

Human Progress Realized: Octavia Butler's Post- human Worlds in Search of Potential

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Taking an entire class on the mind of speculative fiction writer Octavia E. Butler was a daunting challenge, mainly because I had to recognize my own limited scope of humanity to do so. That is why for my final paper in Bryan Yazell's course I chose to dive into the facets of Butler's interpretations of a post-human existence that were explored in three of her most popular works. Deciding to do so meant that I had to figure out what seemingly definable terms like "humanity," "destiny," "enslavement" and even "Earth" meant to Butler in the worlds of Lauren in the Parable series and Lilith in Dawn, as well as to reevaluate what I thought were ultimate and inarguable truths. There is only one conclusion that I could concisely come to in this process: neither humanity nor life without humanity can be defined. Though speculative fiction can draw attention to more intriguing questions, there can and will be no discernable answers.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Emilie wrote this essay for my literature course on science fiction author Octavia Butler. I can safely say that my time with Emilie's class was the highpoint of my teaching career at UC Davis. It was a fortuitous gathering of the right texts at the right time with the right students. In this special context, Emilie's essay stands apart because it highlights her willingness to confront the most difficult questions the literature poses. The writing assignment asked students to consider one thematic unit from our course and make a convincing claim about its development across several of Butler's writings. Emilie's paper expresses itself in concise and confident language while evaluating a subject—the post-human—that is immensely

nuanced. Further, Emilie's essay always accounts for how literary form features into this discussion, which ultimately makes a strong case for why reading speculative narratives like Butler's matters in the first place.

– Bryan Yazell, English Department

According to *Earthseed: Books of the Living*, “The only lasting trust is change.” It is change that allows humans to progress, evolve and realize their potential. In *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia E. Butler establishes human progress as a science fiction *novum* that often relies on the desertion of everything that is or could be known by the species. However, humanity is indicative of the company it keeps, as the narrative of Butler’s 1987 novel *Dawn* shows a potential reality of what Butler lays out in the *Parable* series. Both Lauren and Lilith in their respective worlds take the very human-centric role of teacher to facilitate the transition from one humanity to another. In the *Parable* series, Lauren realizes that it is the Earth’s environment that obstructs humanity from progress; however, as an embodiment of the science fiction *novum*, Butler’s *Dawn* shows the potential reality of the dream to take root among the stars. It is when both human environments and human communities are left behind that a post-human reality is attainable.

Lauren’s belief system establishes the species’ purpose, or “Destiny,” to leave the planet Earth and take root on other worlds. In the *Parable of the Sower*, the reader is introduced to a reality where the environment is pushing humanity to its limits, and is a repercussion of humanity’s faults in an endless cycle of destruction. Lauren declares that “space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us [...] when there’s so much suffering going on just outside our walls” (*Sower* 20). Once Lauren decides to write that “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (*Sower* 84) in the *Books of the Living*, her outlook and will to survive transform into a mission to teach others and have them join her along the way. These are the humble beginnings of the Destiny, used as a coping mechanism to think outside of present conditions of the drought, attacks by pyromaniac drug-addicts, and looting. As one of her verses states, “When a civilization fails to serve, it must disintegrate unless it is acted

upon by unifying internal or external forces” (*Sower* 101). This is her first step towards disintegrating civilization; she has begun writing her records of this new religion as preparation for the opportunity to teach others one day. For Lauren, it is her responsibility to save as many people as she can; through the act of teaching, she will be able to accomplish this.

One of the most important things that Lauren had learned from her father was that “it’s better to teach people than to scare them” (*Sower* 66). Once on the road, in order to soothe her potential followers and get them to come together into a real community, she responds to their questions truthfully. When Lauren first sculpts the idea of the Destiny, she admits that she does not know how “or when it will happen. There’s so much to do before it can even begin [. . .] There’s always a lot to do before you get to go to heaven” (*Sower* 85). Upon meeting Travis at the beach she admits, “I don’t claim that everything changes in every way, but everything changes in some way” (*Sower* 218). When she is challenged, Lauren is able to *teach* rather than *tell* her pupils about the concepts of Earthseed. This not only allows people to come to her willingly, it gives space for other interpretations of the belief system to come about through discussion: “Every now and then, Travis would ask me another question or toss another challenge to Earthseed, and I would try to answer without preaching him a sermon” (*Sower* 220). It is education, then, that leads the growing group towards one common goal, though they may not be fully convinced of this post-human potential just yet while walking past car fires, shoot-outs, and cannibals on the interstate. This is just the beginning of a teacher’s attempts to transition out of this continuous cycle that humanity has found itself in, as she has been able to build a community despite the fractured state of the environment.

As Earthseed grows in the *Parable of the Talents*, the physical environment of Humboldt County, as well as its socio-political environment change drastically. So, in the wake of Jarret’s Crusaders and lack of space in nearby towns, more and more individuals join Earthseed for protection. Just as she approached questions from Travis, her first convert, Lauren tells newcomer Dan Noyer how Acorn works with direct communication, autonomy and, most importantly, education: “Learn what God does. Learn to shape that to your needs. Learn to use it, or at least, learn to adapt to it so that you won’t get squashed by it” (*Talents* 76). Even as other communities around Acorn are attacked (*Talents* 16), Lauren believes until the very end of Acorn that she wants

the community to “go on growing, becoming stronger, richer, [and] educating ourselves” (*Talents* 176) as, in the words of Bankole, “Earthseed is Olamina’s contribution to what she feels should be a species-wide effort to evade, or at least to strengthen the specialize-grow-die evolutionary cycle that humanity faces, that every species faces” (*Talents* 46). When Christian America converts Acorn into Camp Christian, kills Bakole and takes away Larkin, Lauren’s presence remains a glimmer of hope for the survivors of the destruction, like Harry Balter. When he called her by her last name after a quick discussion of the situation, Lauren realizes, “He almost never called me Olamina [. . .] It was as though for him the name were a title” (*Talents* 218). He had never stopped looking toward her, as a spiritual leader and teacher, for guidance. The environment surrounding Earthseed is hostile and violent; however, it is the Earthseed way to persevere and bind together to save one’s fellow members as well as the religion as a true community.

At the end of her life, Lauren witnesses her Earthseed community go up into the sky to complete the Destiny. Her last journal entry states that “I know what I’ve done. [. . .] I can’t give them individual immortality, but I’ve helped them to give our species its only chance at immortality” (*Talents* 405). Her role as a teacher has come to an end, as she has “helped them to the next stage of growth. [. . .] Out there, though, among the stars on the living worlds we already know about and on other worlds that we haven’t yet dreamed of” (*Talents* 405). She still leads one of the most popular belief systems in the country, but she is unable to leave with her pupils to realize this dream in person—she can only wish them well. She has to trust the community that she had built to uphold her intentions to reach the stars. “I feel alone with my thoughts” she says as she contemplates the possibility of remaining on Earth after death: “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, after all, and not to be filled with preservative poisons [. . .] and buried uselessly in some cemetery” (*Talents* 407). Lauren as a transitional teacher is aware of her present environment, and wishes to lead people towards something greater in an unknown world. She has taught her community as a way to lead them in the direction she feels is best: a direction that will get them nearer to their true potential. In this way, she has witnessed human progress as much as she has willed to see, and nothing more.

In the *Parable* series, the reader cannot see a world where the Destiny is met and life away from the Earth’s surface is susceptible for

humanity's roots to take hold. However, in Butler's *Dawn*, we see the potential reality of what human community could look like among the stars—specifically on an Oankali ship. In *Dawn*, Lilith is the one to choose which humans to “Awaken” once it is time to begin their training. Although she had been alone for a great amount of time and was desperate for company (*Dawn* 121), she knows that it was better for her teaching purposes to be as methodical as the Oankali alien race (in a way similar to Lauren) in her choice of humans—and that it was “Better not to awaken them at all until she had some idea how to help them, how not to betray them, how to get them to accept their captivity” (*Dawn* 117). Once she awakens Tate, she has a very human-to-human teaching opportunity when Tate sticks her hand into Celene's pod: “Tate tried this, and the plant obligingly began to swallow her hand. She tugged at her hand then looked at Lilith, obviously afraid. ‘Make it let go!’” (*Dawn* 137). It is this moment that shows not only Lilith's new skill to retract the pod away from Tate's hand, but also her new role as “mother” and teacher to her brood. With Tate as her first pupil, like Lauren with Travis, the reader sees how a new environment and a growing community can change humanity. However, it will be this environment that will estrange Lilith from the others because of her altered DNA—the same DNA that allows her to control the community and ship around her. Once Lilith's brood has Awakened, Lauren's Destiny is realized.

Lilith, like Lauren, is left behind as her pupils move on to experience a new version of human life. Once she discovers that the Oankali had returned the humans to the healed planet Earth, she is upset, but she also realizes with a new group she has “a chance to teach them. [. . .] But not a chance to be one of them. Never again” (*Dawn* 248). Though she makes promises to provide the new group with even more information than the last, with more of a plan of action, she cannot help but hope that “a few fertile people might slip through and find one another. [. . .] If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be” (*Dawn* 248). These humans are returning to a planet that they may not recognize as a sample of a species humanity could have been; they are not going to root among the stars, but they are going somewhere unknowable. With that, Lilith, pregnant with the first of many human-Oankali hybrids, understands that she no longer belongs with humans, whether they end up back on Earth or on a different world. She tells Nikanj that the room, recreated to look like the Amazon rainforest, “is as close to Earth

as it seems you'll let me come" (*Dawn* 247). Though both Lauren and Lilith can facilitate the opportunities to experience a post-human reality, they cannot find out what they have led their followers to; such is the fate of the transitional teacher: the unknowable for humanity remains as unknowable as it had ever been. Lilith is the only one to experience something that can be called post-human under the definition of human progress, as without her brood and with her new DNA, she has no choice but to accept her new identity.

Butler's definition of human progress shown in the *Parable* series must be altered to fit that of *Dawn*, as the latter provides a meaningful look into a possible reality of Earthseed's potential. Lauren's pupils, like Lilith's brood, were all able to achieve what they were set out to do, but they leave behind their teacher in the process. The reader can only guess based on the situation given in *Dawn* how Earthseed may have evolved. In this way, Lilith is the only character of these two novels to achieve post-human realities, as she has now left behind both human environment and human communities; Lauren, however, was never able to do either. The only way to achieve pure human evolution, within Butler's works, is to leave both human environments and communities behind, as taught by two women who had assumed roles as teachers for the characters of the novel—and for its audience.

Works Cited

- Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. Warner, 1997.
- . *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central, 1993.
- . *Parable of the Talents*. Grand Central, 1998.