

GENDER ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

GENDER UTOPIAS

for a Post-Apocalyptic World

JORGE LEÓN CASERO

Editor

NOVA

Gender Issues and Challenges



No part of this digital document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means. The publisher has taken reasonable care in the preparation of this digital document, but makes no expressed or implied warranty of any kind and assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for incidental or consequential damages in connection with or arising out of information contained herein. This digital document is sold with the clear understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, medical or any other professional services.

Gender Issues and Challenges

Gender Equality: Past, Present and Future Perspectives

Henri Morel (Editor)

2021. ISBN: 978-1-53619-919-2 (Hardcover)

2021. ISBN: 978-1-68507-038-0 (eBook)

Masculinity and Femininity: Past, Present and Future

Eliano Barese (Editor)

2020. ISBN: 978-1-53618-415-0 (Softcover)

2020. ISBN: 978-1-53618-584-3 (eBook)

More information about this series can be found at

<https://novapublishers.com/product-category/series/gender-issues-and-challenges/>

Jorge León Casero

Editor

Gender Utopias for a Post-Apocalyptic World



Copyright © 2022 by Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

<https://doi.org/10.52305/YQNE6277>

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means: electronic, electrostatic, magnetic, tape, mechanical photocopying, recording or otherwise without the written permission of the Publisher.

We have partnered with Copyright Clearance Center to make it easy for you to obtain permissions to reuse content from this publication. Simply navigate to this publication's page on Nova's website and locate the "Get Permission" button below the title description. This button is linked directly to the title's permission page on copyright.com. Alternatively, you can visit copyright.com and search by title, ISBN, or ISSN.

For further questions about using the service on copyright.com, please contact:

Copyright Clearance Center

Phone: +1-(978) 750-8400

Fax: +1-(978) 750-4470

E-mail: info@copyright.com.

NOTICE TO THE READER

The Publisher has taken reasonable care in the preparation of this book, but makes no expressed or implied warranty of any kind and assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for incidental or consequential damages in connection with or arising out of information contained in this book. The Publisher shall not be liable for any special, consequential, or exemplary damages resulting, in whole or in part, from the readers' use of, or reliance upon, this material. Any parts of this book based on government reports are so indicated and copyright is claimed for those parts to the extent applicable to compilations of such works.

Independent verification should be sought for any data, advice or recommendations contained in this book. In addition, no responsibility is assumed by the Publisher for any injury and/or damage to persons or property arising from any methods, products, instructions, ideas or otherwise contained in this publication.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information with regard to the subject matter covered herein. It is sold with the clear understanding that the Publisher is not engaged in rendering legal or any other professional services. If legal or any other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent person should be sought. FROM A DECLARATION OF PARTICIPANTS JOINTLY ADOPTED BY A COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION AND A COMMITTEE OF PUBLISHERS.

Additional color graphics may be available in the e-book version of this book.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN: 979-8-88697-299-3(eBook)

Published by Nova Science Publishers, Inc. † New York

“An outstanding collection of reflexions about SF, utopias and stories concerning gender and the possibility of going beyond the limits of the modern project. It’s a remarkable book!”

Paula Cristina Pereira, Universidade do Port (University of Porto) and founder of Philosophy & Public Space Research Group, Portugal

“A fascinating, necessary, highly topical book that masterfully traces the close connections between utopia and gender from an innovative perspective”

Leticia Flores Farfán, PhD, Coordinator of the Postgraduate Program in Gender Studies, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico) (UNAM), Mexico

“A wonderful journey from modern utopias written by women in order to dream up new ways of understanding gender to post-apocalyptic utopias that strike at the heteropatriarchal and racialized modern system of creating these new worlds”

Felipe Schwember, Universidad del Desarrollo (Development University) (UDD), Chile

Contents

Preface	The Post-Apocalyptic Genderings of Future Compostwealths	ix
Section 1: Gender Utopias in and Against the Modern Project1		
Chapter 1	Once upon a Time in the Modern Age: Women Who Dreamt of New Egalitarian Worlds	3
	Julia Urabayen	
Chapter 2	Women of the World United: Gender and Utopia in Flora Tristán	25
	Macarena Iribarne	
Chapter 3	Carole Pateman’s Sexual Contract: Some Historiographical Challenges on Colonial and Modern Latin America	43
	Valentina Verbal	
Section 2: Radical Hybridizations for Other Genders/Worlds61		
Chapter 4	The Queer Politics of Prison Abolition: Revisiting the Case of Latisha King	63
	Nishant Shahani	
Chapter 5	Dealing with Oppression and Hybridity in Octavia E. Butler’s Critical Dystopian Short Stories	81
	Raffaella Baccolini	
Chapter 6	Some Reflections on Utopia, Gender and Decoloniality	99
	María Luisa Femenías	

Chapter 7	“A Voice without an Owner”: María Galindo and the Feminist Utopia of <i>Mujeres Creando</i>	117
	Carolina Meloni González	
Biographies	137
Index	141

Chapter 5

Dealing with Oppression and Hybridity in Octavia E. Butler's Critical Dystopian Short Stories

Raffaella Baccolini*

Department of Interpreting and Translation, University of Bologna, Forlì Campus, Italy

Abstract

Language and communication acquire a particular meaning in African American literature and culture due to the experience of slavery, as it was a punishable crime for Black people to read or write. Octavia E. Butler also responds to the legacy of slavery by investigating the importance of language and communication in her work, particularly in some of her short stories which anticipate the blending of science fiction, historical materialism, and fantasy that characterize what is now commonly referred to as Afrofuturism. Her emphasis on language represents the need to strive for a difficult, complex co-existence, which can be achieved through negotiation, translation, and mediation, no matter how complicated such tasks might be. In the present climate of racism and hatred that manifests itself through the dehumanizing policies that Black people, migrants, and refugees face throughout the world today, these stories offer a timely reflection on literacy and negotiation as tools of resistance. They are also what is necessary to maintain hope even in extreme conditions of oppression.

Keywords: Octavia E. Butler, language and negotiation, resistance and hope, Afrofuturism, critical dystopia

* Corresponding Author's Email: raffaella.baccolini@unibo.it.

In: Gender Utopias for a Post-Apocalyptic World

Editors: Jorge León Casero and Julia Urabayen

ISBN: 979-8-88697-231-3

© 2022 Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Introduction

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives,” Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture 1993.

Toni Morrison’s famous quote reminds us of the fundamental importance of language. Throughout her speech, Morrison insists on the power of language, which she views “partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency —as an act with consequences” (Morrison 1993). The experience of slavery gives language a specific meaning in Black history, as Alice Walker also claims, when she asks how the creativity of Black women was kept alive “when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write” (Walker 1983, 234). Together with the “systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African culture remnants,” the prohibition of learning to read and write was a fundamental part of the dehumanizing process of slavery (Delany in Dery 1993, 746).

Octavia E. Butler also responds to that legacy of slavery through her investigations of the importance of language and communication in her work, particularly in some of her short stories which anticipate the blending of science fiction, historical materialism, and fantasy that characterize what is now commonly referred to as Afrofuturism. Her emphasis on language represents the need to strive for a difficult, complex co-existence, which can be achieved through negotiation, translation, and mediation, no matter how complicated such tasks might be. In the present climate of racism, hatred, and closure that manifests itself, particularly through the dehumanizing policies that Black people, migrants, and refugees face throughout the world today, these stories offer a timely reflection on literacy and negotiation as tools of resistance.

In particular, three stories from Butler’s collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* — “Bloodchild,” “Speech Sounds,” and “Amnesty”— exemplify Afrofuturistic writing by insisting on the importance of communication and negotiation to address themes of oppression, abduction, and displacement. As Isiah Lavender III states, Afrofuturism considers these themes “a fitting metaphor for [the] black experience,” even if, according to Mark Dery’s definition, most critics see Afrofuturism as being “concerned with the impact of black people on technology and of technology on the lives of black people” (Lavender 2011, 190; Dery 1993, 736). I prefer Ytasha L. Womack’s broader view of Afrofuturism as the combination of “elements of science fiction,

historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (Womack 2013, 9). Butler’s stories, by critically engaging with the problems of the present, create a complex future of hybrid communities. In this respect, the insistence on language and literacy as tools of resistance makes Butler’s stories an example of Afrofuturistic science fiction.

At the same time, these characteristics of Butler’s writing place her work firmly in the tradition of dystopian science fiction, and in critical dystopia, in particular. Her stories, in fact, are also an example of critical dystopia, as texts that maintain a utopian impulse: “Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with no space for hope within the story, utopia [...] is maintained in dystopia only *outside* the story. [...] Conversely, [critical dystopias] allow readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure [through] ambiguous, open endings [...] [that] maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work” (Baccolini 2000, 18).¹

But language, both as structure and theme, also represents an essential element of dystopian texts. Dystopian novels open directly on the nightmarish society, with no need for the dystopian citizen to experience time and/or space dislocation, which are typical of utopian narratives. And yet the element of textual estrangement and the critique of society soon become clear since, on the one hand, the narrative often revolves around a protagonist who questions the dystopian society and, on the other, because of dystopia’s narrative structure that develops through and around language itself. Dystopias are in fact formally built around a narrative of the hegemonic order—the values and views of the totalitarian state—and a counter-narrative of resistance—those of the dissenting protagonists. These two elements contribute to making the dystopian form a solid instrument of resistance and critique.

The Emancipatory Role of Language in Dystopias

Since the text opens *in media res* within the nightmarish society, cognitive and political estrangement are at first reduced by the immediacy and normality of the location. “No dream or trip is taken to get to this place of everyday life [...] the protagonist (and the reader) is always already in the world in question,

¹ Another aspect that characterizes critical dystopias and makes them sites of resistance is their blending of different genre conventions. See also Moylan, 2000; and Baccolini and Moylan, 2003.

unreflectively immersed in the society. However, a counter-narrative develops as the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance” (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5), or in what Tom Moylan has called, in his new book, *Becoming Utopian*, a “break” or “gestalt shift” from their “‘well-adjusted’ subject[ivity] to the radically free, self-actualizing” utopian agency (Moylan 2021, 7). “This structural strategy of narrative and counter-narrative most often plays out by way of the social, and anti-social, use of language. Throughout the history of dystopian fiction, the conflict of the text turns on the control of language. To be sure, the official, hegemonic order of most dystopias [...] rests, as Antonio Gramsci put it, on both coercion and consent” (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5).

A central feature of the totalitarian regimes depicted in dystopian novels is the use of language as a tool to control and, therefore, manipulate truth and reality. The dystopian citizen is more or less prohibited from using language (both writing and reading are usually forbidden) and, when s/he does, it means nothing, words having been reduced to a propaganda tool. Theoretically, the new society uses language, usually accompanied by the erasure of past and memory, in order to avoid all ambiguity and create the official version of history; but in fact, the totalitarian regime greatly manipulates facts in order to create just another fiction of history. This new fiction is presented as the only one and, above all, as non-fictional—that is, the new narrative becomes the truth; it becomes the master narrative. The reappropriation of language remains one of the characters’ tools to understand and criticize their society and to unmask its fictions.²

Recovery of history and literacy, and individual and collective memory become instrumental tools of resistance for the protagonists of dystopias. Because authoritarian, hegemonic discourse shapes the narrative about the past and collective memory to the point that individual memory has been erased, individual recollection becomes the first, necessary step for a collective action. Although Butler’s stories under discussion here do not depict totalitarian regimes, the dialectic structure between “hegemonic” discourse and counter-narrative remains. In a similar way, in fact, Butler also investigates the importance of language and communication as subversive acts in her stories. Her emphasis on language represents the need to strive for a difficult, complex co-existence, which can be achieved through negotiation, translation, and mediation, no matter how complicated such tasks might be. In

² On the intersection of language and dystopia, see also Sisk, 1997; Baccolini, 1995; Cavalcanti, 2000; as well as Millwards, 2006.

so doing, Butler's stories position themselves at the crossing of Afrofuturism and critical dystopia.

Language and Literacy in Octavia E. Butler's Short Stories

The importance of language and literacy is a recurring theme in Butler's work. In a conversation held at MIT in 1998, Henry Jenkins asked Butler to comment on the issue of literacy, quoting from *Kindred*, "Speech Sounds," and *Dawn*, where the theme is significantly used (MIT Cultural Studies Project/1998 2010, 142). According to Butler, her interest and appreciation of literacy and language are grounded in the historical and material conditions of her life as well as that of other Black people: "It's obviously very important to me, and because I come from the kind of family I come from, I don't think it could be otherwise. My mother was taken out of school after about three years of education and put to work" (MIT Cultural Studies Project, 142). In a similar vein, in "Positive Obsession," she recollects her mother believing "passionately in books and education," wanting her "to have what she had been denied" (Butler 2005f, 128). However, she mourns the loss of a shared importance of literacy in the Black community and considers it "frightening" that literacy was "more popular when it was the forbidden fruit" (MIT Cultural Studies Project, 143).

Language and literacy are, for Butler, also strongly tied to our sense of humanity. Speaking about two of her stories ("Speech Sounds" and the at-the-time unpublished "Child Finder"), she says that language and literacy mark "the borders of where humanity is" (Butler 1998). Both stories show how violence arises when communication fails. In "Child Finder," a group of telepaths fight one another because they cannot "conceal their disagreements and animosities and contempt," whereas in "Speech Sounds," everyone on Earth suddenly acquires "some kind of communications deficit": they can't read, write, or speak and lose, therefore, connections both to others and to basic humanity (Butler 1998).

Similarly, Jenkins notes that in *Dawn*, when Lilith demands writing implements and books, but is told that her mind can be fixed so that she won't need them, "she seem[s] to think that something fundamental to her humanity would be lost at the moment in which her mind is modified so that she no longer needs the ability to read and write" (MIT Cultural Studies Project, 142). The importance of literacy and its connection to humanity is even more explicit in *Kindred*, where learning to read and write is dangerously risky, but

the lack of literacy contributes to the dehumanization of slaves, yet a continuous negotiation between diverse forms of communication and knowledge is essential to resistance. In Butler's work, language, and the ability to communicate and to negotiate, are fundamental to the sense and survival of humanity.

"Speech Sounds" offers Butler's most straightforward reflection on what happens when language is lost. The story describes a post-apocalyptic society where people lose connections to one another and basic humanity due to the loss of language. A mysterious illness has seemingly left most people with limited abilities to communicate. Some lost the ability to read and write while others lost the ability to speak, resulting in a dismal society, devoid of governmental or private organization, where loneliness and hopelessness run rampant, disagreement and misunderstanding are all too common, and "body language," i.e., physical and often violent confrontation, has replaced verbal communication (Butler 2005g, 92-93). Once lost, language is seemingly never regained, leaving the world in what appears to be a permanent state of fear, jealousy, selfishness, and hatred, a world where some people have reinstated new forms of slavery and sexual property in exchange for protection. The difficulty of communication has therefore reduced interpersonal relations to violence and exploitation.

The story develops from the chance encounters between the protagonist Rye, a former university history teacher, with a man, Obsidian, and two young children. These interactions allow Butler to reflect on how literacy and communication may form the basis for a potentially better, future world. Rye, who has only retained the ability to speak, reacts with "hatred, frustration, and jealousy" when she discovers that Obsidian can read and write (2005g, 98). However, she is able to move from an impulsive reaction, which calls for self-defensiveness and potential violence, to a position of cooperation. The two choose to stay together, but Obsidian is killed while attempting to save a woman being attacked by a man. The subsequent encounter with the woman's two children who, born after the "silence," seem to be immune to the mysterious illness and are able to speak, provides Rye with hope in her otherwise hopeless world.

This utopian moment is part of Butler's anticipation of the Afrofuturistic agenda. Literacy and education lay the foundation of Butler's potentially utopian vision, evident in Rye's inner thoughts: "What if children of three or fewer years were safe and able to learn language? What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors?" (2005g, 107). Rye resolves to take the children home with her, to teach and protect. She chooses kindness and

cooperation against people ready to destroy what they cannot have. For the creation of her budding utopia, she chooses hope and education, reminders that rather than a fixed geographical place, utopia is a process in which, in this case, relations can be peacefully mediated through language, cooperation, and kindness.³

Negotiation as a Resistance Strategy against Oppression

If “Speech Sounds” establishes the importance of language and communication and their ties to our sense of humanity (what makes us human and gives us hope), “Bloodchild,” Butler’s most famous short story, shows that the tenets of Afrofuturism are rooted in the tradition of African American science fiction. The story takes things one step further by explicitly linking communication to negotiation, which become forms of resistance and the first ingredients for change. A brilliant and complex story about reproductive choices in a coercive situation, “Bloodchild” focuses on the themes of reproduction, negotiation, consent, and agency, in order to reconsider not only gender relations, but the hybridization of various cultures and the power inequality that informs relations.⁴ The story thereby offers a reflection on disparate strategies of resistance to our cultural constructions.

“Bloodchild” is set on a planet inhabited and governed by an insect-like alien species called Tlic, and is narrated by Gan, a young Terran boy descended from humans who landed there to escape persecution on Earth. After a failed, violent attempt on the part of the humans to colonize the planet, a later generation of Terrans live in a protected Preserve, where they have been allowed to form families and raise children. However, since the Tlic need host bodies to grow their eggs, each human family must offer at least one member—preferably a male, since human reproduction requires females—to the Tlic. Humans serve as living incubators to implanted eggs that grow to a potentially lethal larval stage when they have to be removed by a Tlic. In a gruesome birth ritual, a Tlic slices the human body up and then removes the “grubs.” Gan must choose whether he will offer his body as a host for the eggs of his long-

³ On kindness as a utopian act, see Baccolini, 2017a.

⁴ Read by several critics as a story about slavery (cf., for example, Helford, 1994), “Bloodchild” is not such a story according to its author. It is, rather, “[a] love story between two very different beings,” “a coming-of-age story,” her “pregnant man story,” an effort to “ease an old fear” of hers, and a story “about paying the rent” (Butler 2005a, 30-31).

term family friend T’Gatoi, the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve.⁵

Having witnessed and participated in a birth procedure that almost killed the human host, Gan wonders about his choices: he can refuse the implantation and have his sister Hoa go through it, therefore becoming as selfish as his older brother Qui who had refused to be a host, or he can commit suicide with the forbidden rifle in his family’s possession. He chooses, instead, to negotiate the terms of the agreement, thus making T’Gatoi acknowledge the coercive nature of their relationship and, in turn, initiating change. Language as negotiation becomes the first steps in Gan’s limited and yet important resistance. Gan’s first act of resistance is to remind T’Gatoi that the aliens never ask humans whether they consent or not: “No one ever asks us [...] You never asked me” (Butler 2005d, 23). But while Gan explicitly denounces the aliens’ exploitation of humans, T’Gatoi, in turn, reminds him of their ancestors’ compromise: “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” (2005d, 25). Despite the power differential in the relationship between species, each has gained something from the agreement.

And yet communication is needed to enact improvements in that unequal relationship. Communication between T’Gatoi and Gan makes them mediators between their respective cultures. Because of her political role, T’Gatoi protects the Terrans while ensuring humans are made available for her people. Gan, for his part, finds himself in the position of negotiating respect and dignity for his choices and Terrans’ alike. By using language and negotiation, Gan is able to break through the hegemonic power of the Tlic and open up the possibility of change: he asks for knowledge and awareness; he demands acceptance of responsibility and accountability both on his and T’Gatoi’s part, and suggests compromise and negotiation are needed for an increased mutuality in their unequal relationship.

Knowledge is necessary for negotiation to be successful. Whereas T’Gatoi maintains that “Terrans should be protected from seeing” births, Gan demands

⁵ By reversing gender roles in reproduction—the female aliens impregnate male humans—Butler defamiliarizes women’s biological functions, thus leaving readers uncomfortable about the accepted naturalness of birth and reproduction. The gruesome procedure is none other than an extrapolation of a human Caesarean section. Through the common formal strategy of estrangement, Butler shows us that the ghastly, dangerous procedure and Gan’s predicament are not so different from the risks and dilemmas that women have faced and continue to face between their freedom to choose motherhood and their right to refuse it (Baccolini 2017b; Green 1994).

knowledge and that they should be shown, so that they can make an informed choice (2005d, 28). At the risk of being the first public example of a birth procedure, Gan's words plant the seed in T'Gatoi's mind, where chances are "it would grow, and eventually she would experiment" (2005d, 29).

Knowledge, which in dystopian and postcolonial discourses as well as in Afrofuturism, is conventionally associated with empowerment, hope, and change, allows Gan to move from an individual accommodation to a potentially collective action. Knowledge is also a prerequisite of accountability: by choosing not to become like his brother, Gan also decides to be responsible and accountable. Similarly, by making T'Gatoi openly ask to initiate the procedure, he also makes her responsible and accountable for her actions. The assumption of responsibility on the part of both becomes the necessary precondition for any potentially radical change.

Finally, both T'Gatoi and Gan must accept compromise as the necessary negotiation that allows for the creation of a more just relationship. When Gan reminds her "that there is risk [...] in dealing with a partner, "he also succeeds in convincing her to let him keep the forbidden rifle" (2005d, 26). Gan chooses to accept and respect his end of the deal. Though Gan's choice could be read as a sign of cooptation and nominal consent, I have interpreted it elsewhere as another expression of the resistance implicit in what Harriet Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, called the "ethic of compromise."⁶

Reciprocal survival means negotiating a new ethic of compromise that, in turn, allows for a form of resistance and potential change. Resistance need not be, as Homi Bhabha suggests, exclusively "an oppositional act of political intention nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture" (Bhabha 1985, 152). Negotiation together with knowledge, awareness, and responsibility provide the necessary elements for resistance in Butler's story (Baccolini 2017b, 137). The story suggests that language and communication, together with knowledge, compromise, and negotiation are needed to enact a change that will allow humans and aliens to reach a more just, if not perfect, world.

⁶ See Baccolini, 2017b. The ethic of compromise has been articulated by Jacobs who reluctantly practiced a form of situational ethic to safeguard her children and herself: "I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs 1988, 86).

Translation as a Survival Strategy in Favor of Hybridity

“Amnesty” presents another complex and disturbing take on the need to do away with notions of purity and isolation, to instead embrace hybridity as a strategy for reciprocal survival. The story is set on a futuristic Earth that aliens resembling tall, “moss-enshrouded bush[es]” have colonized (Butler 2005c, 149). As in “Bloodchild,” after a troubled relationship involving the aliens’ violent abduction of humans, the two groups have reached a tentative arrangement: humans are already in a situation of “negotiated (inter)dependence” (Foster 2013, 146). The protagonist, a Black woman named Noah Cannon, deals explicitly with language: she works as a “translator and personal officer” for a “Community” of aliens (Butler 2005c, 156). Her employer lends her services to another Community that requires her to coordinate a question-and-answer session for a multi-ethnic group of prospective human employees.

Noah acts as a mediator between the two groups, an “unpleasant” task because of the “usual hostility” of human beings and the toughness of the alien subcontractor (2005c, 150). As a translator who works between two cultures, she belongs to neither and is distrusted in particular by her fellow humans. A modern/future Malinche, Noah is seen as a traitor of her race because, like Lilith in *Dawn*, she has chosen to collaborate with the aliens.⁷ She is one of thirty people who can talk to them, “trying to help the two species understand and accept one another before one of them does something fatal” (Butler 2005c, 167).

Noah is, in fact, more than a translator since she is a former abductee who had worked with aliens and others “to begin to assemble a language that both species could use,” a “painfully created common language” (2005c, 173, 150). Because the Communities cannot hear, they never developed a spoken language but, rather, converse “in the gesture and touch language” they have co-assembled (2005c, 177).⁸ Consistent with recent feminist theories that see the act of translation as a form of creativity, Noah the translator is co-creator

⁷ On the figure of Malinche as a translator see, among others, Godayol 2013. La Malinche, a key figure in the Spanish-Aztec War, was an Aztec woman who was sold by her own mother into slavery. She then served as a guide and interpreter and ultimately became Cortés’s mistress. A controversial figure, she is perceived both as a heroine and a traitor of the race. At the crossroads of two cultures, she has become a modern, feminist icon of *mestizaje* as the first female translator.

⁸ Communication between humans and aliens occurs through signs and gestures while being enfolded by the Community: while humans use hands and arms to sign, the Community signals with pressures against the human’s back.

of the sign language and the new society that is being implemented (Godard 1990; Von Flotow, 1997).

Like many Butler's protagonists before her —Gan, Rye, Lilith, and Dana— Noah chooses to find ways to survive with dignity in less-than-optimal conditions of living: we learn, in fact, that the aliens are “here to stay” as “their ship was a one-way transport” (2005c, 167). We also learn of their greater military power: “if they do decide to fight, we won't survive” (2005c, 167).⁹ The story ends with Noah sharing a piece of information that isn't common knowledge. A “short, quiet war” has already been lost by the humans, when they launched a coordinated nuclear strike at the aliens, but the missiles never detonated (2005c, 184). Half of them were returned, “armed and intact” in significant places all over the world, while the other half has remained in the hands of the Communities, along with the weapons they brought with them and any they have been able to build in the meantime (2005c, 183). Noah disagrees with a prospective translator's insistence that there must be “some way to fight,” reminding them three times that the aliens are here and they need to find a way to coexist with them (2005c, 167).

Noah is the example that life with the aliens is possible and that it has been and can still be improved. Since conditions on Earth are dismal because of unemployment, violence, and famine, people must choose how to live: through open conflict or by negotiating a better life. Like the protagonists of Butler's earlier stories, Noah chooses to resist by negotiating with the “enemy.” Her experience with the Communities, but even more so with her fellow humans, has made her an aware, responsible exemplar that a different kind of life is possible.

Abducted by the aliens when she was eleven, Noah was experimented upon in their attempt to understand and study humanity. But while the aliens did not know that they were hurting humans during the early years of her captivity, the military, which got hold of her once she was released, knew what they were doing. In one of the most dramatic moments of the story, Noah bitterly relates her experience of fear, hopelessness, and humiliation: “[T]his time my tormentors were my own people. They were human. They spoke my language. They knew all that I knew about pain and humiliation and fear and

⁹ In this respect, Butler's ending resembles that of Joanna Russ's short story, “When It Changed,” in which the women accept without a fight the invasion by men: “When one culture has the big guns and the other has none, there is a certain predictability about the outcome” (Russ 1988, 415). Russ's somewhat frustrating ending, just like Butler's uncomfortable vision, invites readers to resist the easier way out—i.e., a Hollywood-like ending of heroic fighting—and deal instead with the far more difficult, and yet utopian, task of negotiation.

despair. They knew what they were doing to me, and yet it never occurred to them not to do it” (2005c, 172). In the military’s effort to get information from her that she did not have, Noah is locked up, questioned relentlessly, tortured, and accused of everything “from espionage to murder, from terrorism to treason” (2005c, 170). Noah undergoes a process of dehumanization at the hand of her own people, a stark reminder of the history of oppression Black citizens have experienced and continue to experience under systemic racism.

Her experience convinces her that the only possible way to coexist and improve living conditions for all is through education: she willingly chooses to work for change. The positive effects of communication and negotiation emerge in a series of small improvements Noah secures for herself and others such as clothing and food. Most important, there is neither violence nor experimentation in the interactions between the species. But even more significant is the rapport she develops with her employer, who has never injured her and “who had worked with her and others to begin to assemble a language that both species could use” (2005c, 173). Although Noah does not openly dare to define their relationship as one of friendship and trust, care and respect seem to characterize their bond. For example, when Noah chooses to work with a rough subcontractor whose “rudimentary” vocabulary and understanding of humans may lead to her being hurt, her employer makes it clear that it will support her, whatever decision she makes (2005c, 150). Noah succeeds in educating her employer in letting her wear clothes during communication, and her Community refuses to lend her to others who would not comply with such an agreement.

A profound understanding seems to have been established between Noah and her Community. In a conversation taking place after Noah has obtained the job to train the prospective translators for other Communities, care and concern characterize the exchange between Noah and her employer:

You insist on taking these jobs, but you can’t use them to make the changes you want to make. You know that. You cannot change your people or mine.

I can, a little, she signed. Community by Community, human by human [...]

And so you let subcontractors abuse you. You try to help your own people to see new possibilities and understand changes that have already happened but most of them won’t listen and they hate you.

I want to make them think. I want to tell them what human governments won’t tell them. I want to vote for peace between your people and mine by

telling the truth. I don't know whether my efforts will do any good, in the long run, but I have to try. (2005c, 155)

Noah's "manifesto" expresses her explicit desire to make a difference through knowledge, work for change, and improve life for both species, whatever it takes. Although her employer is skeptical about her success, it helps and supports her, soothes, and comforts her. Noah's words resonate with the utopian energy necessary to enact change. As Lyman Tower Sargent states, it is important to choose utopia: "we must choose Utopia. We must choose the belief that the world can be radically improved; we must dream socially; and we must allow our social dreams to affect our lives. The choice for Utopia is a choice that the world can be radically improved" (Sargent 2007, 306). Noah chooses to believe that changes can be enacted, that her world can slowly but radically improve, and that her actions and words can affect and improve her and others' lives. Noah's choice to work through language to create the conditions for a better coexistence with the aliens is consistent with Butler's vision in many of her works.

Conclusion

Butler's characters, often strong Black women, actively choose survival and change, conditions achievable through negotiation and language. In interviews, when speaking of *Kindred*, Butler often refers to a college friend of hers who "was the kind that would have killed and died, as opposed to surviving and hanging on and hoping and working for change" (Brown 2010, 182; Burton-Rose 2010, 196). Rye, Gan, and Noah—like Lilith from *Dawn*, Dana from *Kindred*, Lauren from the Parable series, and other characters from Butler's oeuvre—choose to keep hope alive and work for change by negotiating and making uncomfortable choices: "That's what I want to write about," claimed Butler in an interview, "when you are *aware* of what it means to be an adult and what choices you have to make, the fact that maybe you're afraid, but you still have to act" (Brown 2010, 182). For Butler, "willing to do demeaning work and accept humiliation"—as her mother had to do in order to provide her with food, shelter, and education—is the responsible,

uncomfortable action of “heroes” and not that of the “frightened,” the “timid,” or “cowards” (Burton-Rose 2010, 197).¹⁰

Though the options Butler’s characters face and choose can be read as signs of cooptation and nominal consent, it seems clear that for Butler, they are what allow humans to survive and keep hope alive. The stories present characters who “choose utopia,” they choose to believe that language and communication, together with knowledge, compromise, and negotiation are necessary to radically change the world and allow humans and aliens to reach a more just, if imperfect, coexistence. Negotiation allows for hybrid societies, where differences can coexist, and reciprocity is encouraged. The theme of hybridity is also a structural characteristic of Butler’s science fiction, a feature that connects her to more recent Afrofuturistic writers.¹¹ Consistent with Morrison’s view of language, cultural and linguistic negotiation is an act with consequences. And in these times, it remains a revolutionary message, one which reminds us of the importance of knowledge and education as a tool of resistance to systemic racism, inequalities, and oppression.

One last story by Butler, “The Book of Martha,” emphasizes the importance and the power of language. It is a conversation between fictional Black novelist Martha Bes and God, which Butler considered as her only explicit “utopia story” (Butler 2005b, 214). God tells Martha that s/he has granted her the power to make one important change to creation so that people will “find less destructive, more peaceful, sustainable ways to live” and “treat one another better and treat their environment more sensibly” (2005e, 192-93). Martha has a great responsibility, one that she will accomplish through language: “I’m supposed to change people by [...] just saying it?” (2005e,

¹⁰ One exchange in “Amnesty” seems particularly significant and can be read as a response to readers being critical about Butler’s position of negotiation. Among the prospective translators are a man and a woman who are very angry and resentful about the situation they are forced to deal with. They repeatedly show their hostility towards and disapproval of Noah. When the woman, Thera Collier, shows her disapproval, she is reminded that she wasn’t there and that it happened to Noah, not her. Shortly after that, while addressing the cases of rape, the woman is cut abruptly short when she judges the behavior of the abductees: “‘You were intelligent. You could see what the weeds were doing to you. You didn’t have to—’ Noah cut her off. ‘I didn’t have to what?’” (Butler 2005c, 167). It seems to me that Noah, and Butler with her, are reminding us that her choices, as all those of people who negotiate survival, cannot be judged by the same standards, a lesson learned from Harriet Jacobs.

¹¹ Womack is one of the scholars who sees Butler as one of the points in the “Afrofuturism trinity” together with Sun Ra and George Clinton. One of only a handful of Black sf writers, Butler has become an inspiration and role model for later writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, and Tananarive Due. Her “quintessential writing” has become “both benchmark and inspiration” (Womack 2013, 109, 112).

195). By using language, particularly naming, Martha will create a better version of her world. Language becomes literally an act with material, social, and political consequences. Martha finally decides to save humanity by granting people dreams that “teach—or at least promote— more thoughtfulness when people are awake” and “promote more concern for real consequences” (2005e, 211). As Marleen S. Barr notes, “[w]hen Martha thinks about her oeuvre and decides to change people in a single positive way, she uses her new power in terms of textuality. (Butler, via Martha, announces that we can do things with words, that the illocutionary force is with us.)” (Barr 2010, 440).

Martha's actions, like those of Noah and Butler's other characters, show that Butler believes in the power of writing science fiction as a way to engage her readers and get them to critically think about the world. In “Positive Obsession,” Butler recalls being asked repeatedly, “What good is science fiction to Black people?” (2005f, 134). Literature, and science fiction in particular—like literacy and the use of language in these stories— influences and stimulates readers to think about “the present, the future, and the past [...] [and] gets reader[s] and writer[s] off the beaten track” (2005f, 134-35).

As she stated in a 1980 interview, authors should “write about human differences, all human differences and help make them acceptable. I think science fiction writers can do this if they want to” (Harrison 2010, 6). And in “The Book of Martha,” Butler imagines Afrofuturist science fiction to be God's gift to a Black woman as a “way to save the world” (Burton-Rose 2010, 204). Butler's use of language shows that negotiation, translation, and mediation are the necessary means to cope with the complexities of dealing with the “other,” thus becoming instruments of resistance. In the tradition of critical dystopias, Butler's Afrofuturist stories maintain hope even in extreme conditions of oppression.

References

- Baccolini, Raffaella. (2000). “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler.” In *Future Females, The Next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, edited by Marleen S. Barr, 13–34. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Baccolini, Raffaella. (1995). “‘It's not in the womb the damage is done’: Memory, Desire, and the Construction of Gender in Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*.” In *Le trasformazioni del narrare [Transformations of narrating]*, edited by E. Siciliani et al. 293–309. Fasano: Schena.

- Baccolini, Raffaella. (2017a). "Kindness and Solidarity as Political Acts." *de genere*, 3, 25–34.
- Baccolini, Raffaella. (2017b). "Nationalism, Reproduction, and Hybridity in Octavia E. Butler's 'Bloodchild.'" In *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, edited by Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal, 132–41. [Yokine, W.A.]: Twelfth Planet Press.
- Baccolini, Raffaella, and Tom Moylan (eds.) (2003). *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. New York: Routledge.
- Barr, Marleen S. (2010). "'The Book of Martha'/'The Books of Octavia: An Appreciation.'" Vonda McIntyre et al. "Reflections on Octavia Butler." *Science Fiction Studies*, 37(3. November), 433–442. [439–442].
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1985). "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1871." *Critical Inquiry*, 12, 144–65.
- Brown, Charles. (2010). "Octavia E. Butler: Persistence." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, edited by Consuela Francis, 181–88. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Burton-Rose, Daniel. (2010). "The Lit Interview: Octavia Butler." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, edited by Consuela Francis, 196–205. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005a). "Afterword." [to "Bloodchild"] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 30–32. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005b). "Afterword." [to "The Book of Martha"] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 214. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005c). "Amnesty." [2003] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 149–184. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005d). "Bloodchild." [1984] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 3–29. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005e). "The Book of Martha." [2005] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 189–214. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (1998). "'Devil Girl from Mars': Why I Write Science Fiction." *media in transition* 4 October. Accessed April 10, 2022. http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/articles/butler_talk_index.html
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005f). "Positive Obsession." [1989] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 125–135. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Butler, Octavia E. (2005g). "Speech Sounds." [1983] In *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 89–108. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Cavalcanti, Ildney. (2000). "Utopia off Language in Contemporary Feminist Dystopia." *Utopian Studies*, 11(2), 152–180.
- Dery, Mark. (1993). "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92 (4. Fall), 735–778.
- Foster, Thomas. (2013). "'We get to live, and so do they': Octavia Butler's Contact Zones." In *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*, edited by Rebecca J. Holden, and Nisi Shawl, 140–167. Seattle: Aqueduct Press.

- Godard, Barbara. (1990). "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation." In *Translation, History and Culture*, edited by Susan Bassnett, and André Lefevere, 87–96. London: Pinter.
- Godayol, Pilar. (2013). "Metaphors, Women and Translation: From Les Belles Infidèles to La Frontera." *Gender and Language*, 7(1), 97–116.
- Green, Michelle Erica. (1994). "'There goes the neighborhood': Octavia Butler's Demand for Diversity in Utopias." In *Utopian and Science Fiction by Women. Worlds of Difference*, edited by Jane L. Donawerth, and Carol A. Kolmerten, 166–189. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Harrison, Rosalie G. (2010). "Sci-Fi Visions: An Interview with Octavia Butler." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, edited by Consuela Francis, 3–9. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Helford, Elyce Rae. (1994). "'Would you really rather die than bear my young?' The Construction of Gender, Race, and Species in Octavia E. Butler's 'Bloodchild.'" *African American Review*, 28(2), 259–271.
- Jacobs, Harriet. (1988). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861]. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lavender, Isiah, III. (2011). "Critical Race Theory." In *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherry Vint, 185–193. New York: Routledge.
- MIT Cultural Studies Project/1998. (2010). "Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany." In *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, edited by Consuela Francis, 142–157. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Millward, Julie. (2007). "Dystopian wor(l)ds: language within and beyond experience." PhD diss., University of Sheffield.
- Morrison, Toni. (1993). "Nobel Lecture." *The Nobel Prize* 7 December. Accessed April 10, 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>
- Moylan, Tom. (2000). *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. Boulder: Westview.
- Moylan, Tom. (2021). *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Russ, Joanna. (1988). "When It Changed." [1972]. In *Science Fiction: The Science Fiction Research Association Anthology*, edited by Patricia S. Warrick, Charles G. Waugh, and Martin H. Greenberg, 411–417. New York: Harper Collins.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. (2007). "Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action." In *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, edited by Tom Moylan, and Raffaella Baccolini. 301–319. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Sisk, David W. (1997). *Transformations of Language in Dystopia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Von Flotow, Luise. (1997). *Translation and Gender. Translating in the "Era of Feminism."* Manchester-Ottawa: St. Jerome-University of Ottawa Press.

- Walker, Alice. (1983). "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 231–243. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Womack, Ytasha L. (2013). *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill.