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Ontogenesis, Memory, and Evolutionary Time in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*

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ABSTRACT

The article uses the convergence of a close reading of *Wild Seed*, trauma theory, and posthuman/materialist analysis to demonstrate that Butler's novel conceptualizes memory not as private experience, but as an archive that overflows individual consciousness. That which is remembered cannot be contained within private experience: it is disseminated via bodies, routines, and reproductive records, and in what happens to us as much as to others. It is transmitted as opposed to simply recorded, and the transmissions by which time flows are political, a subject Butler calls chronopolitics. Through the novel's compression of time, this article considers how, for Butler, futurity cannot be understood either as progressive or as the abstract space beyond death or "after." This essay examines chronopolitics not as theme but as infrastructure of ecological, reproductive, and kinship relationships; the political infrastructure of the novel for this reason continues to inform discussions in ecological literary studies, reproductive justice, and bioethics. The essay analyzes how the idea of "life" is made subject to control while reminding readers that the possibilities of the future can only be recreated on the basis of stewardship, care for other humans, and the right not to be exploited for our physical and reproductive resources.

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1. Introduction: Framing ontogenesis, memory, and time

Wild Seed puts ontogenesis under pressure by defining “becoming” not as natural development or as individual self-construction, but as a fought-over struggle over bodies that carry memories and history and last beyond human timescales. From the start, the narrative frames Doro’s millennia-long project in terms of development: “I search the land for people who are a little different... I bring them together in groups, I begin to build them into a strong new people” (Butler 2020, 19). Ontogenesis here is an immediately political act upon captured subjects whose situation is “improved” through abduction, coercion, and unwanted intimacy. Placed within the context of Butler’s Patternist series, *Wild Seed* provides the genetic and moral blueprint for subsequent Patternist projects, depicting the emergence of “pattern” as a violently enacted system of selection, breeding, and control. The scholarship on Butler’s speculative fiction, as scholars have noted, focuses not just on reproductive futurity but also on a “radical reproduction” that subverts human time and stakes life and history politically (Streeby 2018, 728). The encounter between Doro and Anyanwu is not simply between two immortals but between two competing models of the future, one that uses reproduction for its own ends, the other that sees life as a responsibility that has to be negotiated with bodies, the environment, and others.

From the very first meeting between them in *Wild Seed*, Doro’s perception of Anyanwu takes the form of a recognition beyond the realm of interpersonal understanding and bordering on a species-memory that precedes any voluntary agreement: “Awareness of you has pulled me a great distance out of my way” (Butler 2020, 7). Doro’s remark, apparently innocent yet quietly authoritarian, demonstrates how he automatically conceptualizes Anyanwu as a resource in the longer-term calculation of his own reproductive viability. In this exchange, Anyanwu is not merely a person but rather a signal, part of a vast temporal matrix, a sense of “awareness” that signals a possibility for future becoming. As Maria G. Princess observes, Doro always positions Anyanwu’s traits as useful assets to the Patternist community, aligning her existence with the goals of its expansionist project and ensuring that her identity remains in conflict with those of the other characters, including Doro, because they are defined as biological assets whose identities derive from a struggle for control that conflates biological identity with functionality within the Patternist system (Princess 2025). What to others is an awareness, to Doro is an appropriation: for Anyanwu to be the object of recognition is to be enlisted in an economy of duration, in which lives are valued according to the prospects they offer of intensification, fortification, or reconceivability. This calculation mirrors the scale-pressure introduced into histories of climate and planet. When Chakrabarty refers to the globe as a projected image by man as opposed to “the planet, or the Earth system” which “decenters the human” (Chakrabarty

2021, 4), he gives theoretical, rather than dramatic, expression to a compulsion Butler dramatizes at the level of reproductive and species history. The decentering in *Wild Seed* is nothing so abstract. Doro is as hyperattuned to differences as if they were environmental hazards; Anyanwu's life is long because she is a repository for changes in social and ecological systems. The point is not that the novel just becomes another eco-parable; rather, it places the temporality in which they operate on an altogether different plane—one where institutional imperatives, biological limits, and species-wide futures vie against one another in such a way that none of them can dominate or negotiate with one another with anything approaching consensus. And whereas Doro's awareness sets the novel in motion, Anyanwu's thinking on kinship provides the backdrop for what is at stake in a moment when the relationships among generations no longer succeed one another in their prior, neatly temporal fashion, but come to overlay and overlap with each other and coexist, contemporaneously, manipulatively, precariously. Indeed, early in their painful exchanges, she evokes this embodied temporality: "Generations of kinsmen. Sons and their sons and even their sons" (Butler 2020, 14). The rhythm compresses time into kinship, and the people are not ancestors that will be—as it were, projected—into the far distance, but rather an ever-thicker nexus of commitments whose future seems immanent.

Where Doro seeks to manage them as a population, Anyanwu wants to hold them as an onus, a distinction ontological rather than sentimental, a framing of her person which, by means of her embodiment, seems to make her the site to which everything else in this text is tethered (Japtok and Jenkins 2020, 33). These "generations" are embodied continuities of understanding that Doro hopes to compress into a capacity for procreation; this attempt manifests in its most sinister guise with Doro's longevity, gained by plunder. As Anyanwu realizes, when he is in conflict, "he simply took a new strong, young body. No person, no group could stop him from doing this. No one could stop him from doing anything at all" (Butler 2020, 19). His immutability operates as a political condition—Doro's time, accumulated via the denial of others, constitutes the chronopolitical framework that supports the "ontogenesis" of his future people and ensures the perpetuation of a cycle of death and replacement. That is why the Patternist prehistory feels crucial. The globalized network that later becomes abstractly imagined as pattern is born here in a politics of absolute mobility via flesh. Doro's continuity literally comes at the expense of the interruptions of others, such that "ontogenesis" becomes not an innocent natural process but a system of temporal plunder.

Set against Doro's regimen, Anyanwu's abilities are not showmanship, but ecological and biological attunement—a body functioning as a portal rather than as something to be consumed or controlled. In one of the novel's more graphic scenes of embodied intelligence, she

articulates disease in terms of organic and ecological collapse: "There were things in your hand that should not have been there... Living things too small to see... I can feel them and know them when I take them into my body" (Butler 2020, 31). Here disease is not a specter, but a relation to "living things" recognized and navigated and changed through knowledge of an inner ecology. The literary and environmental critic Stacy Alaimo notes that such bodies, in which ecological and biological divisions seem porous, are, in fact, the transcorporeal agents identified by ecofeminism as destabilizing Cartesian distinctions of body and world; the bodies, in this formulation, "move across human corporeality and nonhuman nature," blurring human/nonhuman divides, making identity, agency, and even biology inseparable from broader relations (Alaimo 1996, 48). This becomes a kind of embodied, then ecological, inheritance: bodies are not only bearers of genes, but also of a lifetime of engagement with the world. Butler takes this ecology of the body further in an explicit account of ontogenesis as self-governing transformation, identifying Anyanwu's capacity to see and reconfigure processes as a cultivated, not innate, talent. The narration identifies the pivotal change in her origin story in a sentence which appears straightforward enough to be misleading: "She could look inside herself and control or alter what she saw there" (Butler 2020, 57). The sentence turns the notion of development into something akin to internal self-governance rather than surrender to natural development. Rather than being subject to biological clocks and timetables, she has practiced and cultivated the power to direct physiology when under threat. The body thus becomes something read, but also altered, a self in progress refusing to remain purely private because it is continually being recalibrated against a hostile world that would sanction other paths toward being.

That calibration offers one of the novel's most pointed claims to categorical otherness, one that touches upon not just gender, but species, knowability, and the impoverishment of inherited lexicons for non-normative existence. When pushed to the limits of language, Anyanwu insists, with a plainness that acts as resistance: "And I am something other than a woman" (Butler 2020, 56). The declaration refuses pathos and evades confinement. Within the Patternist cosmos, the risks escalate precisely because Doro's project is built upon classification, naming difference in order to manage it, pair it, breed it, and make it pay. Anyanwu's "something other" rebels against that management. What follows is the designation of ontogenesis as the production of forms of life that challenge rather than accept social taxonomies; what follows, too, is the invitation to an ethics of recognition, which is also an ethics of futurity. If certain kinds of lives are not nameable, futurity cannot be the continued production of the same partitions and permissions; futurity will instead be the work of transforming the conditions of the demands for legibility. This ethical struggle could not be sharper than it is around reproduction, in which

Doro's "building" imagery exposes his coercive mechanisms and Anyanwu's agency hardens into resistance. When she intervenes in her own reproductive biology, the narration simply and decisively states the motivation: "Now she did it to avoid giving any children at all, to avoid being used" (Butler 2020, 130). Ontogenesis then becomes defensive action, an insistence that futurity will not be claimed as tribute. This does not simply offer words but also refuses to confine Butler's complications to one system of thinking. As Haraway writes, "Feminists of our time have been leaders in unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between... sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons" (Haraway 2016, 102). Anyanwu actualizes the "de-naturalizing" of those ties and presents the risk as an enacted moment, freeing the generative possibilities from compulsion, conceiving of the continuing bonds rather as choices and commitments to our choices and then to difference.

Perhaps the most important stipulation that *Wild Seed* makes is to regard the future as a conflict, and the crucial query to pose is not simply what life endures, but how life continues without being instrumentalized for another. Anyanwu's stance arises out of an approach that sees time as occasion, not limitation. "The world is a much wider place than I thought; there is so much for me to see and know. But I will not be his dog!" (Butler 2020, 135). The life that arises does not just become alive; it arises able to deny, to remember its pasts, and to create alternative imaginaries across centuries. The future in the Patternist world will never fully unfold without prior contamination; it never fully closes itself off, remaining always within the eco-logic and repairing relations between historied lives bound to their own bodies, or within the relation that might become either an instrument of mastery or the underpinning of kinship in its choice and responsiveness.

2. Theoretical Framework

The posthuman childhood in *Wild Seed* is not some soft preamble to the arrival of "adult" agency but the developmental stage through which power, species-difference, and bodily-mobility are inculcated, under duress. Butler time and again likens childhood to a brief cognitive gap in which the "impossible" yet feels like structure, a brief moment of exposure before institutional violence and social fear harden perceptual habits into an automaticity of knowing. When Anyanwu indulges her grandson with a wild exhibition of transformation, the narration registers the boundary of childhood with an austere objectivity, indicating, "He was a young man now, not a child. The easy childhood acceptance of the impossible was gone" (Butler 2020, 55). The experience of the child, exposed to this mutability of embodiment, serves as a form of cognition in which any posthuman capability might be passed down as practiced know-how

and a living anticipation; in other words, it enables the “impossible” to be regarded as learnable and lived, until sociality and culture train the young into regarding their otherness as menace.

It is in no way Butler's agenda, however, to view the child as somehow beyond the imbrications of power and politics or to suggest that the innocence of child-life affords a natural protection to this same life. For the child is precisely the site in which the laws and customs related to kin-group membership, movement, linguistic usage, and physical adherence will be fully instilled as habitual patterns that in due time will constitute the pragmatic directives for an all-too-real existence. It soon becomes clear how and why one might and ought, in some circumstances, to accept the notion of a forcible displacement as a legible “beginning.”

Doro writes himself into marriage among relations, and elides family connections with erasure through omission, as if the amputation of relation were administrative. After having inflicted the violence, he suggests conciliation, using the lexicon of provision. He promises to provide some material securities for liberty: “I will give them land and seed” (Butler 2020, 63). The guise of goodness is a disguise: land and seed are, under the etymology of place and agriculture, a vehicle to transform dispossession into thankfulness, and procreation and consumption into payment for obedience. This kind of language is also didactic: “Others will teach them to live in their new country” (Butler 2020, 63). A child is taught not only about other languages or customs, but also about how quickly kinship ties can be reorganized by authority, how seamlessly “home” can become a question of planning, and how easily colonization can be presented as benevolence.

However, Anyanwu's earliest memory shows an even more microscopic understanding of childhood politics, revealing posthuman capacity to the child as a sort of affective request, as a competitive desire: In the closest Butler comes to illustrating the notion of intergenerational time in the novel, she shows a child weeping. The child's tears are not tears of pain, but another type of suffering: “you wept because you could not change as I could” (Butler 2020, 55). In this passage, biological potential becomes a lesson on wish and on exclusion, on the unevenness of embodied existence.

What is of interest to Butler is not a naturally freeing posthuman body, but the structuring power that the body exerts over the developing child's conscience.

This establishes a vision of what bodies are “supposed” to do and of the painful work of being the one left behind as one's own relative's capacity changes. Trauma arrives through the intimacies of confrontation, a gradual accumulation of lessons on embodied difference. It is at this level, too, that Butler illustrates how the work of dominance is propagated. As family memory marks the posthuman difference as relational strain, enslavement's reordering of

childhood as a target of a profit-making system that breaks continuities makes plain how such disruption can be a systematic process of dominance.

A slave woman recounts her capture: “We were all taken and our children with us. My son...” (Butler 2020, 61). This aborted sentence registers an inability to frame events that rupture temporal, as well as physical, continuity. In this intergenerational rendering of the rupture, childhood serves to repeat the original violences; in speech, the missing “My son” becomes a persistent symptom, a felt rupture in an unfolding life that may or may not continue, and that will be changed for reasons she will be left to understand.

Doro’s breeding practices intensify this developmental politics by foregrounding a eugenics of the child, wherein its being, as the biological “yield,” is appraised by the prevailing moral economy. In the world Butler depicts, an entire community has “obeyed him, throwing away clearly defective children born of their inbreeding” (Butler 2020, 49). Here, the trauma of each child lost becomes compounded by an inherited ethic, a practice, a comfort, an ease with the unthinkable, with the repeatable, with the morally imperative act of elimination.

Even in the seemingly straightforward disposal of “defective” children, trauma as a hereditary approach to existence and being —exists, reforming itself in actions that may, within their environment, seem natural and usual. The eugenic sorting, in turn, connects with an intensely private developmental disaster: the development of telepathic “power” as an agonizing rite of passage, a childhood rite of passage which overwrought the self. “Power came the way a child came with agony,” Doro tells Anyanwu on the eve of a child’s transition, folding biology into a matter of destiny (Butler 2020, 115).

That analogy serves as the novel’s central premise of developmental trauma: the arrival of power is a kind of painful, involuntary, and refashioning genesis.

In Doro’s framework, the body, rather than just being different, is in the process of transformation imposed on it and becomes the device by which the following generation will produce the desired child. The child, in that paradigm, is where the body has been altered, the remodeling having been forcible and extraction-based in this instance. This coercive design becomes clear as Doro plans to weaponize children in the effort to bring adults to his will. Although Anyanwu may manage to hold out a fragile grasp on relational collectivity, Doro proclaims, “Your children are safe, Anyanwu. For the moment” (Butler 2020, 29).

In “for the moment,” one can recognize the chronic anticipation and impending doom that awaits forced acquiescence. The children have already been taken, and their imprisoned condition creates anticipation and fragility for both parents and children alike. This gives some explanation as to why it is so difficult to envision “non-ordinary” children in the role of some type of utopia.

Butler articulates how the “non-ordinary” body becomes a product for the commodification of those considered other and how that body is seen as a viable and tempting target. “He wants a child from us because it will not be ordinary” (Butler 2020, 173) suggests the association between posthuman children and their societal “cost” —a desirability transformed into profit to be envied, targeted, and penalized through a process of punitive aggression. The costs associated with biological and social disparities are so intimately interwoven that they mean a child’s life shaped by secrets, threat and coercion from conception.

We see this developmental design reflected also in the way Butler writes of Doro’s childhood that preludes his subsequent mission: “People whispered about him. They said he was something other than a child” (Butler 2020, 189).

Personhood and thus, all distinction between human and other species, is inherently a fragile and intermediated sphere that relies upon the cooperation of society, an element which Doro’s program, as illustrated by his childhood experiences, simply escalates in its viciousness. When analyzed in their entirety, these brief examples demonstrate how the trauma inherent to these events transcends simple psychological explanation and in its stead reveals how the trauma of *Wild Seed*, systemic, inherent, and woven into all perceptions, reproduction, kinship and instead reveals the trauma of *Wild Seed* as systemic, inherent, and woven into perception, reproduction, and kinship.

A minimal definition of trauma (as outlined by Caruth) might be appropriate: Trauma is not located in the “simple violent or original event,” but in the way its “unassimilated nature... returns to haunt the survivor” (Caruth 1996, 4). Indeed, Butler uses the return itself as a mode of thinking, a method of relating events: the return of the past not merely in memory but in its manipulation—the guarding of innocents as hostages, forced sex as breeding, the removal of persons for safety reframed as “protection,” partitioned lives as “obedience.” It is in the routine of policy, state power, and person management that what cannot be digested comes back again and again. A longitudinal concept of history (and “long-term species projects”) further distances Butler’s novel from anything resembling comfortable, individualized psychology, since species-level trauma is something Butler’s world produces, not something it merely experiences.

The telepathy by which Doro “feels” and “traces” others acts as a way of articulating a temporality which is not solely generational, or personal, but structural: “I can feel their lives drawing me when I think of them” (Butler 2020, 49). Thinking becomes a line that draws people as dots onto an ever-expanding map across time, such that the past is always a problem to be resolved by ongoing effort, not something to be healed in retrospect. The world simply goes on without healing or resolving the past, treating individual lives as an input for, and an output

from, accumulation. Morton's concept of the "hyperobject" is apt to capture the vast scale of this endeavor: "Hyperobjects are what have brought about the end of the world" (Morton 2013, 6). While Butler is not an ecological analyst of destruction (in the sense Morton has proposed), she constructs an equivalent on social terms: a "hyperobject" diffused through space and time, beyond the experience of the individual, and in so doing redefines "kinship," "consent," and "growth." The realm of childhood, or rather posthuman childhood, in Butler's universe represents a junction, a place where deep historical design and immediate physical sensation meet, where structured coercive forms can be embodied and become habitual, and trauma can come to feel like normality. The problem of the end of the world that Butler's species faces makes any prospect of reparability one of urgency.

There is no way back to an already happy, healthy past, because the species already has established mechanisms that justify its present actions with recourse to tales of its victimized past. Repair requires interruption — the resistance of the child to absorption into the old design, a commitment to longevity as an ongoing project, and not an established right. Butler offers us this conclusion: The best future shape of ourselves, our species, our world, can be found only where we are our most vulnerable.

3. Narrative refiguration of species memory and temporality

In *Wild Seed*, Butler presents memory as a contested archive that is hoarded, translated, audited, and forced to be rewritten. Doro's elongated life enables his possession of the past, transforming cultural memory into political capital. He even uses the written language that he developed himself to describe his historical endurance as a collapsing funnel, wherein all the legacy that society once inherited is consolidated into a single individual: "Their descendants have forgotten the old wisdom, the old writing, the old gods. Only I remember" (Butler 2020, 124). The line is not about longing for the past, but about its structure. Doro's insistence on "only" frames memory not as some neutral shared reservoir, or even as a seized resource, but rather as a relation of power that comes from its forcible production through enslavement, dismemberment, and time, while the memory of those who were seized is shattered into memories. Readings of *Wild Seed* and related texts have repeatedly discussed memory as a site of rebellion—an act of intervention that disturbs official records and dominant accounts of history, as well as describing it as a lieu de mémoire (Jones 2018, 698–718) that resists the authoritative archive Doro seeks to curate. But rather than bringing Anyanwu the comfort and command of mastery, rather than producing a triumph that overpowers its readers, the longevity that makes memory an ethical necessity rather than merely an abstraction yields exposure and an unbearable, relentless accretion.

What Butler emphasizes is not Anyanwu's superior grasp, but the understanding she has acquired in a context that includes endurance: her prolonged, suffering life, in its description of "leprosy and huge growths that bring agony and babies born with great holes where their faces should be" (Butler 2020, 177), becomes an important witness, bearing testimony that this body "at the center of suffering" should not fall "out of history."

And herein lies its alliance with Barad's premise that "memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains" but is written into material configurations that persist and reconfigure across time (Barad 2007, 10). Memory is not a photo album; rather, it stings, it self-corrects, and it insists upon itself. The SLA has its writing, yet from what Doro and Margaret discover in looking "through her records" (Butler 2020, 259)—in the records that preserve lineage, the SLA's account, not of his atrocities but of his atrocities' consequences—it becomes clear that writing is hardly an inoculant, that the security of an archive is a question of its context, and that diaspora-space—not as a background against which life is lived, but as a space that lives as its very terrain—provides the site of transmission and exhibition, as a living mnemonic system (Lambert 2025, 160), and at its own peril.

Because this space readily stretches the parameters of its historical reach, this fragility can never be presumed as the given of inherited life, ethnic cohesion or national identity; as Anyanwu explicitly states, "They were called Kush in my time... When I was thirteen years old, I was separated from them. Now my people are those who give me their loyalty" (Butler 2020, 8). "In my time" marks a profound rupturalism, reducing centuries to the present, and personalizing the traumatic loss of home as a permanent state of being that reconfigures how an identity—and the terms by which allegiance is earned—constitutes the social. The past in the form of a lost, ancestral people and country never just passes in Butler, and the narrative's very compression and displacement of linear, human, and historical scale toward the immense, vast, and overwhelming is the aesthetic logic through which Doro manages the terms of allegiance, the structure of family, and the definition of a person that shift and mutate across the vast, deep ocean of time.

A politics of aestheticization that is enabled by the vast, nonlinear expansiveness of chronology—that is to say, by the aestheticization of time as an expanded field—informs the narrative strategies of and resistance to Doro's rule and the SLA's world-making. In a form, then, that compresses time into what, on its surface, is commonplace, the narrative accumulates such expansive passages, teaching readers to read extended duration even in decades, and indeed in what, as in this moment, is presented as simply a matter of sixty years: the sixty years appear not as an experience of accumulation but as its constituent factor as one finds it explained as a fact of provenance: "Gilpin," we are told, was "the name given to the settlement sixty years

before by its first European settlers” (Butler 2020, 112). The syntax which contains this enormous, immeasurable expanse simply carries the knowledge as it is, establishing it as a routine, and perhaps not even worthy of noting with any special comment or effort to imbue it with its enormity.

Butler’s approach naturalizes time in this way; at times, several millennia pass through the story’s narrative arc.

The SLA thus commands its victims’ time, utilizing it as a tool of power that is at once material and ephemeral. For if time is not a backdrop against which individual human beings struggle, then memory, the artifact of our prolonged duration, is executive (Terry 2019, 26–46). If time allows for accumulation—and for Butler it is the agent of accumulation—then it also becomes the condition for a kind of temporal manipulation, for the slow forcing and selection of breeding and generation and lineage. The nightmare the story captures is this: “Most often, however, he thought of her when he bred together her African and American descendants” (Butler 2020, 217).

One’s responsibilities can no longer be conceived in the arithmetic of the one-lifetime human: Butler’s logic of causality is that of accumulation, the inexorable press of outcomes, driven by a will and an identity that exceeds the normal limits of individual biography. Thus genealogies become both glaringly visible and grotesquely stretched: “I won’t wait to ask some stranger who interests me who his many-times-great-grandmother was” (Butler 2020, 298). The phrase “many-times-great” acknowledges and mocks both the length of the genealogic span and the desire for distance to absolve one of responsibility. For time not only multiplies danger, but it also extends it.

The same reordering occurs around embodiment: if not as direct dispossession, then as an abstraction from that narrative. Under Doro’s influence, this form of endurance appears at once practical and surreal: “This is not the body I was born into... It’s not the tenth I’ve worn, nor the hundredth, nor the thousandth” (Butler 2020, 13). Embodiment is costume, an experience of “wearing,” which implies something that can be changed, discarded, and replaced. As Laurie suggests, in Butler’s posthuman ethical framework, Butler refuses to accept as unproblematic the separation between embodiment and power, by positing longevity’s transformed relationship to lived experience as an extension of the power to be and, indeed, to live more, by means of consuming more (Laurie 2009, 47). This longevity is not about transcendence or a sublime expansion of being; it is about domination amplified over time.

Yet, another, different form of the destabilization of identity is embodied in Anyanwu’s transformations — a form of knowing-through that renders all form an archive. The first time she becomes a dolphin, Butler emphasizes an inherent intelligence that outstrips instruction:

“The dolphin body knew tricks her own human body would have taken years to learn” (Butler 2020, 89). The scene suggests that knowledge, or the capacity to know, is already encoded within the very substance of flesh and released by form. Agency is thus no longer a property of the disembodied subject of reason but rather an aspect of embodiment that precedes any command; it becomes a species-specific language, a manner of conjugating its life with other forms. *Wild Seed*, Ibrahim argues, proposes an ecological, transformative ethics, replacing humanist hierarchicalism with a value that privileges bodily knowledge and the erasure of species borders into kinship (Ibrahim 2023, 178).

And in such a world, time restructures the life course as well. No longer is growing older a guarantor of decline. Power does not diminish predictably: Isaac’s talent, he remarks, “doesn’t seem to weaken with age” (Butler 2020, 149). That quietly stated observation marks the significant difference between a world where an extended life course will invariably produce weakened capacity and agency, and one where this form of longevity is also a form of vulnerability.

Butler does not, however, yield temporality completely to the predatory. Instead, she allows for the possibility of hybrid kinships which are created through protection and learning as much as they are through blood or entirely voluntaristic relation: “She settled for protecting her children and any grandchildren or even strangers who became members of her household. These were hers to protect, hers to teach, hers to move if she wished” (Butler 2020, 298). Anyanwu’s reiterative “hers” speaks of authority but also of obligations, a counter to Doro’s conversion of kinship into controlled property.

As against the repetition of generation, the repetition of the household is an anti-genealogy, one through which kin will be remembered, carried forward. Smith notes that the repetition of species memory is one of the primary ways in which Butler recasts reproduction as ethical relationality, and by doing so redefines kin as being based on acts of care and embodied continuity that are resisted by patriarchy (Smith 2024, 46). Here as elsewhere, with Haraway’s injunction to “make kin, not babies... It matters how kin generate kin” (Haraway 2016, 103), the most intense struggle is not over reproduction, but over those forms of relation that might endure over long stretches of time without becoming the apparatus of domination. If Doro reproduces in order to accumulate the future and control it as an extractive pipe, then Anyanwu builds her kin through caring, teaching, and movement; her future is repairable. In Butler’s case, the question of species memory and time is therefore also a question of how identity and kindred relations might endure through deep time, rather than reproducing the violences by which survival becomes possible in the first place.

4. Ecological and ethical reconfigurations of futurity

Butler's futurity in *Wild Seed* also stems from an ecological lexicon which frames reproduction in terms of environment rather than parentage and represents "wildness" both as a potentiality of organisms and the ethical risk of being commandeered for one's raw-material value. When Anyanwu informs Thomas, "I am what he calls wild seed" (Butler 2020, 177), her utterance of the phrase in Doro's terminology of breeding highlights her vulnerability; it reduces living humans to stock to be managed and cultivated by individuals interested in harvesting their output. By appropriating the logic of agricultural stock management for a discussion of living humans, this language not only strips them of their humanity but presents domination through the exploitation of what could be interpreted as possibility for human ends as natural.

The phrase itself, "wild seed," thus represents not some unfettered future but rather a living commodity whose worth depends upon what it can yield to the extractors of resources; that is, it names an approach that prioritizes an extractive logic of reproduction over the temporal flow of human life. As E. Boccara asserts, Butler translates the language of agriculture into a racial-sexual biopolitics, where cultivation and control become metaphors for managing bodies and futures (Boccara 2020, 5). From within such a model, "wildness" marks a tension between an ecological and colonial logic of taming organisms, and frames futurity in terms of the politics of desirable reproduction, in which some environments can be permitted to endure (Boccara 2020, 6). Butler's ecological imagination understands that climates and bodies are mutually constructed through their existence in conditions of survival and posits "nature" as a site of social power, not just an aesthetic or abstract background for such dynamics.

"We were needing rain then to save the yam crop," Anyanwu reflects, "and while I was a python, the rains came" (Butler 2020, 16). The inextricability of ecological and corporeal precarity in the sentence implies that rain offers a point of shared interpretative engagement that constitutes a moment of "magic"—which becomes an opportunity to re-establish patterns of fear and oppression. The question of ecological dependence, in other words, is not apolitical, but an early index that communities utilize in order to bring some semblance of order to a collective state of uncertainty, by singling out any individuals whose physical capabilities to influence such circumstances destabilize that order. As C. M. Frazier notes, Butler argues that weather, hunger, and bodies together generate intertwined sites of power, not segregated arenas of life (Frazier 2016, 49–50). Because climate carries no inherent morality, it operates in sites of power and care with specific force.

By challenging the colonizing fantasy of human control, Butler positions Anyanwu's views on settlement and land use at the center of the moral question, thus treating spatial management

as an ethical technology. After surveying the numerous colonial buildings stretching across the terrain, Anyanwu muses how, by contrast, in her homeland, “one could stand in the middle of a town and see little more than forest,” and reflects that her communities were “more a part of the land they occupied, less of an intrusion upon it” (Butler 2020, 100). These reflections go beyond mere nostalgic longing for a simpler past; rather, Anyanwu uses them as a critique of the colonial practice of “intrusion,” framing built space as indicative of a particular ethical disposition toward land which is inherently one of enclosure and exploitation. The question of futurity is here intrinsically ecological, inasmuch as future societies will be shaped by spatial practices and the manner in which land is claimed and made amenable to governance, no less than through the birth of new individuals.

Doro’s approach is managerial; Anyanwu’s is reparative, embedded in ecologies that extend to her very materials and methods. From early descriptions, “she grew them as medicines for healing,” and “served her people by giving them relief from pain and sickness” (Butler 2020, 5). Authority here derives from her ability to maintain relationships; intelligibility functions by her fixing and soothing, circulation of goods, and diffusion of knowledge within the community. What matters is the plant-based nature of the work, as opposed to state-based regulation and control. Butler locates sources of moral authority in practices of cultivation and repair, refiguring ecological stewardship and care as political practice, as K. Modestino explains within a Black feminist ecology that responds to conditions of disposability and vulnerability (Modestino 2021, 57, 78). Ecology is thus not so much setting as structure of relationship.

Butler highlights this ethos with the stark inclusion of Doro’s performative discourse of care as the organizing principle of violence and harm. His “Be still ... I mean you no harm” (Butler 2020, 7) is not reassuring but the first step in an apparatus of domination that reinterprets care-talk as a technology for slowing time and reorienting subjectivity toward compliance. “This is what it means to care for another” functions by authorizing and instrumentalizing the production of life, and by deploying promises of protection to support regimes of extraction.

The most intensely interspecies passages of *Wild Seed* have care come to stand for the forms of ecological adjustment, healing, and repair that allow for the continuation of life under conditions of duress. By asking Anyanwu to “Go to the sea ... The sea cleanses you ... Go and be a fish for a while” (Butler 2020, 264), Luisa reframes healing not as the recovery of an intact and individuated self, but as a radical change of medium and sensory experience; to be cleansed requires a momentary release of human embodiment in favor of other kinds of being. There is no force of personal willpower that will heal the worn-out body; it is only in its concrete engagement with the elements, habitat, and new forms of sensing that it can be healed. Haraway’s term “making kin” describes this form of life born from “lines of inventive

connection” (Haraway 2016, 120), and Butler offers marine passage as a counterbalance to the domestication of the body and of relation. As Chakrabarty reminds us, deep time flows through our lives and bodies (Chakrabarty 2021, 7), so the care any human must take in ecological time will be that of a millennia-long experience of loss, displacement, and transformation.

Butler’s ecological ethics are not merely intimate. At every juncture, they expose the ways that institutions and “practical” decisions produce subjects as future objects for management but also make room, albeit limited, precarious, and tenaciously alive, for agency. In the slave ship chapter, a slave offers a small but significant act of resistance: “Even a slave must follow his own thoughts sometimes” (Butler 2020, 72). This resistance is not what we typically understand as heroism, but it articulates an important, and contemporary bioethical, claim: not all coercion destroys agency, even if coercion may establish the entire context of the choice. Praxis becomes the work of a minimal residual sovereignty of the inner life that cannot be captured by the system. Butler transforms the slave narrative into a speculative ethics of agency, and reinterprets freedom as the endurance of interiority in conditions of coercion, as Madhu Dubey explains (Dubey 2013, 350–51). Butler therefore extends the scope of ethics beyond the question of consent to the more somber inquiry of how one survives life as a human when human is a term instituted as one that is denied.

This is why Butler’s critique of protective, paternalistic interventions is not allegorically convenient or only historically relevant. Doro protests: “White women must be protected ... whether they want to be or not,” to which Anyanwu retorts, “As property is protected” (Butler 2020, 233). These phrases equate gendered vulnerability with ownership: those bodies are preserved for property owners, with their preservation hailed as care. “Protection” here operates as a title deed, and Butler clearly anticipates how policy ostensibly undertaken to rescue is actually a technology of control, especially as reproductive bodies are understood as an extractable resource. Domination functions not merely through force, but through self-exoneration as safety.

Butler’s ecological futures in *Wild Seed* resonate with issues of climate justice inasmuch as the text articulates the costs—the psychic and somatic—of inhabiting a world structured by extraction and coercion. When Anyanwu looks “down at the great, empty land” and wonders if there was “nowhere in all the forests and rivers and mountains and lakes ... for her to escape and find peace and cleanness” (Butler 2020, 229), she is not, it seems, having a simply personal fantasy of flight from violent circumstances. Even if the land appears to be, in part, empty, it does not yield refuge because, as it turns out, it has already been subsumed into the economy of the system she is running from. The passage insists against the settler habit of construing the

land's "emptiness" as the condition under which it can be "settled"—as a "vacancy" that allows the extraction of property and profit under the name of settlement.

As A. Snell notes, for Butler the goal of ecological sanctuary is to provide a counter-geography to extraction, where flight is a gesture that works against the logic of settler time and ecological dispossession (Snell 2024, 83). If we can yearn for sanctuary from violence, then we are also looking for sanctuary from environmental depredation—the possibility of coming to be in relation, that is, life-affirmingly, without first being compelled to be productive, to produce, or even just to be used up. But for this reparative futurism, Butler asks whether it is possible to learn to become responsible in a system of compulsory reproductive work. "How can they become responsible men if their only future is to be bred?" asks Anyanwu, thereby indicting the moral injuries of all such arrangements in which another is required to be born (Butler 2020, 263). I take the question to dismiss sentimentality: it is not asking how to breed better and more kindly, but whether breeding can ever, and in what conditions, be stopped altogether as destiny, as a method by which the human future is secured. This would not secure futurity simply as an increase in population ("more life"), but futurity as relation: how to construct a life which doesn't presume the futility of agency as a sort of hollow sentimentality; a future where you are not required to assume ownership, where breeding and the protected affect of paternalism are abandoned in favor of kinship and the practices of stewardship that allow one to exist within one's ecological context without necessarily being captured and made into a source for yields or produce.

5. Conclusion

Wild Seed finally weaves together Butler's three central questions—ontogenesis, memory, and evolutionary time—to articulate that the future is not what simply comes next; it is what is forced to stick, made to repeat, or made to disappear. Ontogenesis in Butler's novel is not simply evolutionary drift, but an ethical negotiation of how bodies are allowed to become and by whom, and Butler's blunt assertion of Doro's motive across decades of his life—the attempt to breed a new species—"I'm breeding people" (Butler 2020, 80)—reveals with ugliness why this is so significant. Becoming is refigured as a production process, childhood as a system of sorting, kinship as the very structure of species-level infrastructure, and memory as a registry of fitness for a future that is not yet conceived.

Contrary to Doro's pursuit, Butler articulates how memory and time are not only constitutive of ethics but also provide the framework for it. Memory and time do not automatically make us ethical because of volume. They could very well make possible the further expansion and acceleration of predation just as much as territory and person are amassed, but Butler doesn't imply that her people become thus exempt; she uses the novel to show what costs justify this

species, what violence, enslavement, and extraction underpin it, and how evolutionary time enables the accumulation of greater harms instead of providing an excuse for absent accountability and agency. Time does not rescue us; time accustoms us to increased harm and accountability. As such, the work is not a statement of protest against the coercion of reproduction, but a narrative about the making of a people who can endure over time without turning into property.

Reparative futurism necessitates disruption, the refusal to reproduce life as property for another. However, Butler provides no idealistic refuge from this rupture: instead, Anyanwu lives in an ecology of scarcity, where bodies feel squeezed and escape does not always yield a path out of danger but rather the precarity of a conditionally, perpetually postponed “now.” The choice continues to feel under threat, and extending beyond plot and characterization, the novel concludes with a question of the structural, institutional, and material conditions for a viable kinship that does not turn into a species-wide battle for ascendancy, how we facilitate a kinship that is sustained rather than devolving into a kind of ownership, and how responsibility continues to function as something other than a means of control.

In lieu of providing a cure, Butler poses to us a question that the work leaves with us. Butler’s reinvention of evolutionary time offers a version of hybrid kinship that expands beyond genetics to conceptualize kinship as based in protection, movement, and care. However, where Butler offers protection and care, this cannot be considered a moral position independent of the daily, dangerous practice of survival, care, and healing against the tide of historical traumas and environments.

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