WAR OF THE WORLDS:
POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES IN AFRO-AMERICAN SPECULATIVE FICTION

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Abstract
Based on the concept of *postcolonial* literature as the writing that investigates the literary production of women and other minority groups in relation to the colonial discourse, this article aims to analyze how the Afro-American writer Octavia E. Butler uses speculative fiction to expose and subvert colonial discourse through hybridism. First, it is discussed how science and its biased attitude towards black people became institutionalized in modern Western culture. After this, the text examines the influence of this ideology upon the science fiction narrative. Finally, the article analyses Butler's creation of *postcolonial* identities in the short story "Bloodchild" (1996) and in the novel *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) as a criticism of dominant representations of gender and race.

Keywords
postcolonial literature; hybridism; Afro-American literature; speculative fiction; science fiction

Introduction

The choice of the unhyphenated form of the word *post-colonial* in the title of this article aims to show that the complexity related to the definition of this cultural approach begins with the term itself. This statement finds its support in Theo D'haen's examination of the scope of post-colonial literature, in which a recurrent element is the presence of a war of worlds, or, using his words, a "conflict between the Margin and the Center" (D'HAEN, 1993, p. 15).

According to the critic, the term *post-colonial* used by landmark works such as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's *The empire writes back:* theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (1989) and John Thiene's *Arnold anthology of post-colonial literatures in English* (1996) refers to the writing produced in countries or regions formerly dominated by colonial power. However, the spread of the term to encompass women's and minority studies conducted by theorists of postcolonialism like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak demanded a new terminology represented by the name *postcolonial.* In this sense, similar to what is observed in the writings of post-modern artists like Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood in relation to fantasy, gothic fiction and dystopian literature, postcolonial writers took possession of popular literary forms different from the canonical ones to declare their critical position against the *status quo*; the same environment that promoted science fiction.

Rather than being just a product of culture industry whose main purpose is the ideological promotion of scientific discourse (SODRÉ, 1978, p. 119-120), science fiction[1] has become, through a post-colonial approach, a literary form able to expose and subvert Western Culture assumptions on race and gender that SF itself helped to support.

Since the 1960s however, writers such as Samuel R. Delany Jr., Steven Barnes, Charles R. Saunders, and Octavia E. Butler, among others, have been renewing or evolving the SF form to render the experience of these ostracized groups, especially the Afro-American one, with a free play of intelligence and strong ironic detachment. As one of the leading figures in contemporary Afro-American Literature, Octavia E. Butler epitomizes this fact in her novels and short stories in which the history and culture of African-American women are used to defy the ideological structure of science fiction. In order to discuss this statement, this article aims to analyze how Butler's speculative fiction exposes and subverts colonial discourse through hybridism. First, it will be discussed how science and its biased attitude towards Black people became institutionalized in modern Western culture. After that, the text will examine the influence of this ideology upon the science fiction narrative. Finally, the article intends to study Butler's creation of postcolonial identities in "Bloodchild" (1996) and in *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) as a criticism of dominant representations of gender and race.

[1] The letters "SF" may appear in the text as the abbreviation of the term "Science Fiction".

Science and ideology

The growth of science fiction would be unthinkable without the ascendancy of the scientific outlook. Resulted from the technological triumphs of Industrial Revolution and the erosion of traditional religious beliefs, the prevailing world-view of nineteenth century defended scientific research as intrinsic to the nature and purpose of human existence (PARRINDER, 1979, p. 67). Besides this, the increasing political and economic power of bourgeois society and its need for cultural recognition created new scientific organizations and journals both in Europe and in America, which conferred institutional representation on science with specific interests. As Stepan and Gilman points out:

> Science, as a form of knowledge, separated itself from other knowledge systems; in the process, the dichotomies between the pure and the impure, the rational and the irrational, the objective and the subjective, the hard and the soft, the male and the female, were given natural form (STEPAN and GILMAN, 1991, p. 78)

If science was the product of masculine (European) white minds who alleged detachment and objectivity, the impure, the irrational, the subjective and the soft, became automatically ascribed to women and colored groups. Another consequence of this dichotomy was the creation of a social gap between *high* literary culture and popular culture. Science, with its specific procedures and terminologies, stated ideas which could only be discussed by those who possessed academic knowledge. Only the trained scientist was able to speak in a coherent and legitimate way about scientific matters. In this way, critical texts about science written by women or racial minorities were either refused or dismissed because the criticisms came from *outside* the scientific circle. In relation to women, for example, Carole Boyce Davies mentions that: "Public spaces for speech have been generally identified with paradigms of masculinity, rational discourse, absence of emotion, developed logical arguments, control of representation and so on" (DAVIES, 1999, p. 4). Slowly but steadily, these ostracized groups penetrated the scientific area and began using the scientific discourse to support their claims. This process revealed a pernicious effect of the ideological propaganda: the internalization by both women and racial groups of the negative terms and norms of the dominant view. This means, after years of continuous exposition to sexist and racist ideas, many women and colored scientists accepted the beliefs of the mainstream scientific circle about the stereotypes and understanding of their self-identity (SZASZ, 1977, p. 172). This psychological process of identification with and internalization of their *otherness* as different and unacceptable was enshrined in the minds of minority groups throughout the twentieth century. Butler's own testimony of her dialogue in 1960 with her aunt exemplifies this fact:

> "I want to be a writer when I grow up", I said /.../ "Honey... Negroes can`t be writers." "Why not?" "They just can't." I was most adamant when I didn`t know what I was talking out. In all my thirteen years, I had never read a printed word that I knew to have been written by a Black person. My aunt was a grown woman. She knew more than I did. What if she were right?" (BUTLER, 1996c, p. 127).

Butler's aunt's comment shows how an ideology which considered the black person an inferior being in relation to the *educated* white individual became internalized by this group. This fact is the result of the manifestation of science through diverse influential areas of human experience, as it can be observed in the development of the scientific romance.

The Other in science fiction

As mentioned before, the widespread foundation of learned societies and professional journals that occurred principally in England during the Victorian period conferred to science a growing degree of public esteem. "Scientific romances" (TAVARES, 1992, p. 14), a term coined by H. G. Wells referring to stories which relied on scientific thought, represented bourgeois society's investments in its own future. The scientist, the embodiment of this ideology, belonged to this social group which hoped to gain power and influence through their ideas. Wells, an ex-science student, considered himself as the prophet of an "open conspiracy" (HUNTINGTON, 1979, p. 35) of scientists, technicians and industrialists which would take over world government. However, it was in the United States of the early twentieth century, a land which longed for the future, that the scientific romance found its perfect place for the development of its pedagogic ideals and inherent prejudices — ideals and prejudices embodied by Hugo Gernsback (ROBERTS, 2000, p. 68-69).

Although science fiction had abandoned Gernsback's vision while he was still working as a magazine editor, it owes him and his pulp magazine *Amazing stories* not only the coinage of its own name but also its promotion as a new genre in America (FIKER, 1985, p. 11-12). Started up in 1926, *Amazing Stories*, "the magazine of *scientifiction*" was interested in science and in stories that reflected technological utopianism. It encouraged a vision that SF would make readers learn and earn their way to the future.

Gernsback (CLUTE, 1994, p. 98) reprinted stories by Wells and Verne as well as *space operas* in which the protagonists were the supporters of the order. Buck Rogers — the first space-hero — debuted in January 1929 in *Amazing Stories*, influencing in the subsequent years the creation of many other defenders of the *status quo* such as Brick Bradford (1930) and Flash Gordon (1934). The common portrayal of these heroes as *übermann* reflected the basic characteristics of the SF reader during that period: white, middle class and literate. Readers who also wished to use the latest gadgets against the enemies. But who were the enemies? It was definitely someone (or something) with a *different* skin color.

One characteristic point of post-colonial concern is the construction of the colonized subject as *Other*. As Homi Bhabha states:

> The subjects of discourse are constructed within an apparatus of power which contains, in both senses of the word, an 'other' knowledge — a knowledge that is arrested and fetishistic and circulates through colonial discourse as that limited form of otherness, that form of difference, that I have called the stereotype (BHABHA, 1997, p. 300).

Likewise, "the key symbolic function of the SF *novum* is precisely the representation of the encounter with difference, Otherness, alterity" (ROBERTS, 2000, p. 25). As Adam Roberts points out, the representation of the *Other* is the core of science fiction. In the early years of SF however, racial, political, ideological and cultural difference were reduced to a portrayal of the Other mostly as a colored caricature of evil — a violent, sexually predatory being who threatened the (white) peace. During the thirties, it was the Orient the source of fascination and fear; so when Buck Rogers awoke in the twenty-fifth century from a long hibernation, he realized that the United States had been dominated by terrible yellow invaders. In the same way, Flash Gordon was always ready to fight against the merciless Asian-like emperor Ming, from planet Mongo. In the late forties and fifties, the enemy was the *red* atheist communists symbolized by the alien invaders in John Wyndham`s *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), Robert A. Heinlein`s *The Puppet Masters* (1951) and Jack Finney`s *The Body Snatchers* (1956), among others. What about the black people? Because they have been denied the status of citizens and even humans for a long time, their history within the SF field is one of neglect and invisibility.

There are few black SF writers. Certainly, no one who looks at the world depicted in SF writing before 1960 can have any doubt that the genre was simply not designed to be written or read by the dispossessed. American SF, the dominant form of the genre for many decades, was about the people who conquered the world, or who were about to. The usual space adventures confirm this: a bright young inventor hero lands on a planet, dazzles the dark-skinned native villagers with his science and wisdom, and plants his flag on the world, now entitled to join some Galactic Confederacy. It is a colonial vision that was not aimed at black readers. Even when the characters are described as black, like the protagonist in Heilein's novel *Starship Troopers* (1959) this fact is mentioned incidentally with no discussion of the racial issue. During the 1960s however, political and social changes occurred in Europe and mainly in America marking the outcome of a general questioning of the establishment and of science as a value-free, apolitical, universal, or purely empirical form of knowledge. The fragmentation of the consensus surrounding scientific positivism, a fragmentation that is itself a characteristic of a post-colonial world (HALL, 1999, p.11-13), brought new horizons to the science fiction field. Discussions about politics, drugs, religion and sex were incorporated to the SF themes allied with new experiments in language and style, as it can be found in "Bloodchild".

"Bloodchild"

"Bloodchild" is set in a human colony in a far removed planet and tells the story of the complex relationship between human beings and aliens. The main point in it is that in exchange for protection from the hostile environment of the planet the native alien race (called the Tlics) is using male Terrans (as they call the humans) as hosts to aliens' eggs. The eggs are nourished by men until the aliens are ready to hatch. When this time comes, they first eat out of their elastic shells and then continue to feed on their host. If the mother Tlic is not there to perform the Tlic-birth, the man will die. This story is narrated through the eyes of the adolescent boy named Gan, chosen by T'Gatoi, the female Tlic, to bear her eggs. "'Bloodchild' is my pregnant man story", says Butler (BUTLER, 1996a, p. 30). As it can be observed in this brief description of the plot, this "pregnant man story" exposes the artificiality presented in the ideological conception of male and female roles in society and the unwilling adaptations human beings would have to face in an alien world. This fact reflects Homi Bhabha's description on the idea of hybridization:

> Hybridization is not something that exits somewhere, it's not something to be found in an object or in some mythical hybrid identity. It is a mode of knowledge, a process to understand or perceive the movement of transit or ambiguous and tense transition that necessarily follows any sort of social transformation without the promise of celebrating enclosure… (BHABHA *apud* SOUZA, 2004, p. 113)

Different from the concept of syncretism in which the fusion of the differences results in a third term, leading to homogeneity, in hybridism the differences and conflicts are not solved. In this sense, both in "Bloodchild" and in *The Parable of the Sower* Octavia E. Butler proposes hybrid identities by subverting social constructions of gender and race. In relation to this Josephine Donovan mentions:

> In the Western tradition these stereotypes tend to fall into two categories, reflecting the endemic Manicheistic dualism in the Western world-view. Female stereotypes symbolize either the spiritual or the material, good or evil. […] Several works, considered archetypal masterpieces of the Western tradition, rely upon these simplistic stereotypes of woman… (DONOVAN, 1975, p. 213)

Due to this pattern of male dominance, women become either patient wives, bearers of life or deviants, considered as witches and lesbians. An increasing part of SF stories written by female writers since 1960 invert these gender roles like Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975). Butler's "Bloodchild" consists of one more example of this inversion. The most obvious example of role reversal in it is the fact that the head of the family is a female. This character, the female alien Tric T'Gatoi,

is not a follower of the traditional female role pointed out by Donovan. She acts as both the *protector* and the *owner* of the Terrans in the Preserve — a sector of the planet designed for the humans to live. She is the protector because she is the one in charge of her family, which is composed of humans and herself. She is the owner of the Preserve because she is the one in charge of forming the families that live there. T'Gatoi distributes the humans among the Tlics to create a new *family.*

The Terrans are practically considered a commodity to the Tlics. This is the reason why T'Gatoi makes sure that humans are not snatched away by other Tlics for personal gains and pleasures. Gan, the young protagonist of the story, reports this fact: "Only she and her political faction stood between us and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve — why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them" (BUTLER, 1996b, p. 5).[2] Similar to animals, Terrans need to be protected from the savage Tlics, and it is a female character that performs this duty. T'Gatoi is the character playing the traditional male dominant role. Another female character who appears to have her own independence is Gan's mother, called Lien. She seems to be her own person because she wants to make her own decisions. For instance, T'Gatoi and the family want her to eat the sterile eggs that extend human lives but that also drug them. Lien, however, is choosing not to eat them. Her will is to stop prolonging life so that she can die. In this case, Lien is showing that she is an independent person who has no need to obey orders from a ruler. There is a particular reason why human women on the Preserve, like Lien, have an extra sense of power that the males do not have. The Tlics really need the women because they are necessary to reproduce. Without human women, the Tlics would be left without hosts for their eggs. This dependency is what gives the female Terrans power, and they do not have any need for a man to make up for a lack of power. Qui, the narrator's older brother reveals the male impotence in his dialogue with Gan: "'they usually take men to leave the women free to bear their own young. To provide the next generation of host animals,' he said, switching from contempt to bitterness" (p.21).

Analyzing another point of the story, we also see how men in "Bloodchild" are treated as if they are taking on a reverse gender role. We can easily note how the narrator possesses qualities often ascribed to women. Gan is the one that is chosen to be the bearer of T'Gatoi's eggs. He doesn't have too many conflicts with this idea until he witnesses the horror of a Tlic birth with his own eyes. This fact makes him realize that he is really entering a life threatening scenario — the same faced by pregnant women for many centuries before the development of healthy birth systems. In this point he realizes the gap between him and the being he considered so familiar: "The whole procedure was wrong, alien. I wouldn't have thought anything about her could seem alien to

[2] Subsequent quotations from this story belong to this edition and will be identified in the text by the page number.

me." (p.17) However, after a discussion with T'Gatoi, Gan is given a choice of whether to go on with it or to let one of his siblings be the host of the eggs. He chooses to be the host not for his own safety, but because of the love of his brothers and sisters. He couldn't stand the fact that his decision would put a loved one in a dangerous position. This train of thought is considered a feminine action because women are often the ones to reveal their sincere thoughts of caring (DONOVAN, 1975, p. 212). After making his decision, Gan wants to know how T'Gatoi really felt about implanting the eggs: "Do you care? I asked. Do you care that it's me?" (p.28). This is where "Bloodchild" turns somewhat into a love story. Gan is the male character trying to dig out these genuine feelings of love. But the stronger examples of gender reversion lie exactly in the same areas where the female social roles are more evident: sexuality and motherhood.

As pointed out by Adam Roberts, female SF writers generally use the alien as a way of inverting traditional gender representations. A recurrent use of this element, explored in the film *Alien* (1979), is the situation in which a man can experience what it means to be raped by someone (or something) of the opposite gender (ROBERTS, 2000, p. 25). This is the reality experienced by the male characters in Butler's fictional world: "'No one ever asks us,' I said. 'You never asked me.'" (p.23) These unwanted encounters that are happening on this planet are a form of rape. In the discussion Gan has with T'Gatoi we find out that she was going to perform the implantation regardless of Gan's position. If nobody in the family wants to be a willing host, then there is the rape. T'Gatoi's words are closely akin to the male yearning for sex even if it is achieved by force: "I must do it to someone tonight (p.27).

Another gender inversion used by Butler is the craving of female aliens for the humans. Gan even expresses fear of the female's "desperate eagerness." (p.5). Moreover, by comparing Gan to Lien, his sister Hoa and T'Gatoi it is possible to draw another relation to male violence and savagery. There is a point in the story in which Gan is ordered by T'Gatoi to kill an animal. His appalling reaction towards the violent act he is expected to carry out contrasts with his comment about his sister's and mother's effortlessness in doing the same: "My mother, Hoa, and Qui could kill them with knives. I had never killed one at all, had never slaughtered any animal." (p.11). In this moment we see how the females are portrayed as the more competent gender, and, in this case, the competence is attributed to their ability to commit an act of violence. T'Gatoi is also a female capable of great brutality. Throughout the story there are scenes where T'Gatoi uses her tail as a very effective weapon. She uses it to whip and sting people. One example of this act is when she uses her tail to whip Gan when he hesitates to kill an animal for her. Actually, "Bloodchild" says a lot about the stereotypes of gender and their consequences in society. The idea itself that a man can be pregnant enables the questioning of the structure of society based on specific roles. But besides discussing gender constructions, Butler's condition as a black individual inevitably leads readers to another analysis of social stereotype in her work: race.

"It amazes me that some people have seen 'Bloodchild' as a story of slavery. It isn't" (BUTLER, 1996a, p.30). Butler's remark aims to criticize a common cliché regarding the concept of Afro-American literature in the white establishment. Whenever some story by an author from minority groups is published, it is expected that the problem of race is the guideline of the plot. Such assumption limits both the body of themes of these writers as well as his/her chances to be published. As Zora Neale Hurston observes: "They [publishing houses] shy away from romantic stories about Negroes and Jews because they feel that they know the public indifference to such works, unless the story involves racial tensions" (HURSTON, 1947, p. 54).

This limitation creates a stereotyped idea that, because of their *otherness*, these individuals cannot feel or behave in the same way as *normal*, (white middle class) people. "Bloodchild", as Butler claims, was conceived in one of its levels as a love story between two very different beings (BUTLER, 1996a, p.30). However, even though Butler is plainly declaring that her short story is not about slavery, the prevailing ideas of power, violence, sexual threatening, oppression and containment presented in Gan's narration are undeniably part of the tradition of slave narratives.

The first element which enables the reading of "Bloodchild" as a slave story is the condition of the living places. The colony designed and controlled by the aliens — the Preserve — is considered a refuge for the humans. In it, Terrans are protected from savage Tlics, who see humans just as host animals to their offspring; precious commodities to them. As Gan notices: "…we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people" (p.5). Gan is very frightened to know that if T'Gatoi was not there with him he would be threatened by other Tlics. This is a place where it is clearly stated that the Tlics are the dominant race. The imprisonment in the Preserve is very similar to the image of slavery because the Terrans do what the Tlics expect them to do. Human free will in "Bloodchild" is taken away by the circumstances of living with a superior race. Here it is important to mention that Butler never mentions the race of the humans, a fact that leads readers to conclude that despite their skin color, in this world all humans are suitable slaves. Hierarchical racial status is, therefore, *constructed* by those who have the dominant role. Once living in a specific space, it was necessary for the Tlics to control the Terrans in order to use them, a problem that was solved through drugs and violence.

Before the creation of the Preserve where they were given the right to live in unison with the Tlics, the humans were paired male and female and fed only on the Tlics's sterile eggs, which caused a drunken effect. Through this procedure humans were manipulated to produce more offspring. No matter how much the humans would try to resist the Tlics, there was always this extra means of manipulating humans. In this process in which families were broken up, another face of the slave history is presented. As George Brown Tindall says: "The worst aspect of the slave trade was the breakup of families […] and although the total number is controversial, it took only a few to have a damaging

effect on the morale of all" (TINDALL, 1984, p. 554). But even after the setting of the Preserve, some individuals were still chosen as pets by the Tlics. In the story the only questioning of this social structure comes from Gan's mother — Lien — who defies T'Gatoi's authority. Her refusal to drink from the sterile eggs and its consequent losing of vigor and youth derives from her awareness as a mother who is about to lose one son. Lien's motherly reaction towards T'Gatoi's desire for Gan reveals the resentment of this procedure: "He's still mine, you know, [...] Nothing can buy him from me. [...] Did you think I would sell him for eggs? For long life? My son?" (p. 6-7). By refusing to drink from the eggs, Lien aims to recover her true human nature — the right to decide for her own life — and reject the social role of provider of future hosts. Here it is possible to consider that Lien's ancestors were the ones forced to reproduce because of the eggs's effect. Women who had descendants that struggled to survive are themselves taught how to endure the same hardships as those ancestors, a characteristic present in the experience of black women (TINDALL, 1984, p. 553) Though Butler does not identify race, the character presents this history of suffering in her background. In addition to drugging, it is with Lien that T'Gatoi shows another useful way of controlling humans which resembles the historical slavery methods: violence.

In "Bloodchild" we see the story through the eyes of Gan. His impressions, opinions and feelings for the female alien guide readers in the story. Therefore, it is impossible to consider the opinions and fears of the other humans in the colony since the action is concentrated within Gan's family. However, through his somewhat alienated perspective, readers are able to notice that besides drugging the humans, the Tlics may use physical violence to fulfill their wishes. As Gan realizes: "She knocked me across the room. Her tail was an efficient weapon whether she exposed the sting or not." (p.11). T'Gatoi's apparent benevolence towards the Terrans is, therefore, directly related to their obedience to her. As a dissident voice in the family which needs to be silenced, Lien is the human that suffers the consequences of her rebellion. T'Gatoi herself concludes: "That one [Lien]…. She is always finding new ways for me to make her suffer" (p.14). In other passages of the story there is the mention of the Tlic's use of her tail as a whip whenever her orders are not promptly obeyed. American history is full of examples of this pervasive use of the whip on the slaves: "The difference between a good owner and a bad one, according to one ex-slave, was the difference between one who did not 'whip too much' and one who 'whipped till he's bloodied you and blistered you' (TINDALL, 1984, p. 553). Another oppression to what the humans are submitted which is similar to slavery are the restrictive laws on guns. During the revolution that took place before Gans's lifetime, humans rebelled a great deal. This occurred when the Preserve was initially formed and guns were available to them. For this reason many Tlics were killed during the revolt in the Preserve. "There were stories of whole Terran families wiped out in reprisal back during the assassinations", Gan says (p.12). It turns out that T'Gatoi finds out that there is a gun

in her household. Her immediate response is to take the gun away. She felt a fear that Gan or any other member of the family would kill her. When there is a partnership between different beings, as T'Gatoi claims, there should never be a fear of that person killing you. This is the same fear that slave owners in America had to face. There were many cases in which slaves revolted since they outnumbered the slave owners. The point is that the gun laws in the Preserve demonstrate how the superior alien race has a fear of Terrans with power. If the Terrans acquire power, the Tlics can no longer use their bodies. It is exactly in this exploitation of the body that, from my point of view, is the strongest similarity between the Terrans and the black women.

"In all of the black female slave narratives, the history of sexual harassment of black women by both white and men as well as by white women has been written" (DAVIES, 1999, p. 5). As Davies states, the sexual threatening to which black female slaves were exposed was a constant presence in their lives and was derived from the stereotype of the black woman as a promiscuous being. Though Butler may deny this reading, the situation of the humans in her short story is close to the one black women still have been enduring. In this SF story, however, as previously shown, the men are the ones exposed to this threat. It is in this aspect that "Bloodchild" may be read as a love story since Gan's choice to host T'Gatoi's eggs can be considered an act of love towards the Tlic. The true fact is that T'Gatoi is going to implant her eggs in any member of the family. The purpose of the formation of the Preserve is the dual effect of giving the Terrans some sense of humanity and also to ensure that a Tlic is able to reproduce. One way of looking at the Preserve is that the Tlics are bargaining with the humans instead of completely abusing them. Since the humans in the preserve, principally the men, are expected to host a Tlic's egg, Gan accepts the fact that someone will have to do it. In this reading, choosing to bear T'Gatoi's offspring is not an act of love performed by Gan, as Butler says, but the only salvation to his siblings. In this way, Butler's story is also about the coming-of-age of a boy who needs to abandon the security of his life and face responsibilities.

Science fiction became one of the genres used by postcolonial literature because of the close relation between this literary form and its *zeitgeist*. "Bloodchild" exemplifies this fact by presenting Butler's standpoint of the several changes in progress in contemporary society when it comes to discussing the ideological constructions of gender and race. Through the intimate relationship between human beings and aliens, readers are presented to a postcolonial identity shaped by the belief that, despite its uncertainties, the future of our society lies in accepting and embracing the *other* in a hybrid process. This same fact can be observed in the novel *The Parable of the Sower*.

The Parable of the Sower

Octavia E. Butler's dystopian world is set in an extrapolated America in the early years of the twenty-first century which has been undergoing the re-

sults of a predatory capitalist system. As a result of their interests, transnational corporations have created a social and environmental chaos that destroyed society itself. The loss of social control by the government enabled the rise of an anarchical state that affects the lives of rich, middle class and poor people, forming waves of "squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general" (BUTLER, 1993, p. 9).[3] Throughout the book, Butler shows her concern that, although these changes may affect the population as a whole, minority groups will certainly be, as usual, the principal victims of the establishment. In order to support this idea, the story focuses on one southern Californian suburb of Robledo: a white, black and mixed-race neighborhood defined by one character as "once a rich, green, unwalled little city". (p.9) Because of the increasing social gap however, a wall with "three meters high and topped off with pieces of broken glass as well as the usual barbed wire and the all but invisible razor wire" (p. 65) is erected around the community to protect its members. The families try to live helping each other sharing goods and services. Public services such as the police and even the firemen cannot be trusted anymore because of their corruption and inefficiency. The inevitable journeys outside the wall to buy or sell food and water can only be done by armed groups. Besides the dispossessed, another threat to Robledo are the gangs addicted to the new drug, Pyro, which creates in its users an intense desire to set fire to objects, forests and even human beings.

Butler based her dystopian society on the political and economic events that were taking place during the 1980s (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 224). In her vision, the anti-social right-wing agenda combined with the corporate downsizing and restructuring presented in the America of the future will give rise to a nightmarish capitalism. Butler's story exemplifies M. Keith Booker's distinction between utopias and dystopias: "utopianism is based on a critique of the deficiencies of the present, while dystopian thinking relies on a critique of perceived deficiencies in the future" (BOOKER, 1994, p. 19). This description leads to a second point that must be analyzed in detail: while utopias are *spatially* located (a desert island, a lost world within earth, a new planet), dystopias are set *temporally* distant from the author's own time, but the real references are concrete and near at hand. It is exactly because of this impulse to the future in stories that incorporate both technological backgrounds and social criticisms that dystopias like *The Parable of the Sower* became closely associated in contemporary literature with science fiction.

As an example of dystopian fiction, *The Parable of the Sower* is set in a future land and criticizes, through satire, the possible consequences of the deficiencies of the society to which it is related. Furthermore, as a dystopian fiction *written by a black author*, Butler uses the tradition of Afro-American Literature to satirize concepts of race and gender represented by the dominant white-

[3] Subsequent quotations belong to this edition and will be identified in the text by the page number.

male voice of traditional dystopias. In this process, she expands the dystopian form creating a utopian counter-narrative that incorporates elements of repression, domination, resistance and search for freedom.

"This business sounds half antebellum revival and half science fiction." (p. 109). The protagonist's father's remark about the situation of the American society in the future meta-defines the novel. Throughout the book, elements of Afro-American literature such as slave narratives, survivalist adventures, biblical references, sermons and prayers are mingled with the usual science fiction background of dystopias to tell the story of Lauren Olamina. Lauren, a young Afro-American woman, lives in Robledo with her father, stepmother and brothers. Following the tradition of dystopias that has D-503's and Offred's diaries in *We* (1922) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as typical examples, it is through Lauren's journal that the narrative of *The Parable of the Sower* is presented. Written in the years 2024 to 2027, this journal delineates the problems of her community such as its gradual dismemberment because of the presence of the transnational company KSV, the violent fall of Robledo followed by the assassination of its families, the strategies of Lauren's group to keep themselves alive and the establishment of a new community under the precepts of *Earthseed* — the religion created by Lauren.

In the course of the novel, it is possible to identify the influence of the themes and motives which permeate the history of Afro-American Literature. The setting of the story itself — Lauren's neighborhood — shows one of these values: the importance of the community. As George Brown Tindall remembers: "Members of the slave community were bound together in helping and protecting one another, which in turn created a sense of cohesion and pride" (TINDALL, 1984, p. 557). Being ostracized by white society, Afro-Americans got together to live in closed communities where they could share a sense of identity. Butler herself acknowledges this influence:

> I don't try to create communities. I always automatically create community. This has to do with the way I've lived. [...] I've always lived in clusters of people who found ways of getting along together even if they didn't much like each other, which was often the case. [...] All of my characters either are in a community like Lauren in *The Parable of the Sower* **,** or they create one; she does that, too. My own feeling is that human beings need to live that way and we too often don't. (MEHAFY and KEATING, 1997, p. 11).

In her dystopia, Butler exemplifies her opinion composing Robledo with white, black, Latin, Asian and mixed-class families who live together in a racist society. As Lauren explains: "On the street, people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind. [...] Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games" (p. 31). The place, however, is far from representing a possible utopian alternative to the dystopian society around it. There is always a permanent tension in the community derived from the intrinsic cultural differences of its members and the expectation of the attacks by the

gangs. Lauren's considerations of Mrs. Sims's robbery, rape and consequent suicide enable readers to know this problem: "She didn't like the Hsu family because they were Chinese and Hispanic, […] she didn't like us either because Dad had gone and married 'that Mexican woman Cory-ah-zan'" (p. 19-20). Rather than being an isolated opinion, other characters' behavior show that despite its structure, Robledo stands as a micro representation of the society from which it tries to defend itself. In this context, contrary to possible expectations, the racial diversity of the Southern suburb is not a positive fact, but another source of problem. If there is a community, this is a result of personal interests. As Lauren's father himself confesses: "I protect Moss's place in spite of what I think of him, and he protects mine, no matter what he thinks of me. We all look out for one another" (p. 67). The community of Robledo, therefore, is not based on a political, religious or social project shared by its members. It is, on the contrary, a group of families whose union is a result of radical circumstances. Two events expose clearly the intrinsic problems of the household: the increasing series of robberies and the establishment of the transnational company KSF in the city of Olivar. Considering KSF an opportunity of job and security, some families decide to leave the household, but not everybody. As Lauren's father explains: "I doubt that Olivar is looking for families of blacks and Hispanics". (p. 108). Gradually, Robledo begins to fall: "We are coming apart. The community, the families, individual family members... We're a rope, breaking, a single strand at a time" (p.103). Without a common purpose to exist as a community but to survive, Robledo reacts instead of acting. Lauren foresees the consequences of this lack of attitudes: "Someday we must become too weak — too poor, too hungry, too sick — to defend ourselves. Then we'll be wiped out." (p. 67). Through Lauren's comment, Butler seems to criticize people's omission in relation to the social problems around them. To Lauren (and Butler), the main function of a community is to be a seed to grow, an agent of transformation. To achieve this aim however, it must *correct* and not *reflect* the vices of the world. Closed in itself, Robledo is attacked and destroyed by drug addicts. From the ashes of this community a new story begins, a story of survival, perilous journey, search for freedom, talent for dissimulation and an unbreakable faith. Elements embodied in the hybrid figure of Lauren Olamina, an Afro-American heroine.

"Cities controlled by big companies are old hat in science fiction." (p. 110) Laura's meta-textual analysis of her world states the literary conventions also followed by other dystopian novels, such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and C.M. Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants* (1953) and films like *Metropolis* (1926) and *Blade Runner* (1982). In all of them there are individuals who go against the dominant voice through different strategies. Lauren's words confirm this: "The company-city subgenre always seemed to star a hero who outsmarted, overthrew, or escaped 'the company'" (p. 110). Choosing a black heroine as the protagonist, Butler expands the dystopian genre through the use of the themes and ideas of Afro-American literature. In this context, it

is important to mention the relation between Lauren and other black characters studied by Bernard W. Bell in his critical book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) His comments about the Afro-American hero help to understand this relation:

> The primary unifying principle in the Afro-American novel is the quest for dignity as a free people of African ancestry and the fulfillment of individual potential by merging a divided, alienated self into a truer and better unified, literate self [...] projected with messianic and apocalyptic overtones, begins with bondage, physical or psychological, and leads to some form of deliverance or vision of a new world: moral or political awakening, flight, rebellion, or social reform (BELL, 1987, p. 36).

It is relevant to note the close similarities between Bell's analysis of the Afro-American hero and Tom Moylan's description of the dystopian one:

> The counter-narrative develops as the "dystopian citizen" moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation that is followed by growing awareness and then action that leads to a *climatic* event that does or does not challenge the society (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 148).

Both traditions can, as it will be seen later, be applied to *The Parable of the Sower* and its characters' search for freedom, revealing common themes, motives and principles that link Afro-American narratives to dystopian ones. When the story opens however, the protagonist Lauren is being repressed by her father's religion: "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church" (p. 6). Gradually, Laura begins to abandon her passive attitude. Mrs. Sims's death is the first event that leads her to consider her situation. In response to the dystopian reality around her, she makes the first comment about her writing: "I can't get Mrs. Sims out of my mind. I need to write about what I believe." (p. 21) The second event, Amy Dunn's murder, brings Lauren a contradictory feeling about her home: "God, I hate this place. I mean, I love it. It's home. These are my people. But I hate it" (p. 44). Again, trying to verbalize her feelings about this new act of violence, she writes in her diary: "Sometimes I write to keep from going crazy" (p. 46). Lauren's use of language as a tool to rebel against the world around her follows, in this way, the structure of dystopian fiction mentioned by Moylan: "The counter-narrative is often accomplished precisely by way of language [...] Control over the means of language [...] is a crucial weapon and strategy in dystopian resistance" (MOYLAN, 2000, p. 149).

Moved by her critical conscience and aware of the possible consequences against her, Lauren tries to express her socio-religious thoughts to her best friend Joanne but is betrayed by her. This act precipitates a confrontation between Laura and her father, the Baptist minister of Robledo, a confrontation that is representative of the influence of the Bible upon Afro-American literature: "The influence of the Bible is also seen in the tensions between the most

common major characters in the Afro-American novel: the preacher and the hustler", says Bernard W. Bell (BELL, 1987, p. 31). Because of her resistance and subversion not only to the dystopian society in which she lives but also to established religious ideas, Lauren can be considered as a variation of the *hustler*. Besides, the dialogue between Butler's heroine and her father uses a variation of one of the most characteristic elements of dystopian fiction: the Menippean satire (CUDDON, 1991, p. 593).

So called after Menippus and its originator, the Menippean Satire satirized the follies of man in a mixture of prose and verse. In modern literature, it is represented by a Socratic discussion (a debate of ideas) between characters who are just embodiments of the ideas discussed. It is the tradition followed by Jonathan Swift in *A Modest Proposal* (1729) in which he proposes that the poor people from Ireland eat or sell their own children to solve their problems of famine and overpopulation. As in other dystopias in general, the Menippean satire is used to present the serious and logical support of an absolutely revolting proposal by the champion of the dystopian society and its criticism by the dystopian hero. Classical examples of this are the conversations between Winston Smith and O'Brien in *1984* (1948), the Savage and Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World* (1932) and Guy Montag and Captain Beatty in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). In Butler's dystopia, though the Baptist minister knows his daughter is right, he does not hesitate to order Lauren to keep her ideas to herself. Later on, she comments about Joanne, Cory and her father`s attitude: "What planet do people like that live on?" (p. 62). Alienated from her family, friends and society, Lauren begins to prepare emergency kits in case of need and waits for the inevitable attack. In her Earthseed notebook, the verses state a truth: "A tree / Cannot grow / In its parent's shadows" (p. 73). Eventually Robledo is attacked and the Olamina family, among other members of the community, is destroyed. Lauren can finally, for better and worse, grow.

Examining the carnage that was her community on the previous day, Lauren finds her friends Harry Balter and Zahra Moss, a white man and a black woman like herself. On the following day, a Sunday, the three survivors decide to travel north in a future version of the Underground Railroad of the nineteenth century (TINDALL, 1984, p. 566). At this point of the narrative, Lauren begins the second stage of her life and must learn how to survive in this brave new world. *Survive* is indeed a key word to describe Lauren's group strategies to keep themselves alive and united. From this point on, the narrative becomes an account of life on the road. As such, it follows faithfully the pattern presented in slave narratives like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). As Bell points out:

> One of the most popular features of the slave narratives was the melodrama and the romance of the perilous journey north to freedom. The ingenuity of the escape stratagems and the bold manner in which they were carried out [...] gradually became the stock conventions of the form (BELL, 1987, p. 29).

One of these stratagems carried out by Lauren is her disguise as a man to lead people to think she and Zahra are the heterosexual couple and Harry their white friend. By doing this, the group aims to avoid calling the attention of a racist society that despises mixed couples. Subverting her own identity, a usual device put into practice by runaway slaves to deceive their enemies, Lauren becomes the traditional *trickster* figure of Afro-American folk literature that defeats his powerful enemies through cunning tricks (ROBERTS, 1990, p. 100). Walking on Highway 101, the road that will lead them to the north, Lauren and her group notices that they are part of a single mass: "...the freeway crowd is a heterogeneous mass — black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move..." (p. 158). In the description of Lauren's group and the huge mass of dispossessed who try to escape their situation is the utopian counter-narrative of Butler's dystopia. This criticism is summed up in one of the Earthseed's verses: "Embrace diversity. / Unite / Or be divided, / robbed, / ruled, / killed / By those who see you as a prey. / Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed." (p. 176).

In a message that exceeds the limits of the novel and reveals its postcolonial condition, Butler seems to propose that one of the causes of contemporary problems is the discrimination of groups by their color, gender and class. Diversity, however, as Butler shows in the community of Robledo, is not a solution. There must be awareness that the search for an identity is a continuous process and a common project to be shared by the members of the heterogeneous group. In *The Parable of the Sower* this project is proposed by Lauren and the hope that her Earthseed principles may grow and unite groups into a single purpose: "Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place." (p. 69). In this context, Butler echoes bell hook's criticisms of the intrinsic problems of feminism and other political movements: "...there is need for diversity, disagreement, and difference if we are to grow" (HOOKS, 1997, p. 411).

Diversity, disagreement and difference define Lauren's group. She teaches Zahra how to read at the same time that she sows the first seeds of her religion. The first addition to the group is the mixed-race Douglas family. In the sequence, Taylor Franklin Bankole, compared by Lauren to Franklin Douglas (p. 295), joins them and eventually becomes Lauren's lover. Soon, two young white sisters are rescued and integrated into the party. After this, two mixed-race adults and their daughters complete the group. With the death of one of the sisters, they number thirteen, a group with common stories of repression, sexual violence, slavery, broken families and escapes. In the twenty-first-century version of slavery sustained by the companies, not only Blacks but also Latinos, Asians and mixed-race people are victims of oppression. Gradually, Laura's verses begin to give them a sense of identity. They decide to establish a new community in Humboldt County, in an area owned by Bankole, and Lauren names it *Acorn*. In its open ending that has its sequence in *The Parable of the Talents* (1998) Butler negates the dystopia of future America. United by a common purpose,

Acorn rejects the corrupt world at the same time that it intends to correct it, proposing a utopian core where differences are welcome. In doing so, Butler suggests a possible model for our world through a movement that, *because of* (and not *despite*) its diversity reflects the dynamic forces of its time.

Like the community of Acorn, *The Parable of the Sower* has different voices. It enables several possible readings and approaches. It is a hybrid resulting from the tradition of Afro-American writing, Utopian/Dystopian literature and Science Fiction. The similarities between both genres show that, for a long time of their history, black people endured a dystopian reality. At the same time, this fact enabled them to develop strategies that are represented in their folklore, sermons, prayers, narratives and tales and become real utopian counter-narrative that defies the dominant voice of western culture.

"Bloodchild" and *The Parable of the Sower* exemplify how speculative literature, in the mode of science fiction, acquires through a post-colonial reading the potential to discuss the problematic relation between identity, gender and race in contemporary society. Being both exposed to a hostile environment, Gan and Lauren Olamina share as a common point the awareness that their own survival depends on negotiating their colonized existence with the colonizer, resulting in a hybrid individual whose identity is characterized by tension and unease. However, as Homi Bhabha (*apud* SOUZA, 2004, p. 1) defends, rather than being a problem, these elements constitute the dynamic force of the hybrid and the ability to be in constant change, in an active search for the self.

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SILVA, A. M. GUERRA DE MUNDOS: IDENTIDADES PÓS-COLONIAIS NA FICÇÃO ESPECULATIVA AFRO-AMERICANA

Resumo

Baseado no conceito de literatura pós-colonial como a escrita que investiga a produção literária das mulheres e outros grupos minoritários em relação ao discurso colonial, este artigo objetiva analisar como a escritora afro-americana Octavia E. Butler usa a ficção especulativa para expor e subverter o discurso colonial através do hibridismo. Primeiro, é discutido como a ciência e sua atitude discriminatória em relação ao povo negro se tornou institucionalizada na cultura ocidental moderna. Após isso, o texto examina a influência dessa ideologia sobre a narrativa da ficção científica. Finalmente, o artigo analisa a criação por Butler de identidades pós-coloniais no conto "Bloodchild" (1996) e no romance The Parable of the Sower (1993) como uma crítica às representações dominantes de gênero e raça.

Palavras-chave

literatura pós-colonial; hibridismo; literatura afro-americana; ficção especulativa; ficção científica

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