching for or working towards a utopia they can only hope exists. In her article “The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s: Record of Failure, Midwife of Hope,” Jane Donawerth describes works like Butler’s as “urban postapocalyptic spaces” that “present a future of repressive government, liberated gender roles, and dysfunctional families. . . sexual codes are complex, sexual identity is difficult to discover and most difficult to categorize, and sex may result in death” (49). Further, in her article “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler,” Raffaella Baccolini describes each of Butler’s worlds as “a mostly dystopian, future society” that also “portray surviving and imperfect utopian enclaves with the larger dystopian world” (18). These two critics summarize Butler’s works as critical dystopias. Her stories reveal a world, nation, or community suffering the plight of dystopic elements such as corrupted officials, biological disasters, and the self-destruction of humanity’s dark underside. Butler concurs with these assessments, using her written word to investigate humanity’s ability to mature and change. Butler regards her work as words of warning: “‘Cautionary tales. That is what I hope I am writing...the thing most needed to make homo sapiens viable and whole is ‘alien’ to the species: compassion and rational thought’” (quoted in Shinn 71). In another interview, she further describes her work as a set of cautionary tales about situations that can destroy us unless we realize and confront them: “There have been ages of chaos...all through history. And we could crash into another one. That was what I had in mind in these books. We’re building all these little problems into disasters, mainly by neglecting them” (“Octavia E. Butler Plants [an] Earthseed”). And according to her own words in countless interviews, I

believe she uses these worlds as the basis for her explorations of humanity's loss of and need for freedom.

Freedom, the power to act, speak, or think without externally imposed restraints, is a central theme within Butler's works. In her work *Frankenstein's Daughters*, Jane Donawerth describes Butler's formula: "Octavia Butler creates the feminist utopian vision of science—matrilineal, symbiotic with alien nature, performed at home—and shows it still to be oppressive" (30). Butler examines freedom by crafting an oppressive world, adding a people starving for something they cannot quite envision, and delivering a protagonist with that missing piece of the puzzle: the realization of tyranny, the need for freedom from oppression, and the license to live according to one's own rules.

In the novels and short story referenced in this thesis, each world's people live in terrible conditions, veritable dystopias. Each dystopic land suffers from cruelty and control of differing types. In *Wild Seed*, her dystopia is one of tyranny: a powerful entity known as Doro selectively breeds mutant people in communities like strange, experimental petting zoos. He is the creator and destroyer, the vengeful god to his people, and the incestuous father to his family. In *Dawn* and "Bloodchild," she creates dystopias of domination by a greater power: aliens, who present themselves as benefactors, control the number and lifestyle of human beings through breeding programs and protection. In *Parable of the Sower*, her dystopia is one of a wretched country: a blasted landscape of the United States that is meagerly surviving the advanced stages of global warming, lawlessness, and hopelessness. The daughter of a drug-addicted mother and preacher father, Lauren, sees the destruction and hopelessness of her community, of all human beings, and seeks to aid it by

building her own community. And in each of these worlds, the people strive for something better, a freedom divined and fought for by the protagonist, the savior-tyrant.

The protagonists of these works step forward to help people find a better life that ultimately becomes a struggle for freedom. In each work, the protagonists take power for themselves, assume the position of leadership, and fight through their oppressed states to create their own homes, their own pieces of utopia as detailed by the critical dystopia. However, these leaders realize that true freedom is nothing more than anarchy, the ability of people to dictate their own lives. But like the tyrannical worlds they live in, these leaders cannot allow such independence, for their vision of freedom would be discounted and discredited. In effect, they create worlds of their design, forcing their laws on people, teaching them their way as the way of freedom; however, this enforced liberty is nothing more than trading one tyrant for another.

Through these works, Butler reveals that people cannot and do not truly achieve freedom. As Eric Hoffer states, “It is doubtful if the oppressed ever fight for freedom. They fight for pride and power—power to oppress others. The oppressed want above all to imitate their oppressors; they want to retaliate” (Freedom’s Nest: Eric Hoffer Quotes). Hoffer’s point supports my argument. Butler’s protagonists typically realize that, though they reach a freer position than the one they previously held, they realize true freedom would cause them to lose their power. The fight is much more important than the intended result. In effect, they never truly reach the pinnacle of freedom.

CHAPTER 3

TYRANNICAL SAVIORS

“The weaker the administrative apparatus of the state, the more likely it is that there will be the kind of chaos that leads to the emergence of a powerful political national savior, and the easier it will be for him to turn into a tyrant once he has seized power.”

David Chirot, *Modern Tyrants*

To attain freedom, enslaved peoples need a hero, a leader who sees their problems and works towards releasing them from their impoverished state. These leaders typically come from within the group, angered by the suffering of their world and ready to take a stand to end it. They have a vision, as all good leaders do, an idea or concept of how the world should be and would be under their guidance. However, once on the path, surrounded by needy faces dependent on their word and will, they realize that true power and leadership resides more in action and law than in pretty words and purpose. And in this delicate balance of the dream and quest for freedom and the need for control and rules, the leader becomes a tyrant. In her works *Wild Seed*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower*, and “Bloodchild,” Octavia Butler details a situation much like the one described here. In these works, she creates terrible dystopic worlds that have enslaved a people, depriving them of freedom, and enabling a tyrant to take the reigns of leadership. However, through the works, these leaders realize the need for power and control to enact *their* visions of freedom, become tyrants, and continue to constrain their people.

In his study *Modern Tyrants*, David Chirot defines tyranny: “Tyranny is the abuse of power. There have always been individuals who abuse their greater strength or cleverness to inflict pain and humiliation on others, and to exploit those around them for personal gain” (2). Through this case study of tyrannies of the modern world, Chirot has compiled various

propositions for the formation of tyrannies. Butler's protagonists clearly fit the profile of saviors corrupted by their own vision and goals who become terrible tyrants. As Dorothy Allison states in "The Future of Female: Octavia Butler's Mother Lode," "All of them are mothers, nurturers, healers—traditional Butler heroines in new forms. But they are also tyrants, with the same tendency to infantilize to make choices for the child's 'own good'" (478). In "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler," Hoda M. Zaki further describes Butler's leaders: "the relationship between ruler and ruled is never egalitarian for Butler, but is always a matter of dominance and submission consistent with her essentialist view of human nature" (242). Like these critics, I too see Butler's protagonists as tyrants that fulfill Chirot's theories: the formation of tyrants through the weakness and disorder of a society and government, nationalism and nationalistic rage between groups, and communal ideologies of conflict, virtue, and heredity. And by becoming tyrants, they break the fragile dream and quest for freedom by forcing their will upon others.

Through studying medieval and modern cases of tyranny, political scientists such as Eric Hoffer have determined how tyrants gain power. Typically, tyrants come from one of two types: either they set out to enforce their rule as tyrants or they begin as good leaders and falter into tyranny through the progression of their rule. Butler's leaders typically fall into the latter type. The protagonists of her stories see the violence, destruction, and terror inherent in the current system of government, or they recognize that the terrible state of affairs is due to the lack of government. Answering a need they perceive in the world, these people either take or are forced to take the reigns of leadership. With this power, they are entrusted to save their people, becoming their saints, nationally and religiously. However, as

evidenced in Chirot's case studies of "saint tyrants" detailed in his work *Modern Tyrants: The Prevalence of Evil in Our Age*, their ability to rule does not diminish, but they begin to abuse power. Some of these abuses of power manifested themselves as restrictive laws, aggressive reforms, harsh justice for broken laws, and corrupted enforcement of those laws. Saviors typically fall into tyranny as they see their vision, their concept of freedom, law, and the future, as the only path to gaining every hope and dream they and their people have. To gain this future of plenty, they must develop, enact, and enforce their rule. And if the populace complains, it does so because it does not fully comprehend the long-term vision and needs to be directed closer, pushed harder, and given ultimatums. As a result, the very freedoms once dreamed of and sought after become the chains of a new oppression.

The first theory of tyranny is the creation and empowerment of the tyrant through the chaos and weakness in a people, community, or nation. Tyrants develop in these worlds through the deterioration of societies, political systems, interpersonal relations, and so on. People are brought down to the depths of pain and despair, hoping that things will get better but unable to do anything to bring that future to fruition. In this atmosphere, potential leaders labor through the same terrible conditions of life. However, unlike the populous, they have not lost hope. Striving through the oppressive world, they realize the changes that need to occur and work towards enacting them. The people respond to the goals and visions of their comrade. They envision their comrade as a savior and proclaim him or her as leader. As Chirot states, "The more chaotic the economy and political system, the more they seem to be failing, the more likely it is that a tyrant will emerge as a self-proclaimed savior" (409). In doing so, leaders succumb to the demands of creating and enforcing laws, defining morality, and symbolizing the ideals of their new community, society, or nation. As a result, they

become tyrants. Chirot describes this phenomenon in which the greatest of leaders can fall into tyranny while trying to save communities and their new form of government in a chaotic world:

Countervailing powers within the state may lead to disintegration rather than to democratic stability. If they do, in an era dominated by idealized models of the nation-state as the best form of government, many of the most patriotic nationalists will turn to dictatorial modes of government and drastically undemocratic ideologies in order to save the nation. (405)

In effect, the leader with the best of intentions, acting as a savior for an oppressed people, falls to the pitfalls of leadership, introducing his or her people to a new age of oppression rather than freedom.

Butler's *Parable of the Sower* reveals a world in which a savior leader, Lauren Olamina, seeks a new vision of liberty and life only to fall into a tyranny based on her vision of a new religion called Earthseed. The state of the world depresses the people living in it, as global warming, a disjointed class system, the deterioration of law and order, and degenerate gangs tear apart the harmony of the planet. The work focuses on a small community of people who fight to keep violence outside of their walls while upholding the traditions of a society that can no longer sustain them. Through her young life as the daughter of a drug-addicted mother and a preacher father, Lauren realizes the trap of the dystopic landscape and seeks a new vision of life through the science and frontier books of her community's library, and she keeps a journal detailing her religious ideals, which she calls "Earthseed." She knows death and change are coming. And she envisions what has to happen to prevent them:

“We can get ready. That’s what we’ve got to do now. Get ready for what’s going to happen, get ready to survive it, ready to make a life afterward. Get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get batted around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don’t know what they are doing.”

(Parable of the Sower 48)

Lauren plans to establish these ideals and initiate a crusade with the survivors of this oppressive world. Through the course of the work, Lauren uses her knowledge and survival skills to earn the trust and leadership of her new family. As their travels progress, she slowly engenders her ideals, visions, and religion in these people, further gaining their trust and support. By the end of the book, she has started a new community, which she rules with strict laws to ensure the survival of human beings and her model of humanity’s future. She becomes centered wholly on the survival and success of her world and blueprint of the future:

“We can build a community here. . . . It’s dangerous, sure, but, hell, it’s dangerous everywhere, and the more people there are packed together in cities, the more danger there is. This is a ridiculous place to build a community. It’s isolated, miles from everywhere with no decent road leading here, but for us, for now, it’s perfect.”

(Parable of the Sower 287)

And any who cause unrest or create roadblocks are removed through her laws and followers. In effect, the people who hear her words and join her cause trade one oppressive force for another; otherwise, they will surely suffer and die like the heathens around them, killing each other for more resources or a spot at a fire.

The second theory of tyranny's creation is that it arises from nationalism and nationalistic rage. It occurs when nations resent other nations for their resources, lifestyles, politics, and so on; they feel inferior and lash out even if they wish to come to their level.

Chirot describes this type of tyranny through the work of Liah Greenfield:

As Greenfield explains it, nationalisms characterized by *ressentiment* interpret unsatisfactory internal situations as well as perceived international slights as the result of foreign influence. The pure and ideal nation could not be at fault, so that an external community, or its perceived internal agents, become the chief object of *ressentiment*. Pride in the mythologized nation, combined with growing frustration and jealousy directed against these foreign forces, results in intense xenophobia.

(410)

Tyrants that fit this theory become leaders and assert their power and influence by using the foreign, the alien, as a threat and enemy. They teach that the other powers, other countries and leaders, are enemies of the state, seeking to impose an alien law and oppression on the people of this mighty nation. These tyrants call upon the traditions and history of their people, reflecting on their homegrown way of life and needs, to show how strange and terrible the outsiders are, engendering fear, hatred, and rebellion within their people to fight the perceived atrocities of the foreign power. As Chirot states, one can determine and foresee the probability and power of tyrannies based on the level of resentment and vengeance in the populace:

For any nation, new or old, we can judge the extent to which its political and intellectual elite's identity is based on jealous and vengeful resentment, on memories

of past wrongs, real or imagined, and estimate that the more this is so, the higher the probability of future tyrannies. (412)

These tyrants, including Adolf Hitler, use the threat, power, and alienness of the opposing country as the fuel to fire their goals, plans of the future, and support of their populace.

In Butler's work *Dawn*, a woman chosen to lead and integrate the fragile remains of humanity becomes a tyrant of this type through her need to save humanity from its benefactors, the Oankali. A biotechnological alien species called the Oankali find earth in the early years of a devastating nuclear winter. According to their research and the fragmented thoughts of the survivors, a group of people decided to destroy all humanity through nuclear warfare (12). However, the Oankali save them, supposedly to help them regain their lost life and world, but officially to continue living and evolving and to create a new ship through the destruction of their own planet. The Oankali exist through the integration of other species into their genetic collective. They are gene-robbers, stealing and using the genetic structures of others to add to their own, to continue growing and living. To the Oankali, this is a natural way of life, helpful and enduring. When they encounter humanity, they find an intriguing people. First, humanity seems to have wanted to destroy itself (19). Second, they possess cancer, mutations within cells that create hybrid genes and cells (42-43). And third, their planet, if revived, would be a good host to create a new living spaceship (38). The Oankali save humanity, freezing them to learn more about their cancer, understand and guide the wayward species from its ill-tempered ideas of self-destruction through a terrible hierarchal living structure, and tend to the planet while the new ship grows. When they awaken Lilith, they test and train her to become an ambassador between their species and humanity. After she acclimates to their strange and terrifying ways, she sees the

alien beauty, awesome power, and stable social structures of the species. In many ways, understanding and adding their characteristics to humans would aid the human race; however, the Oankali's treatment of humanity reminds her of finger-wagging parents, slave owners, and the stories of oppression and experimentation reminiscent of slavery and Nazi Germany camps. Nikanj explains some of this to Lilith early in their relationship:

“Ooan says humans—any new trade partner species—can't be treated the way we must treat each other. It's right up to a point. I just think it goes too far. We were bred to work with you. . . . We should be able to find ways through most of our differences.” (82)

As she is forced to lead her fellow humans, she seeks to subvert the will of the Oankali by training them to live with the aliens in order to escape them, to learn the new rules of life that she learned the hard way, and to survive and continue the new traditions she has formulated. The Oankali may have a better system of government, family structures, technologies, and the like; however, their treatment of humans like children being potty trained or puppies learning the rules of their new home have pushed humans to seek freedom. However, to gain this freedom, Lilith enforces a strange mix of law and rebellion for humanity and aliens, teaching them the law and what happens when it is broken. Lilith agonizes over how to remain a leader, to keep her position within the Oankali, and not to betray the human race:

She needed to share the burden of what she knew, what she must do. She needed thoughtful people who would hear what she had to say and not do anything violent or stupid. . . . Her job was to weave them into a cohesive unit and prepare them for the Oankali—prepare them to be the Oankali's new trade partners. That was impossible. .

. . How could she Awaken these people, these survivors of war, and tell them that unless they could escape the Oankali, their children would not be human? (116-7)

She begins teaching the human beings, while keeping their captors happy, hoping they will all one day walk and live on earth. Neither can continue living without her work and rule. Her tyranny over humanity and alien fits Chirot's second theory. By the end of the novel, humanity begins anew, living with Lilith's tyrannical laws of survival and existence, based on a hatred of the oppressive Oankali.

The third theory for the creation of tyrannies is through communal ideologies of conflict, virtue, and heredity. In this tyranny structure, a tyrant creates a utopic goal of the future for his or her people to work towards, a competitive environment for surviving and gaining recognition and acceptance. The leader brings these people together through their fear of the outside world and establishes a commune following the dictates of his or her rule. The theory is neo-Darwinian: a leader uses the utopic world as a struggle of the fittest to attain it:

Reactive nationalism that is based on fear and resentment of the outside world, that demands communal solidarity of the entire nation, regardless of the cultural and individual differences which exist, and that faces serious internal ethnic and religious diversity is likely to impose itself by force. This will produce resistance, and in turn, acceptance of increasingly tyrannical methods of rule by those in power in order to sustain the nationalist ideal. (Chirot 416)

In effect, the society members compete against each other to attain the goals of the parent-figure tyrant, giving this tyrannical leader the rule as he or she sees fit. This environment usually also creates an atmosphere in which the tyrant enacts terrible atrocities and extreme

practices to test the people, thinning the herd of the unfit, disloyal, and troubling. As Chirot states, these people of all races, classes, ethnicities, religions “are the equivalent of species of organisms fighting for survival, and therefore justified in taking the most extreme measures” (413). As a result, we have a tyranny in which the tyrant acts as the head of the household over a community family, believing he or she is doing what is best for the people, but eventually creating an oppressive, dysfunctional system of government and living:

The community has been seen not only as the supreme, but the only legitimate social actor. The individual, except at the top of each social hierarchy where one individual acts for the community as a whole, has been viewed as inconsequential. Thus, the king or political ruler acts an authoritarian but protective father, making society a larger reflection of the authoritarian family. (Chirot 413-4)

The tyrant and the society become a familial dystopic hell always reaching for lofty utopic goals yet never gaining them or freedom.

In Butler’s work *Wild Seed*, two characters create societies that follow this tyranny. Anyanwu, the shape-changing wise woman from the wilds of Africa, and Doro, the century-old soul-body swapping being, both build communities based on similar goals with differing outcomes. In Doro’s vision, the outside world is a terrible place that seeks to torment and destroy those who are different (18-20). Seeing power in the strange abilities of those he finds, he begins creating communities resembling American sit-coms, full of happy families following the dictates of their father-figure leader: “I search the land for people who are a little different—or very different, I search them out, I bring them together in groups, I begin to build them into a strong new people” (18). However, as in sit-coms, the happiness and love are a thin veneer. The happiness in Doro’s communities hide incestuous

relationships, breeding farm practices, and the sick thrill of controlling people like marionettes that Doro enjoys. His utopic goal is a world in which the specially bred creatures he creates rule the world of normal people, controlling them, making them fear their power and ability. Anyanwu plays a part in his communities and, seeing the disgusting practices of the tyrant, leaves to create her own community.

Like Doro, Anyanwu brings people together through the threat of the outside world of “normals,” people born without the strange abilities or maladies of the weak and different. And like him, she sets rules for her commune, detailing what is allowed and what is punishable. Although she detests Doro’s sickening practices, she also creates a tyranny built like a family where she is the father-mother protecting and nurturing her children:

She had bought of the people who worked for her and recruited others among freedmen, but those she bought, she freed. They always stayed to work for her, feeling more comfortable with her and with each other than they had ever been elsewhere. . . . They were misfits, malcontents, trouble-makers—though they did not make trouble for Anyanwu. They treated her as mother, older sister, teacher, and, when she invited it, lover. Somehow, even this last intimacy did nothing to diminish her authority. They knew her power. She was who she was, no matter what role she chose. And yet she did not threaten them, did not slaughter among them as Doro did among his people. . . . She was not Doro, breeding people as though they were cattle, though perhaps her gathering of all of these special ones. . . would accomplish the same purpose as his breeding. She was herself, gathering family. (220)

In her vision, normal people and the different learn to live in harmony, realizing that neither will rule the other through either sheer numbers and physical force or wild powers and supernatural abilities. And like Doro, she too believes her rule is not tyrannical, that she is fulfilling a need: ““They need me...these people...They need someone who can help them, and I can help them. You[, Doro,] don’t want to help them, you want to use them. But I can help”” (216). Together, they create similar communities with different laws (275). Through both of these “familial” structured tyrannies, people seek to attain the utopic goals set before them by their insightful leader, despite the enlightened or crazed qualities of the leaders’ visions. However, they never truly achieve either; Anyanwu and Doro only create new oppressive communities.

Unlike the previous works by Butler, the tyrannical rule in “Bloodchild” differs in its creation and enforcement. In the work, Gan, a young human male, begins to understand the tyrannical rule of the Tlic, an alien race that has kept humans from extinction while using them for their own reproductive needs. The Tlic have created a tyranny much like the one represented in *Parable of the Sower*; the helpful aliens are saving humans from a terrible fate of extinction, always using fear of the terrors of the universe, other aliens, and the ancestors of the human race. When talking to Gan, the alien T’Gatoi recalls the status of humans on the brink of total destruction and the helpful Tlic who saved them: ““And your ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them—they survived because of us. We saw them as people and gave them the Preserve when they still tried to kill us as worms”” (25). But rather than submit wholly to the tyranny of the Tlic, Gan creates his own tyranny over T’Gatoi. To live under the Tlic is to live by their rules. And one of these prohibits human beings from owning weapons such as guns.

Against these rules, Gan not only owns but regularly uses a shotgun. Through the short story, T'Gatoi learns of the gun and demands to have it turned in. But Gan rebels and forces the alien to leave the shotgun with Gan's family. The shotgun represents everything the Tlic fear in humanity: destruction with an easy trigger, always ready to explode with powerful force. It reminds them of their own destruction. And it remains a constant threat of death and annihilation of their treasured breeding stock. Gan faces down T'Gatoi, forcing her to understand the new rules, his rules which become a tyranny through the threat and existence of the gun: "If we're not your animals, if these are adult things, accept the risk. There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner" (26). Through the threat of the gun, Gan instigates his own tyranny, much like T'Gatoi's.

In *Wild Seed*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower*, and "Bloodchild," Butler details how the fight for freedom fails under the rule of tyrants. Despite their vision or goals, each of these savior-leaders defaults into tyrannical rules, much like those of their society or community. She reveals that ideals and power can corrupt even the best of intentions and leaders, who engender oppressive rules, communities, and societies that shape but also restrict freedom.

CHAPTER 4

IDYLLIC IGNORANCE

“[T]he case for individual freedom rests largely on the recognition of the inevitable and universal ignorance of all of us concerning a great many factors on which the achievements of our ends and welfare depend.”

F.A. Hayek, “Freedom’s Nest Hayek”

Knowledge functions as a powerful force in the works of Octavia Butler. While acknowledging that knowledge can free a person’s mind, through experience and information, she reveals how knowledge also binds people, taking away their freedom.

In his work *Arguments from Ignorance*, Douglas Walton defines ignorance as “the absence, or negation of knowledge” (139). What this means is that “we do not know enough about some particular proposition to say that we know it is true, or we know it is false” (141). This definition implies that the uninformed, ignorant of the world around them, are not free; they are restrained by their lack of knowledge or confined to the facts or fallacies they know. These people, ignoramuses, remain imprisoned and oppressed simply because they do not know or understand something which would awaken them to freedom. People become captive in their thoughts and knowledge in different ways. They could lack the capacity for thought, suffering from diseases or conditions leaving them in an uninformed state. Others remain oppressed because of a poor state such as illiteracy, being unaware of freedoms they may have or recognize around them because they are unable to read, speak a language, and so on. They could not know that what they know is false, rendering them inane and useless as they fumble with incorrect information or false ideas. Or they could “know that [they] don’t know something, or have ‘Socratic Wisdom’” (Walton 250). They could also remain ignorant to the ruling structure of their homeland; leaders have often controlled information

to place a strict hold on their people to keep them in line, keep potential rebellions under control, and remain the supreme intellect for that area. Throughout history, rulers have controlled the flow of knowledge to control the masses. By determining what people can know, leaders can control what people think and how they will react. In effect, rulers remain in power because they know everything, making the populous dependent on their obvious knowledge, experience, and wisdom. As David Chirot describes, those in power saw “the state as. . . the private domain of the ruler, and the people as mere tools of his power, hardly superior to domestic animals” (*Modern Tyrants* 5). According to his research, information is one of the key tools and weapons for controlling a populous (5). Rulers throughout the centuries, such as rulers of the Qin state in China, Mao Zedong, Hitler, and Stalin, controlled information to gain acceptance of their regimes. However, with more information, the people may realize their leader is not all-knowing and all-powerful, a realization which could cause rebellion and destruction (Chirot 7). Without knowledge, people exist without freedoms, believing the few liberties they have, if any, are all that there is to their life and living.

Writing has always been a powerful tool for teaching people what they do not know. And Octavia Butler has used this medium to create tales to awaken us from our ignorance, taking us beyond our comfortable ignorance, probing our intellect and sense of right and wrong with facts mixed with philosophy, science, history, and endless questions. Butler describes her work as cautionary tales; she uses the written word to inform and warn us about nature, history, race relations, and our future: “‘Cautionary tales. That is what I hope I am writing...the thing most needed to make homo sapiens viable and whole is ‘alien’ to the species: compassion and rational thought’” (quoted in Shinn 71). In her article “Utopia,

Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler,” Hoda M. Zaki also describes the use of dystopias to warn readers: “Many dystopian texts serve to warn readers about impending catastrophes.... These texts in effect warn that if certain social trends go unchecked, the future will exhibit certain specific undesirable qualities” (244). In her stories, Butler reveals that knowledge is liberating, but in liberating the mind, one may learn that one is enslaved.

Knowledge or the lack of it can enslave people. In Butler’s works, the protagonists gain knowledge and experience, placing them in a higher station in life much like the cave-dwellers in Socrates’ Parable of the Cave. Like Socrates’ enlightened cave dwellers, once Butler’s characters understand their world, learn new ideas, concepts, and information, they cannot easily go back and teach the other cave dwellers what they have found. In Butler’s books, protagonists exist in the high strata as leaders primarily through their knowledge and experience. With this information, they seek to aid the ignorant in their group, to enlighten and free them. In two of Butler’s works, *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*, knowledge and experience aid the protagonists and their communities. Using the knowledge and skills they have learned, these characters enable others to survive in their world and to learn enough to aid in the building of their futures.

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu understands human nature and her own world, but once she meets and lives with Doro, she learns more about treachery, terror, and tyranny. Leaving with him for a new life, a woman innocent to civilization (96), she soon realizes she is nothing more than a new prize mare for Doro’s breeding programs and experimental colonies: “He would use her for breeding and healing. He would use her children, present and future, to create more acceptable long-lived types. . . . She would fear him, obey him,

consider him almost omnipotent” (90). Once in her new land, she learns quickly about Doro’s darkness and tyrannical rule. She watches *his* people, how he interacts with them, and the monstrous power he holds both as a supernatural being, or spirit, and as a tyrant: ““The best people, the ones with the greatest potential power belong to me. I’ve been collecting them, protecting them, breeding them for nearly four millennia while ordinary people poisoned, tortured, hanged, or burned any that I missed”” (276). Doro commits terrible atrocities that awaken her fears and resentment of him as he forces her to marry and carry children, kills as he pleases, and has sex with their children. She tries to teach others, to open their eyes, but they refuse to see and learn about their impoverished and enslaved state or they understand but realize there is nothing they can do: ““People run away sometimes,’ Isaac said. . . . ’But he always catches them and usually wears their bodies back to their home towns so that their people can see and be warned””(102). Aided with her knowledge, she escapes him, no longer able to live such a life. Quickly she forms her own community and teaches them how to survive, read, write, farm, and live free of such diabolical leaders as Doro: ““These people need me, and I need them. I never set out to build a settlement like one of yours. Why should I. . . . All I need is my own kind around me. My family or people who feel like family”” (222). Over the years, she strives to teach them and those with special abilities like her how to use their abilities, grow, and become a strong people. In this work, knowledge saves her people and her, helping them become a formidable community of balanced characters.

In *Parable of the Sower*, knowledge is a powerful tool but also a frightening thing for Lauren and her communities. Throughout the opening chapters, Lauren Olamina seeks to learn all she can once she realizes the pain and hardship that exist outside of her home’s

walls could destroy everything. Her father, a preacher and leader of the community, aids in her learning and training, giving her survivalist books and lessons, practice and instruction with guns, and locations of important items such as money, seeds, and maps (51). With his help, she becomes an informed and powerful leader for the remnants of their community and of the last vestiges of civilized people along their road to building a new community: “We can build a community here...It’s dangerous, sure, but it’s dangerous everywhere...but for us, for now, it’s perfect” (287). With such skills, knowledge, and experience, Lauren leads her people, teaching them as her father taught her. Together, she shows them tactics for building and defending a camp, how to use and repair guns, how to survive on the land, and how to find the ability and faith to take up the struggle to live and flourish in the blasted landscape. With her leadership and knowledge, her rag-tag group becomes a young and capable community.

Although knowledge can be a powerful force for good, Butler also shows in two of her works, *Dawn* and “Bloodchild,” that this information and experience can hinder as well as help. Through these stories, the protagonists learn they are in prisons from which they can hope only to escape. Knowledge becomes a deadly and painful tool.

In *Dawn*, Lilith and the Oankali battle for knowledge and information to retain control and seek freedom. Like Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, Lilith is removed from her people and taught about her new world, the changes that have been made, and the ways to survive and live in it. The population of the earth now resides in the biotechnological stasis pods of the Oankali, an alien race that found humanity dying from a terrible nuclear winter. After studying and experimenting with human beings, they finally found one to teach to help bridge the gulf between Oankali and humanity and form both into one people. With plans for

recolonizing earth and using the humans to resupply their genetic needs, the Oankali teach Lilith their history, way of life, and survival skills for the new earth that humanity and Oankali will share: “[W]e know you, Lilith. And, within reason, we want you to know us” (52). Through her training and living with the Oankali, Lilith learns that their rule has dark undertones: the Oankali have taken genetic material from humans for their own needs (43), have revived the earth to repopulate it with the new race of hybrid human beings mixed with Oankali (44), and have rewritten humanity in the Oankali image, permanently tying human beings to them (44). The aliens hold human lives in their powerful hands. In the opinion of the Oankali, human beings cannot control themselves or live well. As a result, the Oankali control the knowledge, living arrangements, and reproduction of human beings. The Oankali damn human being’s hierarchal living as they speak with Lilith:

“You are hierarchical. That’s the older more entrenched characteristic. . . . When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem. But took pride in it or did not notice it at all. . . . I think your people did not realize what a dangerous thing they were doing.” (41)

To begin this control, the Oankali destroy their ruins and places of importance (37) and refuse to give them the utensils to write or their histories to read without a sufficient reason (64-65). Humanity ceases to exist within this new world, and Lilith knows about it all. However, unlike in the other stories, in *Dawn* this knowledge does not help but enslaves her; she must aid the destruction of humanity to ensure that the survivors of the nuclear winter live:

How could she Awaken people and tell them they were to be part of the genetic engineering scheme of a species so alien that the humans would not be able to look at

it comfortably for a while. . . they must control themselves, learn all that she could teach them, all the Oankali could teach them, then use what they had learned to escape and keep themselves alive. (117)

The Oankali control the lives of the human survivors, but perhaps, with her training and experiences, Lilith can help humanity escape these alien captors. In this work, knowledge enslaves and frees humanity as it reveals their imprisonment in the hands of the Oankali and aids them in fighting against their jailors.

Butler's work "Bloodchild" also exhibits the liberating and enslaving power of information. In this work, Gan, the young man of a human family, is the selected choice for implantation by the Tlic, an alien race that uses the last remaining colonies of humanity as breeders for their grub-worm young. Gan, like all children born in the colony, is raised knowing he will act as host for the Tlic young, larvae that live symbiotically with humans until they are ready to "hatch." At that time, the young are removed from the human and returned to the Tlic to continue growing. The Tlic teach humans from childhood that child-hosting is a blessing and gift, hiding the painful truth; until they face and witness it, they do not truly understand. After witnessing a terrifying birth, Gan turns on T'Gatoi with harsh words about the false lessons and the need for reality for human children, who one day will become hosts: "'Not protected,' I said. 'Shown. Shown when we're young kids, and shown more than once.'" (28-29). However, Gan learns the truth quickly in the story as he interacts with his broken and gaunt mother and watches a "birth." As Gan states while watching the emergency caesarean of a Terran, "I had been told all of my life...that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together—a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something

worse” (“Bloodchild” 16-17). At that moment and through further conversations, he comes to realize that human beings are not the chosen and blessed of the cosmos to carry the young of the Tlic but the breeders, kept and grown in captivity for mere reproductive services. The knowledge that he has acquired opens old wounds and fresh fears as he sees humanity as nothing more than caged animals for breeding (24). It is this knowledge that not only awakens Gan to a greater understanding of humanity’s history and position in the Tlic world, but enslaves him to the truth that he is not a special person but a priceless breeder. However, the information also gives Gan the understanding and motivation to gain a better position for himself and his family through a compromise with T’Gatoi. Through his determination and slow understanding about their complex dichotomy (human beings as breeders to receive Tlic protection), he saves his family through compromise. As a result, Gan submits to the implantation, furthering T’Gatoi’s family, with T’Gatoi allowing the family to keep a gun, a form of protection that rivals the Tlic. Although the knowledge frees Gan of his ignorance of Tlic society, Gan does not resign himself to its enslavement. And the story ends as he effects an arrangement while laboring under a dark knowledge that will haunt him all his days.

Through these works, Butler reveals that knowledge is power, but whether that power is good or ill depends on the holder. In her works, she demonstrates how it can both free and enslave a people.

CHAPTER 5

UNBINDING GENDER ROLES

“Her women are always in some form of bondage, captives of domineering male mutants or religious fanatics or aliens who want to impregnate them. Though the men in Butler’s novels are often equally oppressed, none is forced so painfully to confront the difference between surrender and adjustment.” Dorothy Allison, “The Future Female: Octavia Butler’s Mother Lode”

What is humanity? What does it mean to be human? Most people may begin describing human beings according to genetics, history, or religion. Through the ages, we have made many distinctions within humanity, but one of the most prominent is between men and women, creating social and physical boundaries fitting our ideas about what each could and should do. However, as our technology advances and equality increases, these ideas are slowly being undermined. With each passing year, we are becoming less separatist in our ideas about gender and becoming human, losing the difference between man and woman. Today, both women and men can raise families, fight in the military, and hold office. Professional and social barriers have thinned away. In Feminist Science Fiction, many women writers have uplifted women to the status of men in their works. However, unlike her feminist colleagues, Butler does not assert that men and women can do the same things, that they are equally capable; she reveals that we are humans, not men and women. In her view, differences between men and women are non-existent. She not only breaks the dividing line between genders, but by opposing human beings to aliens rather than men and women to aliens, she subverts gender. In her works, *Wild Seed*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower*, and “Bloodchild,” Butler frees humanity from gender roles such as mother/father,

protector/warrior, and leader/follower only to enslave it with new forms of roles and restrictions based on ability rather than chromosomes.

In feminist science fiction, women found a place to examine the issues of life. In *Frankenstein's Daughters*, Jane Donawerth describes this phenomenon in women's writing and science fiction: women changed the state of women "as subjects not objects," created "revised definitions and discourse of science," awoke people to women's issues, reinvented "a conception of [humanity]'s relation to nature as partnership not domination," and made the ideal of science "subjective, relational, holistic, and complex" (2). In her works, Butler seeks to break the boundaries between men and women, getting us to realize we are humans first, foremost, and always. She challenges what we consider male and female by revealing that our differences are more mental than physical. Jane Donawerth describes Butler's writing as destabilizing gender within literature (146). As Jenny Wolmark, in *Aliens and Others*, asserts, Butler undermines gender by introducing the alien, the other, or the different, to open her characters' eyes to their position as human beings rather than as men or women:

The science fiction convention of the alien attempts to present otherness in unitary terms, so that "humanity" is uncomplicatedly opposed to the "alien"; both Jones and Butler focus on the way in which that opposition seeks to suppress the others of both gender and race by subsuming them within a common-sense notion of what it is to be human. (46)

The situations and contexts of each of her works create an atmosphere in which people gain a new vision of humanity as a single people with different attributes and skills rather than as groupings of men and women. Making people take notice and enact or seek change is a difficult task, but Butler uses science fiction to accomplish it, enabling people to see

themselves as human beings with different capabilities rather than as strictly men and women following predetermined gender roles.

The first gender roles Butler deconstructs are the roles of mother and father. In her worlds, mothers are no longer the only nurturers and fathers do not always know what is best. Butler reveals that motherhood is a state of mind and attitude for raising children rather than the innate qualities of a gender. Many people believe women are natural born mothers, seeing the institution of motherhood as venerated and engrained in the essence of womanhood. In her work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks describes how this role can go terribly wrong:

[M]uch has been made of the idea that women are nurturers who affirm life. . . . Yet women act in nurturing roles even as they socialize young children as parents or educators to believe ‘might makes right,’ even as they exercise abusive domination and control over children, even as they physically abuse children in increasing numbers. (87)

In each of her works Butler rewrites this idea of parenthood by changing our concepts of what a mother and father are, a parental unit of a man and a woman.

Throughout her works, Butler has changed our idea of parenthood. In *Wild Seed* and *Dawn*, she presents parents who do not depend on the typical concept of one man and one woman. In *Wild Seed*, Doro and Anyanwu change the role of parenthood by assuming both roles at once, for they can physically possess both male and female forms. In a supernatural fashion, they act as an advanced form of a single parent, greatly changing the role of mother and father by embodying both as they see the need. Doro represents a terrible father; he abuses his young (120), enacts incestuous relationships to create subjects in a breeding

program (121, 150), and nurtures them to keep their love and affection (139). Anyanwu does not represent a nurturing mother but an authoritative leader as she directs her children in what is right and wrong, teaches them about social problems and aggressions such as slavery, and helps them develop their special abilities for defense (220). Both have fathered and mothered children but have not nurtured them as in the motherhood ideal or led them wisely as in the fatherhood ideal. In *Dawn*, Butler describes parenthood as male and female couples of humans and aliens interconnected with an alien neuter, an ooloi (44). The family structure no longer depends on a hierarchy but on communal effort as men, women, and alien can all contribute to childbirth and the community as a whole aids in raising the child. Children are created through neural connections with the neuter, who takes genetic material from the family, creating a hybrid embryo containing the best of all donors, placing it into the next available host-parent (44-45). Through the Oankali family system, family building has become more science than psychology and choice: the aliens determine the best matches, men and women no longer gain pleasure from each other's touch, and conception occurs through gene-splicing and neural pathways. Through the supernatural abilities of Doro and Anyanwu and the biotechnological ideals of the Oankali-human families, the idea of mother and father drastically change, all but removing gender as a vital component.

In *Parable of the Sower* and "Bloodchild," parenthood is a death wish rather than a blessing. *Parable of the Sower* reveals a world where resources are few, security is non-existent, and families are considered hazardous but required. Mothers and fathers are detriments rather than strengths and children are risks to group security and medical resources; in effect, the institution of parenthood becomes a necessary evil as Lauren asserts: "I know people have always gotten married and had kids, but now. . . . Now there's nowhere

to go, nothing to do. A couple gets married, and if they're lucky, they get a room or a garage to live in—with no hope of anything better and every reason to expect it to get worse" (77). Most of the mothers represented in the work are terrible drug addicts or sex slaves to domineering fathers; as a result, mothers no longer fulfill the stereotypes as nurturers and protectors but are lost and twisted (Donawerth, "The Feminist Dystopia of the 1990s" 50). Lauren's Earthseed group reinvents parenthood by making it a community affair. The parents are the first link to their children, but the entire group helps in the raising and protection of the children, seeing them as the collective's future rather than as the offspring of one bloodline (191). The role of mothers and fathers changes, making entire groups rather than one man and woman responsible to act as the parents for children; procreation takes two but the survival and raising takes many. In the short story "Bloodchild," parents become nothing more than weak-willed progenitors of a race, strictly kept and used as breeding material for the aliens called the Tlic. The Tlic use them to carry their maggot-like children, caring for them until they awaken and must be removed from their host. Humans are unwilling "mothers," akin to pregnant rape victims, and can be of either gender. In this work, the delineation between mother and father radically changes as men or women can carry the Tlic young. Parenthood becomes an institution only to continue the species, not to raise and teach the young for prosperity. As Gan explains, "Her people wanted more of us made available...She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support. Thus, we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people" (5). Butler drastically challenges the gender role of parenthood in this story as "the conventional adolescent male. . . is punished by rape, incest, reproductive exploitation by the dominant race, and anticipation of a painful caesarean birth – and he is expected to like it, as women in

many cultures have been expected to comply with their oppression” (Donawerth, *Frankenstein’s Daughters* 129). As Gan states while watching the emergency caesarean of a Terran, “I had been told all of my life...that this was a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together—a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse” (“Bloodchild” 16-17). It is an enslavement of the people as breeding slaves for the aliens and the continuation of the human species in captivity, survival through procreation to fill a material need in the universe. Throughout all of these works, the institution of parenthood changes biologically, socially, and psychologically, reforming or removing gender from the roles of mother and father and entrusting it only to those with the capability, be they male, female, or alien.

The second gender role Butler transforms is the warrior-protector. Through history, men have been the powerful protectors and warriors. They were the hunters while women were the gatherers. They rode out for crusades on white horses, sheathed in heavy armor, carrying terrible weapons while women waved goodbye to them with dainty hands and scarves. Even today, women have a limited amount of experience and exposure to warfare in the armed services. As bell hooks describes in her work, women typically have been cast as the nurturers and teachers while men have been the killers and warriors (*Feminist Theory* 87). Men have always had the power, ability, and mental/emotional capacity for killing. However, this gender role has been changing with the new liberties women have gained such as hunting for food and sport and joining the military. Butler changes this stereotype by giving women the ability to fight, enhancing their bodies, handing them weapons and the knowledge to use them.

Throughout her works, women become warriors who commit violent acts to protect their people, settle disputes, and the like. In *Wild Seed* and *Dawn*, both female protagonists have the ability to use empowered strength, reflexes, and fighting prowess. In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu can shape change to fight better and faster (186-189), move her internal organs around when damaged (188-189), and counteract toxins and diseases (15-16). She has spent her life defending herself and community with supernatural force; living in Africa and striking out on her own, she has learned the warrior's way. In *Dawn*, due to the effects of the Oankali, Lilith can use her enhanced strength and reflexes to lift incredibly heavy objects, bend metal, move with super speed, and perform incredible acrobatic feats: "The Oankali changed me a little. I'm strong. I move fast. I heal fast. And all that is supposed to help me get as many of you as possible through this experience and back on Earth"(176). Although she did not grow up in the wilds like Anyanwu, the warrior's spirit does come to her naturally with her boosted body as she defends her people, faces aggressors, and hunts and builds a new community with her human brethren. Both women beat and kill attackers, hunt animals, and protect their communities like the male warriors of old.

In *Parable of the Sower* and "Bloodchild," as well, both protagonists use skills they have learned to protect their communities, hunt, and behave as warriors. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren uses her training, experience with guns, and survival tactics to protect her people. She learned from her father and brother how to use, clean, and repair guns. During her childhood, she read and took notes about survival tactics, herbs, medicine, first aid, and now uses the information to further protect and support her group as she explains to another girl in her community:

“I’m trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study books like these. I think we should bury money and other necessities in the ground where thieves won’t find them. I think we should make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we have to get out of here in a hurry. . . . Every time I go outside, I try to imagine what it might be like to live out there without walls, and I realize I don’t know anything.” (51)

As her group travels, she also teaches others how to use guns, survive the night, hunt, find and cook herbs and roots. The men also help; however, they do not have her knowledge and experience. She teaches them everything they need to know to survive, and through the lessons she becomes a warrior. As they begin their travels, they encounter various thieves and killers, and after a fight, Lauren kills one to protect herself and the party: “I killed him because he was a threat to us. . . . I would do it again. I might have to do it again” (171). In “Bloodchild,” Gan becomes the protector and warrior for the family rather than his apprehensive and exhausted mother. Even at a young age, he learned how to use a gun and hunt. After his father died and his mother slowly wore herself away with worry, he took the position as head-of-the-household, conducting matters for the family, including the carrying of the Tlic young. He protects his family by sacrificing his childhood. In each of these stories, the roles of warriors and protectors fall to the shoulders of those with the capabilities to carry them rather than to specific genders.

The third gender role Butler undermines is leadership. The history of the world has been proposed, enacted, and written by men in age-old patriarchies. Whether wielding swords to lop off the heads of enemies or ball-point pens to sign bills into law, histories

describe a world ruled by men. Through recent years, women have gained greater political position; however, men still dominate positions of power. In *Feminist Theory*, bell hooks describes the role of women in politics:

Even though women do not yet kill in wars, do not shape government policy equally with men, they, along with the male ruling groups and most men, believe in the dominant ideology of the culture. Were they to rule, society would not be organized that differently from the way it is currently organized. (87)

History has pushed women politically into revolutionary or strictly regimented positions of power, engendering their oppression and acceptance of limited power. However, hooks refuses to accept this position, stating that until women realize their self-inflicted oppression, they will never gain ground or awaken to their formidable power in positions granted to them (87). And within her works, Butler seeks to change the subservient vision and power struggle of women by forcing the issue of power and leadership. She places women who have the potential to lead into dystopic situations suffering from a power vacuum and engages them to act. In her works, women take the lead.

In her tales, Butler has leveled the playing field further to enable women to take control as leaders. In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu takes leadership through subverting the system. Through her ability to change shape, Anyanwu takes the form of animals and men to enforce her intelligence, wisdom, and experience upon her communities. As an animal (including birds, wolves, and dolphins), she enhances her ability to hide, watch, listen, protect, and attack. As a male, Anyanwu learns what it means to father children, change the rules of government, and build plantations. This ability to shapeshift as humans and beasts teaches her about different cultures, about the various ages/periods of history, and about the ways to

lead and rule people. But Doro and his corrupted rule teach her more about leadership and the abuses of power than has any other source. His view of Anyanwu represents the same vision he has when looking at others: “He would have to teach her, instruct her quickly and begin using her at once. He wanted as many children as he could get from her before it became necessary to kill her” (90). Doro leads his people through fear of the outside world, enforced loyalty and love, and extreme acts of terrorism; he rules tyrannically by promoting fear of others and twisted love of him. After experiencing his rule, Anyanwu creates her own community, also promoting fear of the outside world, but tempering it with authority, setting rules and punishments, giving people freedoms within limits. But to do so, she takes the guise of men, women, and beasts, never solely remaining in one gender or one form. As she considers the community she has built in Louisiana, Anyanwu understands that she is nothing like Doro, even though she uses ploys much like his own; “She was who she was, no matter what role she chose” (220).

In *Dawn* and *Parable of the Sower*, the able-bodied and experienced women are forced into the role of leadership. In *Dawn*, the Oankali, humanity’s alien captors, force Lilith into leadership, for she is the only human with the capabilities to lead and the stamina and open-mindedness to understand the Oankali. Against her wishes, she is forced into the role of leadership, taught the ways of the Oankali and given a group of humans to bridge the gap between the peoples as described by her alien captors:

“You’ll Awaken a small group of humans, all English-speaking, and help them learn to deal with us. You’ll teach them the survival skills we teach you. You people will all be from what you would call civilized societies. Now they’ll have to learn to live

in forests, build their own shelters, and raise their own food all without machines or outside help.” (35)

She leads these people and becomes a double agent of sorts, working to keep her position with the Oankali as ambassador and leader and seeking friendship with and acceptance by the humans to teach them how to survive and fight back (157). Butler transforms leadership through the interactions of Lilith, the ambassador for the Oankali and the last-best-hope leader for humanity. As Jane Donawerth states in *Frankenstein's Daughters*, Butler portrays a new culture in which “women have been granted authority, even though Lilith must still fight old prejudices among her group members” (146). Her rule consists of various structures of leadership: mixing compromise between humans and aliens and using her enhanced strength and reflexes to quell the last vestiges of rebellion. By the end of the tale, Lilith learns important lessons, realizing leaders must balance brute force with vision, interpersonal relations, and compromise. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren takes the position of leader primarily because she is the only one with the knowledge and power to take it. Unlike others, she knew their community would not last; change, death, and destruction were on the way. Planning ahead, she taught herself the skills and knowledge a leader would need to rebuild and create a new community (51) and learned from others along the way (154). Armed with knowledge, experience, teaching abilities, and a determined sense of will, she pulls together a people, takes leadership of them, and sets out to build a new community, “[begins] the first Earthseed Community” (247). Because of her demonstrated ability, no one wants to fight her for the kingship of her mountain.

In “Bloodchild,” leadership also represents ability rather than age or gender as Gan becomes the leader even though he is but a child. Mind and body spent in captivity, his

mother is unable to take the position as head of the household. With his father gone (3), mother anxious and exhausted (4-5), and siblings too young and naïve to understand the world they live in, he takes the role of leader through responsibility, accepting his fate for his mother and siblings by taking the implantation: “Don’t do it to Hoa. . . . Do it to me,” he tells T’Gatoi when she says she must implant her offspring that night (26). Unlike the others, he has witnessed the truth of their state in Tlic society and accepts his fate as the pseudo-head of the household: “I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life” (27). Through these works, gender no longer dictates who should lead and who should follow. Butler reveals that ability and skill rather than the out-of-date patriarchal hierarchies of our world determine who is fit to lead.

Butler creates situations and characters that break beyond the boundaries of gender roles; however, through it she undermines gender all together. Mothers and fathers are strange and twisted, as aliens and exotic abilities reshape the body. Warriors no longer are strong brutes but intelligent tacticians who balance might with the mind and heart. And leaders lose their all-boys-club appeal by entrusting their ability and leadership to the hands of people with vision, promise, and ability. Instead of creating a freedom from gender roles, she transforms them into roles for humanity. Although she changes the basis of the roles, they remain enslaving through a different point of view. No longer are men the fighters and women the nurturers; she creates general roles based on the abilities rather than the sex of people.

CONCLUSION

Science fiction enables writers and readers to leap beyond logic into worlds of fantastic science and adventure. In these worlds, writers have investigated and explained phenomena about our world, our history, and our future. And of these authors, Octavia Butler has introduced us to amazing worlds of a critical dystopic design.

Science fiction began with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. About a hundred years later, women have once again taken the center stage with science fictional works. One of these writers of Feminist Science Fiction, Octavia Butler, has investigated issues relevant not just to women but to all humankind. In her works, she has considered the problems of building communities in an advancing world, the terrors of losing ourselves to alien influence and control, the devastation of global warming, and the question of our social, political, and personal freedoms in any of these worlds. Of all of her subjects, I found the question and exploration of freedom most intriguing.

Human nature is one of desires. We need things: food, shelter, companionship, and freedom. Whether royalty or a beggar on the street, everyone craves freedoms of speaking, living, moving, and dying. Butler has revealed startling yet clear visions of freedom, suggesting that no one is truly free, unrestricted in his or her liberties, but rather, people can improve their situations even though they never eliminate all laws and borders in their lives.

Within her works *Wild Seed*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower*, and "Bloodchild," Butler studies and explores the quest for freedom through the leadership of her savior tyrants, the enslaving nature of knowledge, and the reversal of gender roles. The first element of freedom Butler examines is the movement of her "savior" leaders into tyrants who build restrictive communities to found, achieve, and uphold their ideals for society, politics, and

life. Protagonists in the works seek their visions of freedom that become utopic visions in their respective dystopias. However, instead of leading their people into freedom, they bind them to a new set of laws derived from their utopic vision. Each leader reflects the theories of tyranny as described by David Chirrot in his work *Modern Tyrants*. Whether using the fear of the outside world or creating a competition for the fittest in true Darwinian fashion, each leader establishes a form of tyranny in the hopes of preserving freedom.

Butler also explores the liberty and enslavement engendered by information. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we have entered the Information Age. Enlightening and frightening, we have seen the effects of information as a tool for enacting change, liberating people from the squalor of ignorance, or shackling people in fear and anxiety through knowing too much. Butler also examines the power of information as she uses it to liberate and imprison people throughout her stories. In one respect, knowledge helps people to understand their world and situation and to learn to live within it, as in *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*. However, in another respect, knowledge depresses and encumbers people by revealing too much about their situation, in some ways causing others to fear them, as in *Dawn* and “Bloodchild.” Butler’s works reveal how knowledge can free but also bind the mind and a people.

Finally, Butler investigates and deconstructs gender roles only to enforce a new set of roles based on capabilities. Through her works, she undermines gender through the creation and incorporation of the supernatural (*Wild Seed*), the alien (*Dawn* and “Bloodchild”), and accessible technology and degrading social standards (*Parable of the Sower*). By undermining and negating gender, Butler rewrites the role requirements and tasks for the roles of mothers and fathers, protectors and warriors, and leaders. However, these roles

continue to enslave human beings through a different set of standards, still negating freedom. In her works, people are forced into new roles based on what they can accomplish and not on their genitalia.

These chapters detail Butler's discourse on freedom. Her protagonists and their followers all quest for freedom, requiring some change in their restricted lives. However, through their trials, they either get more than they bargained for or realize that freedom is as elusive as the utopic dream. Freedom is a noble concept and dream to hope for, but it is a terrible, chaotic thing to have and hold. It has caused the rise and fall of nations and changed pious saviors into clever tyrants. It is the banner of creation and destruction. It is a temporal and frightening thing. As a result, Butler's works reveal the fear of true freedom and the usefulness of improvements over extreme liberty.

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