

Becoming the “Other”: How “Bloodchild” Helps Readers Frame Human Colonization of the Environment

The relationship between colonized and colonizer can often seem to be a binary good-evil dichotomy. Sarah Ray suggests in her article, “Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture,” that the way humans treat bodies directly correlates to the way humans treat the environment, that “the body has long been a site of environmental practices and a marker of environmental virtue” (3). If this is true, Octavia Butler’s illumination of the way humans treated bodies as commodities during slavery through the allegorical science fiction story *Bloodchild* also shows how humans have exploited the environment. When humans fall on the apparent “evil colonizer” side of the aforementioned dichotomy, Butler softens the blow by making her story’s colonizers a creature with which the reader is encouraged to empathize. In conjunction with Ray, *Bloodchild* suggests humans colonize the environment much as humans formerly colonized other people. Based on this part of Ray’s thesis, *Bloodchild*’s use of examples of colonization salient to modern readers – allegories to slavery and colonizer characters readers can empathize with – encourages readers to critically consider their role in the colonization of oppressed bodies and the environment.

Throughout this analysis of Butler’s *Bloodchild*, I will utilize an environmentalist or historical lens to examine the colonial narrative. Ray asserts in her essay that the body and the environment are inextricable from one another (3). This analogy enables interaction between environmentalist, feminist, and disability discourse because analysis of inequity imposed upon a body can translate directly to analysis of misuse of the environment. Humans so frequently place power-based value on human bodies that male or able-bodied abuse of female or disabled bodies is often warped and presented as natural domination, linking these issues to the “natural” human

colonization of the environment. In examining power inequities based on disability status, gender, or race, one can also apply this power dynamic to the way humans attempt to exert their domination over nature. Ray reasons that seeing the able body as a means to connect with the environment rather than the disabled body “often ignores the ways in which the body is the means by which environmental injustices occur” (7). The environmental injustices left behind by colonization of land can be directly correlated with physical and psychological injustices people face when they are oppressed on the basis of disability status, race, or gender. As these injustices are committed through similar power hierarchies, the results of colonization of the environment and of bodies can be discussed interchangeably through Ray’s logic. Thus, analysis of colonization enacted on the body can be read as analysis of colonization of the environment and vice versa.

In *Bloodchild*, the alien T’Lic species use male humans as hosts to birth their young. This inversion of gender in the birth process immediately positions the colonial framework as an ideology in which the use and abuse of the colonized entity is acceptable. In watching T’Gatoi, a T’Lic, harvest the grubs in Loman’s body, the narrator Gan notes:

“I had been told all my life that this was a good and necessary thing T’Lic and Terran did together - a kind of birth. I had believed it until now. I knew birth was painful and bloody, no matter what. But this was something else, something worse” (Butler 6).

In the human world, women give birth, which is often just as bloody and painful as the “birth” process male Terrans go through in *Bloodchild*. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Slavery? The Problem and Promise of Mothering in Octavia E. Butler’s ‘Bloodchild,’” Kristen Lillivis notes that some readers view this process as parasitic, while others may see it as empowering, giving Gan the

matriarchal power of “motherhood” (7). Both readings are valid, as Butler’s inversion of gender in the birthing process allows readers to see how the T’lic race has dictated which humans will engage in reproduction despite the natural tendencies of human reproductive organs. This colonization of a body – the selection and then use of the body regardless of what the colonized would naturally engage in – reflects the colonization of the environment as well. Humans have used the environment for profit in ways it would not naturally behave: pumping water into arid deserts for recreation, forcing crops to grow when there is demand instead of when they naturally arise, and the devastating acts of extreme logging and strip mining. While humans perceive many of these destructive actions as necessities, so do the T’lic deem the birthing process necessary. Butler’s examination of the Terran body as the physical site of colonization by the T’lic creates the allegory for environmental colonization as positioned by Ray.

Additionally, Butler’s story evokes slavery in America in many ways, which relates both to colonization of African American bodies and of the American environment. Gan self-describes the Terran as “necessities, status symbols, and an independent people” to the T’Lic (Butler 2). This and other plot details – the T’lic’s keeping the Terrans sedated through unfertilized eggs, the T’lic’s using the offspring of the Terrans much like the child of a slave became a slave herself, the commercialization of the Terrans – all echo slavery in the United States. Slavery involved the white colonizers taking direct control of African American bodies and treating them as a space to be colonized, used, and commercialized. The view plantation owners had of their slaves translated to their view of the environment as well: the land existed to produce cash crops, whether it was suited to or not. In this way, *Bloodchild* exemplifies Ray’s assertion that we treat bodies as we treat the environment. As the T’lic treat the Terrans, so humans have treated the bodies of other humans designated as “other” based on race, and so

humans continue to treat the environment. Butler's allegory of the Terran-T'lic relationship to the institution of slavery can also be seen, by Ray's logic, as directly linking the promotion of slavery to human colonization of the environment.

Through her Terran narrator, Gan, Butler effectively positions the T'lic as intrinsically different from the more human Terrans. Physical descriptors – claws extended from multiple limbs (5), the ability to sedate by stinging (2) – initially position the T'lic as unsettlingly different from a reader's idea of a human person. This reinforces the idea of the T'lic as parasitic, and of the Terrans as slaves. Gan's first person narrative and the inclusion of a very human family structure encourage human readers to relate to the Terrans. Lillvis also notes that the Terran's forced reproduction “evokes the horrors of slavery, reservation systems, and internment camps,” all of which enables white readers to better understand a role which they have not historically occupied in America (11). This allows readers who may not have a personal understanding of oppression to empathize with and understand the perspective of an oppressed group. Through Gan, readers can begin to empathize with a colonized people regardless of the readers' own personal history.

However, throughout the story, the readers are also encouraged to relate to the T'lic. Due to the physical and power-based separation of the T'lic and Terran, a contrast emerges when the Terran and T'lic suddenly seem linked. Lillvis argues that the link of the “motherhood” Gan goes through may also empower him, and strengthens his bond to the T'lic (15). Even Gan considers both Terran and T'lic to be unified under the definition of “people” (Butler 9). Therefore, the T'lic are not seen as the evil part of a good/evil dichotomy. Additionally, T'Gatoi explains her efforts to treat the Terran humanely, by encouraging the joining of families and the development and support of a Preserve (Butler 1-2). While T'Gatoi is

still implicit in the colonization of Terran bodies, she is positioned as the lesser of multiple evils. She is contrasted with more demanding and impetuous T'Lic, much like sympathetic slave owners contrasted with more brutal ones. This suddenly allows readers to relate to the oppressor; since T'Gatoi is presented as a powerful but benevolent partner, as a person, neither the reader nor the Terran are completely revolted by the T'Lic. If readers can now see themselves in the T'Lic, the readers must acknowledge they too are complicit in modern colonization. Suddenly portraying the oppressor more as a person than a parasite, Butler encourages her readers to consider the ways they are complicit in colonization of bodies in history and still in colonization of the environment.

Additionally, in encouraging readers to relate to the T'Lic, Butler's allegory can expand to the way human colonization of nature, like the colonization of Terran bodies, is not always understood as detrimental. As Ray correlates the body and the environment by saying "a crisis of the environment as a crisis of the body," the colonization in "Bloodchild" correlates to the way humans often sort the colonization or use of nature along a spectrum (7). For example, do we feel differently about animals killed by poachers than we do about animals killed in the name of management and conservation? Just as T'Gatoi attempts to minimize harm while still reaping the benefits of oppressed Terran bodies, humans often position "ecofriendly" forms of colonization as better than others. For example, we may see zoos which emphasize conservation and individual animal wellbeing as preferred to Seaworld, an institution positioned to emphasize profit. Both institutions, however, involve using the environment and its nonhuman occupants for human means. Butler's story positions the individual oppressor as, at times, the lesser of two evils in much the same way as we often see colonizing conservation efforts as better than colonizing efforts done only for profit.

It can be uncomfortable to recognize one's implicit role in the oppression of people or the exploitation of the environment. Butler's narrative helps readers critically engage with the role they may have in oppression of bodies and the environment. Though the T'Lic are colonizers, they retain qualities to which readers can relate. Through Ray's thesis, the colonization of Terran bodies by the T'Lic can be compared to the colonization of the environment by modern humans. While this could be perceived as a condemnation, Butler's nuanced portrayal of colonizers who are realistically seen not as all evil, but as part of a greater system of oppression requires readers to consider themselves as active in the oppression of the environment. Once we acknowledge the extent to which we engage in colonization, we are freer to critically imagine the ways we can counteract colonization. Butler's story, through a lens of environmentalism, enables her readers to take the first step by seeing themselves as inextricably entangled in the colonization of the environment.

References

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