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In *Bloodchild* (1995) Octavia Butler's collection of short stories and essays, she writes a short piece identifying why she writes. She provides her personal purpose for writing by using what she identifies as a "Positive Obsession". This positive obsession is what drives her writing, saying how she believes it is more persistent than a normal passion and requires an output of some sort. Instead of a negative fixation, Butler outlines this obsession as a way towards personal action. In the essay, her positive obsession is very clearly outlined as the pursuit of black stories and identity within science fiction. I propose that beyond just this general obsession she has either consciously or unconsciously engaged with another positive obsession. Which focuses on the ways in which the history of and the current status of black women with bodily autonomy and consent is handled within the American psyche. Butler explores this dynamic through her science fiction and theorizes worlds and possibilities where the rights of the body and mind are being questioned and often abused by outside forces. Three of her works, *Bloodchild* (1995), *Dawn* (1989), and *Parable of the Sower* (1993) reveal how Butler utilizes her black female characters to explore the way that past systems of power and oppression have created a people that can work within any future where the body is at risk. Using an interdisciplinary feminist perspective, I aim to outline how Octavia Butler explores the historical experiences and capabilities of black women within trauma spaces allowing them to have access to skills in order to recognize and survive within systemic oppression, especially when it affects the rights to bodily autonomy and consent.

Octavia Butler's focus on the oppression of bodily autonomy and consent within her black female characters follows a clear theoretical road map based on Womanist theory. Originating in Africa as a promotion of Women's rights, Womanist theory grew in the 1960s and 70s. In the beginning African women writers became focused on differentiating their own

feminist philosophies separate from what they deemed as the 'extreme radical' Western feminism (Ogini 14). This became important to the African Feminist community to recognize that "...the needs of the black woman are not the same as those of the white woman, while equally affirming that the African woman has passed through a chain of oppression under the system of patriarchy" (Ogini 14). Feminist writers such as Mariama Ba and Aduke Adebayo who wrote primarily within African and Caribbean spaces inspired American Feminist authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Alice Walker specifically defined Womanism as "a different degree of feminism which concerns itself with the needs of the blacks. In her definition, she classifies a womanist as a black feminist or feminist of colour who loves other women and women's strength and prefers woman culture" (Ogini 17). Although now focusing clearly upon African American Women, Walker, and others still continued the promotion of "completeness, unity and equality of the races in the world. This ideology tends to be self-healing, emphasising caring and sharing" (Ogini 18). This new priority of self-actualization aimed to break preconceived notions of black womanhood and create a way to escape the cycle of hate and poverty that prevailed within the world's margins.

Before one can fully begin the journey of improvement and growth, Womanists see an acknowledgment of history and past oppressions as essential to upward movement. History and past play a role in first identifying one's perceived identity within society, before the changes can be made in a positive promotion of adaptation. Acknowledging the ways that Black Women fall within a multitude of degrees of oppression reveals how "the dominant culture has little respect and value for—black women's minds and bodies" (Taylor 18-19). Noting beyond just the constant devaluation of black women, others pin-point the need to identify particularly what historical notions have been created and used against Black women in order to combat them in

an effective way. Rousseau outlines in her article *Historical Womanist Theory: Re-Visioning Black Feminist Thought* how "...they continue to be identified as the root of pervasive social problems within Black communities and are often blamed for real as well as perceived crises within the Black laboring class" (Rousseau 194). This particular connection with class and economic growth begins to reveal the way that oppression within systems of labor has effectively labeled black women as "routinely accused of being lazy; hyperfertile; and lacking a strong work ethic, moral foundation, and family values" (Rousseau 194). Knowing these preconceived notions of Black women's work ethic allows feminist theorists to actively combat these notions head-on with subversive texts and works that aim to create a black female identity as not the entire cause for economic plights within Black communities instead refocusing on the systems of racism that prevail upon all systems of labor and material within the United States. This singular example only showcases how Black Womanism can work effectively. Rousseau notes Black Womanism's importance saying, "This theoretical lens facilitates our examination of Black women's identities as oppressed people of color, in a gendered/raced society. What Brewer calls, "the simultaneity of oppression," necessitates that analyses of Black women concurrently explore race and gender issues (1993:13)" (Rousseau 194). Within Octavia Butler's many works, she consistently uses Black Womanist theory in each of her main characters by presenting their abilities to acknowledge their oppressed past quickly and utilize it effectively to make a change.

Just like other Womanist writers, a path to self-actualization is built by her characters through first engaging quickly with their own systems of oppression. Lilith in the novel *Dawn* reveals her perseverance is built upon her ability to realize difficult changes within her past and her increasing loss of power. She states early in the novel how "Perhaps because she had known even before her capture that the world she had known was dead. She had already absorbed that

loss to the degree that she could” (*Dawn* 36). Again, this is only one circumstance in which Butler’s heroines define the reality of their oppression and then move on to create a change that can better themselves and the rest of humanity.

Where Womanism appears to lay the groundwork of the history of Black Women and oppression, Butler utilizes cutting-edge notions of adaptation and change to reveal a potential way towards self-improvement for black women. In order to contextualize these notions, Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* gives these notions vocabulary that can be helpful to fully express Butler’s notions of potentiality within identity. In using the idea of the ‘cyborg’ Haraway theorizes how we can express new interdisciplinary combinations of identity in order to explore future notions of change. Haraway outlines in her essay how using the definition of the cyborg, a being formed of various human and technological parts, could extend theories of identity further in a way that makes conceptual sense. Instead of a mix of human parts and technological machines, Haraway imagines a person who is built with seemingly ‘monstrous’ pieces of identity and thus has an ability that has yet to be fully explored and utilized within dominant society. These ‘monstrous’ pieces are “...a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of “outsider” identities...” (Haraway 54). The most undervalued traits within the dominant society are combined to create the cyborg. In the United States then, the Black Woman is the intersection of the most undervalued traits by most of society. Haraway theorizes that this consistent interaction with oppression and prejudice allows the cyborg to understand systems of exploitation and fight them. The cyborg itself invites an unusual subversion beyond previously held beliefs and they can “define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman.” (Butler 65) The black woman is thus redefined as not just a victim within society but instead as a potential ticket towards freedom for

all due to their abilities which come from their identities. Within the genre of science fiction, the black woman as a cyborg creates a whole new 'hero' and a completely different 'hero's journey'.

In identifying Octavia Butler's stories within the cyborg theory, the new notions of the genre are forced to change completely. Whereas past science fiction heroes have no basis for a universal past and conflict, Butler's main characters as black women work within systems of previously understood oppression. Using Womanist theory her characters must work within real systems of conflict alongside the creative and fictional conflicts. The heroines also have a skill and ability completely unique to themselves and their stories. Like cyborgs, their connection with a multitude of outsider identities creates new ways in which conflicts are approached and resolved. Butler's use of black women as her main character allows the literature to work simultaneously within reality and fiction defining what the past has wrought and what the future may hold. Specifically, Butler explores an anxiety about the loss of bodily autonomy and mental and physical consent within her science fiction and how it aligns with the reality of black women in America.

Bodily Autonomy is an important notion within American ethos as it relies heavily upon the notions of freedom and respect, most people value the right over one's own body, and yet in American society there have been frequent transgressions upon the rights of black women and their own bodies. Octavia Butler frequently engages within her science fiction the many ways that one's bodily autonomy is shaken or even completely void. In each case of an intrusion of bodily autonomy, Butler's characters are able to engage thoughtfully with the conflict and react in careful and opportune ways in which they can try and gain their rights back.

In the short story “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” featured in *Bloodchild* the main character Lynn Mortimer lives in a futuristic society that has been affected by a mysterious disease known as Duryea-Gode Disease which causes the victims to have inexplicable psychotic episodes that cause them to commit suicide by digging and cutting into their own bodies. The disease was caused by a pill that was found to be a cure for cancer and yet had the unforeseen side effect of this deadly disease. There is only one way in which the disease spreads, through reproduction. Lynn is the daughter of two DGD parents who both died from their disease and she now lives in fear of her own body. Lynn and her partner Alan visit Alan’s mother Naomi who is declining from her condition due to the disease. However, as Lynn and Alan enter the institution that is housing Naomi, they meet a woman called Beatrice who reveals that she is DGD positive and they have found a way that helps control the disease. As patients decline they slowly disengage with reality, frequently disassociating with the world around them as “they all drifted—went off into a world of their own and stopped responding to their surroundings” (*Bloodchild* 46). Beatrice realized that if there is a female child of two DGD-positive parents then they have a special ability to control the disease. Beatrice describes it saying, “It’s only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do good in a place like this” (61). Like the queen bee in a hive, the ‘alpha’ female so to say is territorial over the DGD patients in her care and only she can prevent the psychotic breaks that can lead to violence. Lynn uses her abilities to help Naomi, and Beatrice reveals the truth to both Alan and Lynn. Alan is anxious at first, unsure about his own relationship with Lynn, questioning whether it was his own free will that began their relationship or the disease. Beatrice offers a place for Lynn at their institution as she can actually help people. As Lynn deliberates her decision Alan asks, “‘What are you going to do?’ he asked.

The question startled me. ‘You have a choice,’ I said. ‘I don’t. If she’s right... how could I not wind up running a retreat?’ ‘Do you want to?’... ‘No!’ ‘But you will.’ “...Yes” (67). In the final paragraph of the story Lynn realizes that she must become the leader of a retreat and use her new abilities to help others.

“The Evening and the Morning and the Night” invites the readers to explore a complicated nuisance where the ability to control one's own body is shifted due to biology. The deadly disease explored in the story shifts the previous notions of control within many dynamics within an interdisciplinary analysis. Where in the past those with the most power were white men who were able-bodied and healthy, the new reality being framed in the story reveals the power shifting to a black woman who suffers herself from the very disease that she is fighting against. Within the story, Butler reveals the anxiety of this changing dynamic through Alan who realizes the true reality of the change as “He stared at her, seemed to be caught by her intensity—or her scent. He spoke as though his words were a strain, as though they hurt. His throat. ‘I won’t be a puppet. I won’t be controlled... by a goddamn smell!’” (65). The fear and anger Alan feels are from the stripping of his rights but also from the reality that is his own girlfriend who now has all control over him. However, the loss of bodily autonomy is not just limited to Alan. Lynn herself loses her capabilities for life outside of the position of caregiver, due to her empathy and moral code she cannot escape the reality of her position now. Why can’t she just leave? Because of who she is. She has felt what it is like to be Alan or to be Naomi, unable to control your own body, feelings, and perceptions. Lynn has no real choice; her identity prevents it. She has amazing capabilities that could potentially save lives and yet it must be built on the past. Butler recognizes the shortcomings of identity, and how engaging with past and a history of oppression can often work not just as a way forward but also as a confinement to certain responsibilities.

She leaves this specific question open within this short story, how can black women change the future using their abilities without feeling obligated or confined to help others? Although the story explores the loss of bodily autonomy due to humans and biology, Butler also explores a reality where bodily autonomy is endangered by a non-human.

In the short story "*Bloodchild*" also the title of the collection, the story is described by Butler in the Afterword as "my pregnant man story" (*Bloodchild* 30). The story is exactly that, in a futuristic world an alien race called the Tlic has invaded Earth and have chosen certain humans as pets where they could use the males as incubators for their eggs to hatch. The story follows Gan whose family is owned by T'Gatoi, a young man who is reaching the age when he will be impregnated by T'Gatoi and house her eggs until they are ready to hatch. As the story unfolds Gan accidentally witnesses another man having his owner's eggs taken out. With his increasing fear and horror at witnessing the event he suddenly confronts T'Gatoi threatening to kill himself instead of having her eggs. Although the circumstance seems obviously justified from the readers perspective Gan feels guilty. Although the Tlic species is completely foreign to the readers, Gan outlines how his entire family has been treated and taken care of by T'Gatoi for decades. His entire family comfortably lives safe and healthy within the Reserve set away for them. Beyond that, Gan and his family are close with T'Gatoi who often tells them how much she cares for *her* humans. However, when Gan tells her he will not take her eggs she offers to use his sister Xuan Hoa. Before T'Gatoi can go and get her, Gan stops her, "I shook my head. 'Don't do it to her, Gatoi.' I was not Qui... I couldn't make Xuan Hoa my shield. It would be easier to know that red worms were growing in her flesh instead of mine? 'Don't do it to Hoa,' I repeated. She stared at me, utterly still. I looked away, then back at her, 'Do it to me'" (26). Gan has once again agreed to be an incubator for T'Gatoi he gets implanted. In a proto-sexual ceremony, he describes, "The

thought of her doing it to Hoa at all disturbed me in a different way now, and I was suddenly angry. Yet I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do, what to expect. I had been told all my life” (27). He feels jealous of his sister for a moment and steels himself to the fate that was his. Gan’s story ends here with his future laid out before him, he will be an incubator for T’Gatoi’s eggs and then he will be cut open and the eggs will be harvested.

Although an extremely uncomfortable story from the beginning, Butler’s description of it as her “pregnant man” story reimagines the ways in which the story connects with reality. Like In “The Evening and the Morning and the Night”, the usual systems of oppression and control are shifted. Instead of women’s bodies being controlled and used as an incubator for humans, this narrative shifts the control by aliens onto the male body. The relationship between T’Gatoi is not dissimilar to an abusive relationship where a partner is coerced by the other with emotional manipulation. What makes this story horrifying is not just the changes in species in the dynamic but also the uncomfortable nature of having the usually powerful being controlled in the same way they usually use to control. Instead of black women being the brunt of manipulation and dominance a young man is the victim. Unlike Lynn before who had the history and past to realize the situation, she was in almost immediately Gan is not prepared for his sudden loss of agency. Gan has never had his own bodily autonomy taken away, he has never had a father or grandfather to warn him about what will happen and how he should handle the situation. He fails to recognize the manipulation and thus he cannot even approach a place where he could potentially leave the situation. His rights are further stripped from him and he is left alone.

Alongside the physical body, Butler also often engages with the loss of consent both physical and mental. First, I should probably outline what I mean by a physical and mental

consent. Physical consent is similar to bodily autonomy, as in the ability to give consent towards something affecting your own body. This could be within a sexual context or not, whichever the case the requirement is the ability to make informed and conscious decisions about your own physical body. Mental consent is being able to make decisions about your own consciousness and mindset. In circumstances like in science fiction where the mind is able to be controlled the ability to give consent over the changes and uses of your mind are as essential as physical consent over one's body. Both of these like bodily autonomy have historically been ignored in dominant society for black women. Historically forced sterilization and lobotomies all the way to limited access to healthcare and education are ways in which the right to physical and mental consent has been kept from black women in America. Octavia Butler focuses similarly to bodily autonomy with the loss of consent between humans but also in an interspecies dynamic.

In *Parable of the Sower*, the main character Lauren lives in an increasingly chaotic Los Angeles in the imagined 2020s. After multiple global climate crises and an economic collapse, Lauren and her family are forced to isolate and protect themselves from increasing dangers resulting from a collapsing social safety net. With pillagers, looters, and rioters on the loose, a shortage of water, and no police or government to provide aid fifteen-year-old Lauren realizes that the only way to survive is through adaptation. The part of the novel which focuses on consent however is another part of Lauren's personality. The novel, in the form of diary entries from Lauren, reveals that she suffers from hyperempathy a condition which makes her have the ability to feel other people's pleasure and pain just by looking at them. She describes her condition by saying:

I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what Dad thinks or want or wishes. I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an 'organic delusional syndrome.' Big shit. It hurts, that's all I know. Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I'm crazy. I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts. (12).

Not only is her hyperempathy uncontrollable but also it is caused by her mother's addiction to drugs. She has no ability to consent to her mental landscape being changed due to it being caused by her mother, but also she has no ability to stop the mental assault of pain that occurs whenever she watches others get hurt. This syndrome that she describes is affected upon her by another human and she is stuck with the lack of ability to consent to an invasion of her own mind.

Lauren however is a young black girl, particularly this part of her identity has prepared her to deal with the challenges of losing control. Instead of giving up or wallowing in her pain, Lauren is able to quickly accept her situation and the reality that it brings. Her father tries to hide it from their community just like how he tries to persuade everyone that society will go back to being the way it was, but Lauren is able to see the truth. Hyperempathy is just a part of her now, and the world is being destroyed. Out of this new life and identity, Lauren builds "Earthseed" a faith system that is founded on the idea that *change* is inevitable, and adaptability is holy. Very clearly her ability to consent is threatened and yet Lauren is able to use her identity and history to realize how this new

change is affecting her and her community, then she is able to build a future that is actually useful and productive to herself and others.

All of the texts that I have discussed thus far utilize the way that Octavia Butler explores the loss of the ability to give physical consent. However, one novel that uses the idea of physical consent in a clear and creative way is *Dawn* the first book in the “Lilith’s Brood” series. Like *Bloodchild* from previously, this novel explores the loss of control within the context of aliens. In the novel, the main character Lilith is awoken inside a spaceship which is floating above earth’s surface. The aliens who are in the ship call themselves Ooloi and they are a race of beings whose goal is to collect and learn about as many species they can across space. They have extraordinary abilities which allow them to physically manipulate the chemical and molecular makeup of any living thing including humans. They hold Lilith in a cell on their spaceship for years so that they can test her and then finally they reveal themselves and tell her their plan. They tell Lilith that their goal is to teach her their ways so that she can awaken other humans and help them become comfortable, then the Ooloi will have them create ooloi/human hybrids which can stay aboard the ship. The humans will be deposited back on earth which has been destroyed by nuclear war and rebuilt to it’s pre-human state by the Ooloi.

Throughout the novel Lilith deals with her own ability to consent being consistently manipulated. Although the Ooloi tell her that she has control and free will as she learns and teaches the other humans they are frequently doing things that undermine her own consent. At the beginning of the novel when Lilith is being kept in a cell for years in order to break her down to be easier for manipulation she describes how sometimes “she refused them, gave them no

answers, ignored the tests, physical and mental, that they tried to put her through. She did not know what they would do to her. She was terrified that she would be hurt, punished” (*Dawn* 7). Often, she expressed her fear of “being tampered with” (84). And yet as she is made aware of the situation she is in, she quickly realizes how little control she has, saying how “She would go on being a prisoner, forced to stay wherever they chose to leave her. She would not be permitted even the illusion of freedom” (62). Instead of shutting down and giving up, Lilith decides that she will focus all her ability on human survival. She became focused on hope for continued life. Still, throughout the novel, her ability to consent is consistently being taken. When the Ooloi first wake her up they remove cancerous cells from her body while she slept, Lilith describes her fear that “Even her flesh could be cut and stitched without her consent or knowledge” (5). They even change her body through the use of their powers. Before she is able to begin teaching other humans about the Ooloi she must go through a physical transformation that gives her increased strength and speed, although they say that she can say no, she has no choice but to agree if she wants a chance to be let go.

Still throughout all of the ways in which she realizes that she has no power and her consent is not needed for the Ooloi to be able to use or change her body she still is able to survive. Once she is left with the other humans who were awakened she begins to teach them about the Ooloi. Many of them don’t believe her and some even try to break out of their section of the ship using force yet instead of inciting a riot out of anger towards her captors Lilith sees the long term effects of their choices. She realizes that if they can stick it out and let the Ooloi control them for a limited amount of time there is a chance for life. The other humans don’t have the abilities or wisdom that Lilith has and still act out against her and their captors. When they try and rape another person who is in the cell with them Lilith stands up, She raised her voice.

‘Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anybody else’s body’ (201). She protects them from each other, hoping to get them to a spot where they can be let go. One man, named Joseph, realizes what Lilith is trying to do and he tells her, “Do you understand why they chose you—someone who desperately doesn’t want the responsibility, who doesn’t want to lead, who is a woman?” (176). Lilith is the only one that can recognize how much danger the humans are in and how to get them out. She is the only one that can hold down her anger and disgust as their consent is ignored without question.

At the end of the first novel the humans reject Lilith’s teachings, the Ooloi tell her that they were put back on earth without her, but Lilith suspects that their first experiment failed and that the humans were either killed or put back to sleep. Although Lilith seemed to fail in trying to save humanity, she is asked to try again. Lilith is once again shown to reflect the ideas from Womanist theory and the cyborg ideals. Her past and her identity have prepared her with the expectations of oppression and allowed her to build a way to reach freedom and growth for all humans. Although it fails the first time, Butler finishes the novel with hope.

In all of her texts, Octavia Butler allows her black heroines to deal frequently with the fear of their bodies and minds being taken advantage of and used by a more powerful force and from that place of oppression they are able to retrieve some kind of control and power. Science fiction is often a space to explore a future where humans can analyze reality and where it may go. In Octavia Butler’s science fiction the future is often bleak and filled with dangers and constant invasions of the rights of the human body and experience, and yet she imagines how the identity, character and abilities of the black woman and girls are the pathway to surviving the future. Through exploring the past of oppression of the United States there is one group that

specifically stands at the intersection of dominance and control. The nature of the Black Woman in America begins and provides an identity that exists within a space of change, adaptation, and growth. Through feminist analysis, Octavia Butler uses science fiction and visions of the future to reveal potential environments that endanger the rights of human bodies. Within these visions of the future Butler engages with historical experiences within a Womanist analysis while also expanding the strength and adaptability of black women through their reactions and experiences within her novels. This picture of womanhood inspires a community defined by adaptability, determination, and hope for the future.

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