

2007

## Black Hole: The Role of Black Aesthetics in Science Fiction

Thomas Leo Johnson  
*Wright State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd\\_all](https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Johnson, Thomas Leo, "Black Hole: The Role of Black Aesthetics in Science Fiction" (2007). *Browse all Theses and Dissertations*. 109.

[https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd\\_all/109](https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/etd_all/109)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Browse all Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact [library-corescholar@wright.edu](mailto:library-corescholar@wright.edu).

BLACK HOLE: THE ROLE OF BLACK AESTHETICS IN SCIENCE FICTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Humanities

By

THOMAS LEO JOHNSON  
B.A., Wright State University, 2003

2007  
Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

January 10, 2007

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS  
PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY  
Thomas Leo Johnson ENTITLED Black  
Hole: The Role of Black Aesthetics in  
Science Fiction BE ACCEPTED IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master  
of Humanities.

---

Carol Loranger, Ph.D.  
Thesis Director

---

Ava Chamberlain, Ph.D.  
Department Chair

Committee on  
Final Examination

---

Carol Loranger, Ph.D.

---

Lynette Jones, Ph.D.

---

Tracey Steele, Ph.D.

---

Joseph F. Thomas Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean, School of  
Graduate Studies

## ABSTRACT

Johnson, Thomas Leo. M.H., Master of Humanities, Wright State University, 2007.  
Black Hole: The Role of Black Aesthetics in Science Fiction

The main purpose of this thesis is to answer the question of why the genre of science fiction permits African-American authors to expand their themes beyond African-American concerns and characters. This thesis puts forward the argument that science fiction provides African-American writers with the capacity to craft their works' central conflicts to include or exclude issues that affect the Black community.

This thesis answers the question in four points, the first being a brief historical overview of the debate within the Black literary community on the prevalence of Black aesthetics. The overview also gives a summary of the debate over the true definition of science fiction. The next three points comprise the main body of the text by giving examples of the diversity of issues explored by three selected authors: Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Charles Johnson. The thesis concludes that science fiction offers a freedom to African-American writers that cannot be found in other genres of fiction because its subjects are not bound by the social and cultural norms of a reality-based world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	.1
II. DEBATES WITHIN LITERATURE . . . . .	.5
III. DELANY . . . . .	.23
IV. BUTLER . . . . .	.42
V. JOHNSON . . . . .	.61
VI. CONCLUSION . . . . .	.77
APPENDICES	
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	.81

## I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a high school teenager who has been given a summer reading project for his or her next English class. The student must find a work by an African-American author of his or her choice to write a report. For most students, the logical places to find materials are the library and the nearest bookstore. Upon entering the store the student would head straight for the section marked "African-American" and expect to pick up a book. Unfortunately for the student, he or she would have missed out on one of the most popular science fiction writers of the modern era, African-American writer Octavia Butler. The student is not at fault for not making this discovery. The chances of finding the book would have been higher had any of the author's works been classified as African-American. Instead the works of Octavia Butler are found under the Science Fiction section of many libraries and bookstores, though she is included in African-American literature textbooks\*.

The most obvious question that arises is why is the African-American science fiction writer Butler not shelved in some African American sections though she is included in African-American literature textbooks? Authors from all other types of literary genres from romance to non-fiction are categorized under this umbrella title, so what makes Butler the exception?

---

\* Research done by visiting the Miamisburg and Middletown, Ohio libraries, Barnes and Noble and Waldenbooks in Miamisburg, Ohio.

Reading Butler's works, one can quickly see that her stories are on the surface afrocentric. The protagonists are Black and many of the characters in her stories are of African-American origins, but characters of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are represented in her plots. Closer reading reveals that the works deal with more than race relations in America, including issues of economics and politics such as outsourcing and class warfare and how they affect the morals, values, and daily life of American society. Sandra M. Grayson sums up Butler's themes stating that "[a]ll of Butler's novels... explore issues of domination and control-relationships between the empowered and the powerless and cycles of oppression and violence" (113). This complicates the seemingly obvious question of Butler's classification because the themes of her works do not completely fall under the category of African-American issues. What further makes this question murky is the fact that Butler is not the only exception in the classification of African-American writers; many African-American science fiction authors find themselves placed in the science fiction category instead of the broader African-American literature category.

Science fiction as a genre can encompass themes and settings from other genres such as historical fiction, non-fiction and, in this case, African-American fiction because of its ability to stretch as far as an author's imagination and still be considered science fiction. This process does not work well in reverse because when a genre like African-American

literature encompasses science fiction it changes into something other than the original genre. Because of these points, I ask the question: what about the science fiction genre permits African-American authors to deal with more than African-American characters and issues? This thesis will attempt to answer this question by putting forward the argument that science fiction gives Black writers the ability to broaden their treatment of power struggles to focus on more than race relations if they choose.

In order to fully explore to the possibilities offered by science fiction to Black literature, this thesis will explore the works of three different African-American writers to see how they use the genre to address issues that are important to them. I will examine each author to give instances of where these issues become exposed in their works. These authors have been selected to show the varying degrees to which African-American authors can integrate the issue of race relations into their works. The first, Samuel Delany, uses science fiction to address sexual identity politics in America. The second, Octavia Butler, offers an example of the duality of African-American science fiction writers because she both talks about issues affecting African Americans, and deals with a broader range of topics such as the effects of American capitalism on its whole populace. The final writer Charles Johnson focuses closely on the political issues facing African Americans in his science fiction. But before my argument delves completely into the compositions of these three

authors, I will provide a brief overview of the two bases of their writing: the encompassing genres of African-American literature and science fiction.

## II. DEBATES WITHIN LITERATURE

Black aesthetics has sparked a continuing debate within the African-American literary community from the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance to the present. African-American authors and critics have been arguing amongst each other for decades on what *Black* literature is and whether all Black literature should, by definition, deal with identity politics.

During the Harlem Renaissance there were two distinct sides to this debate; the first side being writers such as Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, and W.E.B. DuBois who felt that Black literature was a vehicle for social change within American society for African Americans and a chronicle of the struggle of the race throughout the country's history. This is the view commonly known as Black aesthetics.

The other segment, which I will call the *anti-aesthetics* movement, included critics such as George S. Schuyler and Sterling A. Brown. This segment viewed placing such a strict definition on Black literature as a way of stifling creativity and barricading African-American writing behind the arbitrary walls of skin color. The argument for a Black aesthetics could be seen as much more relevant during the years of the Harlem Renaissance (ca. 1920-1930). In an era where racial discrimination was commonplace in every aspect of American life, the Black literary community had to look within itself to find a voice powerful enough to be heard by the majority. Depending on

the point of view of the critic, the problem (or virtue) of this is that in finding this voice, this community created a mold, an ideal of what Black writing *should* be, and a standard to which all subsequent African-American writers were compared.

Figures like Langston Hughes, one of the most celebrated poets of the Harlem Renaissance, championed the effort to see that Black literature dealt with Black issues. In his 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the poet offered an argument for keeping the Black aesthetic front and center in Black literature. To Hughes, just by virtue of being an African-American, the Black artist of any medium should use his or her talent for the sole purpose of furthering Black culture. Artists who felt that the subject of their works should venture beyond racial lines were seen as ashamed of their race. Hughes specifically makes his point by giving his opinion of a colleague who does not want to be known as solely a Black writer:

One of the most promising of the Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet" meaning, subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. (Hughes 55)

Many today might see Hughes's opinion as biased, but for the period of the Harlem Renaissance when Blacks were trying to wrest control of their own self-image from the white majority, the *New Negroes* and the art they produced would be created *for* an Afrocentric community *with* Afrocentric subject matter. Black literature was to be a source of racial pride, a way for Blacks to change the monolithic version of the illiterate, bumbling darky that had dominated American literature for over a century.

By the same token, Hughes's anecdote suggests a bias towards persons who do not follow the guidelines of Black aesthetics and, like many of his contemporaries, a passing of judgment on those who aspired not to be pigeonholed. Hughes ignores the possibility that the poet in the anecdote didn't want to be known solely as a Negro poet. To writers with conflicting view to Hughes's, the irony is in the statement "for no great poet has ever been afraid of himself" because the argument can be made that the poet, in wanting to be recognized by more than his skin color, is embracing more of himself in his works than Hughes would allow him to.

Contemporaries of Hughes such as essayist and novelist Jessie Fauset relayed how imperative it was for Black artists of the time to confront the stereotype of Blacks found in popular books such as Uncle Tom's Cabin. She writes in The Gift of Laughter, "the Caucasian in America has persisted in dragging to the limelight merely one aspect of Negro characteristics, by which the whole race has been glimpsed, through which it has been

judged" (Fauset 45). In her view and that of others like her, it was the sole function of the Black writer to uplift in American society, for the fate of the race was the most important goal. The writers who rebelled against the mission did a disservice to the race because they shied away from the responsibility fairly or unfairly placed on them by their birthright to use their talents in making equality for Blacks in America a realization.

Judging by the essays written in this era<sup>1</sup> Black aesthetics was the view shared by the majority of Black writers and critics of the time. The anti-aesthetics movement seems to have had their views buried under the weight of the majority opinion. There were few, not unlike George S. Schuyler who felt that the idea of an Afrocentric presence in art was just another limiting construct of African-Americans perpetrated by themselves. He asserts in "The Negro-Art Hokum" "the out growth of ragtime known as jazz...and the Charleston...are foreign to Northern Negroes, West Indian Negroes, and African Negroes" (Schuyler 51). For Schuyler, Blacks were not a separate cohesive entity in the vast spectrum of arts. There was no collective Black voice, unified in message and method, to speak for all dark-skinned people living in America at the time. The artistic expressions in the aforementioned passage are "no more expressive or characteristic

---

<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, ed. Angelyn (Mitchell Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 60-68.

Alain Locke, "The New Negro," Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, ed. Angelyn (Mitchell Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 21-31.

of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders... [to] the Caucasian race (Schuyler 51).

The debate on Black aesthetics still rages on within the Black literary community with more contemporary writers and critics weighing in on the same issues. The debate, though, has taken a different shape. Contemporary Black writers and critics such as Joyce A. Joyce and Amiri Baraka who ascribe to the notion of Black aesthetics are part of a community which at one time was trying to find a voice within a white-dominated society. Now this movement is struggling to keep an authentic Black voice in a multicultural society. Modern Black writers are now trying to uphold the legacy of the great Black authors who came before them.

The same pressures of racial unity are being put towards Black authors and critics such as Barbara T. Christian, Kevin Christopher James, and Hugh Pearson who do not want their books relegated to the African-American section at the bookstore on the strength of the picture on the back of the book, nor do they believe all works by African-Americans can, or should, reflect one monolithic view of the race.

The modern anti-aesthetic movement still has to deal with the view that if one is a Black writer in the technical sense one must also be a Black writer in the literary sense. This means that in order to be an 'authentic' Black writer one must, above all else, write about the Black experience in such a way that contributes to the advancement of the race. Each is laden with

the burden not to air the race's 'dirty laundry' as Gloria Naylor was charged with after writing The Women of Brewster Place.

Terry McMillan is another author who has received similar criticism for writing books that show the complexities of Black social life instead of a view that is singularly uplifting. She says of critics that "[t]he things we write about as writers, myself included, are the very things we get criticized for. What I write about is what I like to think of as our illness, our ill treatment of each other" (McMillan 237-238). She still has to battle her critics, critics who want her to be part of one cohesive voice, one that paints the race in a productive, united manner. In works like Waiting to Exhale McMillan instead writes about the community in an honest, though fictional, way. She shows that, like any other community, Blacks have their own problems and that not all of them are caused from the outside by the white majority; some of the race's tribulations are caused in part by internal strife.

McMillan's work can be vindicated in its efforts to show the mainstream that the African-American community has its own domestic struggles. The blending of different ideas, genres, and cultures into a single field of literature still comes under fire by purists of the African-American literary canon like critic Joyce A Joyce who urges that all Black scholars who don't subscribe to a Black-first, literature-second idea by not "engag[ing] in racial issues" are "soothing" and "non-threatening" to whites (Joyce 480).

The present day Black literary community contrasts with the community of the Harlem Renaissance in that the debate over Black aesthetics in literature is not so one-sided any longer. Those who feel Black literature should be for and about Blacks now are being engaged by a more numerically equal opposition that believes that not all Black writers have to send messages in their works that either enlighten the mainstream culture to the Black experience or rally African Americans to achieve a utopian sense of community and form a united front against white society. Kevin Christopher James, for example, states "I believe each life experience is an individual, overall circumstance, mystical, indefinable and unique even more than genetic codes" (James 106). For writers and critics who identify with this position, there is no shame in relating the Black experience in their work if the author chooses race or any social agenda, or the writer loses freedom of expression, the essential ability to express him or herself.

These opposing views are part of a larger debate about race divided between persons who want racial unity in art and life and persons who seek individual self-expression. Hugh Pearson describes the rift as one of an identity crisis perpetuated by the Black community's self-exile. For Pearson, the entire history of mankind is patterned with the ebb and flow of catastrophe and victory, but Blacks have taken a self-deprecating view of their own segment of history in relation to world history. According to Pearson this means that Blacks tend to see their history as

containing the most suffering and injustice of all mankind. Next, he lays out the reasons for the condition by arguing that African Americans have a tendency toward myopia when looking at the world and also an inclination to rebuke the portion of the Black community that chooses to find bonds with other peoples of the world. This indirectly adds to the oppression experienced by the African-American population from outside forces by compelling it to exile itself further and further from the rest of mankind (Pearson 107-108). Pearson concludes that Blacks must see themselves as part of the larger picture of mankind, asking:

Do we [African Americans] face the greatest oppression of all God's children? Possibly, but if we deny the universal elements of our experience, we permanently relegate ourselves to second-class status and collaborate in our own oppression. (109)

Pearson's analysis of the debate comes in defense of those writers who try to relay the common experiences of all mankind in their works. He argues that Black writers should be free to build bridges that link their community to the rest of the world, not build walls to keep them boxed in. For Pearson, critics of such writers are actually themselves committing a disservice to the community that they critique so readily by generating an environment of isolation in which the only voices and ideas heard are all the same, their own.

In her book, Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future, Sandra M. Grayson also

explores the topic of Black writers in science fiction. To achieve this, Grayson selects works by authors also appearing in this thesis such as Butler and Delany, but also works of Tananarive Due and LeVar Burton. Similar to my thesis, her study focuses on their attempts to deal with social and cultural issues central to African Americans life.

The crux of Grayson' study is much more specific in its focus than this thesis. I am trying to present a broad range of Black authors to conclude that science fiction writers have the ability to move in and out of the conversation of Black aesthetics. Grayson, in contrast, deals specifically with writers and their works that confront the concerns and history of African Americans. Furthermore, she bolsters her argument by showing how the authors in her study intertwine the histories of slaves and the contemporary issues of African Americans into their themes while contemplating the future outcome of Black America if it stays on its current path. Grayson also highlights the recurring theme throughout the selected novels of social acceptance and inclusion of Blacks in American society.

Though many of these themes are similar to those to be explained in this thesis, I take her study a step further and add to the conversation a contradictory view of the Black science fiction writers. I do lend a part of my discussion to the exploration of how African American science fiction writers use the genre to tackle the concerns of Black America. On the other hand, I use two of the authors found in her study, Delany and

Butler, but present how these to broaden their themes to include other social issues that solely affect African Americans.

Grayson is careful not to leave out the elements of science fiction when making her argument about Black aesthetics in the genre. She strikes this balance, for instance, when dissecting Delany's works. Grayson gives ample attention to how the author uses aliens as a metaphor for racial assimilation and difference in one novel, then use the same metaphor to critiques racism and colonialism in another. Though she does not go into specific detail about science fiction in particular, she does devote enough argument to ensure the next person in the conversation can understand how the genre can be an essential vehicle for Black aesthetics in literature.

African-American literature is not the only genre with internal debates over aesthetics. The genre of science fiction also struggles to define itself. M.H. Abrams's A Glossary of Literary Terms defines science fiction as "narratives in which...an explicit attempt is made to render plausible the fictional world by reference to known or imagined scientific principles, or to a projected advance in technology, or to a drastic change in the organization of a society" (Abrams 279). This is where the clarity of the definition ends and the debate over what is true science fiction begins. Again, there are at least two distinct camps in this argument. On one side of the debate are science fiction purists who see true science fiction works defined by the literal sense of the word "science" and containing certain key

elements, primarily any element that can be explained, or has its origins in, scientific theory. On the other side are those who believe that fantasy or other speculative fiction should also be included under the classification.

For purists, the first of these elements is that the world must be set in an uncertain future, one in which the reader's reality is imagined as being changed by an event or discovery that has not occurred, but which will have worldwide effects. Second, these world-changing events or discoveries must center around or have origins in science and technology. Third, the future worlds in science fiction need to be recognizable through some similarities to the reader's own world. For example, the setting and the characters, both set in the future, are influenced by the imagined effects of space travel, or a nuclear holocaust, as was a popular theme of science fiction in the 1950s. Shows like The Twilight Zone and The Outer Limits used this theme in their stories. The characters might live in a world made barren by the nuclear winter and defend themselves against animals and people mutated by radiation. Samuel Delany's Babel-17 offers a typical example of 'pure' science fiction:

They waited for the monorail nearly six minutes. When they came down, the streets were smaller, and a continuous whine of transport ships fell across the sky. Warehouses and repair and supply shops sandwiched rickety apartments and rooming houses. A larger street cut past, rumbling with traffic, busy loaders and stellarmen. They passed neon

entertainments, restaurants of many worlds, bars, and brothels...Up from the basement café Black burst—a man, ebony-skinned, with red and green jewels set into his chest, face, arms, and thighs. Moist membranes, also jeweled, fell from his arms. (25)

This small passage alone illustrates a few points; the first being that Delany describes a world that has discovered through technological advances the means for interstellar travel. Second, the world described is not dissimilar to the present day in the fact that interstellar travel, like Earth travel, is used for commerce. Delany writes about "loaders" who spend their leisure time in places not unlike the truck stops that accommodate interstate truckers. The uses of "transport ships" and "warehouses" provide the connection to present day. Finally, the jeweled man in the passage is an example of space-age body art. In Delany's future, advances in technology allow the future's citizens to alter their bodies via an array of choices such as jewels, a spectrum of skin colors, and even novelty parts like wings, beaks, and paws. This small item shows how advances in genetics can be commercialized in the future for a commodity as common as cosmetics.

Fantasy writers create a fiction that they believe has similar elements to science fiction; mainly that they both create worlds that are a departure from reality. Fantasists may use elements of science and technology, but the key difference between science fiction and fantasy is that the laws of science

and technology do not bind the worlds of fantasy. Instead of having setting and characters based on the speculation about the effects of likely scientific advances on the world's future, fantasy writers have the ability to create completely new worlds. It is possible that these worlds could be completely fictional down to the last blade of grass. For instance, worlds in fantasy can have completely imaginary beings that are nothing more than floating heads, or planes of existence in which the characters live in complete darkness. J. R.R. Tolkien's popular fantasy The Hobbit provides a useful example:

There are no words to express his [Bilbo the Hobbit's] staggerment, since Men had changed the language that they learned of the elves in the days when all the world [Middle-earth] was wonderful. Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before, but the splendour, the lust, the glory of such treasure had never yet come home to him. His heart was pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves...(157).

A science-fiction story would not have elves (because their existence has not been scientifically proven), nor would there be a mention of dragons (unless it was discovered that the giant lizard was a mutated offshoot of dinosaurs). Fantasy plots, on the other hand, would not include time travel, nor a case of genetic manipulation the likes of Jurassic Park.

The discussion of Butler's work brings up another area of science fiction called *speculative fiction*. In her work, Parable

of the Sower, Butler does not create her future in a setting that centers around a scientific or technological discovery like works created by science fiction purists. But neither does Butler's work completely break away from reality into a world of her imaginings. Simply put, the author looks at the contemporary world and asks the question "what would happen if..." Parable of the Sower answers the question "what would happen if capitalism and racism spun out of control in America?"

Where science fiction and speculative fiction authors are bound by the laws of reality, fantasy writers are unlimited in their imaginings. Ursula K. LeGuin states that people outside the science fiction genre mistake sci-fi writers' level of reality for fantasy writers' believing that, "sci fi writers just make it all up" (LeGuin 121). She argues that for a science fiction writer, imagination is key to creating, but that imagination must be tempered by solid fact. The professional science fiction writer, to be taken seriously by the audience, must achieve, often through research, a certain level of verisimilitude. As LeGuin observes, "[a] great part of the pleasure of the genre, for both writer and reader, lies in the solidity and precision, the logical elegance, of fantasy stimulated by and extrapolated from scientific fact" (122). By "fantasy" in this context, LeGuin means the product of the imagination, not the literary sub-genre. Science fiction's science, though fantastic, must at its core be sound and parallel to the realistic science found in present day.

For an African-American science fiction writer such as Charles Johnson, fantasy enables him to create fairy tales, a form of fantasy, that relay a message or deal with an issue important to the Black community. For instance, his work "The Gift of the Osuo" deals directly with the origins of the slave trade in Africa. Johnson, through the use of fantasy, transports the reader to that period in time through the eyes of a fictional king of an imaginary tribe. Centering the plot on the king's foolish use of a magical piece of charcoal helps Johnson ease into a much darker historical lesson.

This is the difference between the three kinds of plots and settings: a movie such as *Lord of the Rings* takes place in a world of Hobbits, Orcs, and magic, which have origins in the imagination or the collective consciousness of the author. A movie like *Escape from New York* illustrates what can happen what can happen to America if it continues the upward trend of overcrowded prisons. And finally, a television show like *Star Trek* boasts a crew of humans that travels from Earth to explore the regions of the galaxy using technology that could be created in the future. To further illustrate the difference, many of today's inventions have striking similarities to technology in science fiction. For instance, the design of today's cell phones were preceded by the communication devices, or tricorders, used by the crew in the 1960's *Star Trek*, or the robot designs of present day look like robots found on *Lost In Space* or *Buck Rogers*.

LeGuin argues that science fiction, like all genres of fiction, is metaphorical. Fiction has always offered a way to make sense of the reality of the time the work was created. According to LeGuin, these fictions are extracted from the significant aspects that dominated life in that era. Science and technology have been the dominant factors in the era since the genesis of science fiction (159). Science fiction centers around the advancement of these areas and their effects on the future. Science fiction writers endeavor to explore the possibilities for mankind through this era's expanding science and technology domination. Not only does science fiction take an outward look into science and technology's "effects" on society, but also make an effort toward introspection. Science fiction questions how human desires and limitations have affected, and will affect, the handling of information and the advancement of the species. Because of this role, science fiction has been a genre that also explores social, cultural, and governmental structures along with primarily science.

In this way sci-fi functions as a distant mirror for reality. It separates readers from its ostensible subject by taking them to far-away lands that seem analogous to their world. This can give the author the ability to discuss a vexing social or political issue, in part or full, indirectly and thus, more complexly, and for a broader audience, than can a mainstream fiction writer. For Black science fiction writers, this ability opens a new avenue to discuss social issues important to them and

also capture the ear of the majority. Grayson says that novels by Black science fiction writers "encourage the reader to reconsider the focus on individualism (especially pervasive in North American society) and to conceptualize a society that recognizes all nations and people as connected to a larger global community" (4). That encouragement subtly brings to the fore the discussion of equality in American society.

Science fiction can also give the author sufficient literary license to take a current social practice to a more extreme or definitive outcome. LeGuin says the basic premise of science fiction is to "take a trend or phenomenon of the here and now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect and extend it into the future" (155). The reason that mainstream fiction cannot achieve this result is that it is limited to events that are happening currently or that have happened in the past.

Octavia Butler uses science fiction to warn her reader of what could be a horrific and very plausible future if American society does not change its course. She takes events and issues from today and explores them to their final convergence into dystopia. Not only does she consider the effects of current trends in capitalism, but as an African-American writer, she deals directly with the issue of racism. Butler looks into the near future to show the reader what can happen if racism in America is not eradicated soon. To achieve this, Butler strings together events from the past and the present to create a believable ending to the issue. Butler looks back and forward at

the same time in her work "reflect[ing] a construction of time as a pendulum moving in patterns of recurrence that represent inseparability among the past, present, and future" (Grayson 3). This keeps the reader interested while simultaneously sending him/her a serious message.

### III. DELANY

Now that I have explored the history behind the Black aesthetics movement and the debate over the definition of science fiction I will move onto the first of the three authors being discussed: Samuel Delany. In his short story "Aye, and Gomorrah..." Delany paints a picture of a world that has institutionalized intolerance based on sexual orientation. In contrast, Delany displays in his novel Babel-17 a universe which is much more tolerant to the point where homosexuality and polygamy become an asset in some circumstances. Both works show how Delany uses science fiction to speak on issues personal to him that do not center around his racial identity.

In "Aye, and Gomorrah...", Delany creates a world in which humanity has conquered space travel and frequently commutes through the solar system. The problematic element is that humans cannot travel into space for more than 24 hours without facing reproductive repercussions, specifically mutation or sterilization. The governments of Earth have enacted a plan to solve the problem and further space exploration, while curbing the population boom brought on by the "sexual freedom" of the long-gone twentieth century. Governments chose "children whose sexual responses [were] hopelessly retarded at puberty" and neuter them, effectively making them "creatures not even androgynous [...]" for space travel (129).

These altered humans, called *Spacers*, can travel in and out of the atmosphere as easily as one would travel from city to city in a car. The spacers suffer no physical consequences to their bodies during their journeys. A spacer can travel up from New York and in half an hour come down in Tokyo. This becomes an effective solution to the society's problem of space travel. Unfortunately for Spacers, this same society regards them as subhuman since they are different sexually from the rest of the Earthbound population. Exploring this prejudice motivates the plot of "Aye, and Gomorrah..." and also is the vehicle for Delany's own commentary on discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Spacers are valued for their ability to space jump and for their scientifically-conditioned beauty, and at the same time are reviled for their lack of 'normal' sexual desire.

Delany makes this apparent as early as the second page of the short story when the spacers are told to leave a bus station by a less marginalized member of the society: a bisexual prostitute. This prostitute says to the narrator "Spacer, do you not think you...people should leave? [...] Sorry. But you have nothing that...would be useful to me. It's too bad, for you look like you were once a woman, no? And I like women, too..." (125). The scene offers a blunt introduction into the issues Delany wants to address. To complicate the issue Delany creates a sub-population of Spacer admirers—dubbed *frelks* — who, though sexually attracted to the neutered space-walkers, keep their adoration hidden for fear of being ostracized.

What is missing from the work is any mention of race of the Spacers. Delany takes care to describe in detail the physical characteristics of the Spacers as a group. He also gives names to the members of the Spacer group in the story (except for the narrator). The absent element in his descriptions is any mention of skin color and it is quite possible this was done deliberately. In "Aye, and Gommorah..." Delaney wanted his theme to focus solely on the discrimination and marginalization of people based on sexual orientation. To add skin color would create a subplot of racism (or its perceived possibility), or at best, distract from the main focus. As an African-American writer, then, Delany can be placed more appropriately into the anti-aesthetic movement because he does not address concerns of race in this story. Instead he deals with an issue that concerns another aspect of his life - being a gay man in America.

In the fantastic world of "Aye", Delany characterizes the Spacers as beings who see themselves as a tool of the society, functioning as a part of the space program for society at large, and as a sexual novelty for the other small portion drawn sexually toward them. Through the thoughts and conversations of the Spacers, Delany paints a picture of what members of ostracized subcultures feel about themselves.

In one scene, a spacer sitting in a café in Istanbul reveals that it has no money for the weekend and nonchalantly mentions that it will have to sell its body to a frelk for some extra cash. It does not concern the Spacers at all that their

bodies are being sold, because of their lack of sexual desire. Having sex for profit is as mundane as shining shoes for profit: a simple service stripped of all emotional properties. The Spacers' laissez faire attitude about sex is a direct product of the culture that created them. Capper Nichols echoes this thought in Delany's Tales: "[w]hat is striking to me about the various sexualities in Delany's work is their ordinariness. That attitude, that demystification of sex, is what I find so appealing" (151). Sex is nothing to the Spacers, but it is everything to the frelks. This theme is a parable for the society that Delany lives in: sex of any type should be a personal, not cultural concern. Delany mentions sex on every page of "Aye, and Gomorrah..." either directly or indirectly. By the end of the story this has effectively desensitized the reader to the forbidden nature of the act. This opens the reader to the narrator's point of view when examining the character of the female frelk accompanying it. Through the narrator's eyes, the reader sees the cultural imprints of fear and misunderstanding stamped on the woman, her words, and her actions.

Delany develops the plot of "Aye" focusing closely on sex to address the different forms of marginalization by society on a person. Later in the story the aloof spacer narrator does become enraged by the ignorant curiosity of the frelks it engages with. It understands that the frelks are chiefly enthralled with their sideshow freakishness. Frelks couple with them for what they are, not who they are. In this Delany shows the reader that

patronizing those who are sexually different is also a form or marginalization.

The narrator, while bartering the price of its services, does not ask for money, but instead wants the frelk to pay it with something of personal value to her:

"Give me something," I said. "Give me something—it doesn't have to be worth sixty lira. Give me something that you like, anything of yours that means something to you."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I—"

"—don't want to give up part of that ego. None of you frelks do!" (131)

To the narrator, this gesture would validate it as a living thing, not an object. The giving of something personal forces the frelk to attach the memory of the spacer to the personal object in her mind when she thinks of its loss. This serves a dual purpose of setting him apart from the faceless mass of Spacers that have come and gone in the frelk's mind while returning to him a small sense of lost pride.

As characters, frelks serve as a metaphor for those who, while curious about those of different sexual orientations, do not respect to the objects of their curiosity because of their difference. They partake of a culture foreign to them, but will not accept it as a valid part of their world. This is shown

through the narrator's interaction with the frelk. In the first moments of their meeting, the frelk misrepresents herself as a Turkish student new to the local university in Istanbul as she begins a probing bout of small talk. Once the narrator reveals that it is a spacer, the awkward small talk ends and the business transaction begins.

This encounter with the frelk appears written to be similar to the interaction between a prostitute and her/his client. The disingenuousness of the frelk indicates the lack of respect she has for Spacers. She does not want to be caught soliciting a spacer, and so adopts "These little lies one makes up for strangers to protect one's ego..." (128). Likening the interaction between the narrator and the frelk to prostitution invokes the social taboo against bedding a person of different sexual orientation, or, in the context of the story, no sexual orientation. David Lunde's assessment of Delany's motivation in the similar context of another novel, The Ballad of Beta-2 can be applied in this instance: "Delany's own feeling of being outside the social norm is clearly reflected here, as is society's fear and repression of those who are 'different'" (121). For the frelk, treating the spacer as an equal would remove her from her comfortable position in society as "normal," if she were discovered to be fraternizing with a spacer, which is evidently something she cannot risk.

Later, the frelk speaks to the narrator in a patronizing manner. Her speech is laden with pity, regretting what a fine

specimen of man it could have been if it had not been changed: "You'd think they could have found another way of neutering you, turning you into creatures not even androgynous..." she tells him regretfully, but her use of the word "creatures" shows that the sympathy is only superficial (129). This character stands in for those who patronize homosexuals as damaged people; homosexuals who, in their opinion, if they had not chosen to be with the same sex, would be a viable option for their love and affection.

Finally, the frelk's personal assessment shows the fascination she has with Spacers is one she could only categorize as a "perversion" because she does not see her own feelings of attraction as normal. Her description of herself and others like her as "necrophiles" again shows that the Spacer, a living human being, is dead to her and not worth an investing of her feelings. She categorizes it as not a person and herself as one who has a mental disorder for the affection she has towards him. Her self-hating judgment shows the marginalizing effect of the culture the characters reside in. It is a reflection of what those around her think of the pair.

Many readers can infer that Delany is relating the actions of the characters in the story to similar experiences he has had with dealing with his sexuality in relation to American society. Lunde, for example, says that "[t]hrough his incorporation of directly autobiographical concerns and materials, we see him working toward these same goals on a personal level by manipulating these projections of himself through various

speculative possibilities" (119). Very thinly, through the interaction of the frelk and the narrator Delany shows the bigotry that one can experience from those who do not understand, nor care to understand, someone different. As a gay man, the author is transplanting experiences of the gay community into the slice of the Spacer's life that he writes about.

Like "Aye, and Gomorrah...", Babel-17 is set in a society that has advanced in the technology of space travel. It also focuses on the group of beings who work in the industry and how they deal with the rest of society. Unlike "Aye, and Gomorrah..." the society that is found in Babel-17 is much more accepting of different sexual orientations. In this work, Delany shows a gay community that has injected itself into the heart of the mainstream by performing a vital service to society. Grayson speaks of this theme in another of Delany's works, but the same can be applied in this instance. Delany's novel, she puts forward, "suggests that those who are different need not be defined and confined by the old (which can be read as the dominant cultural ideology); rather they are creators of narratives and actives agents of changes" (87).

In the novel Babel-17, Samuel Delany writes a story that is a mix of mystery, adventure, and romance within the broad genre of science-fiction. The plot circles around a character, Rydra Wong, who is an intergalactically-famous poet and linguistic genius. Rydra is given a mission by the Alliance, a military organization created through a pact among five galaxies to

protect their citizens. In the past two decades the five galaxies had been under attack from a mysterious and elusive force, known as the Invaders, which had carried out systematic attacks, destroying parts of the Alliance's population. Rydra's mission is to unlock a cryptic code called Babel-17 used by the Invaders that can be heard immediately before a sabotage attack begins. She must travel the universe to uncover its secret in time to stop the next attack.

The driving force in the novel is not the backdrop of war or Wong's adventures, but the eclectic assortment of social misfits who make up the crew of the starship that she captains. The crew consists of beings such as a genetically-altered human with the appearance of a silver lion (for fashion purposes), a set of ghosts for navigation, and a trio of lovers whose ability to steer the ship is dependant on how much they love one another. The inclusion of so many different species as crewmembers reflects a belief within the novel that everyone is included and useful to one another. The world Delany constructs would fall apart without the cooperation of all those who live within it. It is the paradox of a social utopia within a political dystopia. Delany drives home the point that love and acceptance should not be completely hindered by social norms.

Once again, Delany sidesteps the notion of race in his work. In this novel, he also does not mention race in his description of his characters, with the exception of Rydra of who the reader might glean that she is of Asian descent from her last

name Wong. Delany takes this purging of race from his work a step further by creating alien species as characters in the novel and also making most of the humans so genetically altered that the reader is unable to make a guess as to race. The author is using science fiction as an equalizer, making sure the reader focuses on the themes of inclusion and cooperation in society. This goes against the Black aesthetics movement and its focus on the divisions of race in America, but Delany chose to speak about homosexuality and polygamy in this work, not racism.

This novel is in stark contrast to the previous story, 'Aye, and Gomorrah...' in its treatment of sexual politics. In Aye, Delany paints a picture of a world entirely consumed by the suppression of sexual expression. The Spacer program itself is an effort to curb the results of a growing population caused by increased sexual activity. The asexual spacers and those who adore them, the frelks, both live in a society that reviles them for their sexual practices. Delany goes one step further by also creating a tendentious point of view from the frelks toward the Spacers because their superficial worship is still colored by the negative opinions of their culture.

Babel-17, conversely, presents a much more accepting world where sexual freedom is not only a necessary part of life, but those who oppose the broadening of the definition of "relationship" are presented as an ignorant minority. As David Samuelson puts it, Delany's art "provides examples of individuals and whole societies celebrating cultural diversity" and Babel-17

falls in this category (168). When reading Babel-17, one can approach the work through the paradigm of queer theory, focusing specifically on how the author dismantles the competing classifications of Western culture of what is natural or unnatural. Delany attempts to demystify alternative lifestyles for heterosexual readers who may pick up the book. He represents those involved in alternative relationships as normal people with normal joys and problems with their couplings or, in the case of Babel-17, triplings.

Social inclusion based on necessity is accepted as fact in the story and paves the way for the most controversial grouping in the book: the Triplets. The triplets are, as the name implies, three navigators who work in tandem to fly a starship. As the story's protagonist Rydra better defines it, a triplet is "a close, precarious, emotional, and sexual relation with two other people" (Delany, Babel-17 43). Their ability to work in tandem is derived from the fact that they are in a loving relationship with each other. The closeness between them gives them the ability to work as one entity. What one navigator is not able to do instantly, the other automatically compensates for him/her.

In the Babel-17 social economy, no love between three people means no triplet, and that means no ships make it off the ground. Delany stresses this when Rydra explains to a customs officer (and by extension the reader) that "[t]here are some jobs [...] on a Transport ship you just can't give to two people alone. The jobs are just too complicated" (38). By making poly-sexuality

integral to the Babel-17 universe, Delany effectively denies the reader the opportunity to impose the familiar heterosexual binary structure on the world. The reader is forced to accept that three people in love with each other would be a viable option.

Delany understands that people's view of the world will influence how they connect with a story. To allow this to stay in the mind of the reader means that for the brief period of time the reader explores the world of Babel-17, Delany has effectively suspended their expectations of how society is supposed to function. Nichols states that "Delany's writing clarified for me the connections among literature, writing, communication, and the way people live in and perceive their worlds" (149). In other words, instead of the reader's own view shaping their understanding of a story, the story inversely can shape the reader's views. David Lunde adds that "[Delany's] art provides templates upon which we can assess our own efforts toward self-knowledge and self-acceptance" (124). Babel-17 provides that template through the use of the triplet to compel the reader to ask oneself, "Can I tolerate/accept people with alternative lifestyles?", and moreover, recognize how malleable and socially constructed sexual morality can be. If the reader asks the question, then Delany has accomplished a goal with the novel.

The world of Babel-17 is not *completely* without prejudice. The author illustrates this point with a short, but violent encounter between one of the triplets and the customs officer. At this point in the story the triplet, Calli, is one of two left to

grieve over the death of the third of their group at the hands of the Invaders. Calli and the customs officer get into a argument which turns physical and ends very quickly. Rydra explains that Calli's outburst is because of his loss. The customs officer, having lost the altercation, spits out "Perverts!" before he is able to stop himself (38).

The officer admits that he knows the special function of the triplets. I interpret the insult as stemming more from occupational rather than lifestyle ignorance. The customs officer is akin to one who does not understand the legal system, and so paints the lawyers with the broad brush of being morally ambiguous in reference to the seemingly Black and white issue of the "truth". The customs officer further proves this point when he says: "I know," he admits when told of the necessity of the trio (38). This suggests that the comment was meant to hurt the offending Calli, but did not take into account the other triplet, Ron.

Readers are pushed to suspend their own moral beliefs as the story progresses. Delany attempts to give the relationship of the triplets an aura of normality through scenes of dialogue between the group and Rydra. In these scenes, the author gives the relationship familiar elements to which the reader can connect. Delany sprinkles these scenes throughout Babel-17 as a constant reminder that these relationships do exist and one cannot forget about them. He makes certain that the readers

understand that Ron, Mollya, and Calli are all sleeping with *each other*.

In the same scenes, he is careful to show that the triplet is a functional relationship that focuses on more than simply sex. Sex is a small part of the complicated matter for those involved in the grouping, but is the center of attention for outsiders. For instance, in a scene in which Rydra happens upon Ron sitting alone outside during a party, the triplet expresses to her a concern that the communication within their trio is stunted. The female triplet, Mollya, is new to the English language while Calli is able to express himself better through physical actions and body language. Ron says about Calli "[he's] just a big old bear and I can tumble around with him and play with him" (84). Ron, understanding both of these aspects, wants to bridge the gap between the other two triplets' expressions of themselves without making himself the fulcrum of the relationship.

To reiterate, Ron says this in reference to the diagnosis of a lack of communication, which is a much larger point of contention than the sexual aspect of the relationship. This is supplemented by Nichols who describes love-making in Delany's works as "decidedly unromantic; ...instead it tends to be friendly (in contrast to the obsessive and controlling nature of romantic love), playful, and diverse" (151). He goes on to expand on the definition of diverse as "the sense that sexualities proliferate, undermining conventional notions of sex that define accepted and

proper practices" (151), which mirrors the book's own sentiments that the Delany's definition of sex is larger than society's version.

With the conversation between Ron and Rydra, Delany is creating a moment where one friend is asking another for relationship advice. Many readers can connect with either needing or giving this type of advice sometime in their lives. No matter what one's sexual orientation is, we can begin to empathize with a character who wants the people he loves to love one another. It is not the dividing of his affection between the two people that is the focus of the conversation, but the personal, painful emotions the situation causes him. Delany does not focus on the physical dynamics of the relationship when writing Rydra's answer to the triplet. She tells the despondent triple:

It hurts more when there's something wrong between  
[Calli and Mollya] because it doesn't seem to be  
anything you can do. But it's easier to fix [...]  
Because they love you [...] Sometimes you have to make  
sacrifices. (85)

Rydra gives Ron sound advice without making judgments. The effect of this is to communicate to the reader that even those who are in same-sex or poly-sexual relationships can achieve pure love. This scene becomes another example to strengthen the foundation of this story's subplot. This adds to the believability of the triplets while the reader's reality is still completely suspended in the fabric of science fiction.

Another way the dialogue between Rydra and Ron naturalizes the triplet's bond is that the protagonist was also once in a triplet herself. Ron echoes the perceived bigotry that he has noticed to those in the ignorant minority: "'Perverts' he said, that's what you [...] all really think [...] all those people in there staring at us, who can't understand why you could want more than two" (82). Rydra's revelation comforts him, allowing him to be unbiased when listening to her advice.

In the world of Babel-17 Rydra is literally the universe's most famous person because of her unique brand of poetry, which crosses all social, political, and economic lines. Not only is she the most famous, but her reputation gives her an air of respectability that is akin to a Queen Elizabeth I, George Washington, and Albert Einstein combined. Her books of poetry are read across the galaxy and give hope and comfort to its citizens engrossed in a war. Because Rydra has an uncanny ability to illustrate the deepest thoughts and emotions of the masses, the masses give her words and ideas an immense amount of credibility. During the story she walks into rooms full of diplomats, generals, or pirates and is unequivocally given the first and last word on any decision.

Rydra, the most distinguished character in the story, having once been part of a triplet helps legitimize the arrangement. Rydra also reveals that the other two members of the triplet were not just ordinary people; one was a ship's captain

and the other was a writer with the pop cultural stature of John Lennon.

David Samuelson muses that “[r]eading Delany requires a constant reexamination of one's assumptions. In his fiction and nonfiction, memoirs and criticism overlap [...]” (167). This can be applied to Rydra’s triplet in two ways. First, the passages that seem like social criticism could possibly be memoir in disguise. The creation of Rydra and the triplet must not be assumed to be a concept that Delany pulled out of the ether of his imagination. According to Lunde, the character of Rydra was crafted from his former wife, poet Marilyn Hacker. The second and famous member of Rydra’s triplet was based on himself and the third was based on a lover that the two were mutually involved with. Lunde gives a brief description of the history of the three in relation to Rydra’s triplet in Babel-17:

The other significant life experience that is echoed in this novel is the three-way relationship between Delany, Hacker, and a young man named Bob that was mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The relationship was a happy one for all three and lasted for some time. It ended as a result of the intrusion of Bob's wife and his eventual return to Florida.

(122)

With this information one can agree with Samuelson’s assertion that Delany used science fiction, not only to open minds about

different forms of sexuality, but to also deal with a similar event in his own life.

The second application of Samuelson's suggestion to Babel-17 is to illustrate how memoir can function as social criticism. For instance, Ron's problems with being the glue in the relationship among Calli, Mollya, and himself can indeed be directly lifted from Delany's own triplet. Lunde says that Delany's marriage to Hacker fell apart after Bob left the triplet at the time Babel-17 was being written. Lunde says that Bob "was virtually the last thing that had held them together, and when it ended, their own relationship rapidly worsened" (122). One can infer that Ron's fictional problem could be Delany giving shape to Bob's real problematic role in their triad. Delany did not address his marriage only through Bob's point of view, but also through the view of his wife. Rydra laments that if she would ever triple again, it would be with another woman because it would make things easier (82). Giving voice to Hacker, Delany critiques his role in the failure of his marriage to his wife.

Samuelson insists that "[c]onflicts between his sexual drive and his society's demands for conformity made [Delany] an acute analyst of social roles and behaviors" (166). Rydra's admission alludes to stress put on Delany's relationship with Hacker after the male counterpart left. Delany was a gay man who succumbed to the pressures of a heterosexual society and had to desire to stay married.

Delany's timing of Rydra's revelation is significant.

Delany plants it a third of the way into the story. By the time one reads this admission one is already emotionally invested in the character. Through ten chapters one has come to respect her intellect and ability to command the allegiance of those whom she encounters. This forces the reader to make a decision of either putting the book down or reading on. But to read on, one has to accept the complete picture of Rydra as a respectable person who has been in an alternative relationship. Crafting the character in such a way causes the reader to make another decision as to whether or not reading about people with alternative lifestyles is too uncomfortable. As mentioned before, this seems to be another way for Delany to achieve the objective of forcing that question from his readers.

## IV. BUTLER

During this discussion I am transitioning from one end of the spectrum of Black aesthetics in science fiction to the other. What I mean is that the authors I am discussing range in their contemplation of African-American issues from none at all to very heavily. Samuel Delany uses science fiction to advance the debate over the politics of sexual identity. The next author, Octavia Butler, is the fulcrum of my argument because she uses her writing to discuss not only issues of race, but broadens her topics to include class and politics.

Octavia Butler's The Parable of the Sower is about a young Black female named Lauren Olamina, living in the America of 2024, a dystopia in the near future. The central government of the United States has all but collapsed, and the population is left to fend for itself. The rich live behind walled fortresses protected by armed guards. The ever-shrinking middle class is forced behind walled neighborhoods to protect themselves from the masses of the poor and destitute. Once Lauren's own neighborhood is attacked, she is forced out into the "wilderness" of California and begins a trek to the northern parts of the United States using her knowledge of survival skills and the principles of the religion she created, Earthseed, to keep her alive.

Through Lauren's eyes and thoughts, Butler gives pointed criticism on the state of race relations in America. Writing science fiction gives Butler the ability to comment on the

dynamic of race relations by exaggerating the effects of it in the near-futuristic world Lauren is part of. Jerry Phillips observes about this theme in Butler's work that "[f]ew elements of the present are more charged with apocalyptic potential than the current racial formation of American society." Butler extrapolates from Phillips the threat of a coming race war; a threat not addressed in contemporary social discourse. Within the context of the story, this means that despite the fact that the setting is California in 2027, the interactions and suspicions that are attributed to racial tension are familiar to readers of the present day. The reader can observe similarities between the novel's plot and current events such as the alleged mistreatment and migration of the New Orleans Black community during hurricane Katrina, or the continuing debate in America concerning illegal immigration. Grayson recalls that "while contemplating [her] works, Butler...had in mind current trends that recall racist practices of the past" (4). While addressing the effects of capitalism on American society in Parable of the Sower, Butler devotes just as much attention to the issue of race and equality. This balance simultaneously satisfies the Black aesthetics and anti-aesthetics movements.

To read Parable of the Sower in terms of racial relations, one doesn't have to look far to come face to face with the issue. The narrator of the story is Black herself. Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating report that this is a common occurrence in Butler's works. They also surmise that "[i]n this way her work

complicates traditional science fiction themes—global and local power struggles—by inflecting such struggles with the implications of... ethnic, and class difference” (Mehaffy 46). In Parable of the Sower sources of conflict, the elements that drive plot, focus partially on the detail of her minority ethnicity. This changes the flavor of the story by introducing elements into the story that would not occur with a narrator who was part of a white majority. Grayson adds that Butler’s works “suggest that the reader (re)discover/recognize the traditional beliefs in and rich histories of African nations” (5). In order to understand Parable of the Sower in its entirety, the reader would most likely have to do some research of the topics dealt with in the novel. To achieve a level of knowledge the reader must acquaint himself/herself with African-American history.

In the case of Parable of the Sower, a white character would not comment on the shade of her skin color relative to those around her. Lauren not only does this in the novel, but also goes into the social effects her color has on those of varying shades within her race and those not of her race. Also, Lauren gives the reader insight into how she feels about herself in relation to whites. This would not be present in the monologue of a white narrator. Double-consciousness permeates the novel as the protagonist introduces insights and glimpses into Black history and culture just by going through her daily life. An example of this is when Lauren gives a brief lesson on the origin of her last name, Olamina, and another character’s, Bankole. She

reveals that they both "descend from men who assumed African surnames back during the 1960s" and that their ancestors both chose "Yoruba replacement names" (230). What makes the revelation more interesting according to Bankole is that they were chosen in contrast to the trend in that era when most were choosing Swahili replacement names. He admitted that his father "had to do something different. All his life he had to be different" (230). This detailed Black cultural information would not fit into a story with a mainstream protagonist. The simple reason behind this assumption is that in most cases it would not make sense to put Black cultural facts into a plot to describe the history and life experience of a white main character. Conversely, as the novel progresses, Lauren meets and befriends people of other ethnicities. There was no room for their histories and culture to fit into a story with a Black protagonist.

The gated community of Robledo, California, is a portrait of the American racial divide. The walled-in neighborhood is Butler's microcosm of American society and an illustration of the damage that poor race relations have on it. She sets within its walls families that are of all ethnicities, from the (African-American) Olaminas, to the (Caucasian) Dunns, (Hispanic) Quintanillas and (Asian-American) Hsus.

A Black woman named Mrs. Sims is Butler's first example of how racial divisions can be found within all people. One might assume that Mrs. Sims, being a minority herself, would have more compassion for other minorities because the chances that they

have had similar life experiences might be greater than with one who is of the majority, but Butler immediately breaks that assumption with Lauren's description of Mrs. Sims and her history:

Different people frightened her in some deep, hard, ugly way. She didn't like the Hsu family because they were Chinese and Hispanic, and the older Chinese generation is still Buddhist. She's lived a couple doors up from them for longer than I've been alive, but they were still from Saturn as far as she was concerned... "Idolaters," she used to call them if none of them were around. (203)

Butler acknowledges all humans have the penchant for bigotry and ignorance towards those whom they do not understand. In a time where the more "civilized" of society should band together, Butler suggests that division rooted in differences may be a basic part of human nature. Part of the parable in Parable of the Sower is "united we stand, divided we fall." In the story those who stay in cohesive groups stay alive; those groups that splinter are picked apart by scavengers.

Mrs. Sims represents how the world outside of Robledo came to be. She, like many others, was so concerned with how her neighbor could harm her that she failed to see what was happening outside of their own sphere of existence. Instead of looking out for one another, this divisive atmosphere brings race hostility into the community. This leads to the neighborhood's downfall: a

fitting metaphor for contemporary America. As Peter Stillman remarks, Butler creates exemplars like Mrs. Sims to represent what can destroy a society, characters that are "...so convinced of their own rightness, so scared, or so committed to maintaining their own arbitrary power that it can be disheartening to attempt to hope, think, and act in utopian, promising, or novel ways" (17). These people, through their individual character flaws, each meet an untimely demise in Parable of the Sower.

Once the wall comes down and Lauren must brave the outside world, Butler goes on to present much darker truths and commentary on human nature in the context of race relations. Lauren essentially becomes the reader's tour guide into the recesses of the human mind once the pillars of morality, law, and order have been pulled out from underneath ordered society.

In the aftermath of her neighborhood's destruction, Lauren joins up with the only two people to survive other than her, Zahra and Harry. Zahra is a Black woman a few years older than Lauren, and Harry is a white man around Lauren's age. They decide that their chances of survival in the dangerous world would increase if they stick together. They all agree that there is safety in numbers, but before the group sets out Lauren makes the decision to cut her hair and dress to appear more masculine. She believes this would also increase her chances of survival because of her tall, lanky stature; opportunists would think twice about accosting her and rape would be less likely.

Butler also mixes into their conversation the concern that they might be targeted based on the racial makeup of the trio. Zahra, who has prior experience outside the wall from her younger years, knows that racism is prevalent. She advises the newly formed group that Lauren's supposed masculinity is the least of their worries because "[m]ixed couples catch hell whether people think they are gay or straight. Harry'll piss off all the Blacks and you'll piss off all the whites. Good luck" (171-172). One is not surprised that the problem of mixed couples is unsolved in the near future, but Butler stresses that society has degraded to a point where it will get the group killed faster than being a homogenous group. Butler's world is based on the logic of pack survival: the only people that can be trusted are those like oneself.

Butler shows that racial conflict is more dangerous in the futuristic world of Parable of the Sower than the present when Lauren further comments on the trio's chances outside the wall. She says "if Harry can get a reasonable tan, maybe we can claim him as a cousin" (172). This comment makes the reader understand that one's skin color is more serious than just causing a little trouble. One could claim that the effects of racism are just as dangerous in contemporary America as the near-future setting of the story. Butler makes this claim difficult for the reader to prove because of her unique style of story telling. The style of story telling is cyclical in nature instead of linear where the effects from past events can overlap or run parallel to the

present. This allows the reader to compare the path of present society to its projected end in the future.

Mark Steinberg comments that Butler has a concept of history in her work that is non-Western in nature, one where historical events repeat frequently throughout time. She writes in a manner such that she is able to show how racism can continue in the present day and the future (Steinberg 467). For example, Harry's tan is the reverse of a phenomenon practiced in early twentieth century that African-American culture called *passing*. To avoid the ills of prejudice and racism by the white majority, very light complexioned Blacks would pass through white society as if they were white themselves. These Blacks would try to live the entirety of their life interacting with whites and taking on "white" cultural characteristics to keep from being the subject of that society's hatred. Lauren's plans for Harry's tan are akin to remembering a compass or sunscreen as essential items on a hiking trip: a necessity. This highlights the sense of urgency placed on race and reveals how crucial homogeneity is in Lauren's world; just as it was to *passing* Blacks in American history.

This theme of blending in shows where Butler takes science fiction and uses it as a mirror of society. The experience of passing is reversed completely with the suggestion that Harry, a white man who in today's society is at the pinnacle of America's social structure, pass as a Black man in order to survive in the America of the future. Butler's use of science fiction to address racial issues is very apparent in the irony of Harry's survival

depending on how well he switches from the pinnacle of American society to near its bottom.

Despite its dystopian cast, Parable of the Sower also hints at a possibility of improvement in America by employing, as Jerry Phillips puts it, "a race-transcendent communalist ethics to frame a sense of hope" (307). Via Lauren, Harry and Zahra, Butler shows what racial harmony can do if it is introduced into a culture. She first gives the reader a glimpse into what can happen to a society if and when racism is let loose on a mass scale with no opposing forces like law and order to counteract it. Once that is established, she uses Lauren and her following to show the reader how racial harmony can be put together slowly if there is willingness by people to look past those divisive labels.

For instance, Lauren helps an interracial couple with a baby who have just had their water stolen. Lauren is concerned for their well-being because she knows as a mixed-race couple they encounter racism. Lauren comments to Harry that the couple has "no natural allies around here except us. Mixed couples are rare out here" (207). Though the couple is wary of Lauren and her group, they understand that they need to stick together. Even with Lauren extending her hand in friendship, Butler makes sure that she does not lead the reader into thinking that the narrator is a fool. Once Lauren has a chance to meet the couple, she assesses Natividad as a person she is fond of and is compelled to trust. But Lauren also adds, "I'll have to be careful about

[trusting her]. But I don't believe she would steal from us" (211). Butler thus advises the reader to judge people on their merits, not their physical features. Natividad being Latino does not cause suspicion that she might, steal, but neither does her good-natured appearance elicit blind faith.

The next people that Lauren helps are a pair of sisters who happen to be white. The sisters are resistant and hostile to Lauren, but she woos them into joining the group anyway for the safety of all involved. Towards the end of the story she finds two runaway slaves, a mother and daughter, who accidentally slipped into their camp and fell asleep while no one was watching. The pair was of Japanese, Black, and Latin descent and looked slightly dangerous with their shifty-eyed actions and hungry faces. Once again, Lauren trusts in them enough to bring them into fold. In this apocalyptic world Lauren still finds it within herself to trust strangers of different races in spite of protest from her group that these "strangers" might do them harm. Her only real requirement is that they help each other in times of need and that they want to live. This goes against the cynicism some readers have, but the author wants the reader to "swim against the current" (309) and shows this through Lauren who "extends a hand to the desperate swimmer who struggles to make the shore" (309). Lauren shows that, like destruction, solidarity can come in all colors.

Along with offering a statement on race relations in America, Parable of the Sower is also a scathing critique of

American capitalism and the fate the country could endure if it continues on the same path. Peter Stillman gives a description of the novel's setting in relation to its origins in contemporary America:

The dystopia of eviscerated and impotent government reflects the realization and intensification of the dreams of...Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich in his 1994 "Contract with America," which promised lower taxes, less governmental regulation and other "interference" in the market, lower levels of aid to the poor, and a general reliance on the market to reward and penalize (16).

The novel is littered with examples of extreme poverty that function as background in Lauren's travels. Again, Butler uses Lauren as a tour guide through this world that is foreign to most, if not all, of her readers. Butler establishes the setting with descriptions of people who live in burned shacks and dilapidated houses of "unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash" with no lights or running water (10). These people, existing in squalor outside of Lauren's neighborhood at the beginning, become an allegory for her readers for whom poverty is figuratively right outside their gate.

Butler paints a world where the mortality rate from a small cut is astronomically high because of the lack of medical resources. Lauren describes some of the afflicted as "carry[ing] untreated diseases and festering wounds." They are so lacking in

water to bathe that "even the unwounded have sores" (11). Butler creates stark, shocking images in this first chapter such as "a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be" or "a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs" to set the scene. Stillman comments that in Butler's America, the poor only get poorer and are unable to afford what the present day reader would deem basic necessities of life; only the rich have access to these provisions that the poor in their meager subsistence cannot even image existing (17). What makes these images so dismal is that Butler only slightly exaggerates phenomena that are taking place in present day America.

Butler's treatment of the effects of capitalism in America takes her away from the issues concerning the Black aesthetic movement because she begins to address the problems facing all Americans, not just Blacks. Her work becomes balanced between the Black and anti-aesthetic movement, seamlessly weaving the concerns of both into Parable of the Sower. Since the setting of the story is in the future, Butler can deal with all of these issues at her own leisure without taking criticism from the Black aesthetics movement for not focusing solely on the racial aspect of the novel. The events that happen in the novel are, at the present moment, fictional which means she can put as much or as little about racism in her work as she wants without being accused of rewriting or glossing over African-American history and issues.

Familiar economic issues such as outsourcing, gentrification, eminent domain, and the rising cost of health care make Butler's work all the more relevant for the reader. The author adopts the reader's questions and uncertainties about the economic future and takes them to a logical, yet disturbing conclusion. Case in point: Butler shows what can happen to money if the stock market collapsed, or inflation went to extraordinary levels. A member of Lauren's party finds a thousand dollars in the boots of a dead woman, which to the finder, who had never owned money, was a bounty. The reader, living in an era of a relatively stable economy, would agree with the woman, but Lauren has to correct her. She tells her that if she were frugal the money might feed her for two weeks. The emphasis is on the word "might". Lauren points out that "shopp[ing] only at the cheapest stores, and [eating] no meat, wheat or dairy, products" the member's money could stretch for two weeks (312). Both Phillips and Stillman agree that Butler's work reaches into the present to make its point. Phillips feels that the work makes the argument that "late capitalist society cannot generate a future worth believing in" (Phillips 15). Stillman points out that Butler also has little patience with "ideologies" and business practices that plague the country today such as outsourcing and eminent domain (15).

Butler extends the theme of the future of capitalism into her vision of society shaped by the rise of corporate towns. In Parable, cities such as the fictitious KSF are conglomerates run

by foreign owners who buy entire cities or towns. This is done legally with the consent of the residents who are in grave need of revitalization. This KSF town hires people desperate for a better life with promises of security and living wages behind its heavily guarded walls. Here, Butler seems to illustrate where she feels America will find itself when its corporate owners and CEO's sell off their companies to foreign investors. Mr. Olamina, Lauren's father, alludes to the present worry stating "When I was young, people said it would come to this. Well why shouldn't other countries buy what's left of us if we put it up for sale?" (121). The inhabitants of Olivar now work for a foreign company and have no rights to their property or any influence over what is done with it.

The city of Olivar and other company towns promise security to lure in workers. Once the laborers are in the city, they work for very low wages, which to them is better than the nothing they were earning before. Some company towns in the story pay their workers not in U.S. currency, but in scrip valid only within the walls of the town. The company then charges rates for food, clothing, and shelter higher than the rates they pay. This effectively puts the workers into debt to the company, which must be paid off before the workers can be released out of their contracts. The working off of one's debt is made legal by the U.S. government in the story. The reader might not be able to understand how the government can endorse such an oppressive

practice, but Jerry Phillips may offer an explanation with his summary of the government of this 2024 America:

With social control rather than justice as its primary goal, the state establishes quasi-permanent "structure and organized systems" which secure the interests of the few at the expense of the many. Butler suggests that, caught in the vise between corporate tyranny and state authoritarianism, the individual suffers a crushing loss of self-identity; neurosis and psychosis become normal states of being; murderous impulses are given release; the death-wish takes hold. The end result is a people well prepared to accept fascism.

(305)

The people of Olivar and company towns like it will sentence themselves to a harsh life for the opportunity to live that harsh life to completion. For many, living under tyranny is better than not living at all – akin to giving up a few freedoms for national security by approving the Patriot Act. Lauren simplifies it:

"That's an old company-town trick – get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery" (122).

"Debt slavery" is similar to indentured servitude commonplace in the early history of America. In exchange for travel to the New World, people agreed to work off their debt to those who paid for their trip. Usually the debt was paid off after a few years of work on the collector's farm. Over time, this practice became less profitable as travel to the New World

leveled off. With a shortage of servants, the practice of buying permanent servants, or slaves became commonplace.

Once again, Butler draws heavily from historical facts to create a nightmare future. The author calls her version of these servants "quasi-indentured people" and in Lauren's America "[a]ccording to new laws that might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer who they owed money. They were obligated to work off their debt" (268). At the core of her fiction of events to come are accounts of events that have happened.

Parable of the Sower addresses what can happen when the country, as a saying used by African-Americans goes, "sells [it]self right back into slavery." As Robledo is a microcosm of racial relations in America, so the treatment of the poverty-stricken worker is a metaphor for slavery. The debt slaves Travis and Natividad recount their life story as live-in laborers for a rich couple. The first point of interest in their story is the fact that the male of the couple would not allow Travis to read any of the books in the large library of the house. Many slave narratives of nineteenth-century America do tell of masters who would not only ban their slaves from reading, but would also have any slave caught reading beaten or killed. Like many of the narrators of these stories, Travis had to learn how to read by *borrowing*, books, as he explained it, "I read them anyway. My mother would sneak them to me...We were careful. It was important. She never borrowed more than one book at a time" (218). Butler

does not tell us what will happen to those who are caught reading in this future; she simply leaves us to wonder if private persons get away with abusing their help.

Finally, we learn that Natividad, in order to keep her dignity and her body uncorrupted, had to leave the property to keep away from her lascivious employer (218). Travis painfully relates his witness to these events: "...[T]hen the old bastard we worked for decided he wanted Natividad. He would try to watch her when she [breast] fed the baby. Couldn't let her alone" (218). Butler relentlessly reminds us that those in power can take advantage of those less fortunate. Natividad's part of the story, especially, has striking similarities to the protagonist's plight in such slave narratives as Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl or the recently discovered The Bondwoman's Narrative. In the latter is a scene in which the mistress of the plantation discovers a slave who has been an unwilling victim of her husband's attention. She violently confronts the slave while the slave breastfeeds her two children by the master. The slave reveals the paradox that many Black women faced during slavery, saying "It is true that I have received favors from my master, but I couldn't help it, indeed I couldn't" (Craft 181). The female slave has had her chastity taken by her master, but is powerless to defend herself by law and is seen as complicit in her defilement. By transferring into her fiction items of historical fact Butler suggests that human nature stays the same throughout time. Those in power can abuse that power as seen in

Parable of the Sower and The Bondwoman's Narrative; Butler pierces the reader's complacency by demonstrating that the only thing separating Travis and Natividad's reality from the reader's are the current laws of the U.S. government that could easily be changed. If there were no laws to protect the less fortunate citizens from the powerful ones, Butler's version of the future of extreme poverty, indentured servitude, and debt slavery can become quite possible.

In Lauren's world, the abuses of slavery are not found only in the private communities of the wealthy. Later in the Parable of the Sower, Lauren encounters a single parent who was a laborer at a company town similar to Olivar. Going back to the motif of the worker as slave, Butler creates a back-story that exemplifies the transformation of indentured servitude into slavery. Workers are trapped into a cycle of poverty and debt that they can never break free from until they lose their identities as people with rights as human beings. Stillman again comments on this trap saying that a worker's hope for recovering their life is "doomed by meager wages once reserved for "illegals" and third-world workers" (18). Emery, a female, is a runaway slave from a company town who after marrying and moving to the town became a widow. She and her three children had to work off her family's accumulating debt until the company abruptly took two of her children from her. In desperation she refused to work until the company threatened to take the last child. The novel implies that Emery's children were sold. The logical way in which Butler lays

out this devolution into slavery is a testament to her storytelling ability. For instance, Bankole tells Lauren about slavery in the twentieth century:

In the early 1990s while I was in college, I heard cases of growers doing some of this—holding people against their wills and forcing them to work without pay. Latins in California, Blacks and Latins in the south...Now and then someone would go to jail for it.

(292)

As its title indicates, the novel reads like a parable, warning those who read it to beware for there are darker days ahead if America does not change its capitalistic ways. Butler warns through the aforementioned subplots that the reader must not sell one's freedoms away for money.

## V. JOHNSON

The last author I will discuss for my argument will be Charles Johnson. I have moved from Samuel Delany, who did not address themes central to Black aesthetics in his works, to Octavia Butler who balanced the themes in her works between problems affecting the Black community and problems affecting the entire American population. Johnson takes on subjects that directly influence the lives of African Americans.

Charles Johnson's work Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories is a collection of various short stories written for such magazines and journals as the African American Review and Playboy. This collection is eclectic in subject matter, tone and character, but for the purpose of this argument, I will focus on two of his stories, "The Gift of the Osuo" and "Cultural Relativity." Both of these stories address openly issues that have concerned the Black community, such as the history of slavery and the assimilation of African American into mainstream society. Each also contains elements that make them fantastic in nature.

"Cultural Relativity" is the story of Felicia Brooks, a college student who finds that the African student she is dating, Fortunata Maafa, is the son of his country's president. Her future is bright as the couple becomes engaged, but she has the nagging problem of a custom of Fortunata's people that she does not agree with: his people do not kiss. She tries to be sensitive

to his culture, but cannot get past the fact that it does not permit her own culture's expression of love. This causes her to become secretly obsessed with the reason for the taboo. In a moment of shock and absentmindedness she kisses Fortunata and learns the answer to her question. Fortunata turns into a frog.

Johnson's stories foreground the complex ways some Black writers intermingle fantasy/science fiction and social/racial analysis. Like "The Gift of the Osuo," "Cultural Relativity" has comic and fairy tale elements, but this is only a surface coating. The story also addresses more serious social issues such as the growing disconnect between African American men and women. Johnson's female narrator laments, "All the good Black men are taken, and the rest are in prison, on drugs, or unemployed, or dating white women—or don't like girls at all...What was a sistah to do?" (Johnson 12). It isn't until one rereads the story that it is apparent that the tale had the foreshadowing of a cautionary fairy tale reminiscent of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" or "Hansel and Gretel."

Johnson's fairy-tales attempt to teach adults lessons they might have not learned yet in their adult life. Also, Johnson's works can re-teach lessons that adults might have forgotten or disregarded during their development. For instance, "Cultural Relativity" illustrates that difference, in any form, is not terrible, or as Grayson puts it, "Those who are "different" are part of and essential to the future (change in society)" (86).

"Cultural Relativity" is an allegory. In Johnson's allegory of ideas, his characters represent concepts and the plot literalizes an abstract theme. Felicia shows the process that culturally sensitive people will undergo when their own interests outweigh their reason. Societies, countries, or single, ordinary persons like Felicia can fall victim to the same trap that Johnson lays out in his work. For Felicia, her downfall comes in the form of a kiss, or more specifically, her acculturated need for kissing .

When her boyfriend, Fortunata, proposes to her with a four-carat diamond, her first impulse is to kiss him. Fortunata stops her from doing this and explains that this cannot be. It is a custom in his country that people do not kiss, he has been expressly instructed by his father to avoid this American custom. The dialogue indicates this is not the first time the subject had been broached. Felicia has a conflict: she knows that she must respect Fortunata's custom even though the reason for it as he puts it is "lost in antiquity" (14). Fortunata goes so far as to lay out a rational case for why kissing is not necessary and even provides examples of other cultures that do not practice the custom of kissing.

This cultural rift between the lovers highlights the fact that there is no single, overarching, world Black culture. Felicia is African-American and Fortunata is African, but they are two different people from vastly different worlds who have and will lead two totally different lives. This contrasts with

the idea of Black nationalism, a concept which asserts that all African-Americans, regardless of background, should join into a single community that will not be assimilate into the broader American culture. When asked about his opinion of his own cultural identity in an interview with Michael Boccia, Johnson said that "A part of me sympathizes with Black nationalist concerns...But I just never bought into Black cultural nationalism. It always struck me as naïve (all cultures we know about are synthetic, a tissue of contributions from others)" (Boccia 197). "Cultural Relativity" embodies Johnson's ambivalence by showing that there is no monolithic "Black" community; that the Black community is diverse within itself.

"Cultural Relativity" shows that Blacks come from all walks of life and can have as much or as little in common with each other as they do with others outside their race. He says of himself that "[i]n the end, Black cultural nationalism only served to remind me of how thoroughly American my family and I have always been" (Boccia 197). As far as this is reflected in the story, the critical reader has to play along with the premise of the work— Felicia's tragic gaffe at the expense of her lover's cultural sensitivity—or the story will not achieve the ending that the reader expects from a cautionary fable such as this. Johnson uses fantasy to hide his views on cultural sensitivity underneath the lesson "be careful what you wish for".

Johnson allows the reader to be drawn into the discussion of customs along with Felicia via Fortunata's rational arguments.

It is difficult not to understand where Fortunata is coming from when he explains, "...it's not that unusual. Polynesians rub noses, you know. Samoans sniff each other. And traditional Chinese cultures did not include this strange practice called kissing. I suspect they felt it was far too intimate a thing for people to do" (14). The reader is forced to take pause in choosing sides in this argument when such cultural facts are thrown into the dispute. Most of Johnson's readers, it can be assumed, will be American, and, as an Americans the readers will probably initially side with Felicia. Like Felicia, the reader would not be able to imagine spending a lifetime with someone they could not express their love to in the common American way, especially if it has been proven that there is no physical harm in it. Johnson ensnares readers with their own train of thought and pulls them further into the story. The reader must develop his or her own opinion by the end of the story because Johnson designs the plot specifically to force the reader to do so by giving strong points to each side of this cultural debate on kissing.

Fortunata's brief anthropological lesson provides facts that broaden the readers' sense of worldwide practice. Johnson has Fortunata inform the reader and Felicia simultaneously that the world is larger and more diverse than just America. He later gives the reader Felicia's reasoning about the way she feels and also throws in cultural history to bolster her point of view: "[Kissing] dated back to the fifth century. And as a custom it was even older than that! The early Christians borrowed kissing

from the Romans" (17). As this is happening, the reader is forming an opinion that more than likely will be definite by the climax of the story. Essentially, the reader must answer the same question put forward in the literary debate over Black aesthetics: "should my world view be that only my culture should be relevant to me, or should I broaden my cultural awareness to include the rest of humankind?" They must also figure out if, in the case of Black nationalism, they are leaving behind or making less of their own culture by joining the world culture.

At first Felicia tries to accept the custom and even wonders if she is being "culturally inflexible" (16). Johnson increases the irony of her attempt to be culturally sensitive by giving her an anthropology degree. She should have some understanding of the diverse cultures of the world. But the lovers' cultural conflict foreshadows the tragic consequences that the fulfillment of her desire will ultimately create. When the narrator makes Felicia's warring interests apparent—"...she has always taken great pains to listen carefully when Fortunata spoke of his country's history and mysterious customs...But she wanted a kiss! Was that asking for so much?"—the reader predicts that Felicia's own interests will win out. Breaking taboos is avoidable with understanding and willpower, but readers can imagine that if one trained in cultural differences cannot resist, there is less hope for them.

The other element that makes Felicia's conflict so interesting is that she embodies the influence of American

culture on African-Americans. African-Americans are Americans because they were born in this country but have African ancestry; Black Americans are not African, just as white Americans are not culturally Poles, Britons, or French. African Americans by and large have taken on the ideals and culture of the majority though they have not necessarily obtained the equal status.

In the Boccia interview, Johnson himself shed some light on this theme of African Americans within American culture in this story and others. When asked if he identified with any sub-cultures, Johnson told Boccia that the only thing close to a sub-culture that he is able to think of is "Black American experience" but he adds a caveat, saying "but [the Black American experience] is—as we know—a cultural experience that has shaped American politics, economics, music, religion, entertainment, athletics, and the arts since 1619" (Boccia 195). Here, Johnson gives clues into his characterization of Felicia as an "all-American girl" because as an African American she has been saturated by typical American culture while at the same time African Americans have contributed to forming that typical American culture. Johnson scoffs at the notion that African Americans are not an important part of the American mainstream: "Sub-culture, indeed! It's best to say that from my childhood forward I've always seen myself first and foremost as an American, because it is impossible to separate our Black people from this nation's evolution" (Boccia 195). This is why Felicia

can consider Fortunata more of an alien than she would a white American, with whom she shares cultural similarities.

Felicia demonstrates how far apart Africans and African-Americans are in values by her reaction to his foreign custom. In the story, Fortunata admits that he is uncomfortable with the sexual frankness of American pop culture and he then has to fend off his fiancée's kiss. His culture is traditionally and sexually conservative and stresses abstinence before marriage, but somehow the couple still ends up doing "almost everything else lovers did" (15). The emphasis on everything insinuates more than the story reveals in the next sentence, when readers learn "[t]hey held hands, hugged, and snuggled" (15).

As the story progresses, Felicia shows an increasing intolerance for Fortunata's taboo on kissing. She convinces herself that her country's custom of kissing as an expression of love is the correct one by searching the history of kissing on the Internet. Her findings only bolster her confidence that her custom is superior to Fortunata's. Earlier in the story she referred to Fortunata as "her very own Galatea" to her "Pygmalion" (13). The reference to Galatea suggests Fortunata needs to be sculpted or molded by Felicia. In other words, Felicia, with her anthropology degree, still harbors a belief in American cultural superiority over the seemingly backwards African. This ethnocentrism is further reinforced in the next paragraph:

During the last year Felicia had introduced Fortunata to all kinds of things outside his culture—karaoke, the music of Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain, the importance of Ichiro bobbleheads, and why everyone needed a goof-looking tattoo—and he had enjoyed all of it, and thanked her for enlightening him, as a Good Galatea would. (17)

One can surmise that Felicia uses more of her energy to resist his culture and impose her own on him instead of understanding and accepting his differences. This assumption is based on the fact that Felicia exhibits no sign of personal growth from her time spent with Fortunata, coupled with her narrow-minded rejection of her fiancée's principles.

With the confidence that her society's way is the right way, she shows another American trait: suspicion of dissimilar cultures. She wonders if her fiancé is lying to her about the custom because he does not want to kiss *her* personally, but she quickly dismisses the thought. Johnson illustrates the habit of Americans to refuse to believe others may not wish to embrace our culture by showing Felicia's mistrust of Fortunata's intentions. Finally, Felicia convinces herself that if Fortunata experiences one kiss with her, he will change his custom. She sees her error only when her fiancé becomes a "giant West African frog" (18).

"The Gift of the Osuo" tells the story of an African ruler, King Shabaka, who settles an argument between two *osuos*, African wizards. The king is given a magical piece of charcoal, "ten

years older than Allah himself", as gift (38). This charcoal has the ability to bring to life anything that is drawn with it. Johnson begins the tale with a charming myth of how the Empire of Congo was established through the combination of this charcoal and Shabaka's imagination, but the climax of the story takes a darker tone when the king's best intentions raise the ire of warring tribes who are selling enemy captives to the Europeans in the infancy of the slave trade. The king, after warring with these tribes and suffering a stunning defeat, is himself sold into slavery. As Shabaka contemplates how life has taken such an ill turn, he finds himself back at the beginning of the story, realizing that he had dreamt the entire thing.

"The Gift of the Osuo" has the feel of two different stories in one. The first takes the form of the fairy tale or fable with the familiar story arc of a man who has a lot in life, but feels he could make better if only he had the chance. The second half is more comparable to historical fiction, telling the story of a king trying to keep his people from being kidnapped and enslaved by Europeans at a time when Europeans are completely alien to African eyes. The king can only describe them as "colorless men," and "men with faces like metal, and no lips...who suddenly burst into honey-white needles of fire and light [gunfire]" (53). Once the slavery narrative commences, the fantastic element of the magical charcoal is not brought back until the end of the story.

In "The Gift of the Osuo," Johnson brings aspects of African and African-American culture and history to life that are not addressed in mainstream American culture. In his description of characters, primarily the character of Noi, Shabaka's resurrected wife, Johnson injects an African perspective of beauty into a debate dominated by a white European physical aesthetic. Noi's features run counter to those of the thin, blonde-haired and blue-eyed visions gracing the front covers of most magazines. Noi more closely resembles the figure of Ur, a Mesopotamian fertility statuette, whose shape that is more supple, rounded, and thicker and whose features are more curvaceous than the typically preferred white physique.

"The Gift of the Osuo" offers a fictional, but accurately descriptive anthropology of some African tribes. The fictional Allmuseri person, a conglomeration of other real tribes, gives the reader a broad glimpse into daily African life. For instance, the story describes foods and drink that the tribe ingests such as *watoto* and *viazi*, which are a type of corn and grain, and *zythum*, an Egyptian beer which is ninety percent alcohol. The story also explains customs of African Americans that are actually customs carried over from Africa and passed down through the generations. For example, the story describes a situation where Shabaka pours a small portion of his *zythum* on the floor of his hut "for Allah and ancestors" (54). This is a sign of respect paid by the living to the ethereal members of their community. One might witness this same phenomenon in modern day Black

culture in which Blacks will pour out a portion of their alcoholic beverage onto the ground as a signal of respect and remembrance for those members of the community who are missing. In contemporary America the large population of incarcerated Blacks has been added to the list of those remembered by the tradition.

Finally, Johnson throws in references to recent African history that may be new to the reader. For example, Johnson writes a scene in which Noi convinces Shabaka to use the enchanted charcoal to bring an end to the conflict their Allmuseri tribe has with a neighboring tribe, the Wazimba. She says of the tribe that it has "held a grudge against us—as fierce as the Hutu have for the Tutsi..." (45). The reader will likely recall the recent conflicts between the Tutsi and the Hutu which have escalated in the last century into one of the most horrific genocides in world history, culminating in genocide in Rwanda in the 1990's when Hutus raped, tortured, and massacred roughly one million Tutsi people. Johnson, by the smallest reference in his story, opens this subject of history to the reader.

Halfway through "The Gift of the Osuo" the story changes from fairy tale to tragedy. King Shabaka is given the news that the Wazimba are selling slaves to European traders in exchange for weapons and goods. Here Johnson depicts the beginnings of the slave trade in Africa. Though Johnson uses fictional tribes, he writes about actual events in history. He presents the stark

reality of the slave trade and illustrates that it was not a Black or white issue, but instead a Black and white issue.

The notion that all Africans were victimized by Europeans who autonomously arrived in Africa and began kidnapping the natives is attractive for some, but Johnson offers a more complex account in his this story. Tribes like the Wazimba aided the Europeans by selling them debtors from their tribe, or prisoners of war captured from other tribes. In exchange, they would receive items such as guns from the Europeans to aid them in their battles. When those stocks ran out, the tribes began raiding other tribes for slaves, as Johnson illustrates. Marc Steinberg says: "[u]nlike many contemporary writers, then, Johnson's interest goes beyond recovering history, for he demonstrates that by fictionalizing historical events, he can assume power over them" (Steinberg 375). Johnson shines a light into the darker, less traveled parts of history; the parts that are not written into the history books most people have encountered in their schooling. Steinberg adds that Johnson "...demonstrates that history is fiction. Johnson apparently believes that by producing a fiction that looks like 'truth' (the novel), he can 'overwrite' those historical fictions that look like truth" (375). In other words he can use fiction to dispel historical myths that have been passed off as fact over time.

The plight of King Shabaka also illustrates the ugliness of this period in African history. Shabaka's son, Prince Asoka, takes a peaceful delegation to the Wazimba village to insist that

the tribe's actions cease. The prince is captured and immediately handed over to the Europeans and bartered for more "weapons and whiskey" (50). After losing a retaliatory war with the Wazimba, Shabaka and Noi are also captured and marched for days to slave port on the coast to be sold. The European sailors rape Noi, a once proud queen of a massive empire, repeatedly until she loses her mind and commits suicide by falling on a spear. With this, Johnson gives the reader a thumbnail sketch of the destruction of African kingdoms by the complex machinery of the slave trade. In a fantastic story which begins with a man being given a magical item, Johnson could have made his protagonist a common farmer or herder. Instead, he made the protagonist a powerful king of a vast region of Africa to illustrate that no African was exempt from being sold into slavery. A king was just as expendable as a farmer to the Europeans and to his neighboring enemies.

To show the impotence of the king in the face of what the reader knows to be the fate of the Allmuseri and tribes like it, Johnson has Shabaka contemplate how he could have changed the outcome. The narrator describes the king ruing: "Where, he wondered, had he erred? He had acted to end hunger, need, want, and—behold—each act of the ego engendered suffering" (53). The passage ironically shifts the blame for slavery to this bumbling king and away from the actual perpetrators. Having the reader in on the irony of the king's circumstances gives them the feeling of dread because they know slavery will happen regardless of his actions.

The fact that the story of "The Gift of the Osuo" ends like a fairy tale instead of a tragedy is the work's most interesting aspect. Shabaka awakens from his dream at the exact point where he made the decision to use the charcoal for the first time. He realizes the error of his dream-life, which was wanting too much, and throws the charcoal back to the osuos. The king then wisely asks why the wizards did not use such a powerful magical instrument for themselves. One of them replies "Why it ill-befits a sober man to swell the world's agony by adding his own desires to it, King. He fares best if he has maximum concern for life but minimum attachment" (54). But the osuos' fairy tale lesson and the story's neat and tidy ending are undercut by the reader's knowledge of the ravages of history.

The lesson, even if taken to heart, will not help the king when his nightmare becomes a reality. This is especially true if he is to be concerned with his people becoming slaves, but cultivate detachment needed not to use the charcoal to better his kingdom. The reader knows that the ending of Shabaka's dream-life, though altered slightly because of the lack of the charcoal, is still inevitable. Shabaka's nightmare is not over: the real history is like a nightmare inside of a nightmare.

Johnson uses the genre of science fiction/fantasy to lull the reader into being receptive to new ideas while reading "The Gift of the Osuo." The fantastic element of the story's first half allows the reader to imagine magical charcoal and make-believe creatures crafted by it like ifrits and toy soldiers that

can walk and talk. By the time the reader notices that the story has taken a downward spiral from which it will not recover until the end, he/she is lost in the grim story of the birth of slavery. In essence, Johnson uses science fiction to explore the most controversial and painful issues of African American history. Johnson has said that "one of the greatest mistakes that critics and readers make when approaching a novel by a Black author is the tendency to read that work as sociology, anthropology, or political statement of some sort," but one cannot help but to think that "The Gift of the Osuo' is a fairy tale addressing all of the above (Boccia 200). But Johnson has an answer: "for many Black writers 'race' is not the only subject they can write about with authority" (Boccia 200). One can infer that Johnson is able to objectively distance himself from the Black nationalism characteristic of Black literary aesthetics, but still can deal with Black issues in his work. He recognizes and illustrates that African-Americans are far from a monolithic race, but a very diverse people with varied views of life and varied levels of acculturation into American society.

## VI. CONCLUSION

For African-American writers, science fiction is a bastion of free thought where they are less hindered in their efforts to write about issues that they see as important. The fantastic nature of science fiction allows the Black writer full use of the unlimited resource of their imagination. They are able to create realities that are as diverse and far removed from their own as they choose. This frees them to address issues that affect them personally without having to pursue a limited agenda set forth by Black nationalists who feel that the direction of African-American writing has been set in stone by their racial inheritance.

Samuel Delany's works Babel-17 and "Aye...and Gomorrah" both concentrate on an issue important to the author as a gay man in America: sexual identity politics. Delany can move his focus completely away from racial politics by creating characters that essentially do not have a race, ones that are ethereal, or are genetically modified with different skin colors and flora- and fauna-like parts. This effectively robs the reader of the inclination to read the works from the viewpoint of cultural studies criticism. Once this is achieved Delany can illustrate his views on the marginalization of people living alternative lifestyles. He shows the ill effects of sexual prejudice in society through the characterization of spacers and frelks in "Aye...and Gomorrah" and the normalization of open sexual identity

through the triplet relationship in Babel-17. To expect racial politics in these stories becomes a low priority, its irrelevancy evident when looking for black and white in a world of greens and purples.

Octavia Butler, in Parable of the Sower was able to create a Black protagonist, an atypical occurrence in science fiction, to address issues of class from an African American perspective. This gives her power to address the relation of race and class in America through the trials of Lauren and the people that she encounters in her story of survival. By setting her speculative fiction novel in the near future, Butler is able to look at the phenomenon of racism by showing that arbitrary differences between races will always occur, but they must be overcome to survive in the future as well as to survive in the present. Butler's treatment of power struggles goes past the point of racism into the effects of American capitalism and class warfare on society. She can use science fiction to explore capitalism's consequences on America in the future and inversely show her setting's genesis in the reality of present day. Science fiction allows her to accomplish her goals because the genre takes the reader and critic away from the ties of reality that bind other fiction writers to address present day issues. By not having to place her characters in the contemporary, she can move around that barrier. She avoids turning the reader off by discussing issues in a futuristic setting instead of using direct, contemporary examples.

Charles Johnson makes it known in both of his short stories "The Gift of the Osuo" and "Cultural Relativity" that he is dealing directly with African-American history and culture, but he uses fantasy as a vehicle to express dissenting views on issues such as Black nationalism and the simplified version of early history of slavery. In order to keep the reader's attention long enough to state his case, he writes in the deceptively simple form of fairy tales. The reader is drawn in by the fantastic nature of these stories involving magical charcoal and modern day frog-princes and does not realize the subversive nature of the works until they are emotionally occupied by the plights of the characters. The stories do fit some superficial criteria that appease purists of Black aesthetics, but the genre of science fiction allows Johnson to still detach himself from the structure of Black nationalist aesthetics. It is difficult for a reader to immediately reject on a story that is fairy tale-like in nature; an allegory is able to cross racial boundaries while still being able to speak to a minority or readers on a different level. An allegory is so basic that the lesson of the story can be applied to anyone; readers can take the lesson to heart without feeling excluded. This makes Johnson's stories palatable to a broad audience.

Science fiction itself has its share of ideologues. This genre's purists feel that all science fiction should center around science, but they criticize authors solely on the content of their writing, and unlike purists of Black aesthetics, do not

criticize their authors on a standard that has more to do with social issues than literary issues. For that reason, authors like Butler, Delany, and Johnson are free to bounce back and forth between African-American topics and topics affecting Americans of all races. The author in the battle of science fiction versus fantasy only has to contend with a dilemma of semantics giving them more freedom than the battle within black literature. Three categories of science fiction were mentioned in this argument alone. In spite of this fact the genre of science fiction still provides African-American authors more freedom than the battle within Black literature.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boccia, Michael. "An Interview with Charles Johnson". Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson. Ed. Jim McWilliams. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2004. 192-205.
- Butler, Octavia. Parable of the Sower. New York: Warner Books, 1993.
- Crafts, Hannah. The Bondwoman's Narrative. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Warner Books, 2002.
- Delany, Samuel. "Aye, And Gomorrah..." Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction the African Diaspora. Ed. Sheree R. Thomas. New York: Warner Books, Inc. 2000. 124-133.
- Babel-17. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1969.
- Fauset, Jessie. "The Gift of Laughter." Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 45-50.
- Grayson, Sandra M. Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2003.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 55-59.
- James, Kelvin Christopher. "Fractals of a Grander Pattern." Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 90s. Ed. Elizabeth Nunez and Brenda M. Greene. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. 103-106.
- Joyce, Joyce A. "The Problems with Silence and Exclusiveness in the African American Literary Community." African American Literary Theory: A Reader. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York UP, 2000. 475-481.
- LeGuin, Ursula K. Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction. Ed. Susan Wood. New York. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979.
- Lunde, David. "Black Man/Gay Man/Writer...Prodigy: The Quest of Identity in Delany's Early Work." Review of Contemporary Fiction 16 (Fall 1996): 116-124.

- McMillan, Terry. "A Renaissance? Beware of the Backlash!" Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 90s. Ed. Elizabeth Nunez and Brenda M. Greene. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. 235-238.
- Mehaffy, Marylin and AnaLouise Keating. "'Radio Imagination': Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment." MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States 26.1 (Spring 2001): 45-76.
- Nichols, Capper. "Delany's Tales." The Review of Contemporary Fiction 16 (Fall 1996). 148-152.
- Pearson, Hugh. "Contradictions in the Search for Authenticity." Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 90s. Ed. Elizabeth Nunez and Brenda M. Greene. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. 107-110.
- Phillips, Jerry. "The Intuition of the Future: Utopia and Catastrophe in "Octavia Butler's 'Parable of the Sower'." Novel: A Forum on Fiction 35.2-3 (Spring-Summer 2002). 299-311.
- Samuelson, David. "Necessary Constraints: Samuel R. Delany on Science Fiction." The Review of Contemporary Fiction 16 (Fall 1996). 165-169.
- Schuyler, George. "The Negro-Art Hokum." Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994.
- Steinberg, Marc. "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative." African American Review 38.3 (Fall 2004): 467-76.
- Stillman, Peter. "Dystopia Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's Parables." Utopian Studies 14.1 (2003): 15-35.
- J.R.R. Tolkien. The Hobbit: or There and Back Again. New York: Ballantine Books, 1977.