**The Canary in the Coalmine: Retransmitting Apocalyptic Warnings through Dystopian Narrative**

 **Linda Scott**

 **Falmouth University, 25 Woodlane, Falmouth, Cornwall, TR11 4RH**

 **Linda Scott@falmouth.ac.uk**

**Abstract:** This is an analysis of a contemporary adaptation of Afro Futurist novelist Octavia Butler’s dystopian, speculative novel *The Parable of the Sower,* the first of a trilogy of books she wrote. Illustrator John Jennings and writer Damian Duffy have created a striking and unsettling Graphic Novel adaptation in response to Butler’s novel that has the potential to influence and expand the awareness of new and younger audiences, encouraging them to explore challenging political and environmental subject matter that they might otherwise overlook. There is a slew of graphic novels that have acquired a higher status in recent years overriding historic perceptions of the form in which they were considered to be at the lower end of the literary hierarchy. Theorists including Linda Hutcheon and Kamilla Elliot in their analyses of adaptations question whether or not absolute loyalty to the original source is essential for them to have value. The theme of educational value for contemporary audiences is also explored.

**Key Words:** dystopia, Octavia Butler, big pharma, John Jennings, Damian Duffy, adaptation, Linda Hutcheon, Kamilla Elliot, science fiction, Abrams Comics, speculative fiction

**Introduction:**

Contemporary adaptations of classic novels have the power to influence new and younger generations of readers in which seeds may be planted that can enrich and expand their current knowledge of a range of issues that they may not yet be familiar with. Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon suggests that ‘*Adaptations are so much a part of Western culture that they appear to affirm Walter Benjamin’s insight that “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories”*. [1] Children often enjoy the repetition of reading a particular story until knowing it intimately so perhaps in a similar way, adult audiences might enjoy engaging with source narratives in adapted into different forms to become more familiar with them, internalising them so that they might then understand the narrative from multiple perspectives.

**Dystopian futures**

*Parable of The Sower*, a challenging dystopian novel written by Octavia Butler, who was auspiciously titled the mother of Afrofuturism has recently been adapted as a graphic novel and is currently being developed as a film

for the big screen. The prescient novel, written in 1993, is underpinned by themes including climate change, the collapse of American society, slavery, homelessness, corporation owned cities and Big Pharma. In this dystopian world, water costs more than food and many of those living outside of the privileged gated communities are addicted to ‘Pyro’, a drug which causes its users to derive pleasure from starting fires. Such themes explore some of the concerns of the time and now 30 years later, these have become ever more pressing. Butler’s novel was adapted by African American illustrator and academic John Jennings and comics afficionado and author Damian Duffy, who were also responsible for adapting ‘*Kindred*’, Butler’s most popular novel as a graphic novel and are currently working on a third title. *Parable of The Sower* is an exploration and analysis of contemporary American society as Butler imagined it to be in the 2020s. The author of an article published by *Callaloo* claims that the novel is not postmodernist as some theorists have suggested, but instead ‘post Fordist.’

In addition to illustrating *Parable of The Sower* academic John Jennings is also the author of the ‘*The Blacker the Ink*, *constructions of Black identity in comics and sequential art ‘*and in his analysis provides some fascinating but troubling insights into the subject. He begins his investigation with an overview of the history of censorship in relation to comics and graphic novels with an example of the racism inherent in publishing at that time, writing that in 1955, the head of the CMAA (comics code – a system similar to the Hays Code used to rank film censorship) Charles F. Murphy rejected a story put forward for publication in the comic book series **Incredible Stories***. ‘Murphy’s personal objection is said to have been, “You can’t have a Negro” in the story ‘*[2] .

It's worthy of note that black people had, in fact appeared in Comic books before that time – Herge’s *Tin Tin in The Congo* for example, published in 1930 includes visual representations of black men portrayed in subservient roles such as sedan bearers for white masters, these visual representations being highly caricatured in ways that would be perceived as offensive today. Another challenging representation appears on the cover of an issue of Classic Comics, in which an illustration inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s controversial novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* depicts a slave owner handling three vicious dogs on leads hunting for an escaped slave who is hiding in a river.

Fig I: Classic Comics

Those faced with the task of adapting novels can experience challenges with the process and decisions need to be made as to how closely one might stay true to the original form, but when interpreting words and translating them as images there is the possibility that the adaptor might miss nuances within the original narrative and omit important information as an outcome of their personal and often unconscious biases. Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon has defined the process of adaptation as:

* *‘An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works*
* *A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging*
* *An extended intertextual* *work* *engagement with the adapted work ‘*[3]

As Jennings and Duffy’s adaptation of *Parable of the Sower* was undertaken after Butler’s death, the author’s input and feedback was absent from the equation.

**Earthseed**

It could be claimed that the graphic novel form sits somewhere between that of illustration and film and is a bridge between both. Within the context of both graphic novels and film, the process usually starts with a storyboard of some kind. The graphic novel is often, but not always a combination of words and static images, the words either being contained within text boxes or captured within speech bubbles. Sometimes text is integrated within the image, unbounded by a frame. As certain theorists have pointed out, adapting novels into other forms results in a new entity existing in its own right, although related to the original. Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon takes the position that there is value in the process and outcome :*‘You might tell me that through images film conveys a vast amount of information that words can only attempt to approximate, and you would be right, but approximation is precious in itself, because it bears the author’s stamp more than the book, and that the same would be true of the film.’* [4] The term ‘approximation ‘ could be seen as a useful way to consider any adaptation and is certainly relevant to Duffy and Jennings’ graphic novel.

It is the character of Lauren first described in both Butler’s original novel and the graphic novel that ‘*as Murray Smith has argued’* is ‘*crucial to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of both narrative and performance texts because they engage receivers’ imaginations through what he calls recognition, alignment and allegiance* ‘[5] Butler created her protagonist, the highly empathic teenager Lauren Olamina ( a Yoruba surname her father assumed in the ‘60s ) as a conduit through which to explore and question key themes within the novel including those of religion, climate change, politics and the increasingly dystopian world in which she inhabits, and she does so through writing in her personal journal. We are introduced to Lauren’s philosophising through her journal entries, both within the context of the novel and graphic novel adaptation, these being written in the first person and consequently, the reader begins to internalise the questions that Lauren is grappling with. Jennings’ response to visually translating the diary entries was created through the inclusion of scans of lined exercise book pages, onto which Lauren’s hand- written manifesto for EARTHSEED is written.

The choice to include captions written onto lined paper sourced from an exercise book, visually connects with and reinforces the concept of the personal journal into which Lauren both records events and proposes her manifesto. As a visual strategy, it enables large bodies of text sourced from the novel to be integrated within the pages and also reduces the number of images - at almost 300 pages, the adaptation is lengthy, and such a strategy may have been harnessed to reduce time. The use of ruled paper throughout the graphic novel references Lauren’s writing in an exercise book and is also used as a device through which to include text. This allows more text to be included than is often seen in most graphic novels. Another innovation Jennings employs is the inclusion of digitally captured maps of Los Angeles to provide context.

II Jennings, J, Duffy, D Parable of the Sower

Lauren, as a strong young black female protagonist reflects both physical and biographical characteristics that could be identified with those of Butler herself. There are clear parallels between certain themes woven into the narrative of *Parable of The Sower* and those of Butler’s own life. We learn that Lauren is the daughter of a Baptist minister which mirrors Butler’s personal experience of having been brought up within the Baptist religion, although both later rejected this path and as the story progresses, Lauren instead creates her own philosophy or manifesto titled EARTHSEED, which is documented within the pages of her journal.

The first page of Butler’s novel commences with a passage from Lauren’s manifesto ‘EARTHSEED ‘and is followed by a paragraph whereby Lauren describes a recurring dream in which she is learning to fly. After several pages of imagery designed to set the visual tone of his adaptation, Jennings created a panel depicting a celestial map of the stars, followed by another in which Lauren levitates above the floor. The map of the stars alludes to Lauren being asleep and dreaming, but as the narrative unfolds it transpires that this is also a reference to key themes connected to her ‘EARTHSEED ‘manifesto and her growing awareness of the necessity for humans affected by climate change and the breaking down of civilization to colonise other worlds. In addition to learning how to fly in her dream Lauren also possesses the trait of hyper empathy, meaning that she experiences pain as acutely as the person in which it originates.

The language of Butler’s novel spares no detail of sometimes violent and shocking events unfolding which subsequently evokes searing imagery in one’s mind. The language she uses to describe traumatic events, in its directness is often hard to digest, and somehow more potent than Jennings ‘images, which at times border on the grotesque, whilst at other times evoking a sense of menace and foreboding. Lauren lives with her family in a gated community and as the narrative unfolds, we learn that societal anarchy reigns beyond the boundaries.

Fig III: Jennings, J Parable of the Sower

**Hyper Empathy**

Occasional trips between the increasingly threatened safety of their enclosed community to the chaotic world beyond is initially visually conveyed through the use of graffiti covered walls, dominating early panels. As the family and friends venture outside, they and the reader are also confronted by grotesque visual representations of beheaded humans, maggot ridden faces and amputated limbs and these traumatic injuries are alluded to once again in a series of 3 panels on page 9 in which Lauren is seen cycling on her bike through the streets herself bearing horrific physical wounds. The visual reference here to the physical traumas witnessed in the earlier panels, is an allusion to the fact that Lauren’s physical traumas mirror those of wounded individuals and this is Jennings’ solution to visually conveying Lauren’s hyper empathy. Tones of red are the overriding palettes used throughout these panels which connote the bloody trauma and pain that Lauren viscerally experiences when witnessing the physical suffering of others.

In another series of panels Lauren’s hyper empathy with an injured and dying dog is depicted both through her body language, facial expression and clusters of reverberating red jagged marks around the upper part of her body which visually represent pain and trauma. The juxtaposition of two final panels at the bottom of the page, simultaneously depict a moment in time when the dog finally dies a violent death and Lauren also experiences the life leaving the animal. These two panels are connected by a roughly hewn bright red border with a division between them drawn in red. Lauren’s hair breaches the constraints of the border and connects with the dog, enabling the reader to understand that this is a single moment in time in which both Lauren and the dog simultaneously experience extreme pain. In addition to her ability for hyper empathy, Lauren is also a seer and from the outset of the novel displays a dogged determination to awaken her family and community from their denial with regards to the fragile gated community in which they live to acceptance of the very real possibility of the feral homeless communities living beyond breaching the wall that has kept them safe until recently.

In places images also allude to the identification of certain plants that Lauren discovered through reading her father’s books. In the section where Lauren is trying to educate her friend Joanne by introducing her to her father’s survivalist books, Jennings has integrated scans from books or newspapers into his visual language. The visual representations of black characters are nuanced and expressive, and colour is often used to heighten drama with dramatic lighting and tone. Variations in panel sizes are utilized to show transitions from one environment to another The panels are often panoramic and suggest the dimensions of a cinema screen. In places, Jennings breaks with this visual convention and introduces a series of trapeziums outlined with a red frame to connote danger and violence. Colour is applied strategically to images to communicate shifts from the city to the desert and canyons beyond where the families from the gated community travel by bike.The visual language is expressive, with bold black mark making outlining each form and with an ever- present urban graffiti aesthetic populating backgrounds. Colour is vibrant and striking and palettes shift to represent day and night – it is also used strategically to herald changes in atmosphere and emotional tone.

As the story progresses, the walls of the gated community are breached and a series of burglaries undertaken, until eventually the drug crazed ‘red and green faces ‘from beyond the wall, high on ‘Pyro ‘a drug which feeds a desire for setting fires, torch the buildings. Prior to the disintegration of the gated community there existed an oppressive tension and ominous foreboding at the boundary wall, which threatened to erupt at any given time. When this boundary is breached, chaos and anarchy ensue and those from the outside plunder, pillage, murder and rape in an orgy beyond comprehension, forcing the community within to flee and enter the terrible chaos and anarchy of the outside world. Thus, Lauren is forced to navigate a treacherous journey away from her home and murdered family. *‘Freud argues that, in consequence of the fact that ‘‘instinctual passions are* *stronger than reasonable interests’ ..‘‘civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration’’* [6] . Butler taps into our deepest fears, perhaps unconscious or at least, residing at the boundaries of consciousness, that civilization is woven together with the finest of threads. The dissolution of the wall and the community within is a metaphor for wider civilization breaking down - the wolf at the door has now entered and barbarism unfolds as human’s feral instincts, repressed for so long are unleashed. Butler spares little in her description of the brutality and volatility beyond the wall dismemberment and torture are commonplace and the rape of women and minors a regular occurrence. What Freud would term repression of humanity’s darker desires, or in Jung’s terminology *The Shadow* content of the human mind is released, with devastating results. Theorist Sheldon George has explored the troubling perspective that those responsible for slavery in America were acting out their repressed desires upon the black slaves under their control and in parts of the novel, Butler alludes to slavery once again as she did within the context of *Kindred. ‘However, beginning with slavery, what the history of race and racism in America has shown is the possibility of civilization* *grounding itself on these very instincts of aggression and destruction whose repression in Freud’s theory seem so essential to social progress’.* [7]

**Slavery**

Butler alludes elsewhere in her novel to the theme of slavery, for example with regards to the conglomerate Kagimoto, Stamm and Frampton who, later in the narrative approach one of the floundering American cities with a proposal for ‘corporate – civic Collaboration’. Lauren’s father is adamant that they should resist the company town, who on the promise of safety offer low wages and as one of the protesters against the company points out also the potential for debt slavery. On page 96 of the graphic novel Lauren’s father says that ‘this sounds half antebellum revival and half science fiction’. As Butler points out, cities being controlled by large corporations are commonplace in science fiction literature and again this reinforces the prescient nature of her writing. ‘*Indeed, I suggest that what starts to develop through capitalism and slavery is ‘‘a society founded’’ on the master’s discourse …the very purpose of which is to mask the division of the master by presenting the objects of his possession as proof that he does not lack ‘* [8] This quote also alludes to a moment in the graphic novel in which Lauren makesa reference to slavery in Antebellum America and the connection with a character who is wealthy enough to be in a polygamous relationship with three formerly homeless beautiful black women who are financially dependent on him.As the narrative progresses, there is another reference to slavery alluding to a character in the novel reading in secret and we learn that his mother worked for a man who owned many books which she sometimes smuggled to her son to enable him to read. This is highlighted visually through the use of 2 text boxes, in which the text is in the form of hand- writing on lined paper *‘The son of a cook marrying one of the maids … Like something from another era’. [9]* There is an acknowledgement here of themes of slavery both in the past and in the present time.

After her father goes missing, Lauren ventures out with her brother and another friend and comes across a shocking revelation, which is visually depicted by Jennings to striking effect. An amputated black man’s arm hanging from the tree dominates the page and resonates with former memories of lynchings that historically occurred in the deep south. The image of the arm cuts a compositional diagonal and forces a confrontation for the reader with the shocking sight of the arm. The composition of the page, colour and rendering of the pyro addicts brandishing weapons and lit torches reinforces a sense of chaos and fear as they plunder the community. The introduction at this point of an expressionistic style deviates from the more representational style seen elsewhere and heralds a shift in the heightening of drama. The boundaries of panels are breached and fragmented, mirroring the fragmentation and collapse of the community. Facial expressions of the invading ‘paints ‘(people whose faces are decorated with paints) high on the drug Pyro are contorted and exaggerated, conveying a primitive and tribal like set of facial characteristics. The following page continues with the expressionist style, digitally rendered but in places, seemingly alluding to a woodcut or lino cut technique, conveyed through bold mark making.

Fig IV: Jennings, J Parable of the Sower

Jennings continues to create more experimental imagery and below he pushes the boundaries of more conventional panelling through flipping from a two -dimensional appearance over to an illusory three- dimensional physical space, at once a pathway on which Lauren walks then segueing to an environment resembling a series of deep trenches in which she is situated. Following this the panels are reverted once again to a more conventional visual treatment.

Fig V: Jennings, J Parable of the Sower

As Lauren continues onwards to her escape to the north, in a search for sanctuary she begins to share her EARTHSEED manifesto with a few other travellers escaping the fires and chaos. An earthquake further complicates the situation and causes more fires and riots. She then meets with the character Bankole, a doctor with whom she forms a romantic relationship, and he comments that Lauren’s EARTHSEED manifesto is a ‘combination of Buddhism, existentialism and Sufism.’ [10]. It transpires that Bankole has land further up north where they could set up a new and safer community and he invites Lauren to go with him. Towards the end of the narrative the landscape depicted within the panels are mostly filled with images of fires from a recent earthquake and from torchings and these engulf and dominate the landscape. On reaching their destination they discover a well on the site of Bankole’s land and carefully stored in her survivalist pack, Lauren has retained seeds which can be planted to create crops which will be harvested for food. As civilization beyond the new encampment collapses further, society appears to revert back to slavery and power structures seemingly alluding to the distant past of Antebellum America.

**Conclusion:**

As has been discussed earlier, perceptions of Graphic Novels have been elevated in recent years and in the case of Duffy and Jennings’ adaptation of *Parable of the Sower* and *Kindred* have been the recipients of important literary awards. Such developments challenge perspectives both held and dictated by a more traditional canonical hierarchy through which value is attributed. Theorist Robert Stam, for example, would probably frame the graphic novel as being at the lower end of the value hierarchy: *‘For some, as Robert Stam argues, literature will always have axiomatic superiority over any adaptation of it because its seniority as an art form. But this hierarchy also involves what he calls iconophobia (a suspicion of the visual) and logophilia, a love of the word as sacred)’.* [11]Octavia Butler was a pioneer who through the creation of narratives such as *Parable of The Sower* was able to shed light upon themes of a political, social and racial nature.Such historically important novels are currently taught within some American school curricula. Through the vehicle of their graphic novels Jennings and Duffy (also both academics) further disseminate such challenging subject matter to marginalised audiences who may not necessarily be comfortable reading novels. Critics of the genre have questioned the value of comic books and graphic novels and even suggested that they corrupt the minds of those deemed unable to read them with a discerning mind. As Jennings points out in his analysis of the genre in *‘The Blacker the ink, constructions of Black identity in comics and sequential art ‘* there were those who went as far as claiming that the form was potentially dangerous and could seriously damage the minds of those reading them !

*‘…in winter 1954, Fredric Wertham, a Bavarian-born psychiatrist and “liberal progressive concerned about the poor and disadvantaged,” published Seduction of the Innocent, a four-hundred-page screed on the social evils and psychological dangers involved in reading comic books* ‘[12]

From a historic perspective graphic novels and comic books have been perceived as a low brow form inferior to the novel, and which as critics such as Wertham claimed, had the power to corrupt the minds of those considered vulnerable. However, contemporary adaptations of highly regarded novels challenge such perceptions and certain scholars through their analyses of these adaptations, suggest that certain graphic novels are of real value, to the reader- indeed in recent years Jennings and Duffy’s adaptation has received the highly regarded Eisner award. In response to Wertham’s proposal that comics would corrupt the poor and marginalised in society Jennings cites those who have challenged such hyperbole but also cites those with an opposing perspective: ‘*Wertham’s text was “pompous, polemical, and sensational” and “aimed to impress a popu- lar audience with professional expertise and moral outrage” (Wright 157–158). Despite some protest from the comic book industry and a few concerned sup- porters, “Wertham affirmed parents’ worst fears: that comics were rotting our brains and turning kids into potential degenerates”,* [13].Jennings goes on to explain how as a consequence of such dramatic claims, at that time strict guidelines were constructed as a means to protect the minds of the young :*‘By August, a number of concerned publishers had formed the Comics Maga- zine Association of America (CMAA), which decided to adopt a strict code of self-regulation, the Comics Code Authority, patterned somewhat after the Hollywood studios’ Hays Office of the 1930s.’* [14]

Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon has explored motives for adaptation in depth and proposes a number of theories for the practice, including monetary gain and to further disseminate social and political perspectives. She suggests that certain contemporary comic book artists create new work with a view that these will be further adapted as films but goes on to suggest that an adaptation might also be the catalyst needed for children to then seek out the original source of the adaptation. *‘Adaptations of books, however are often considered educationally important for children , for an entertaining film or stage version might give them a taste for reading the book on which it is based. This is what novelist Phillip Pullman calls the ‘’worthiness argument ‘.* [15] As Pullman points out, the engagement with an adapted format can be a worthwhile pursuit for children and can also be the catalyst for further learning.

In his analysis of adaptation, Gordon E Slethaug highlights a series of questions developed by Timothy Corrigan which are designed to gage how faithful an adaptation really is to the original. Such questions explore whether the characters are similar to those described in the original, if the contexts remain the same, if the transfer to another medium translates a similar set of meanings and finally, if it is authentic. He goes on to say *‘This privileging of the original over the adaptation is based on cultural conceptions of morality ‘*. [16] This implies an almost religious insistence on truth. Robert Stam has expressed annoyance at historic, moralistic perspectives of adaptations and of those scholars who used terminology such as *‘vulgarization’ ‘desecration ‘, ‘infidelity’* and *‘violation’* [17]in their descriptions of the process*.* He goes on to point out that both Foucault and Barthes have suggested that an author is *a ‘function of discourse ‘*[18]and that their voice is ‘*one among many* [19] that they have been influenced by multiple sources which also have cultural and historical influences and that the relationship between author and reader is dynamic. Such a perspective challenges the notion that any form and in particular, the novel, is a pure act of originality, unsullied by external forces and influences and therefore morally superior. Christopher Booker, in his lengthy analysis *The Seven Basic Plots* proposes that all stories are derivative and culminate from root sources in the form of seven archetypal themes underpinning them. If we are to support this claim then perhaps it could be suggested that all stories, in whatever form they are transmitted, are adaptations.

*‘As Kamilla Elliott has astutely noted, adaptation commits the heresy of showing that form(expression) can be separated from content (ideas) – something that both mainstream and semiotic theories have resisted or denied …beginning to theorize*

*..in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary popular adaptations are most often put down as secondary , derivative ,’’belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior”.* [20]As the form of the graphic novel has also been historically perceived as a low brow pursuit , and add into the mix that Butler’s novel has been defined as fitting within the genre of science fiction , it might also be construed that Duffy and Jennings’ book had all the odds stacked against it in terms of perceptions of value, however when considering Walter Benjamin’s earlier comment about storytelling, and the notable fact that both the Graphic Novel and Butler’s original novel have won prestigious awards ,this is proof of alternative perspectives suggesting otherwise. Virginia Woolfe, commenting on early cinema, suggested that it was a ‘parasite’ on novels but did also add that it could bring another perspective, notably that of emotion that might be lacking in words alone. Indeed, the idea of the adaptation as being parasitical on other ‘purer ‘forms is in alignment with perspectives that perceive the process as immoral and of debasing the original. In the case of Duffy and Jennings‘ adaptation, the translation of her novel decades after Butler wrote it , ensures that the story continues to be disseminated to young and contemporary audiences who are now faced with some of the pressing issues outlined in the book , including climate change . Key themes embedded within the graphic novel remain intact, so it might be argued that this is justification for the adaptation and as theorist Linda Hutcheon has pointed out,’*…teachers and their students provide one of the largest audiences for adaptations. Many of us grew up with the* ***Classics Illustrated*** *comics or the animated cartoon versions of canonical literature.* [21] The graphic novel could be seen, for younger and marginalised readers, as a more palatable form through which to initially access narrative themes explored through novels and if such engagement piques their interest in challenging and important concepts that they may otherwise have avoided, then surely that is, as Pullman says, a worthy pursuit.

In an article published in the journal *Callaloo* the author suggests that ‘Butler’s Earthseed novels *‘can be read as cautionary tales, warning us of the regressive nature of nostalgia for the future frequently produced out of the confrontation with post – Fordism.’* [22]It might, therefore, be fair to surmise that Jennings and Duffy’s reimagining of Butler’s powerful story, is a way of passing important and timely messages on to new generations, much in the way that stories of the oral tradition have historically been disseminated using new and evolving media and technologies. (The graphic novel is available both in analogue and digital formats). In addition to the text, Jennings’ imagery conveys atmosphere, tone, character and sense of place, all of which visually impact the reader and support with an understanding of worlds perhaps previously unknown. This could be particularly potent for a demographic of younger readers unfamiliar with such content. It could be argued that Octavia Butler wrote stories in part because she wanted to see black people reflected in them – in a similar sense, illustrator John Jennings and Damian Duffy are keeping Butler’s stories alive and bringing them to the attention of new audiences. In these books we see positive role models for young black people, who are defined not as mere bystanders, but characters who have agency and power.

As Sheena C. Howard points out, the comic book genre can offer sanctuary for those black children and teenagers seeking out more positive role models with whom they can empathise. *‘Blacks are seldom recognized and celebrated for their exceptional historical contributions and achievements beyond sports and entertainment, Black children often turn elsewhere to fuel their imaginations. The fantastical worlds of comic strips, cartoons, and comic books have the powerful potential to weave imaginary narratives that offer possibilities for seeing Black heroism. Nonetheless, it is possible to engage with these worlds and walk away with little understanding about either how Blacks have contributed to these genres or how Blacks have used these genres to transmit positive, political messages to consumers.’* [23]. Howard also looks to the historic past of those pioneers of black comics such as George Herriman, a Creole man living in New Orleans who became widely known with the publication of his comic book *Gooseberry Sprig* and went on to create *Krazy Kat* which featured characters who would transition between black and white, the book being cited by scholars to contain commentaries on racism. Following on from Herriman in 1935, black comic book artist Oliver Harrington created a number of publications, including *Dark Laughter*, and like Herriman his work often embedded political commentaries which highlighted racist themes.

Octavia Butler’s books are now included as part of the school curriculum in some American states, which has the potential for encouraging healthy debate and discussion around such challenging themes. In addition to contemporary critical analyses of comics created by black artists, for example as seen in Jennings’ *The Blacker the Ink* and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson’s *Black Comics* there is currently a growing awareness of mediums through which black academics and artists are contributing to a deeper understanding of their pasts, presents and futures and ways in which they might harness these mediums to impact upon and influence the debate further and disseminate important political, social and cultural messages to new audiences.

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# Science Fiction and the Absurd: Lauren Olamina as a Symbol of Hope in Butler's *Parables,* The Journal of Popular Culture, Howells, P, Wiley Periodicals (2023)

# <https://vector-bsfa.com/2021/02/05/broadcasting-change-in-empathic-dialogue-with-duffy-and-jenningss-graphic-novel-adaptation-of-octavia-butlers-parable-of-the-sower/> accessed 28/04/23

# The Seven Basic Plots , Booker, C (2004)

Technicians of Human Dignity Bodies, Souls, and the Making of Intrinsic Worth

**Attribution**

Gaymon Bennett.

Bennett (Arizona State Univ.) provides an overview of the ways in which the term "dignity" has been used, in three official settings, in the late-20th and early-21st centuries. His three case studies are The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, developed by the second Vatican Council; the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the reports of the US's President's Council on Bioethics (later The Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues). He sets all of these documents in historical context, and looks at the differing ways that each attempts to justify or define what "dignity" means and how that dignity can be best safeguarded, promoted, or protected. In doing this Bennett provides careful readings of Foucault's work on governmentality and pastoral power. Dignity has been a contested concept in both philosophy and theology, and Bennett's work does much to show the changing nature of the concept and the different ways it has been conceived of and talked about, as demonstrated in three particular settings. The book is dense but worthwhile for its careful analysis. Summing Up: Recommended. Graduate students, researchers, faculty. --Aaron Wesley Klink, Duke University

Technicians of Human Dignity Bodies, Souls, and the Making of Intrinsic Worth

**Attribution**

Gaymon Bennett.

# *Jouissance* and discontent: A meeting of psychoanalysis, race and American slavery

[Sheldon, George](https://www.proquest.com/indexinglinkhandler/sng/author/Sheldon%2C%2BGeorge/%24N?accountid=15894).  [**Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society**](https://www.proquest.com/pubidlinkhandler/sng/pubtitle/Psychoanalysis%2C%2BCulture%2B%2426%2BSociety/%24N/29071/PagePdf/2112916713/fulltextPDF/6BE9A4A119F4DF9PQ/1?accountid=15894)**; London**[Vol. 23, Iss. 3,](https://www.proquest.com/indexingvolumeissuelinkhandler/29071/Psychoanalysis%2C%2BCulture%2B%2426%2BSociety/02018Y09Y01%2423Sep%2B2018%243b%2B%2BVol.%2B23%2B%24283%2429/23/3?accountid=15894) (Sep 2018): 267-289. DOI:10.1057/s41282-018-0105-0

*Our current political climate has given rise to fears over the future of*

*America. Many find emanating from the political sphere new license to*

*discriminate against racial others, license that they fear will lead to*

*a dissolution of American values, and even, potentially, of the nation itself.*

*I suggest, however, the greater danger may be that this license has little*

*destructive impact upon the broad structure of our civil society. Race and*

*racism hold a fraught relation to what Sigmund Freud had called civilization.*

*Our current political climate has given rise to fears over the future of*

*America. Many find emanating from the political sphere new license to*

*discriminate against racial others, license that they fear will lead to*

*a dissolution of American values, and even, potentially, of the nation itself.*

*Freud argues that, in consequence of the fact that ‘‘instinctual passions are*

*stronger than reasonable interests,’’ ‘‘civilized society is perpetually threatened*

*with disintegration’’ (p. 112). However, beginning with slavery, what the*

*history of race and racism in America has shown is the possibility of civilization*

*grounding itself on these very instincts of aggression and destruction whose*

*repression in Freud’s theory seem so essential to social progress*

*Hampered by what we must recognize as a racism that causes his reluctance to align primitive instincts*

*with civilized white nations, Freud is shocked by the frightening ubiquity of*

*aggressive impulses when they are no longer directed at racial others. As Jacques*

*Lacan (1997) specifies in his rereading of Freud’s theories, Freud is appalled*

*most specifically by the ‘‘horror of the civilized man,’’ whose brutality seems*

*newly unveiled by war (p. 194). But Lacan’s own rearticulation*

***Sheldon George***

*Confronted after the First World War with*

*a wasteland of death and destruction, T.S. Eliot (2001) voices a question that*

*would characterize the sense of alienation and uncertainty that plagued the*

*times: ‘‘What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony*

*rubbish?’’ (p. 5). Eliot articulates a search for substantial meaning that, in some*

*sense, would be supplied by psychoanalysis, in the form of a reified notion of the*

*self as fragmented between consciousness and a now visible unconscious*

*brutality.*

***Sheldon George***

*Indeed, I suggest that what starts to develop through capitalism and slavery is ‘‘a society founded’’ on*

*the master’s discourse (p. 126), the very purpose of which is to mask the division*

*of the master by presenting the objects of his possession as proof that he does*

*not lack (p. 103)*

***Sheldon George.***

This quote relates to the part of the graphic novel in which Lauren makesa reference to slavery (which page ?) in Antebellum America and the connection with the character who has enough wealth to be in a polygamous relationship with 3 formerly homeless beautiful black women who are financially dependent on him.

*Slavery attempted to unveil the slave’s true psychic condition of lack*

*by making the slave’s social positioning mirror his or her psychic reality. It did*

*this by reducing the slave to the status of a signifier, as a mere commodity in an*

*exchange system, a signifier within a chain of meanings. This signifying chain*

*incorporated the hierarchal structure of the Great Chain of Being in an*

*articulation of the slave as a paradoxical nonbeing, whose erasure facilitated his*

*or her redeployment as a signifier for the master’s own recuperated being.*

**Sheldon George**

*Despite the fact that, as Patterson (1982) argues, slavery attempted to*

*situate the slave as ‘‘a social nonperson’’ with ‘‘no socially recognized existence*

*outside of his master,’’ part of what slaves were able to do was construct a*

*discourse of the self that shaped religious beliefs into folk narratives reflective of*

*their personal and communal world views (p. 5). Through folk practices like*

*storytelling, slaves attempted to create not only a counter-narrative to that*

*facilitated by the master signifier of whiteness, but also, and more basically, a*

*narrative of self that simply made life livable, a narrative that recuperated for*

*them a semblance of being, resuturing their fragmented selves, and producing*

*their own surplus jouissance.*

**Sheldon George**

*Indeed,*

*in the very first novel published by an African American, the escaped slave*

*William Wells Brown paints a telling image of America as split between two*

*fully integrated but divergent modes of accessing surplus jouissance. Brown*

*(1853/2004), in 1853, fictionalizes the then popular and now validated claim of*

*Thomas Jefferson’s sexual exploits with his slave-mistress in a tale Brown titles*

*Clotel or, The President’s Daughter.8 While rendering this daughter as a slave*

*who escapes her pursuers by jumping to her death from the center of a bridge*

*joining the ‘‘capitol of the Union,’’ Washington, DC, to the slave state of*

*Virginia, Brown contextualizes slavery within a revisionary origin-narrative that*

*ties the birth of the nation to the trafficking of two ships (p. 184). Both arriving*

*in 1620, one ship is the ‘‘May-flower anchored at Plymouth Rock,’’ and the*

*other is ‘‘the slave-ship in James River’’ carrying the ‘‘first cargo of slaves on*

**George Sheldon**

The theme of power resonates through Butler’s work and is interwoven within the pages of ‘ The Parable of The Sower .’

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LAUREN J LACEY research paper on Octavia Butler and Power

Look at Foucault on Power.