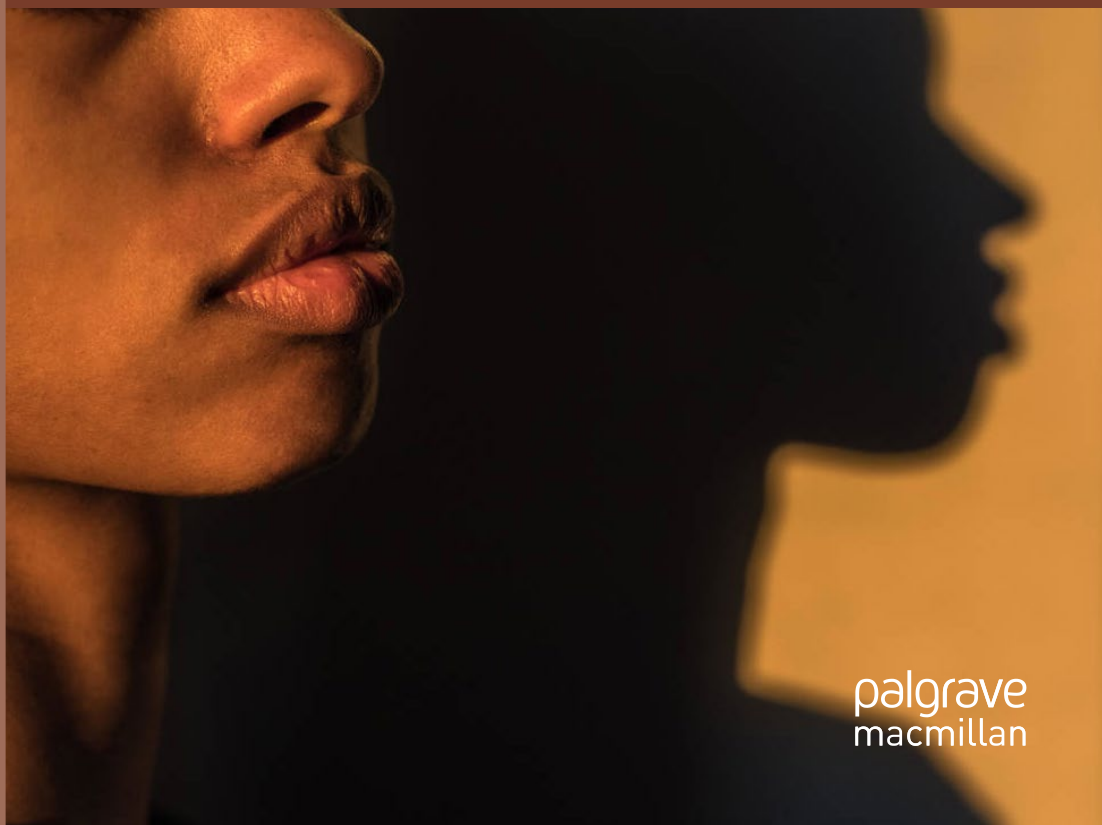
Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

Edited by Martin Japtok · Jerry Rafiki Jenkins



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Contents

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work

Martin Japtok and Jerry Rafiki Jenkins

The novels and short stories by Octavia Estelle Butler (1947–2006), who was inducted in the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2010, continue to speak to the times we live in, maybe even more so today than at the time of their publication. Given their thematic concerns (e.g., climate change/global warming, slavery, religion, colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, survivalism, otherness, exploitation, consent, negotiation, the workings of power and the tools of the powerless, the impact of hard and bio-technologies, and the meaning of being human), Butler's novels and short stories are useful for understanding current local, national, and global problems as well as for thinking about solutions to them. Through a maze of present and future problems as she diagnosed and predicted them, Butler always speculated that there would be a path forward, even if that path was full of hard compromises.

"Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism," says Walidah Imarisha (2015, 3), "we are engaging in speculative fiction." In a number of ways, that

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definition of speculative fiction—the overall term now often used to include "science fiction and horror, fantasy" (Stanley 2019, 9), fiction invoking the supernatural, and alternate visions of the past and present—captures the works of Octavia Butler. In addition to winning several literary awards for her fiction—including the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and Solstice awards as well as the Langston Hughes Medal and the PEN Lifetime Achievement Award—Butler is the first science fiction writer to receive a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. At the time of her unfortunate death, Butler was "the only prominent, popular, female African American and decidedly feminist voice in an historically white male domain called science fiction and fantasy or SF/F" (Smith 2007, 385). Instead of focusing on issues of war, conquest, and empire, issues that defined much of SF/F before the 1960s, Butler's fiction, like that of Samuel Delany, can be read as "experiments in social justice" that "complicate" the simplistic view of "the alien as Other" (Smith 2007, 387). However, as she has stated in a 1998 interview, Butler's fictions are not utopian: "personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We're not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely" (McCaffery and McMenamin 2010, 26). Indeed, Butler's work does not offer us worlds absent of war, violence, empire, or forms of domination; instead, her work searches for possibilities to first survive and then transform worlds filled with such social evils. Citing Butler's "A Few Rules for Predicting the Future," Sandra Y. Govan reminds us that "Octavia staunchly maintained that 'the one thing that [she] and [her] main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up on hope'" (McIntyre et al. 2010, 434). Thus, Butler offered us often hard-nosed and unsentimental fictional analyses of our world with the hope of making it and ourselves better.

To make ourselves and our worlds better, Butler believed that we had to address the "human contradiction," the notion that we have two characteristics that work against each other—intelligence and hierarchical behavior. In *Dawn* (1987), the first novel of Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the human contradiction is referred to as a "terrestrial characteristic" and "genetic problem" (39). The problem with the human contradiction, as Butler saw it, is that it could lead to human extinction: "Unfortunately, the hierarchical behavior is the older behavior, which is true; you can find it in algae, for goodness sakes. So sometimes the one in charge shouldn't be. That's why I begin [*Xenogenesis*] with the idea that we've one-upped ourselves to death in a nuclear war" (Mehaffy and Keating 2010, 105).

For Butler, the link between the human contradiction and human extinction are those moments when our hierarchical tendencies "focus and drive our intelligence" (Fry 2010, 128). An example of those moments is our inability or unwillingness to distinguish what Butler calls "real biological determinism," actual biological facts, from "body knowledge," what is made of biological facts (Mehaffy and Keating 2010, 108). In other words, implicit in the notion of the human contradiction is that "the gap between real biological determinism and body knowledge is largely due to our propensity to privilege our hierarchical tendencies … over our intelligence" (Jenkins 2019, 119). As Butler points out in her fictions, our tendency to confuse biology with body knowledge has resulted in classifications of humans that have been used to justify racism, sexism, heterosexism, colonialism, slavery, and other forms of discrimination, domination, exclusion, and exploitation. Thus, although the human contradiction will always be with us, Butler's novels and short stories contend that one of the ways that it may be controlled or attenuated is to de-hierarchize human difference and different ways of being human. Put another way, since human difference is one of the issues that links questions of social justice and otherness to the human contradiction, Butler believed that keeping the human contradiction in check required rethinking the connections we have constructed between human differences—biological facts—and our social hierarchies—the ways in which we have interpreted those biological facts.

In her explorations of social justice, otherness, and hope, Butler wrote about people who tended to be absent from science fiction. According to Gerry Canavan (2016, 3), "Butler's creative and critical work demonstrates that science fiction was never really a straight, white, male genre, despite its pretensions to the contrary; blackness, womanhood, poverty, disability, and queerness were always there, under the surface, the genre's hidden truth." Her engagement with and focus on science fiction's hidden truth were partly due to what she believed was the "duty" of all writers. As she stated in a 1980 interview, authors should "write about human differences, all human differences and help make them acceptable. I think s.f. writers can do this if they want to. In my opinion, they are a lot more likely to have a social conscience than other kinds of writers" (Harrison 2010, 6). In this light, Butler's engagement with science fiction's hidden truth was also an attempt to do what many science fiction writers can but choose not to do—to write about humanity as it is. For Butler, writers cannot claim to be writing about humanity if they only write about one people or one way to be human. Butler reiterated this point 20 years later in her

description of what she focuses on in her fiction: "I write about people and the different ways of being human. And you really can't do that unless you write about a lot of different kinds of people" (Butler 2000). As she saw it, problems concerning social justice, otherness, and hope all derived from our inability to accept human differences, an inability that continues to shape the social evils we witness, experience, or produce in everyday life.

Octavia Butler is also rightly regarded as a founding figure in the movement now often referred to as Afrofuturism. While there is a host of definitions of the term, Mark Dery, who coined the term in 1994, argued that "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (180). It is important to note, as Alondra Nelson (2002, 14n23) does, that "the currents that comprise [Afrofuturism] existed long before" Dery came up with his catch-all term for African American science fiction, fantasy, horror, futurism, cyberculture, and the like (for more on the pre-history of Afrofuturism, see, for example, Lavender 2019; Youngquist 2016). In addition, Nelson herself, as editor of the 2002 Afrofuturism issue of *Social Text*, Sheree R. Thomas, as editor of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), and many others contributed to defining the movement. Whereas Dery's (1994) definition of Afrofuturism focuses on the role that technology plays, has played, and/or will play in African American lives, recent notions of the term focus on how black people might shape humanity in a prosthetically enhanced future. As Susana Morris (2010, 153) notes in her analysis of Butler's *Fledgling*, "not only does Afrofuturism posit that blacks will exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse, but in 'recovering the histories of counter-futures,' Afrofuturism insists that blacks fundamentally *are* the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society." Thus, at its most basic level, Afrofuturism imagines that there is a future that has black people in it, as so much of science fiction prior to the 1970s did not (Ursula Le Guin being the notable exception among white authors; however, as Gregory Jerome Hampton [2010, xxi] has noted, while Le Guin is one of Butler's "feminist predecessors," her seminal work *Left Hand of Darkness*, for example, does not explore "how other identities complicate problems of the body in addition to gender"). Stated more explicitly, Afrofuturism, while not leaving the past

behind and often critically engaging it, seeks a way forward, in multiple media and artistic expressions, that frees black people from confining stereotypical definitions of the past and delves imaginatively into a liberated future. These concerns are older than Afrofuturism, of course. Louis Chude-Sokei's (2016) book *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* reminds us of Afrofuturism's rootedness in "the long-standing commitment in black thinking to remapping the past with an injunction to not just imagine futures but make sure those futures not be colonized by the geographic or ideological limitations of the present" (14–15).

Butler is a pivotal ancestral figure for Afrofuturism not only as a literary pioneer but also as role model and thinker who sought to free herself from "the ideological limitations of the present" and thought in nuanced and complex ways about blackness, ways still being explored by a growing number of critics today. As Kilgore and Samantrai (2010, 355–356) put it, Butler's works are not "condition-of-the-people stories" that "faithfully and joyfully" represent "familiar black communities as a condition of the future"; instead, "the communities she creates are always hybrid, composed of individuals and families who share oddities across the range of more conventional phenotypic differences: African, European, Asian." Butler's refusal to see any community as monolithic or bound to definitions of the past, whether self-engendered or imposed, was both a reflection of an ever-more globalized present and an insistence on the necessity of cooperation, however tangled such cooperation might be. We are all still exploring the layers and nuances of Butler's fiction and are in some sense in the early phases of plumbing the suggestive depth of her texts.

Following the lead of Francis (2010), Hampton (2010), Holden and Shawl (2013), Canavan (2016), Pierce and Mondal (2017), and Stanley (2019), which are invaluable to developing an understanding of Butler's fiction, legacies, and humanity, the critical chapters in *Human Contradictions in Octavia E. Butler's Work*, all published here for the first time, seek to make important contributions to Butlerian scholarship. Like Holden and Shawl's (2013) *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*, and like Pierce and Mondal's (2017) *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, *Human Contradictions* "demonstrate[s] both the wide range of Butler's appeal and its influence in multiple worlds" (Holden and Shawl 2013, 3). Unlike *Strange Matings* and *Luminescent Threads*, *Human Contradictions* is exclusively comprised of academic investigations into Butler's literary

works. Unlike Tarshia L. Stanley's (2019) *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler*, which provides invaluable contextualization and suggestions for classroom uses for Butler's novels and short stories, our volume present essay-length deep readings of individual texts to continue the critical conversation about Butler's texts in higher education and help ensure that her essays, short stories, and novels are viewed as required reading in America's high schools, colleges, and universities. Even though, as Shannon Gibney (2011, 101) notes, the literary genres that Butler's work "builds on, undercuts, and surpasses […] are mainstream Black literature, mainstream science fiction, and feminist science fiction," Butler's texts need not be limited to literature courses; they can also be used to help teach courses in philosophy, biology, sociology, anthropology, psychology, cultural studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, religious studies, American studies, and U.S. history. Our collection thus covers a wide range of concerns and approaches and engages with the fullness of Butler's work: her series (*Seed to Harvest*, *Xenogenesis*, *Parables*), her stand-alone novels (*Kindred* and *Fledgling*), and her short stories.

In "Contextualizing Escape in the Neo-slave Narratives of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*," Allison E. Francis focuses on the processes of escape and on its psychological ramifications as both novels depict them. Francis argues that physical escape is merely one dimension of liberation, and not the one Butler and Williams primarily center in their narratives. Francis specifically hones in on "the politics of interracial relationships, the psychology of violence, and nontraditional modalities of escape" to explore how "Octavia Butler in *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* complicate what is meant by 'escape' for Black female slaves." Both authors are not bound by audience expectations or the limits of rhetoric available to writers of slave narratives, and for them it is also the consequences of slavery that move into the foreground; thus, "escape does not represent finality in *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose*; escape appears to be where survival truly begins."

Regina Hamilton also addresses the issue of black female survival in her chapter "The Somatopic Black Female Body within Archipelagic Space and Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*," but creates a new theoretical framework to enable an analysis of the complexities of Butler's novel and focus on the centrality of the black female body in it. She merges Bakthin's notion of the chronotope, the fusion of "spatial and temporal indicators into one … concrete whole," Ramona Fernandez's idea of the somatope, which gives a bodily dimension to the chronotope, and Elaine Stratford

et al.'s concept of the archipelago, which is to account for the complex relationships between geographic locations, in order to do justice to the manifold consequences that flow from "thinking about Anyanwu's body as the site from which all of the relations of [*Wild Seed*] flow." The novel's plot involves multiple geographic locations, multiple historical eras, multiple cultures, with Anyanwu being the only physical constant in all, but Hamilton also utilizes the novel to hope to create a theoretical apparatus that keeps on view that in "African American and Black Atlantic literatures, the body, space, and time cannot be separated, and the idea of a black somatic body creates a terminology that represents this inseparability while also disallowing the elision of the individual components." *Wild Seed* is the text that both inspires and tests this theory.

Martin Japtok asks, in his chapter "What Is 'Love'?—Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild,'" whether something like love can exist when power relations are unequal, a question *Wild Seed* and much of Butler's fiction poses. In attempting to find out what love means in "Bloodchild," this chapter puts the short story in conversation with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, all of which explore that question as well, and with a variety of definitions of love. "Bloodchild," this chapter argues, "allows one to ask what 'love' is, what its functions are, and observe the extent to which love may help explain relationships within specific historical contexts, especially to the individuals involved in those relationships." Love, both in the short story and in Butler's work in general, is a functional term and plays an ambiguous role, providing some leverage where there might otherwise be none but also potentially obfuscating power differentials. Yet the story also suggests there might be no alternative to it. As Moreno's chapter, Japtok highlights Butler's pragmatism in response to complicated lifeworlds.

Beth A. McCoy's "'Accept the Risk': Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild' and Institutional Power" explores Butler's short story's value as a pedagogical tool for exploring unequal power dynamics in everyday life, in this case at the very institution students are enrolled. Institutional power to some extent parallels the power Butler's Tlic are exerting in that there may not be much room for negotiation: one accepts the power difference and conditions, or one does not get to attend (or stay on the planet, in the short story's case). McCoy argues that a study of "Bloodchild" prods "students to think carefully and critically about the terms with which they enter academic institutions even as the story underscores how important it is that

they make principled demands of the institutionally powerful who set those terms, even—and perhaps *especially*—when those institutions purport to be protective and liberatory." Like Burnett's chapter on *Dawn*, McCoy also interrogates the complicated nature of consent.

"Beyond Science Fiction: Genre in *Kindred* and Butler's Short Stories" by Heather Duerre Humann does not focus primarily on plot analysis but puts genre questions into the foreground, arguing that Octavia Butler is an innovator on that plane as well. As Humann argues, "Butler's science fiction differs from traditional science fiction in three key ways: the narrative perspectives she employs, her sustained focus on race and 'otherness,' and the manner in which she borrows from and blends tropes and conventions common to other literary genres." Humann looks at *Kindred*, but the majority of her discussion emphasizes how ground-breaking and genre-bending Butler's short stories are.

Joshua Yu Burnett's chapter "Troubling Issues of Consent in *Dawn*" reads Butler's novel against contemporary discussions about consent, employing a similar lens as Beth A. McCoy but using college consent guidelines as his starting point. The "tangled web of consent and desire Butler weaves in *Dawn*" allows for a discussion of the boundaries between coercion, voluntary assent, manipulation, and exploitation. Butler does not draw clear boundaries, and readers of the novel are left with the uncomfortable task on figuring out themselves where those might be, and, as this chapter shows, are confronted with the fact that the "Oankali disinterest in … securing affirmative consent causes great emotional distress for their supposed human 'partners,' dis-ease in readers, and a lingering sense of uncanny horror towards the Oankali in the novel's human characters' even ones who are otherwise sympathetic to the Oankali and critical of humanity's deeply flawed nature."

Jerry Rafiki Jenkins's "Transhumanism, Posthumanism, and the Human in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" focuses on how Butler's trilogy makes an argument for transhumanism, the idea that humans can change and improve themselves, and against posthumanism, the notion that if humans change themselves, they will constitute a new species. The latter notion often takes as its point of departure that a particular kind of human—the Western white subject—is somehow the acme of human evolution, an argument often implicit in bioconservatism and "end of history" discussions. Butler shows, however, that it is just that very racial-historical construct, the most extreme embodiment of what Butler has called the "human contradiction"—hierarchical thinking and intelligence—that has

led humanity to the brink of self-extinction. In Butler's trilogy, that debate plays out in the relationship between the Oankali, humans they have genetically altered, Oankali-human "constructs," and groups of resisters who initially refuse Oankali genetic modifications. Jenkins proposes that *Xenogenesis* makes a case for multiple ways of being human so that the trilogy "is not only about the birth of a new species, but also about the birth of new ways of being human," ideas that reverberate, if in different ways, in *Wild Seed* and "Bloodchild" as well.

"'But All We Really Know That We Have Is the Flesh': Body-Knowledge, Mulatto Genomics, and Reproductive Futurities in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" by Karina A. Vado delves into the complexities of genetic manipulation, a key concern in Butler's trilogy. This chapter approaches this topic differently than Rafiki Jenkins does in that it focuses on the topic of "mixing" as a window into Butler's thinking on the emerging dominance of genomics, and Karina A. Vado points out that DNA would become "the reigning metaphor of the twenty-first century." Engaging the intellectual history of eugenics, the author examines "how both the (resister) Humans and the Oankali in the series invariably adhere to ideas of biological essentialism that stifle, to varying degrees, the building or 'engineering,' if you will, of actual emancipatory futures for mixed-race/hybrid and/or non-normative subjects. More specifically, I trace and uncover the competing discourses of white and black eugenics that are weaved through the Humans' obsession with 'human purity' (paralleling white eugenics' preoccupation with maintaining untainted bloodlines), and the Oankali's morally ambivalent genetic engineering/species interbreeding project (paralleling early twentieth-century 'New Negro' eugenicists notions of racial progress vis-à-vis the *amalgamation* of the black and white races)." The questions of what function being "mixed-race" plays, for whom, and to what purpose turn out to be charged, even if the "mixing" is enacted for seemingly benevolent purposes.

In "'Learn or Die': Survivalism and Anarchy in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," Stefanie K. Dunning reads Butler's novel as inviting thought about how to create a more sustainable "society based on anarchic principles of flexibility, anti-fragility, and change." Though survival is a key theme in almost all of Butler's fiction, Dunning shows how central it is in *Parable of the Sower*, which shows the tragedy of one form of society collapsing but not without asking whether a better society can be built from the ruins. Dunning reads the novel in the larger context of African American survival in the New World, and references Harriet Tubman and

maroon communities as historical antecedents. Dunning thus sees possibilities in the collapse *Sower* depicts: "The anarchy implied by Lauren's community represents the end of black social death, a radical break in the nation which upends its historical logic." *Sower*, and its sequel *Talents*, thus invites comparison to *Xenogenesis* in that these novels explore whether the necessary renewal of society can only follow the end of its current, destructive form.

In "Survival by Any Means: Race and Gender, Passing and Performance in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," Micah Moreno makes a case that Butler's novels illustrate race and gender as primarily performative categories than as expressions of immutable identity. Indeed, the novels show that they need to be in the interest of survival, which is necessarily intertwined with visions of the societal renewal Lauren Olamina strives for. Moreno thus focuses more on the pragmatic aspects of survival than Francis, who saw Dana's survival and escape in *Kindred* as stage one, followed by the psychological consequences of harrowing experiences which also require a kind of survival, and less on the potential of an anarchic, sustainable future than Dunning, though the fluidity of performativity Moreno emphasizes has anarchic potential. Moreno's main concern is that in the *Parable* novels, gender or racial performance are seen not so much as foundational to identity and psychology but measured by whether they contribute to survival. Lauren, the founding mother of the Earthseed religion, "is a trickster and an enigma, drawing on her ancestral history as well as her understanding of the performative nature of gender to become a survivor by any means necessary," so that gender and racial roles are "adopted, discarded, and shaped pragmatically in the interest of survival."

tobias c. van Veen, in his chapter "Of Blood and Blackness in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling:* On Post-Racial Utopias in Posthumanist Discourse," examines the only other stand-alone novel in Butler's oeuvre outside of *Kindred*, and her last published novel. As he argues, *Fledgling* continues Butler's "exploration of female black protagonists who are not quite human, providing a speculative model for the study of the social and biological constructs of race, including the very 'race' of the human species, inviting comparisons to Jenkins's and Vado's essays. *Fledgling* is particularly crucial to understanding the relationship between discourses of Afrofuturism—that (re)imagine blackness in the future/past by way of science fiction—and posthumanism, the latter of which critically re-evaluates Western ideas of the human while proposing models for post-human

entanglements with the animal, machine, earth and alien." Van Veen's chapter thus shares Jenkin's chapter's concern with definitions of the human, connecting such concerns with the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism in which such questions are central.

We hope that the chapters in *Human Contradictions* inspire others to read and study Butler's work because one collection of chapters cannot capture the intelligence, depth, significance, and impact of Butler's work. If anything, her work appears to grow more relevant to the world we live each passing decade, and as this collection illustrates, new concerns and new ways of reading will be brought to her work. She continues to inspire, causes one to question one's premises, baffles, and invites reflection.

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CHAPTER 2

Contextualizing Escape in the Neo-slave Narratives of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*

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In historical, fugitive slave narratives like the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself* (1847), successful escapes from slavery represent a slave's physical emancipation. However, in neo-slave narratives like Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), escape is less about the geographical journey to freedom and more about the emotional and psychological liberation and revelations of the female protagonists, Dana and Dessa, respectively. In these neo-slave narratives, a slave's feelings and reactions to liberation become more important than the mechanics of the escape itself. Therefore, these protagonists are able to reinvigorate the enslaved female's vocabulary by using sentiments to express both judgment and emotions, which signals the necessity of exposing a slave's reactions to enslavement that was expurgated from early slave narratives like that of Charles Ball. In fact, Ball's editor Isaac Fisher believed that if he did not suppress the subjectivity and opinions

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Ball expressed about slavery, Ball's narrative would "[contaminate] facts rendering them less fit for the reader's 'eye' than for his 'imagination'" (Andrews 1986, 63). So, facts and observations of this "peculiar institution" and life in the South then, not sensibility and sentimentality, would garner the attention and support of early Northern readers.

Instead of relying on facts and observations, Butler and Williams politicize sentimental discourse, like Harriet A. Jacobs and Mary Prince did in their narratives, to explore the transgressions of racial and sexual violence visited upon black female slaves in the American slave cycle. Unlike early fugitive slave narratives, however, Butler and Williams are able to provide readers with insight not readily available in nineteenth-century autobiographical accounts precisely because their characters employ sentiments as both the language of feeling and the language of judgment—without censure.[1]

Nevertheless, both fictional characters, Dana and Dessa, are isolated despite the various communities they encounter. Dana, as a time traveler from the twentieth century, becomes inexplicably propelled to her ancestors' enslaved past, but she travels too far back in rural Maryland of the 1800s to await emancipation, so her survival and that of her distasteful, white ancestor Rufus Weylin, become paramount until she returns again and again to her present day—Los Angeles in 1976. Dessa, on the other hand, is a young, pregnant, renegade slave who recently escaped from a coffle and seeks refuge with other fugitive slaves on the incomplete plantation of Mistress Ruth Elizabeth or "Rufel," in the antebellum South. Dessa eventually realizes that while she and her mistress share the vulnerabilities of being unprotected and female, class and race divides cannot be broached by gender alone. Therefore, escape for both Dana and Dessa is not only desirable, but they must believe in its inevitability.

Since Butler's and Williams's narratives are fictional accounts of slavery reflecting history and tradition, the slave escape can be explored (and perhaps exploited) in ways it cannot in fugitive slave narratives whose authors were still in hiding. To this end, Butler and Williams poke, prod, and push through the understandable limitations of traditional slave narratives written by fugitive slave women like Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs. Consequently, through the politics of interracial relationships, the psychology of violence, and nontraditional modalities of escape, Octavia Butler in *Kindred* and Sherley Anne Williams in *Dessa Rose* complicate what is meant by "escape" for black female slaves.

Before we might contemplate the discursive, literary techniques by which Williams and Butler render their twentieth-century narratives, we need to understand the term "neo-slave narrative". James Olney in "'I Was Born': Slave Narrative, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature" argues that the act of transforming memory into the slave narrative form involves "the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, [so] events are lifted out of time to be resuscitated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance" (Olney 1984, 47). This definition posits an intriguing argument between the historical slave narrative and neo-narrative because as Olney suggests, memory shapes the past events in slave narratives, but the memory is tempered by the present state of the author—specifically, the fugitive slave during the writing process.

Unlike Bell and Olney, Guy Mark Foster argues, as Paul Gilroy does, that neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* are not merely re-imagining slavery by rescuing or reshaping memory; these narratives offer a means of negotiating the historical import of an enslaved past through the lens of modernity:

> For if it is true that a focus on slavery is the reason that so many contemporary critics and readers of African American literary texts celebrate Butler's novel, then I would say that slavery itself is overdetermined within the tradition, since *Kindred* is not so much *about* slavery as it is about how black Americans learn to renegotiate the history of slavery within their present-day circumstances. (Foster 2007, 147)

While I believe Foster's argument is a valid caution against the reductive approach of most literary critics to neo-slave narratives, in my reading, Butler and Williams construct idealized memories based on their readings of previous slave narratives, and in turn, each author's protagonist, Dana and Dessa, enacts these speculative memories based on the author's ability to shape the future progression, the "patterned significance" if you will, of the specific protagonist.

So, these twentieth-century novels rely on speculative memories despite the narrative truths used to render them, which is why they become what Bernard Bell (1989, 289) coined "neo-slave narratives" in 1987: "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom." Ashraf

Rushdy (1999, 3) extended this definition to mean "contemporary novels that adopt the form, assume the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative." Through the application of this definition, Rushdy is able

> to explore in some detail the social logic of the literary form of the Neo-slave narrative: its origins in the social, intellectual and racial formations of the sixties, its cultural politics as these texts intervene in debates over the significance of race, and its literary politics as these texts make statements on engagements between texts, and between mainstream and minority traditions. (3)

Rushdy's argument centers on the four representative neo-narratives he examines—Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, and Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Rushdy believes these novels respond to cultural and sociopolitical debates from the 1960s, which are then transformed to represent literary trends in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, when this modern rendering of the slave narrative genre is conflated with speculative fiction by an author, Nadine Flagel (2012, 218) believes "the neo-slave narrative is liberated from the rigid forms of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with speculative fiction." Moreover, Flagel notes how both genres have suffered similar literary stigmas: "Arguably the most popular vehicle for imagining alterity in the nineteenth century was the slave narrative; in the twentieth, speculative fiction. Yet both have been dismissed at times for being formulaic, repetitive, and non-literary" (217). My interest, however, relies on the revelations this neo-narrative genre presents for Butler's and Williams's female protagonists, who enact non-traditional and perhaps more disruptive modes of escape from bondage even though they physically remain enslaved, while their psyches and personal truths do not. This disruption is most transgressive through Butler's and Williams's construction of interracial relationships.

Interracial Relationships

Although Harriet Jacobs, in her seminal 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* reveals the possibility of love, or at least mutual desire between a slave girl and a white man, neo-slave narratives have the advantage of exploring such antebellum taboos more explicitly. For