## **Lessons from Culture**

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<sup>66</sup> O n what basis should we grant rights to non-human species?" questions Robert P. Harrison, in his essay "Toward a Philosophy of Nature." On what basis indeed? How does one define a non-human species? Harrison answers by exploring the difference between human and non-human species and what rights truly are. He comes to the conclusion that, according to our culture, there are few differences between humankind and animals, and that "rights exist solely because they can be violated" (435). Mankind's society and culture generally accepts that humans are the established superior species, and thus are the "natural" rulers who determine what our "natural" rights are. By examining concepts of domination, relationship, and change in culture, Octavia Butler, in her story "Bloodchild," suggests that anyone's concept of "natural" stems from his frame of reference, which then challenges socially accepted views regarding what the "natural order" truly is.

In her afterward, Butler calls "Bloodchild" not a "story of slavery," but a "love story between two very different beings," a "coming of age story" and her "pregnant man story" (30). As much as she may deny it, the theme of domination resonates through the tale, and plays a key role in her challenge of socially accepted ideas about "natural." Butler presents a time when humans have landed on a distant planet. In an attempt to ensure their very survival, the humans have made an uneasy arrangement with the Tilcs, the original inhabitants who are an intelligent, worm-like species. The colonists, called 'Terrans,' are allowed to maintain a semblance of restricted typical human life while living on a protected 'Preserve' set up by the Tlic. In exchange, the Terrans are required to provide one person from each family as a host for Tlic young. As a host, the person allows Tlic eggs to be implanted in their abdomen to feed upon their blood until the grubs are ready to be removed, which is a painful and gruesome process to undergo. Butler's story follows Gan, a young Terran who was selected to be a host, as he interacts in his society. As the story progresses, he becomes aware of the ramifications of being a host, and ultimately chooses to allow egg implantation by a Tlic named T'Gatoi.

Butler's world flies in the face of common thought, and challenges our perceptions of the "proper" order of the world. The Terrans are not superior, and as a result are not the dominant group. Instead, the roles of human and non-human are reversed, challenging the reader's idea of who "naturally" is in control. Rather than the newcomers assuming the position of authority like the European settlers of the Americas did, the colonists in this future age have become the subjected ones. They are used as a host species to nurture Tlic young and as a bargaining tool for power "She [T'Gatoi] parceled us [Terrans] out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support" (5). Tlic culture views the Terrans only as a grave necessity for their natural method of reproduction. This offends on two levels, one, the Terrans (humans) are not in the dominant position, and two, the newcomers are not the conquerors. Instead of a victorious species, they are a commodity. Both of these outcomes are contrary to society's vision of the accepted order of the world.

Many human cultures tend to agree that humans are superior to every species and therefore will "naturally" dominate and rule over all others. Butler creates Gan's brother Qui to represent this conventional culture and thought. Qui views his family's state under non-human domination as "unnatural," and sees Terrans as little more than slaves. According to Qui, the Terran's basic "natural" right to freedom has been usurped. He appears to agree with Harrison that "Freedom means first and foremost being who or what one is" (Harrison 433). He feels that he cannot be fully human while under Tlic control; he is not allowed to make important choices himself. He cannot choose where he lives, he must live on the Preserve. He cannot choose where he goes, he must either remain on the Preserve, or go where he is sent. He cannot chose what to do for a living. Terrans "were forbidden motorized vehicles except for certain farm equipment" (Butler 17) and so must farm or raise animals. He in essence cannot determine the course of his own life and be who he is, but instead must defer to the Tlic. In response to this, he attempts, unsuccessfully, to run away. He afterwards recognizes the futility of his endeavor, and calls it "Stupid" and "Running in a cage" (20). Bereft of any hope of self-determination, he instead seeks release through the intoxicating effect of sterile Tlic eggs. He cannot cope with the fact that this new Tlic/Terran culture does not coincide with his Terran view of the world as was shaped by those around him on the Preserve. Much as Qui must face the idea of loss of "natural" human superiority and freedom, so must the reader consider and accept this fact as s/he reads the story.

The story grapples with this concept, and ultimately makes steps toward an assimilation of Terran culture into Tlic culture, to form a new concept of what is the proper order of society. In this case, Terrans must adjust their concept of "natural" to provide for the continuation of the Terran species. Without this concession, the Terrans are as good as slaves. The Tlics would and did destroy objectors and force Terran reproduction to ensure Tlic continuity. By accepting their situation, Terrans gain some control over it, and are able to alter the outcome. According to Harrison,

We gain our freedom not by overcoming, but by recognizing [the] limit. Just as freedom is not a question of rights, so too it is not a question of emancipation. Its essence lies in the acknowledgment. (Harrison 436) The Terrans choose to cooperate with the Tlics, and so the Tlics accept, to a degree, Terran independence and autonomy, allowing them a haven on the Preserve and the right to live.

This way of life does not exclude Terran/Tlic interactions and relationships. T'Gatoi regularly visits Gan's home, and has sought to develop a relationship with both him and his mother. These relationships are "natural" enough if one considers Terrans and Tlics equals, as Gan appears to. He is jealous of the love relationship he has with T'Gatoi and is possessive of the intimacy he will share with her when she implants the eggs. "The thought of her doing it to Hoa [his sister] at all disturbed me in a different way now, I was suddenly angry" (Butler 27). T'Gatoi was a large part of his development, and so he developed an emotional intimacy with her. Gan "was first caged within T'Gatoi's many limbs only three minutes after [his] birth" (8). Gan had been taught since he was young what to expect, and to view hosting as the natural course of events in his life. This constant contact with her allowed him to develop a fondness for her, and to become comfortable with her and her people. He was one of only a few who didn't feel "caged" when held by T'Gatoi (6). He had assimilated her into his view of the world. It is a part of his accepted culture.

As a result of his familiarity and comfort, Gan was willing to choose to become a host, both out of a desire to protect Hoa and to "keep [T'Gatoi] for [himself]" "It was so. [He] didn't understand it, but it was so" (28). He loved her in a way he could not describe. Culturally, his relationship with the Tlic was the accepted order of things, and this relationship was a common thing. Brain Lomas, another Tlic host, called for his Tlic when it was time for the grubs he carried to be born (14). As touching as that is, and as much as it may be natural in any culture for a person to be possessive of one they one love, for a Terran to love a Tlic is unnatural to many Terran sensibilities. The difficulty lies in the realization that while the Tlic give the humans a place to stay, at the same time the Tlic restrict Terran movements and use them to host their young. It is hard to love one's oppressor.

The two cultures must both redefine their concepts of a natural way of life for the Terrans. A Tlic's natural course of life is completely foreign to a Terran's viewpoint, and vice versa. These ways of living have given rise to distinct cultures which relate to, interact with and change how these species live in relation to the nature around them and within them. However, on this world, the two disparate cultures must meld into an uneasy new third culture, where each makes concessions for the questionable good of all. Each culture must slightly shift its values and focus so that both parties may live together in relative peace and prosperity. Terran men must agree to bear Tlic young, and Tlic adults must agree to maintain and care for the Terran Preserve. Even as these concessions are made, new dialogue begins and the relationship of one to the other continues to change. As a sign that she recognizes him as an equal, T'Gatoi allows Gan to keep a gun, which was forbidden anywhere on the preserve. This was a difficult decision for her, because she realizes the power it gives Gan to change the order of society. According to Harrison:

A slave is a slave to the degree that the master refuses to acknowledge his humanity. But when emancipation comes about and the master's shackles are thrown off, it is up to the slaves in their liberation to acknowledge their humanity for themselves. (Harrison 436)

This indeed is what Gan has done, he has begun to realize his humanity and the need to have a hand in determining his fate. This, in turn, raises him to a higher level of equality within the culture. He is reaching closer to Qui's vision of freedom and choice, a state most Terrans and humans alike would naturally seek.

Even as Gan seeks to change his world, and alter again the culture which has shaped him, so Butler seeks to challenge and change our perceptions of the natural order of our world. She wants us to consider why humankind rules this earth, and to evaluate the way in which we do. She asks us to consider how we would view our lives if we had been taught differently as Gan had, and to contemplate why we have the established systems in place that we do. In short, Butler, by offending our sense of "order" and challenging our ideas of relationship, culture and domination seeks to shock the reader into accepting the possibility of a different way of life. Pamela Maynard

## Works Cited

- Butler, Olivia E. "Bloodchild." *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996. 3-31.
- Harrison, Robert P. "Toward a Philosophy of Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. William Cronan Ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. 426-437.