

"SHE DID NOT OWN HERSELF ANY LONGER". SLAVERY AND THE PROMISE OF HUMANISM IN OCTAVIA E. BUTLER'S SCIENCE FICTION

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Humanism and Infrahumanism

Science fiction's indebtedness to and investment in humanism is evident in its preoccupation with the human and, more specifically, its interrogation of who (or what) constitutes a human being. Numerous science fiction texts demonstrate a concern with the humanness of aliens, androids, cyborgs, and sentient machines, monsters, and animals – from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, to *Planet of the Apes*. This concern is often articulated through and with the theme of slavery. Like many other science fiction writers and artists, Octavia E. Butler uses the theme of slavery to examine the human. Yet, Butler's black, feminist science fiction reclaims humanism for those historically excluded from the category human and denigrated as, in Paul Gilroy's words, "infrahuman". [1] In doing so, it expands definitions of 'human being'.

As a viewpoint espousing "an optimism about human possibilities and achievements," liberal humanism emerged in Western Europe during the early modern period. [2] With the Enlightenment, it came to be associated with subjectivity in regards to autonomy, agency, moral and political choice, and dignity (as articulated by human, civil, and political rights). As so-called savages, barbarians, infidels, heathens, and/or slaves, certain people, such as people of color, colonized people, non-Christians, poor people, and women, have been excluded from Western definitions of civilization, modernity, and the human. In short, they have been rendered 'infrahuman' (i.e., subhuman, unhuman).

The histories of so-called 'infrahuman people' are in part marked by their struggles to expand definitions of *human being* and to extend the values, dictates, and promises of humanism to those who have been excluded from the category 'human'. Butler underscores and participates in these struggles in and through her many works, most notably *Kindred* (1979), *Wild Seed* (1980), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and *Parable of the Talents* (1998).

Slavery and Science Fiction

At first glance, *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, and the *Parable* series do not seem to have much in common. In fact, Butler distinguishes *Kindred* from her other publications by classifying it as 'fantasy', rather than as science fiction. [3] Yet, like many science fiction narratives, *Kindred* is about time travel; its protagonist, Dana Franklin, a twenty-six-year-old African American woman, travels between her home in a Los Angeles suburb in 1976 and a plantation in antebellum Maryland, home of both her black and white ancestors.

In contrast, *Wild Seed* opens in a West African village in 1690 and closes in Louisiana in 1840. While *Kindred's* protagonist is an ordinary woman who finds herself in extraordinary situations, Anyanwu, the protagonist of *Wild Seed*, is far from typical or normal. Rather, she is a three-hundred-year-old mutant with superhuman strength who is brought to North America as a slave. Throughout the course of the novel, Anyanwu, whose original form is that of a young, heterosexual Igbo woman, transforms herself into an elderly priestess, a young man, a leopard, a dolphin, a dog, and a wealthy white man.

Unlike *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* offer a much more common science fiction scenario: future dystopia. Both novels are set in a twenty-first-century

California plagued by pollution, global warming, drought, economic crisis, racial violence, and war. When *Sower* opens in 2024, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, is a bored, precocious African American teenager living in a suburb of Los Angeles. She is also a 'sharer'; that is, she suffers from a disease known as 'hyperempathy', which causes her to experience others' physical sensations as viscerally as her own. When *Sower*'s sequel, *Talents*, closes, Olamina is eighty-one-years old and the founder of Earthseed, a growing religion whose followers believe that god is change and that humans must migrate to other solar systems.

Despite all their differences, *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, and the *Parable* series have at least one characteristic in common: all are about slavery. Indeed, slavery is a prevalent theme in much science fiction. Numerous popular science fiction texts, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Blade Runner*, *Voyager*, *Deep Space Nine*, *The Matrix*, the *Planet of the Apes* series, and *Terminator I* and *II*, present scenarios in which humans or human-like creatures have been enslaved (usually by machines, monsters, or aliens). In some works, most notably *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Matrix*, and *Voyager* and *Deep Space Nine* episodes that feature the Borg, powerful alien forces seize not only human beings' bodies, but their minds as well. Images of the slave ship also permeate much science fiction. For example, in the television series *Alien Nation*, which aired in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a spaceship transporting slaves crash-lands in California's Mojave Desert. Meanwhile, in the *Star Wars* films, novels, and comic books, the notorious bounty hunter Boba Fett's spaceship is known as "The Slave".

Butler's treatment of slavery differs greatly from depictions of slavery in most mainstream (i.e., white) science fiction, for she clearly situates the subject within the history of people of African descent in North America. She does so by grounding her novels in specific, African American experiences. For example, *Kindred* is about a young, African American woman's struggle to come to terms with the history of slavery and violence of which she is a product. However, it is not only about Dana Franklin's personal and family history, but the history of black slavery in the U.S. in general. In fact, at least one literary critic places *Kindred* within the literary tradition of the African American slave narrative. [4]

Similarly, *Wild Seed* draws upon the history of the Atlantic slave trade. Anyanwu is brought from Africa to Wheatley, New York, where she is made her nemesis's slave and an incubator for his and other men's seed. Eventually, she escapes from Wheatley, first by transforming herself into an eagle and flying to the Atlantic coast; then by turning into a dolphin and swimming back to Africa. Finally, she returns to North America, where she assumes the form of a wealthy, white, male plantation owner in Louisiana. Anyanwu's 'plantation' is actually more of a commune, as well as a sanctuary for the slaves whose freedom she purchases at the slave markets in New Orleans. As in Africa, Anyanwu bears generations of descendants and ultimately takes the name Emma because "[s]he had heard that it meant grandmother or ancestress." [5]

(Incidentally, "Wheatley" may refer to Phillis Wheatley, the eighteenth-century, African American slave, poet, and 'ancestress' of African American letters. [6])

References to the history of African American slavery in the United States also permeate *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. Like Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, both novels are set in a post-apocalypse; their characters have been uprooted and must survive in a hostile environment. Indeed, many of Olamina's companions (and converts) are fugitive and/or former slaves. Some are former agricultural contract laborers whose relationships with their employers and working conditions resembled those of Jim Crow-era sharecroppers. As they journey from Los Angeles to rural Northern California in *Sower*, she refers to her group as "the crew of a modern underground railroad" and teaches her companions, many of whom are illiterate, to read and write. [7] Like Harriet Tubman, Olamina disguises herself as a man as she travels and, at one point, she gazes at her husband, Taylor Franklin Bankole, and compares him to "an old picture I used to have of Frederick Douglass". [8] In *Talents*, Olamina and her companions are captured and enslaved by the Crusaders, an ultra-right-wing, Christian fundamentalist group. The Crusaders justify slavery in religious terms and rename Acorn, the Earthseed community Olamina and her followers have established and cared for, "Camp Christian Reeducation Facility". While Acorn resembles a *kibbutz*, Camp Christian is more like a plantation or concentration camp.

The New Slavery

However, this is not to say that Butler's novels focus exclusively on African American slavery or slavery in the United States prior to 1865. In addition to exploring the slavery of the past, the *Parable* novels in particular scrutinize modern slavery, or what Kevin Bales has termed "the new slavery." [9] Bales defines slave as "a person held by violence or the threat of violence for economic exploitation" and estimated that there were 27 million slaves in the world by 1999, even though slavery was and still is supposed to be illegal everywhere. [10] He argues that the new slavery is a contributor to and product of the global economy. Slavery reduces production costs and pervades the global economy, for slave-produced goods and goods assembled from slave-made components are often "mixed into the flow of other products" – thus increasing profits for manufacturers, rather than merely lowering prices for consumers. [11]

Bales identifies three forms of the new slavery: (1) chattel slavery, (2) debt bondage, and (3) contract slavery. Chattel slavery is the form most similar to the old slavery. A person may be "captured, born, or sold into permanent servitude, and ownership is often asserted. The slave's children are normally treated as property as well and can be sold by the slaveholder". In debt bondage, the most common form of slavery in the world by 1999 (the year Bales's book was published), "[a] person pledges him- or herself against a loan of money.... Ownership is not normally asserted, but there is complete physical control of the bonded laborer" and his/her offspring. Lastly, contract slavery involves the use of contracts to trick a person into slavery and to disguise slavery as legitimate employment. [12] Bales emphasizes that the three types of slavery are not mutually exclusive, that they occur everywhere in the world, including the U.S., and that anyone of any race or ethnicity can be a slave.

The *Parable* novels foreground all three forms of the new slavery. In Butler's twenty-first century, men, women, and children of all races and ethnicities are frequently abducted by slavers and sold into bondage. Like the contract slaves Bales describes, others enter slavery unwittingly, but of their own accord. They move to company towns with the belief that they will work in exchange for protection – only to find that they have been enslaved. Many toil for long hours and little pay (usually in the form of company scrip) on farms owned by large agribusiness conglomerates or in borderworks, factories that bear an uncanny resemblance to current day *maquiladoras* (i.e., export processing factories located just south of the U.S.-Mexico border). Borderworks are owned by multinational corporations and their laborers produce goods that are shipped to Canada or Asia. They also work in unsafe conditions. For example, they "breathe toxic fumes or drink contaminated water or get caught in unshielded machinery". Their welfare is unimportant to their employer-masters because "[t]hey're easy to replace – thousands of jobless for every job". [13] What's more, agribusiness and borderworks laborers live in company towns, where the cost of living exceeds their meager earnings. Not surprisingly, they fall into arrears and, subsequently, debt slavery. Olamina explains:

"According to new laws that might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money. They were obligated to work off the debt as either quasi-indentured people or as convicts. That is, if they refused to work, they could be arrested, jailed, and in the end, handed over to their employers. Either way, such debt slaves could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be 'disciplined' if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families, to distant employers who had temporary or permanent need of them. Worse, children could be forced to work off the debt of their parents if the parents died, became disabled, or escaped." [14]

In *Talents*, the reader learns that slavery is supposed to be illegal, but that indentured servitude is perfectly legal. The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments still exist, although custom and law alike have rendered them all but extinct. Olamina recognizes slavery and indentured servitude as a means of exploiting a growing pool of poor, unskilled, increasingly desperate, disposable laborers. "Indenturing indigents is supposed to keep them employed, teach them a trade, feed them, house them, and keep them out of trouble", she notes. "In fact, it's just one more way of getting people to work for nothing or almost nothing." [15]

According to science fiction writer and critic Philip K. Dick, science fiction is not so much about aliens, spaceships, and zap guns, but about "our known society", "our world...dislocated by some

kind of mental effort on the part of the author”. [16] Butler explicitly links the slavery in her fictional twenty-first century to “our world” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In *Sower*, Olamina’s husband recalls, “In the early 1990s while I was in college, I heard about cases of growers...holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in California, blacks and Latins in the south....Now and then, someone would go to jail for it”. [17] And, in a 1999 interview, Butler claimed that she wrote the *Parable* series as a means of speculating what might happen in the United States if poor people – in particular, poor people of color and immigrants – continue to be pushed to the margins of society. “I wrote the way I did about education in the two novels because I kept hearing or reading such contempt for public education, and at the same time such enthusiasm for the building and filling of more and more prisons”, she explained. In addition, Butler noted that, while writing *Talents*, voters in California passed Proposition 187. She expressed outrage that the proposition’s supporters attempted to create a permanent underclass of “sick, uneducated people” willing to accept “dirty, ill-paid, dangerous jobs”. [18]

New Humans

Throughout the *Parable* novels, Butler repeatedly returns to the query prominent in much science fiction: *Who (or what) is a human being?* In *Sower*, *human* is defined in terms of its inverse: one is not human if one is a ‘monster’; if one derives pleasure from another’s suffering; and if one is an ‘animal’. Olamina describes her violent, selfish brother, Keith, as a monster. [19] Moreover, she refers to ‘paints’, dangerous, pyromaniac junkies who shave and paint their entire bodies and kill for fun, as “people who aren’t human any more”. [20] After a gang of paints raids and destroys her neighborhood, she and two other survivors decide to head north. As they walk along California’s derelict highways, Olamina and her companions confront wild dogs, thieves, rapists, murderers, cannibals, and more paints. Because they are forced to steal or starve and must kill or be killed, one of her companions fears that they, too, will “turn into animals”. [21]

In *Talents*, Butler closely examines the relationship between humanity, ‘infrahumanity’, and slavery. The Crusaders who invade Acorn deny Olamina and other Earthseed followers their humanity by referring to them as ‘heathens’ and ‘dogs’. [22] As slaves, she and her companions are forced to wear electronic collars, which are also known as ‘dog collars’ and ‘choke chains’. [23] As long as the collars are activated, they are unable to escape from Camp Christian (“Get a certain distance from the control unit and the collar chokes you.”), to attack their masters, or to defend themselves or anyone else. [24] Additionally, the slavers can and do use the collars to sick slaves on one another. Olamina’s brother, Marc, warns that a collar “makes you turn traitor against your kind, against your freedom, against yourself”. [25] Finally, the collars are used to torture and execute their wearers. After she is brutally electronically ‘lashed’ for attempting to kill one of her captors, Olamina suffers from temporary amnesia and is transformed into “a zombie for several days”. She is shocked and dismayed when she realizes the power the slavers have over her: “I knew that strangers could appear and steal or destroy everything and everyone I loved. People and possessions could be snatched away. But somehow, it had not occurred to me that...*bits of my own mind* could be snatched away too”. [26]

Throughout *Talents*, Butler stresses that slavery involves both physical and psychic domination of another. Olamina compares the wearing of a collar to hyperempathy, “except that instead of sharing what other people feel, the wearer feels whatever the person holding the control unit wants him to feel...After a while, needing the pleasure, fearing the pain, and always being desperate to please the master could become a person’s whole life”. [27] In addition, she witnesses a few Earthseed followers convert to Christianity. Some do so to appease their captors; Olamina herself poses as a Christian in order to protect herself. However, others slowly and truly reject their beliefs and values in favor of those of their masters. As an act of self-preservation, Olamina manages to write in her journal on Sundays, the day that the Crusaders leave her and the other slaves alone. She finds that writing provides her with a necessary sense of interiority and privacy: “My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human, that God is Change, and that I will escape this place”. [28] In short, it reminds her of who and what she is, of her beliefs and values, and of her hope for the future. Above all, writing reminds Olamina that, even though her body, will, and memories can be stolen from her, she is still human.

At first glance, *Talents* seems to define ‘human’ in terms of the cerebral and in opposition to the

carnal. Although Olamina has lost ownership of her body, she is human because she still has her mind. She is unable to escape from Camp Christian, but she is able to escape to the realm of thought, at least one day per week. In other words, Olamina thinks, therefore, she is. However, upon further investigation, one finds that she is human not so much because she thinks, but because she feels. Indeed, the *Parable* novels define *human* in terms of empathy. Empathy, the identification with or vicarious experiencing of another's feelings, thoughts, or attitudes, is precisely what makes one human. That is, the ability to step outside of oneself – rather than self alone – defines “human”. Olamina's hyperempathy makes her painfully human and prevents her from becoming a ‘monster’ or ‘animal’. In Butler's nightmarish twenty-first century, slavers use the electronic collars not only to control their slaves' bodies, but to rob them of that which makes them human: the ability to empathize.

As the *Parable* series illustrates, Butler's definition of ‘human’ differs greatly from some Enlightenment-era definitions. First, Butler's human is not the subject of reason exclusively. Instead, Butler's human thinks and *feels*. Nor is Butler's human a closed, autonomous actor. Rather, Butler defines *self* in relation to others, rather than in and of itself. She does so through her exploration of empathy and her emphasis on community, both of which erase boundaries between individuals. In all of her novels, not just the *Parable* series, Butler's protagonists must learn to forge new communities. In *Sower*, for example, after her parents and siblings are murdered and her home is destroyed, Olamina gathers people around her, most of whom have lost loved ones to slavery and/or murder, and realizes, “*In spite of your loss and pain, you aren't alone. You still have people who care about you and want you to be all right. You still have family*”. [29] Likewise, in *Talents*, Olamina once again builds a new family after the Crusaders demolish Acorn, kill her husband, and kidnap Larkin, her infant daughter. Even though she is reunited with her brother, Marc (who she thought was dead in *Sower*), and, ultimately, with her adult daughter, Olamina continues to define community in terms of *affinity*, rather than *essence*. As Larkin bitterly observes, “All Earthseed was her family. We never were, Uncle Marc and I”. [30] In contrast, Larkin and Marc define family exclusively in terms of ‘blood’. Marc invites his niece to live with him because, as he tells her, “[Y]ou're family – the only family I have”. [31]

Conclusion: Old Promises for a New World

Jürgen Habermas has pointed out that in the West, ‘human rights’ have been defined in terms of a ‘possessive individualism’ stemming from the Lockean tradition; whereas, in other parts of the world, especially Asia and Africa, ‘human’ is often not defined as *the individual*, but in the context of a collective. [32] Arguing that “the status of legal persons as rights-bearers develops only in the context of a legal community which is premised on the mutual recognition of its freely associated members”, he calls for a new understanding of *human rights*:

“*[T]he understanding of human rights must jettison the metaphysical assumption of an individual who exists prior to all socialization and, as it were, comes into the world already equipped with innate rights...The choice between ‘individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ approaches disappears once we approach fundamental legal concepts with an eye toward the dialectical unity of individuation and socialization processes. Because even legal persons are individuated only on the path to socialization, the integrity of individual persons can be protected only together with the free access to those interpersonal relationships and cultural traditions in which they can maintain their identities. Without this kind of ‘communitarianism’, a properly understood individualism remains incomplete*”. [33]

Via the theme of slavery, and in their critiques of slavery, both past and present, Butler's novels redefine *human* – not as free-floating atom, but as an integral part of a network of constructed interconnectedness. Furthermore, they impart the values and dictates of humanism qua human rights to those historically excluded from the category human, including and especially slaves. Lastly, the *Parable* series in particular extends humanism into the twenty-first century, a time when there are more slaves living in the world than at any other moment in history. [34] Butler's science fiction reveals that the promises of the past must be reshaped for the challenges of the present and future.

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NOTES

[1] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

[2] Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick (eds.), *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 180.).

[3] Quoted in Frances M. Beal, “Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre,” *Black Scholar* 17 (March-April 1986): 14.

[4] Robert Crossley, “Introduction.” In Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979, ix).

[5] Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner Books, 1980, 278.)

[6] Regarding Phillis Wheatley, see Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997).

[7] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner Books, 1993, 292).

[8] *Ibid.*, 328.

[9] According to Bales, the new slavery is very different from older forms of slavery. In the past, documents produced and confirmed one’s ownership of slaves. Because slavery is technically “illegal everywhere”, legal ownership of slaves is avoided in the new slavery. In other words, “there is no more legal ownership of human beings. When people buy slaves today they don’t ask for a receipt or ownership papers, but they do gain control – and they use violence to maintain this control” (Bales 1999, 5). Additionally, in the past, slaves were an expensive, long-term investment. By 1999, they could be purchased at a relatively low cost and on a temporary basis. For example, according to Bales, a girl between the ages of twelve and fifteen years can be purchased in Thailand for as little as \$800 (*ibid.*, 18). Finally, Bales maintains that race is not an important factor in the new slavery and points out that it is often more cost-effective for a slave owner to purchase a slave who is from the same geographic area and of the same race, ethnicity, or nationality. See Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 1999), especially pp. 5-33.

[10] *Ibid.*, 280; 8.

[11] *Ibid.*, 23.

[12] *Ibid.*, 19-20.

[13] *Parable of the Sower*, 324.

[14] *Ibid.*, 288.

[15] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Warner Books, 1998, 40).

[16] Philip K. Dick, "My Definition of Science Fiction." In *The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick: Selected Literary and Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Lawrence Sutin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995, 99).

[17] *Ibid.*, 292.

[18] "A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler." In *Parable of the Talents*, 417-18. Proposition 187, which passed in 1994, would have denied undocumented immigrants access to social services, including health care, and public education.

[19] *Parable of the Sower*, 115.

[20] *Ibid.*, 135.

[21] *Ibid.*, 182.

[22] *Parable of the Talents*, 208-9.

[23] *Ibid.*, 83.

[24] *Ibid.*, 130.

[25] *Ibid.*, 131.

[26] *Ibid.*, 227-28 (*italics original*).

[27] *Ibid.*, 83-84.

[28] *Ibid.*, 223.

[29] *Parable of the Sower*, 303 (*italics original*).

[30] *Ibid.*, 405. I discuss community, essence, and affinity in *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower* at length in "Cyborg Feminism: The Science Fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa" in *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, eds. H. Austin Booth and Mary Flanagan (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute Technology Press, 2003, pp.374-402).

[31] *Parable of the Talents*, 377.

[32] Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on Legitimation through Human Rights." In *The Postnational Condition: Political Essays*, ed. and trans. by Max Pensky. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2001. 123-125.

[33] *Ibid.*, 125-26.

[34] *Disposable People*, 9.

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