Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler’s Pedagogical Philosophy

SARAH OUTTERTSON

The deliberate and relentless depiction of violence in Octavia Butler’s science fiction is striking. Her books are full of conflict that ranges from nuclear war to suburban looting, child abuse to concentration-camp slavery, self-defense to deliberate genocide. Within this violent world, her characters consistently encounter dramatic changes in cultural and bodily identity as they form new and strange family groups. Butler uses classically fantastic constructions such as vampires, aliens, and telepaths to present both the radical degree of separating difference and the extraordinary extent of intersubjective joining necessary to her project, as she engages the problematic idea that unity in community is a utopian prospect. The community structures she presents are soaked with explicit and implicit violence, inherent in both their origins and in the way their structure is controlled by determined, essentialist elements—whether genetic, pathological, or technological. Butler depicts violence between children and parents, teachers and students, alien protectors and human subjects, the infectors and the infected. Even the most caring and protective relationships are revealed to be inherently dangerous in their very intimacy and isolation. Again and again, Butler envisions a seeming-utopia whose hidden stagnation is suddenly ripped open by the violence of change.

Butler’s characters exist in worlds that require them constantly to learn and teach in order to adapt. This learning process is not benign, however. From Patternmaster to Fledgling, Butler’s novels portray the process of maturing and discovering the world to be dangerous and violent. Students are just as dangerous to teachers as teachers are to students. Thus, the learning that goes on in these novels does not follow either typical utopian or dystopian forms. According to Baccolini and Moylan, “the eutopian plot [consists] of dislocation, education, and return of an informed visitor” whereas a dystopia begins in medias res with a slow realization of and confrontation with the dominant culture, usually via “reappropriation of language” (6). Butler’s

characters do not so much confront the dominant culture as find themselves learning and teaching because of its violence. The more they resist the lesson, the more they learn; the best teacher of all is the violent encounter with inevitable change.

On the most basic level, violence is bodily harm that inflicts suffering. Abstracted, the word has developed to include cultural harm; that is, restriction or imposition on rights and freedoms both systemically and deliberately. But if the metaphoric possibilities of “violence” are extended, the word also carries the idea of the violation of boundaries, transgression of the lines defining personal identity and integrity—an idea central to Butler’s interests. For Butler, whose entire project sometimes seems to be to depict “violent transgression of bodily boundaries,” the resonant connotations inherent in this word “violence” allow her to enact, as Peter Sands says, a “rhetorical worldview” that emphasizes the “fluidity of bodily borders, perhaps of essences” (2–3). This rhetorical, and, as I will emphasize, pedagogical worldview arises out of the idea that the process of encountering difference and allowing yourself to change in response to it (even in order to build more intimately connected communities) is a much more violating experience than we often sentimentalize it to be.

Thus, at the same time as Butler’s treatment of the idealized concepts of learning, change, and the reconciliation of difference demonstrates the hidden violence within them, her treatment of violence reveals its transgressive possibilities. I am aware of the moral issues presented by this thesis, and I do not wish to justify the so-called myth of redemptive violence by which we literally fight for peace. However, within my own pacifist and utopian desires, I find Butler’s novels counter-intuitively and unsentimentally compelling as an exploration of the inevitability of violence. In juxtaposition, they reveal to each other the lies we tell ourselves about our own violent behavior. Taking Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy and the Parable duo as my main texts, I will trace how Butler’s progressive retelling of the relationship linking diversity, change, and intellectual growth with inevitable violence offers, despite its relentless and pragmatic pessimism, a space for a pedagogical vision of practical and embodied community to overcome the barriers that divide us.
Lilith, the protagonist of the *Xenogenesis* books, is one of Butler’s clearest examples of the violated and violent teacher. In *Dawn*, aliens arrive on earth after nuclear war has devastated the planet. After taking as many humans as possible into their ship, they choose Lilith to lead and teach the new colony of humans to be sent back to the recovering planet. Their rescue of the humans, however, is hardly altruistic. They genetically alter the humans so that they can only reproduce with the Oankali, doing so in order to incorporate both species’ genetic qualities into a new construct offspring. The Oankali will help the humans to begin repopulating Earth, but only on their own terms. After confining Lilith alone to study her until she nearly goes mad with isolation, the Oankali finally begin to interact with her only to demand that she learn exactly what they wish her to learn. The “Oankali version of stubbornness” is “extreme” (Butler 120). When she asks for specific answers, they tell her, “You’ll get them eventually—as you need them” (52). Nikanj, the gender-neutral companion that the Oankali intend to mate with Lilith, is equally demanding: “It needed less sleep than she did, and when she was not asleep, it expected her to be learning or teaching. It wanted not only language, but culture, biology, history, her own life story. . . . Whatever she knew, it expected to learn” (60). Lilith and Nikanj are not learning from each other freely but under the coercion of the larger Oankali project. While Lilith is not treated cruelly after the mistakes of the initial isolation, and she is often allowed to wander on the Oankali ship, she feels completely helpless as if she were a “five-year-old” (63) or a “captive” (65). While she is not in fear of physical violence from the Oankali, she does call the situation “coercion” (82).

When Lilith accepts her work of leading the first group of humans, she takes on a role that seems opposite, teaching instead of learning, but the pattern of enforcement repeats itself. The Oankali give Lilith the abilities necessary to “parent” the first group: “To teach, to give comfort, to feed and clothe, to guide them through and interpret what will be, for them, a new and frightening world. To parent” (111). In order to teach, Lilith must gain enough power to control the other humans. The Oankali fear that since “humans were impressed by size” Lilith will be too small to be “impressive” (120). In order to teach, Lilith must be able to “impress” information on the other humans. Therefore, they make changes in her very body, giving her
physical and mental power to enforce her leadership: “The Oankali had given her information, increased physical strength, enhanced memory, and an ability to control the walls and the suspended animation plants. These were her tools. And every one of them would make her seem less human” (120). As she becomes more powerful, Lilith’s body becomes more physically alien from those she is about to teach. The other humans fear that Lilith has become a collaborator, a “trustee” (130). Lilith has taken on Oankali characteristics not just physically but pedagogically.

The humans are confined together in “the training room” for months, which provokes the threat of killing between them, the ultimate violence: “Bored, caged humans could not help finding destructive things to do” (154, 147). Yet according to Nikanj, “this way is best” for training them to survive on Earth (154). Though the Oankali don’t harm the humans themselves, learning requires suffering, so teachers must become part of a violent system. The Oankali explicitly permit Lilith “to defend herself” even to the point of killing although for the rest the decree is that “no one who has killed or severely injured another will set foot on Earth again” (154). Lilith has become incorporated into the Oankali’s community of teachers despite her own resistance to their methods, and if she is to teach, the violence she encounters and inflicts is inescapable. While Lilith herself is not committing the aggressive acts of violent domination which she must use violence to stop, the juxtaposition of sexual assaults by humans whom she can stop and sexual assault by the Oankali, whom she cannot, reveals how the violence she inflicts on the other humans is an inescapable part of the learning process. Metaphorically, Lilith is right when she shouts at a woman who has just tried to strangle her, “I’m a prisoner here just like you!” (137).

If teachers and students are trapped in a violent system, parents and children are equally so. The Oankali’s analogy between teaching and parenthood for Lilith echoes in much of Butler’s other work, and the dangerous apathy or abusiveness of parents toward their children is staggering. The mental powers of Patternist children are so out of control before their transitions that they drive their parents mad if they live together. The parents who are not already insane and violently abusive simply send the children away to school and avoid them as much as possible. Fathers like Doro and Rayal in the Patternmaster books manipulate their children without compunction. In the Parable books, which have the dubious distinction of showing Butler’s
most insistently violent world, Lauren Olamina consciously rejects the choice to abandon her visionary community for the sake of a safer environment for her child. The impact of her choice is emphasized when Larkin is violently kidnapped and does not meet her mother again except by chance much later in life. In *Dawn*, when Nikanj suffers an apparently mortal wound, Lilith is horrified at the “insanely calm” voice of its parent, who seems to find “nothing important going on for it here. Only its child, horribly wounded” (232). The presence of the child is disturbing to parents in Butler’s work, who take an unusually unsentimental attitude toward them often with violent results.

Butler shows us these parents who make decisions that put children in danger, despite the anxiety these depictions provoke, to examine the real implications and workings-out of pedagogy and parenting. She challenges our assumption that learning can happen as such without violence. While this unsentimental attitude is not valorized by the text, it is eventually adopted by even the most sympathetic characters such as Anyanwu. Dana, the protagonist of Butler’s time-travel novel *Kindred*, does not escape from her experiences without losing her arm; neither can we emerge intact from one stage into another without sacrificing parts of ourselves. The other central characters who mediate between groups by teaching and being taught—including Anyanwu, Mary, and Alanna of the *Patternist* series; Lilith, Akin, and Jodahs of the *Xenogenesis* series; Lauren Olamina of the *Parable* books; Gan in the story “Bloodchild”; Noah in “Amnesty”; and Shori of *Fledgling*—do so to survive the same violent encounter between different groups. Education in Butler’s work is violent in both senses: while it literally involves physical harm and suffering, that violence also serves as a metaphor for more fundamental bodily boundary-violation. Both forms become necessary to the teaching and learning that goes on in the novels.

**Retelling Patterns of Violence**

The ambiguity of this unusually neutral definition of violence as “boundary-violating” is counter-intuitive especially considering how Butler also seems to intend the continuous violence, physical harm, and suffering in the novels to reveal to us our own inherent violence as humans. Whenever reason and compassion falter in Butler’s worlds, violent aggression and domination automatically take over. Butler’s personal view seems to be that our “hierarchi-
cal” tendencies, as described in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, have an inescapably violent effect on our interactions: though the human resisters who refuse to mate with the Oankali are finally allowed to settle by themselves on Mars, there is no suggestion that anything in their fundamental nature has changed to prevent them from destroying themselves with nuclear war just as before; similarly, the most arbitrary cruelty in *Clay’s Ark* and *Fledgling* is inflicted not by the communities of blood-sucking or diseased hybrids but by the fully-human gangs that capture and torture others by choice and out of their own aggression.

The Clayark organism of the book *Clay’s Ark* is Butler’s most powerful manifestation of violent biological inevitability. This alien organism infects the bodies of humans and immediately begins to change them both mentally and physically. Crucially, the microbe gives them an irresistible urge to spread it by mating with and infecting others. The more they resist this urge, the stronger it gets. Humans become tools for spreading the organism throughout the human race with incredible speed. Upon infection they become leaner, stronger, faster; their senses sharpen and they age more slowly. The microbe even prevents them from choosing to destroy themselves. The disease is repellent; those affected give birth to mutant, though sentient, children; they eat raw meat; they mate indiscriminately; they are forced to infect others who are likely to die in the transition process if they are not frequently re-infected. Yet the horror and self-disgust that the infected humans feel for themselves and for their four-legged, cat-like children cannot prevent them from fulfilling their new biological imperative. They must infect the rest of humanity; they have no choice.

Similarly, the aliens of the *Xenogenesis* books have a biological imperative that forces dramatic changes on the humans. They carry the Oankali organelle in their cells, which allows them to sense and manipulate genetic information, and, crucially, to mate species to species in the irresistible “gene trade” that feeds their “hunger for difference.” While the Oankali say they are rescuing the humans from the biological imperative towards hierarchical behavior that has resulted in nuclear war, the way they force the humans to mate with them seems intrinsically violent. The Oankali’s “tendency to infantilize to make choices for the child’s ‘own good’” denies the humans the right to remain as they are (Allison 478). Christina Braid situates the multiple and subtle modes of violence that the Oankali display—in such forms as
the “violence of apathy,” imprisonment and selfish exploitation, and cultural assimilation of humans—as unintended side-effects of Butler’s ideals of community. But these side-effects are not incidental. The actions of the Oankali are as driven by the organism they carry in their cells as those of the Clayark people.

Meanwhile, the more apparently human Patternists, who escape both the mutations of the Clayark organism and the enforced interbreeding of the Oankali, are just as controlled by their mental connections. In *Patternmaster*, the protagonist Teray spends the whole book fighting the oppressive structure of the mental Pattern and plantation-style house system that controls the mind-reading Patternists, enslaves the human mutes, and wars against the mutant Clayarks. As much as Teray resists the system oppressing him, however, its self-replicating structure is inescapable: even after victory, he and Amber, an independent Patternist healer, cannot destroy the Pattern but can only take on the oppressive role themselves. The disembodied Doro, who rules with his ability to take over human bodies and thus live forever by killing, breeds humans into Patternists with unmistakably violent and controlling methods. The powerful latent Patternists brought together to mate are increasingly likely to kill each other. However, as soon as Doro’s methods result in a Patternmaster, and Mary realizes her power to control, she must immediately link the other Patternists to her with mental “leashes” despite their resistance. Her power all but requires her to invade and bind their minds in order to prevent them all from destroying each other. Then, the new Patternmaster uses the power she can draw from all the Patternists to destroy the one who created and brought them together in the first place, Doro. The Pattern is inevitable. The violence that the Pattern allows its masters to inflict is paltry in comparison to its intrinsic and self-reinforcing power. The very fact of its existence is the ultimate violation of personal identity and self-determination, and so Pattern, power, even violence itself rules, and not the characters who serve as its figurehead.

Hoda Zaki has argued that because “Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally violent,” the novels deny “collective human action” as a possible solution (241). According to Zaki, therefore, Butler’s “conditions for fundamental social change are such as to postpone it indefinitely.” If all violence is biologically determined and necessary, then no action is possible—hardly a utopian world. But while Butler does argue in interviews that
“simple hierarchical behavior goes all the way back, I suspect, to the beginning of life” (Mehaffy and Keating 55) and, so, makes violence evolutionarily inevitable, it is possible that she did not realize the full range of implications of the way she depicts violence. The insistence of Butler’s return to her characteristic boundary-violating communities suggests that they carry some trace of whatever utopian hope may exist for her.

**Per-apocalyptic Communities**

Many of Butler’s critics respond to the disturbing inevitability of these patterns by arguing that the conflicts she creates are science-fictional metonyms for more cultural and contingent problems. Much criticism attempts to identify the violence in her work by pointing to flawed villains or tyrants as a cause. Her stories of earnestly helpful aliens and resistant humans become allegories for human enslavement and human resistance and, so, allow critics to argue the balance of moral guilt between characters that become violent in order to survive. While some see the possibilities offered by the Oankali perspective as utopian, others find the utopia in Butler’s work only in the resistance of the humans to their compelled mixing of mind with mind, body with body, human with alien, human with other. Salvaggio writes that “though Butler’s heroines are dangerous and powerful women, their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny” (81). Braid suggests that “pockets of hope” in the *Xenogenesis* books present “the ideal of a justice based in compassion and the uniqueness of individuals. Such a philosophy surpasses the scientifically pragmatic Oankali logic, which calculates ways to give to others by means of seduction, manipulation, and illusion” (61). Other, more pessimistic, interpretations see all of Butler’s human protagonists, like the different kinds of powerful aliens, as “saviors corrupted by their own vision and goals who become terrible tyrants” (Krell 29). I find all these interpretations accurate in part, but inadequate in that they fail to acknowledge both the pervasive presence of violence in the books and its value as experience.

It is difficult to pin down Butler’s practical definition of the violence undeniably occurring somewhere in her books, let alone her moral evaluation of it. James Miller finds middle ground in his construction of Butler’s work as a “critical dystopia,” a form which “points to the socio-historic causes of the
dystopian elements of our culture” not out of pessimism but out of a desire “to create new myths for the postmodern age” (337). He argues that Butler “does not offer a full-blown utopian ‘blueprint’ in her work, but rather a post-apocalyptic hoping informed by the lessons of the past” (336). Butler has said that she intends to “stretch minds” (Mehaffy and Keating 53). I agree that Butler’s work presents a pessimistic world in order to stretch our minds and enable us to criticize our own, but I think her criticisms work in a more unusual way, for she does not suggest that we can reach a less violent future through any attempt to rid ourselves of violence. Her hope is not as much “post-apocalyptic” as per-apocalyptic: violence transmuted, not overcome.

To explain: Butler’s vision of violence links it with the connection and intimacy of these communities of mixing and calls into question our easy sentimentalization of the processes of learning, growth, and joining differences. These merging relationships and communities are a consistent trope in Butler’s work. Sandra Govan writes that power is the core of Butler’s work, and that “illuminating that central core are the threads, cords, ropes, and cables wrapped around it” (83). In every version, however different, the pattern bringing people together always involves power relationships that violate boundaries of mind and body. The trope “moves back and forth along a continuum from the threat of Self-annihilation in the maw of the Other—e.g., Doro’s constant threat in the Patternist series—to advocating willfully casting off the Self in favor of a communal consciousness—e.g., the promises of the Oankali and Earthseed” (Sands 3). Yet, Butler’s juxtaposition of these different forms of violence suggests a basic similarity between them all.

Butler’s integration of utopian desire for communal consciousness with the violence it produces is not easy to accept, not least because it seems to preempt any possibility of utopian peace or unity. Miller makes the problematic justification that “while Butler clearly presents the Oankali in a positive light with regard to their non-hierarchical society and their respect for healing, diversity, and guilt-free pleasure, she does not endorse their determinist views about humans” (342). This comment seems faulty considering Butler’s oft-expressed fear that humanity is in trouble because “hierarchical behavior is too much in charge, too self-sustaining” (McCaffery 67). In fact, Butler herself seems to have mixed feelings about the result of her investigation into Patternist and Oankali modes of boundary-violating community. Describing her effort to alter perceptions of human hierarchical behavior by proposing
an alternate system, she says, “But I’m not sure I really managed what I set out to do. I wound up with a somewhat different hierarchical system, chemically controlled as with DNA, but, instead, pheromonal” (Mehaffy and Keating 54). Pheromonal control by the Oankali turns out to be just as violent as genetically-determined hierarchical behavior in humans.

Still, her work is more consistent than she gives herself credit for. Her exploration of ways of violating boundaries of bodies and minds in the *Patternmaster* series, the “cyborg” ideal, led her to the apocalyptic violence of the final installment, *Clay’s Ark*, which finds its philosophical climax in the nuclear war that begins the story of *Dawn*. With hindsight, the connection is clear. Thus, it is also clear why her effort to provide humans with genetic engineers to combat genetic hierarchical violence fails to eliminate the workings of violence itself. Butler argues that everyone and everything, including her utopian-minded search for transgressive communities, is violent. Those in power are never free of controlling structures, and those who commit acts or perpetuate systems that seem violent are themselves within boundary-violating systems such as the oooloi family groups or the Pattern. No one is truly free, and so even when people try to do the right things they cause bad things to happen.

However, at the same time, as I have already suggested, these communities of radical merging have a utopian quality. The characters establishing these transgressive systems become increasingly sympathetic as Butler’s work proceeds; though we begin with the horrifying Doro, we end with the much more hopeful pattern-makers Olamina and Shori (though they are still ruthless characters in their own ways). The Oankali’s enforcement of radical change on the humans in *Xenogenesis* propels them together and brings them to a more welcoming and intersubjective community. The Oankali are joined with their living ship and with each other through their genetic perception and communication, and this joining allows a mental consensus structure that is mediated through the body. Similarly, the infected Clayarks become an irrevocably united family and another manifestation of Butler’s characteristic community sustained by its diversity and flexible acceptance of change. The Clayark organism is “transformative, not degenerative,” and despite the fear and horror of both humans and Patternists at their animal-like qualities, the Clayarks are still sentient beings (Birns 8). Thus, the Clayark and Oankali organisms commit the same kind of uncomfortable but not cruel violence as
part of the process of mixing differences together. The way they integrate diversity, accept change, and offer the possibility of more complete connection between people fulfills utopian desires.

The Compelling Violence of Change

There is an essential opposition that can now be identified in the definition of violence. The words “coercion” and “compulsion” currently have nearly identical meanings that suggest violent enforcement. However, the Latin roots of the words have very different connotations. The verb “coercere” suggests being enclosed, limited, confined, restrained, with a noun form that means summary punishment inflicted without a trial. In contrast, the verb “compellere” means to bring together, to localize, to impel with the force of wind. The most negative meaning to be found for the word in Traupman’s Latin dictionary is “to reduce by force (to some state or condition).” Paying tribute to this etymology, I would like to associate the particular idea that I have been here developing—of boundary-crossing violence—with this word “compulsion” in order to distinguish it from the more negative connotations of “coercion.”

In Butler’s work, this “compulsion” is violence that leads to dramatic communal intersubjectivity. Laurel Bollinger suggests that while one of Butler’s goals is “to envision intersubjectivity without hierarchy, yet [Butler] doubts that such economy can be sustained by human beings alone” (346). The economy mentioned is Irigaray’s placental economy, which Bollinger intriguingly imagines as the kind of healthy intersubjectivity sought by Butler’s work. The image of the placenta promises to mediate between and connect two subjects who are neither separated nor absorbed one into the other. While Bollinger sees Butler resisting “images of intersubjective fusion that simplify or glamorize unmediated connection” (331) because they result in a “destructive fusion” (330) where “bonding threatens to become bondage” (337), she finds in Butler’s images of intersubjective mixing and internal diversity the suggestion that “only such intersubjective physiology can—or should—survive” (343). For Bollinger, Butler’s placental structures offer hope by preserving the between-ness of the subjects being connected into a community that gives shape and structure to its members.

Just as violence helps the “placental,” mediating characters to merge diversity into radical communities of shared mind and body, these communi-
ties themselves become locations of change. Butler’s treatment of the relation between change and violence in her Parable novels is particularly complex and suggests that even diversity, freedom, and education within the utopian enclave community are not sufficient for lasting survival. Lauren Olamina lives in a disintegrating world. As her family tries to resist the unrest and violence swirling outside their walled enclave of neighbors, Lauren begins to realize the impossibility of maintaining their way of life. The religious verses that she begins to write as a young girl explore the idea of change as the ultimate inevitability and necessity. Hence, the violence of the eventual destruction of her family’s enclave fulfills the philosophy of her verses: unchanging isolation cannot last.

When Lauren escapes that destruction, she begins traveling the dangerous highways north and picking up companions along the way—many of whom, like her, are empathics, a characteristic which makes their experience of pain distinctly communal. Though the people of the new community begin to depend on each other for survival, they are afraid of becoming too close and trusting the wrong people. When they arrive in a safe place, they finally begin to build another community. But withdrawing from conflict, unfortunately, stifles change. Even though Acorn distinguishes itself for its diversity, acceptance, and utopian freedom—contrasting with the “closed societies” of the surrounding towns as it joins the openness of the city to a pastoral sense of safety—violence must still come to Acorn because of its very impulse toward stagnating self-protection. Change becomes violent once again because it must break through the intellectual version of the same wall that surrounded Lauren’s home in Parable of the Sower. Thus, the violent attack and destruction of the community is the only thing that can teach Olamina the full implications of her Earthseed philosophy. Olamina was right—change is necessary—but change is also violence, and so in a sense the violence that destroys her communities is inevitable. Only when she finally lets the seed spread, when she finally sends her companions out to travel without a safe and unchanging home, can they survive.

This message can be found more obliquely in previous books, too, such as Clay’s Ark, in which, as it turns out, attempts to escape from the disease are what finally make its spread inevitable. The Clayark organism is brought to Earth by astronauts attempting to escape it. Eli’s sabotage of the ship is what turns him into an infectious rogue-agent outside the institutional
quarantine that might have prevented the biological imperative from having its way. Blake’s attempt to escape from the uneasy equilibrium of Eli’s community, which has so far managed to contain the disease to itself, is what finally releases it into the wider world beyond their control. The transition of the rest of humanity, occurring without the life-saving care and help of the already-infected humans, will come with catastrophic and deadly effect. Thus, the more that the humans try to isolate themselves and preserve the status quo, the more dangerous change becomes.

The Embodied Violence in Diversity

The anxiety and yet inevitability associated with bodily mixing is the essence of Butler’s engagement with the problem of diversity. The central horror of the resister humans in the *Xenogenesis* books is not aliens and humans learning from each other or even living together in communities, but the implication of the mating that threatens to join them completely: they fear the imminent destruction of the human race as they know it. The ambiguity of the Oankali’s reproductive approach is clear: while they crave difference and new genetic information, the genetic trade ultimately eliminates difference by creating a single species out of two. Butler argues that the utopian ideal of merging complex differences into a long-desired community involves violence, compulsion rather than coercion, perhaps, but violence nonetheless. Both the teacher and the parent must die in order to form the new creature. Teaching and parenting are both terrifying because the child or student is the image of your own death before your eyes; the better you do your job, the more completely they replace you. As Kahguyaht says, “Your children will know us, Lilith. You never will” (112). Butler shows how there is no way to escape the reality that change and difference are destructive of the current state of affairs.

Moreover, the Oankali’s desire for difference arises out of nothing other than a bodily desire to learn. “How do the Oankali study?” Lilith asks in *Dawn*. The answer is that they “perceive” (22). The Oankali do not have culture or writing to transmit knowledge in the human sense; instead, information travels through the body by means of the sensory tentacles and the mediation of the Oankali organelle manipulating genetic essence. The way the Oankali learn, then, is predictably connected to a transgressively embod-
ied form of violence. Kahguyaht tells Lilith that the Oankali have “learned” to eat Earth food “by studying teachers to whom it isn’t poison. By studying your people, Lilith. Your bodies” (49). The Oankali crave the knowledge of difference, but their need does not stop there. When Lilith first understands their plan to interbreed with humans, she asks why they need the gene trade when they already have the information gained from human genetic material, and she continues: “No. I don’t care what you do with what you’ve already learned—how you apply it to yourselves—but leave us out of it. Just let us go. If we have the problem you think we do, let us work it out as human beings” (42). However, the Oankali cannot do so: “We are as committed to the trade as your body is to breathing. We were overdue for it when we found you. Now it will be done—to the rebirth of your people and mine” (43).

The Oankali’s learning is natural to their bodies. It is as inevitable as the Clayark drive to infect or the human hierarchical impulse that Butler depicts. This Oankali pedagogical philosophy explains their odd aversion to human writing. When Lilith is first struggling with learning the Oankali language and collecting her thoughts in the aftermath of all the revelations, she asks for paper and pens. The Oankali, however refuse despite all pleading. Writing is “not allowed” (62). When Lilith protests again and again that humans need help to remember things and, so, she wants to take notes, Nikanj’s response is to offer to begin changing her body to allow her to learn quickly and easily the way the Oankali do. The Oankali’s authoritarian resistance to Lilith’s writing arises out of their more intimate modes of knowing and teaching. The Oankali suspect human writing because it comes from a “contingent view of reality that runs counter to their own ability to directly transmit both experience and genetic knowledge” (Sands 6). Human communication relies on signs and symbols not the genetic and physical perception that the Oankali use. The Oankali are free from the artificial cultural reality that, because it provides a semblance of connection between humans, ultimately distances and separates them all the more. Their refusal to allow Lilith the tools of that external culture whets her hunger for the greater connection that only they can provide. Once again, coercion becomes compulsion.

The way Oankali pedagogy relies on the unmediated connection of body to body suggests the same compulsive violation of boundaries of identity that has appeared before. Crucially, that compulsion also seems violently destructive of a future for humanity as independent and unviolated in its
substance. Lilith’s resistance to the “trade” at her first encounter with the idea is the same as the more general reaction of violent aggression by the resister humans. When she thinks of the mixed children of Oankali and human, she remembers her son, “how like her he had been, how like his father. Then she thought of grotesque, Medusa children.” Natural pleasure in human mixing turns into horror when she realizes that interbreeding means the destruction of the human race: “No! You’ll finish what the war began” (43). The Oankali learn from genetic material, a process which allows communal knowledge that does not separate body and mind. However, this transgressive form of learning means, in a narrative if not logical sense, that the boundary-violating must continue all the way into compulsion, into bringing humans and Oankali together completely. Yet, all this violent connective desire is driven by the Oankali organelle’s biological hunger for genetic difference: Nikanj describes its desire for sexual union as “torment” (83). Again, the moral value of violent compulsion is not clear to Lilith nor perhaps to the reader, but the fact that Butler draws connections between violence, transgressive mixing, community connection, and survival is provocative.

**The Dangerous Pursuit of Utopia**

Introducing her analysis of Butler as a feminist utopian writer, Claire Curtis writes that “twentieth century political philosophy takes for granted that the pursuit of utopia is dangerous for three reasons: pursuing utopia justifies the use of violence to accomplish its ends; it requires one to deny the individual in favor of the community; and it utilizes a mindset of mere problem-solving when asking the question of how humans should live together fruitfully.” In contrast to such a model stand writers of “feminist science fiction” such as Butler, Curtis explains, “whose utopias embrace pluralism, ambiguity, and the messiness of politics” (147). Butler’s work, according to Curtis, escapes the inherent violence of utopia by valuing change and diversity (which are the basic “ambiguous and self-directed” concepts of Earthseed) and by allowing for “the option of exit, for some may not share the vision” (155). While I agree with Curtis’s ultimate conclusion that Butler’s work escapes any coercion that is particular to utopian political philosophies, I have already defined violence so that valuing change and diversity does not escape violence but rather invites it. It seems to me that Butler’s valuation of diversity is extremely
pragmatic. She invites and accepts it, but as with Acorn she does not flinch from the prospect of destroying it when it becomes necessary to bring the community together. As the fact of the Oankali demonstrates, even if the parents and their original diversity may be destroyed in the process, mixing together is necessary for survival.

Thus, Butler's utopias are in fact dangerous, but only in the sense that through them she reveals how every interaction and relationship is dangerous because it opens borders to violence. It is particularly interesting here that the standard criticism quoted by Curtis of the violence inherent in “pursuit of utopia” could also work as a progressive critique of educational practice. That is, educational techniques that justify the use of coercion and incentives in the classroom tend to become ends in themselves. When they subordinate individual desires and creative impulses to the goals of the educational community, they become destructive of real learning. My instinctive position on the use of violence is that its natural pattern is to justify its own use until it ultimately destroys any goal beyond efficient problem-solving as an end in itself. Relationships violating individual identity are no more a means to healthy community than is physical violence a means to empower the victim. Yet, if Curtis’s defense of Butler’s attempts at utopia for their ambiguity and messiness holds water, then so does the ambiguous and messy theory of violence that Butler’s work proposes.

Butler has two arguments here. First, violence is inevitable. Despite the thin veneer of culture that we pretend exists, violating power is an independent force that we can’t avoid. Enslavement occurs even in the non-thinking patterns and procedures to which we revert so easily. Furthermore, survival requires violence. Butler demonstrates again and again how the harsh reality of confrontation with the ugliest forms of natural, determined behavior demonstrates the essential presence of violence in the human character. Second, and more controversially, violence is necessary for freedom. Knowledge, adulthood, and the reconciliation of difference are attained through a gauntlet of destruction. Compulsion brings us together through the painful violation of individual boundaries and the death of our precious past selves. The paradox Butler explores—one with which, incidentally, moral and religious philosophers have struggled for millennia—is that we are both determined by our violent natures and freed through their effects. This interpretation does not, I want to emphasize, mean that all violence is harmless—far from it—or
even of equal moral value. However, it does suggest how even coercive,
damaging violence has redemptive effects for those who suffer it, because it causes
and reminds us of the messiness of change.

Stoic nonviolence is certainly not the customary mode of Butler’s
characters. Moreover, the strange and painful affliction of the empathic “shar-
ers” in the Parable books, mentioned earlier, seems expressly to mock naive
expectations for the utopian value of relational abilities. The empathic com-
munication they share is not useful or constructive, it is simply dangerous.
Sharing pain does not make the sharers any less violent nor any more utopian;
it just makes them that much more vulnerable to the effects of violence. The
situation of the sharers certainly shows that transgressively connective com-
panies, as much as we may desire them, are dangerous (a thesis already
thoroughly advanced in the Patternmaster and Xenogenesis books). However,
in the sharers, Butler also depicts a completely depersonalized and causal
form of pain, a depiction which allows her the opportunity to examine a
new attitude toward the experience of violence. No longer must the suffer-
ers worry that they are cooperating with their oppressors; the only oppressor
here is their own reaction to the pain of others. Their stoic acceptance of pain
and the actions (rescuing people, protecting their community) that they are
determined to take regardless of consequence posit a structure for how to act
under inevitable violence. Although being taken over by someone else’s pain
doesn’t affect the structures or situation that inflicted that pain directly or
indirectly, the inevitable reactions of the sharers make them less likely to act
violently themselves. The sharers do not feel simply the uneasy or nauseated
moral qualms of Mary or Anyanwu in the Patternmaster books, or of Dana in
Kindred, or of Lilith in the Xenogenesis books; here, in a world more materially
realistic than any of these, the sharers finally have a direct physical experience
of the suffering of others. Instead of a cycle of violence leading to violence, for
them violence leads only to cycles of pain. While Butler’s plan for the rest of
her Parable series, unfinished at her death, cannot be known, the existence of
the sharers suggests the essential limit to the moral value of violence: inflict-
ing violence on others irrevocably hurts the inflictor.

Struggling for Peace?

Butler’s theory of violence promotes a critical, rhetorical way of looking at
the world. Jennifer Nelson sees in Butler’s work an argument for the need of constant “changes of cultural perspective,” and she contrasts her work with “conventional utopian literature, in which the readers’ task is to reproduce in our response to the fiction its author’s desire or revulsion, respectively, for the dreams or nightmares envisioned therein” (89). As Peter Sands argues, Butler “places foundationalism and contingency in conflict, giving primacy to a rhetorical worldview—acceptance of protean reality—over a philosophical worldview—seeking a stable, singular Truth” (3). Change is part of this newly-apparent violent reality. As mentioned before, Butler’s work is more consistent than she gives herself credit for. In her utopian-minded search for transgressive communities, Butler discovers the fundamental connection between violating boundaries of bodies and minds and what Curtis calls a “key human tendency—the ability to adapt to change while simultaneously living to avoid such change” (154).

Butler suggests throughout her work that one outlet for aggressive impulses could be the difficulty of new and changing environments, and Nicholas Birns sees “the optimistic acceptance of change” as a guiding value for many of Butler’s protagonists in addition to Olamina (11). Butler argues in several interviews that we must “channel what [we] can’t resist into sports and careers” (Butler, “NPR Essay”) “not because we are going to go someplace else and change ourselves, but because we will go someplace else and be forced to change” (Potts 336). Butler’s vision of space travel and colonization as a redemptively challenging environment for humans incorporates her realization of humanity’s intrinsically coercive nature. Though she suggests it to evade ultimate pessimism, Butler is only able to imagine the loss of the human hierarchical impulse by means of further violence which enforces change. Perhaps unconsciously, Butler acknowledges the dependence of change on violence. Recall that the same connection was present in the relationship of diversity to violence: violence is necessary to mix difference together, and the mixing of difference is itself violent. Yet, in the context of Butler’s larger depiction of violence, this connection between violence and change is not entirely hopeless.

Butler further critiques her own “mythos of pioneer expansion” with the ominous and ambiguous futures she suggests for the human communities established throughout the *Xenogenesis* and *Patternist* series (Birns 7). Sharon DeGraw writes that the “extraterrestrial potential” pointed to in *Xenogenesis*
and *Earthseed* is questioned by *Survivor* in particular, which “chronicles just such a departure from Earth and the continued ethnocentrism and racism on the part of the new colonists” (35). The colonists of the book, driven from Earth by the Clayark epidemic, eventually find themselves caught between two groups of the same alien species, one of which is addicted to “meklah,” a substance which is only harmless until consumption stops. The protagonist, Alanna, who mediates between the humans and the Kohn, eventually completes the joining of the groups by becoming the first to reproduce with the free and unaddicted Tehkohn. Birns thinks Butler’s refusal to reprint *Survivor*, which she disliked and called her “Star Trek” novel, is a response to the book’s morally simplistic optimism about the peaceful mixing and peaceful survival supposedly brought by “that old pioneer spirit” (3). Because violence is the necessary catalyst for survival in Butler’s work, she finds it simply impossible to depict peaceful explorers and an ideal pioneer environment without violence.

As characters such as Lilith and *Kindred*’s Dana negotiate coercive systems, they wonder whether they are becoming collaborators. In this way, they recall the guilt felt by any enslaved group cooperating with its masters. Is submission necessary for survival in a violent situation, or does it simply enable the violence? Again and again, Butler demands attention for this paradox by setting up a situation in which one group has a disturbing level of control over another, but then she questions that suggestively violent dynamic and explores the ways in which the two groups depend on each other for survival. It’s obvious that, if the Oankali didn’t inflict violence on the humans, none of them would have survived the radioactive fallout of their own war anyway. Like the aliens in “Bloodchild,” the Oankali rescue the humans not simply for their own good but for their survival. The coercive systems that result are simply what Butler calls in her Afterword to “Bloodchild” the “rent” paid for survival. Note again her rejection of the “Star Trek” spirit of detached, patronizing, and—most of all—disembodied encounters with the other. Though Butler rejected easy racial theorizing of her work and called herself interested in symbiosis not slavery, she nevertheless expands the definition of symbiosis—a bodily, biological phenomenon—until it involves survival in violent situations (McCaffery 56). When everyone’s actions depend on everyone else’s, the question is no longer who enslaves whom, but what we have to learn in order to survive. Readying herself to lead the humans she will
awake on the Oankali ship, Lilith plans “how to help them, how not to betray them, how to get them to accept their captivity, accept the Oankali, accept anything until they were sent to Earth. Then run like hell at the first opportunity” (117). By showing us the ways that violent situations are educational and education is violent, Butler teaches us, too, to “learn and run” (118).

Butler’s concept of violence in education is accurate beyond her overt message. The process of teaching is inescapably violent in the sense that the inherent goal of teachers is to communicate ideas. No matter how progressive or Socratic the pedagogy, the final goal is still to produce specific effects and changes in the student, and those changes do not come easily. Even if enforcement occurs only through emotional interaction, still it occurs. Moreover, teachers (like authors and artists, in fact) are trying to connect with their audience. Their explicit goal is to cross the boundaries of personal identity to connect with others. Children in the novels often exhibit the same kind of compulsory lack of awareness of identity, children such as Jodahs and Aaor, the shapeshifter Oankali/human constructs in *Imago*, who need a community—what Eric White calls a “social matrix less chaotically mutable than themselves” (406)—in order to remain structurally complex and become adult through metamorphosis. Children are not yet socialized and integrated into the structure of society; thus, their transgressive tendencies are dangerous. Like the Patternist children, we must become controllable before we can enter adult society. Metaphorically, the student must kill the teacher just as the child must kill the parent in order to grow. For Butler, violence must be reinterpreted as the death that is necessary for rebirth and growth.

Butler is not arguing for a specific utopia nor is she justifying the use of violence for any final ideal of community; indeed, she hardly suggests any to be reachable. Instead, Butler displays the uncomfortable ways in which violence is inherently necessary for the way we live, utopia or no. For example, imagine young people suffering under an oppressive culture and struggling against it. If they finally free themselves from that oppression, they will have learned the value of their newfound freedom with visceral clarity. Their children will grow up in comfort, happiness, and freedom. However, because these children never encountered any violent opposition, the chaotic anger of adolescence may not be channelled toward productive struggle as their parents’ was. As thoughtful and historically-minded as they may be, they (like Olamina’s grown daughter Larkin/Asha Vere) will never have the
same urgency to their understanding of the value of that freedom as their parents have. Martin Luther King, Jr. made the same link between opposition, diversity in community, change, and education in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail:"

I must confess that I am not afraid of the word “tension.” I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. (67–68)

The principle is universal, and though King’s definition of violence is more precise than Butler’s metaphorical development in her novels, they are in general agreement. What has been struggled for, what has been sought against opposition (whether internal or external), gives more understanding. We must constantly renew our minds and our perceptions of the traditions and tendencies of the past. The answer is not a single, final pedagogical method, but a constant willingness to undergo compulsive, violent death and renewal of ourselves.

Butler is interested in the violent process of striving for utopia not the utopia itself. For her, as illustrated by the Oankali, the unchanging, unmixing, unviolating utopia is stagnant. As Eric White has remarked, “These apostles of becoming are not guided in their matings by a criterion of adaptive optimization. . . . The Oankali thus become other in order to . . . become other” (404). They are committed to an eternal process of change. Butler explains, “Personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We’re not going to have a perfect society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would probably be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system. As bad as we humans are sometimes, I have a feeling
that we’ll never have that problem with the current system” (McCaffery 69). As she shows, that system keeps its balance because of the opposing forces of disagreement and violence caused by our struggles for a better structure. James Baldwin said that “one of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop a conscience, you find yourself at war with your society” (331). Humanity needs to grow up, and that maturing process is painful. However, the violence that causes pain also brings new life; accepting change and diversity creates the tension that prevents a community from falling into entropy; a violent world gives us things to write about and learn from. Butler forces us to acknowledge the value of the way educational constraints and limitations make us strain harder to escape them. The experience of slavery makes us aware of freedom—and the path to any utopia of change Butler’s novels might teach passes through pain.

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