

S Kinship, Reproduction and Care in the Multispecies Community of Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild": And a Kafka Connection

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Abstract

The system of Tlic-Terran family in the extrasolar world of "Bloodchild" is marked by mutualism; the Tlics ensure the "protection" and longevity of the Terrans, and the Terrans serve as optimal surrogate bodies for the Tlic reproduction. This paper examines the incongruous distribution of power, care, and rights in the purportedly symbiotic relationship between the Tlics and the Terrans. The demands of survival, both at the individual and species level, lead to a complex web of interspecies relationships. While the Tlics are the Bloodchildren of the Terrans, this hybrid family is built less on care and more on blood relations and the continuity of the Tlics and their domination. Gan's negotiation for transparency and accountability attempts to reform the terms and expectations of this family, and by extension, ensure greater equitability in the relationship between the two communities. The paper also focuses on care and mutual responsibility as a way of "becoming-with" instead of merely becoming in the multispecies world of Bloodchild.

Keywords

- Interspecies Family
- Care
- Reproduction
- Bloodchild
- Becoming- with

Introduction

While discussing the demands of cohabitation, Judith Butler notes that “we are also bound to one another, in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately for ourselves, for a “we” who is constantly in the making” (150). It is in a state of “unwilled adjacency” and “unchosen cohabitation” that the humans (Terrans) find themselves in an extrasolar planet inhabited by “an intelligent but dying group of indigenous people called the Tlic” (Hampton 138). Fleeing from persecution on Earth, and failing to subdue the sentient caterpillar-like Tlics in the war, the Terrans are subjected to forced reproduction reminiscent of chattel slavery (Helford 266; Heidenescher 57). This arrangement arises when the Tlics realise that Terran hosts are the optimal hosts for Tlic young as they “were always larger as well as more numerous” than those conceived by host animals (“Bloodchild” 18). While the first generation of Terrans were penned together to reproduce, later the Tlics developed a system of hybrid Terran-Tlic families devised for a harmonious coexistence of both species wherein “everyone had a personal stake in keeping the peace” (“Bloodchild” 12).

“Bloodchild” features a young Terran, Gan’s entry into this system as a promised surrogate to Gatoi, a Tlic who is a government official. As (at least) a third-generation Terran, Gan grows up knowing and even looking forward to carrying the Tlic young of Gatoi. However, his unmediated involvement in the emergency extraction of Tlic grubs from an N’Tlic, Bram Lomas, disenchants his idealized view of the process and the very basis of Tlic-Terran relations. This paper analyses the nature of these interspecies relationships and the precarity of the “peace” in the Preserve concerning the unequal distribution of power, rights, and responsibility in Tlic-Terran relations.

According to Lynn Margulis, periods of “cohabitation, long-term living, results in symbiogenesis: the appearance of new bodies, new organs, new species” (43). The history of Tlics and Terrans and their generational contact results in mutual dependency on some levels for the survival of both species. Donna Haraway notes that “Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all” (4). The inefficiency of using host animals for Tlic reproduction was resolved by using the fertile bodies of the Terrans. Gatoi remarks how the arrival of the Terrans help the Tlics become “a healthy, thriving people” by increasing their population as “[e]verything lives inside you Terrans” (“Bloodchild” 16). For the Terrans who fled from their homeland due to persecution, the Preserve becomes a refuge where they are recognized as people. The sterile eggs of the Tlics could even double their lifespans, as in the case of Gan’s father, and their stings have soothing properties. The service of reproduction from one member of the Terran family becomes, as Butler notes in her Afterword, a form of “paying the rent” to the “hosts” (31, 32). However, the characterization of this arrangement as purely symbiotic, even by Butler herself (McCaffrey 56), would be an oversimplification that undermines the asymmetrical relations of power between the Tlics and the Terrans. By imagining a society where humans are (positionally) subordinate to another species, Butler challenges anthropocentric views and envisions an arrangement that is disadvantageous yet vital for

the Terrans.

Haraway observes that Butler's work focuses on "the problem of destruction and wounded flourishing not simply survival—in exile, diaspora, abduction, and transportation—the earthly gift-burden of the descendants of slaves, refugees, immigrants, travelers, and of the indigenous too." (120) The costs of the "thriving" and "flourishing" of the species come into question when we consider the ascendancy of the Tlics over the Terrans. The Terrans are subservient to the Tlics who once considered them as "convenient, big, warm-blooded animals". This is akin to the "family business" of Gan's family which raises animals "for the table" and "for their fur" ("Bloodchild" 11). The history of Terrans being penned together to procreate, and fed only eggs points to a unilateral system that benefits the Tlics. While Bram Lomas, an N'Tlic, wears an armband that associates him with his Tlic and bears her child, it is the Tlic who undergoes a change in social status (T'Khotgif becomes Ch'Khotgif). Even in the interspecies family, the reproductive labour of the Terrans generates social currency for the Tlics, for which the Terrans are allowed to stay safely in the Preserve.

A Terran becomes an N'Tlic while carrying Terran young, which again is a temporary status based on relation to the Tlic grubs. Gan reveals how Gatoi "parceled [Terrans] out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support" ("Bloodchild" 5). This complicates Gan's understanding of the Terrans as "necessities, status symbols, and an *independent* people" ("Bloodchild" 5; my emphasis). Gan and his sister, Xuan Hoa, have been conditioned into believing that the birth was "a good and necessary thing Tlic and Terran did together" to such an extent that they compete for Gatoi's affection ("Bloodchild" 16). However, seeing Bram Lomas's birthing experience disillusioned Gan who feels misguided by the "drawings or diagrams" that bring to the front ideas of informed consent ("Bloodchild" 16).

Gan's upbringing partially fulfilled by Gatoi becomes an exercise in indoctrinating Gan; Gan himself encourages Tlics to adopt potential surrogates young as it decreases their distrust and fear towards the Tlics. Yet the birth/ death that Qui witnesses shows the precarity of the birthing process and also the privileging of the Tlic young over the life of the human host. The "risks" involved in the birthing process including the "sickening" of the host, and the possibility of being eaten by the grubs is imminent. The Terrans as refugees allowed in this foreign planet seem to have no say in the stipulated reproductive demands set by the Tlics. Such an ambiguous depiction of mutualism in the name of the continuation of both species raises questions about agency, responsibility and the ethical considerations of reproductive rights.

The "joining of families" by the Tlic government officials then becomes a social refashioning of an unequal system. The social order of Tlic-Terran families (marked by a strange admixture of kinship, care, etc.) in the dystopian world of the story forces us to rethink our 'normal' ideas of symbiotic relationships, power hierarchies, etc. While "any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them", the systematic arrangement of one Terran male in every family to be implanted is not negotiable but contractual. Gatoi's arrangement of Lien's marriage with her husband also implies a new family, also implies a new family, with their children ensuring more surrogates for the Tlics. The continuation of Terran life is then important for the continuation of a healthy Tlic

population and their dominance. Whether Terrans have the freedom to choose not to bear children is left unanswered. The ban on firearms also implies a restriction on taking the lives of fellow Terrans and Tlics. Building on Michael Foucault's idea of biopolitics, Ferrández San Miguel sees the Preserve as a biopolitical regime established to "control the population and subjugate the body through their designation of ways of living and dying" (34). As Judith Butler notes "[Our] precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organisation of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions" (148). Precarity is built into the terms of Terran life in the Preserve, where bodily integrity is the price to pay for cohabitation. As Gatoi was involved in Gan's life in his developmental stages from birth, she uses her tail both to discipline and caress him. The distinctions between parental and erotic advances of Gatoi blur due to their age gap. Her involvement also has strategic importance as it allows her to influence and domesticate Gan to prevent recalcitrance as well as fatten him enough to carry her young safely. The etymological understanding of "family", which comes from the French word "famille", signifying "servants", more accurately describes this hierarchical arrangement. The superficiality of "joining families" also surfaces when we notice that Gatoi refers to Gan's family as "the family" while she refers to her future progeny as "my life, my family" ("Bloodchild" 25). The capricious nature of peace in the Preserve is understood even by outwardly conforming Terrans like Gan's father who hides guns in the house perhaps being "concerned with protecting his family from Tlic assault, but also with preparing his family for a possible uprising against the Tlic" (Jenkins 127).

With interspecies reproduction and families, the ideas of gender and exclusive heteronormative relationships are unsettled in the multispecies community of "Bloodchild". Like the achi which has a "breeding male", the male human is penetrated and impregnated by the female Tlic, in what Butler calls, "a pregnant man story" (Afterword 30). The watertight categories of gender do not hold as the conventional functions of both genders are performed by the other gender. The fact that women can also be Terran surrogates suggests queer relations. As Amanda Thibodeau observes "exclusively female adult Tlics [hold] absolute authority over Terrans such as Gan, who has been socially conditioned to a set of gender expectations that are more conventionally feminine—docility, receptivity, and monogamous desire." (271) While Gan finds himself attracted to Gatoi, he also thinks of "[finding] a girl and [sharing] a waking dream with her", challenging the idea of monogamy. However, Elyce Rae Helford questions whether this is a mere reversal of gender roles:

Through this reversal of traditional human gender roles under Western patriarchy, we see a biologically determined matriarchy whose hierarchical nature limits its effectiveness as a creative textual response to patriarchy. Ultimately, destabilizing social roles would be more effective if biology were not destiny in Tlic culture, regardless of whether it resulted in a patriarchy or a matriarchy. (265).

The gendered division of care and reproduction then replicates itself in the hierarchical difference between the Tlics and the Terrans. The prudence of choosing Terran males as surrogates leaving the women (who are more ideal hosts) "free to bear their own young" is

highlighted by Qui as it produces the next generation of host animals (“Bloodchild” 21).

Katherine Dautrich also observes that:

“Implicitly, Butler acknowledged the gendering of carework... [for]Butler to write a “believable” story of male care, she found it first necessary to craft a foreign planet populated by extraterrestrial life forms and create an Earth so catastrophic that it drove humans to seek solace in the unknown circumstances of outer space.” (10)

Both male and female Tlics are to be engaged in the reproduction of Tlic and Terran lives and the reproduction of the status quo. The Terrans are “protected” in the Preserve and excluded from the public sphere, giving them no political representation or power. Kristen Lillvis argues that the racially marginalised section (here the Terrans) being deprived of the father physically and metaphorically alters “the child's place in society and, for the son, his position as an inheritor of phallic power” (9). They find themselves being subject to the law of the Mother enabling them to access non-phallic authority. Kristen Lillven builds on Hortense J. Spillers’s work “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” which argues that the descendants of the enslaved slaves use the law of the Mother instead of the paternal law to access the Lacanian Symbolic stage as the father was physically and metaphorically estranged from them due to slavery. Gatoi assumes the role of a pater familias to whom Lien (and her family) are “unwillingly obedient”. Lien makes Gan conscious of his behaviour towards Gatoi especially because she is “the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve, and thus the most important of her kind to deal directly with Terrans” (“Bloodchild” 3). Her injunction “[t]ake care of her” also comes from the understanding that the relative safety of the family arrangement depends on the current system to which she is their only point of contact. This care is also to some extent self-preserving as the Tlic are physically, politically and socially superior to the Terrans. This superiority allows individual Tlics to pursue a relationship with Terrans that is strictly or barely contractual if they wish to do so, which explains why Lien promised one of her children to Gatoi rather than a stranger. Gan too recognises that Gatoi is the only one who “stood between us and that desperation that could so easily swallow us” (“Bloodchild” 5). As Jenkins notes, the power dynamics that inform the Tlic-Terran trade could be described as “symbiosis without love... [making it] a precarious arrangement because neither party has an interest in the other’s survival or well-being outside the context of need” (133).

After witnessing Gatoi’s mechanical way of taking grubs while ignoring the screams of Bram Lomas, Gan decides to threaten to take his own life; an invaluable resource that the Tlics depend on. He realises that this is “Qui’s away”, the only way to completely get rid of the predicament. Qui took *care* of himself by eating eggs and of Gan knowing that “as long as [Gan] was all right, he was safe from the Tlic” (“Bloodchild” 19). Gan’s aversion to the Tlics makes Gatoi consider Hoa as a better host with an “urgency”, making the surrogate seem almost immaterial. Gan realises that he is replaceable and that taking his own life would not significantly change the crisis for his own family or for the Terrans. Unlike Qui, Gan decides that even if Hoa would like to be a N’Tlic, he would rather bear the Tlics himself. This emerges both from care towards his family and his possessiveness for Gatoi as a sibling/lover. For Vinciane Despret,

What passion means refers neither to some parasitic supplement nor to some sweet story of love: it means to make an effort to become interested, to immerse oneself in the multitude of problems presented by [another species], to grow, to experience the following of a mother, the fear of strangers. It means to care. (131).

While Gan's decision to be pregnant is as Butler notes in her afterword "an act of love", it becomes care in that he "[chooses] pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties" (30). Gan chooses to become pregnant with complete knowledge of the risks involved yet he also tries to ensure greater autonomy from within the system. Haraway notes that "Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are, in Vinciane Despret's terms, rendered capable" (12). Gan's negotiation with Gatoi as a "partner" to keep a gun and his proposal to make the birthing process public becomes a bargaining for more accountability and responsibility for the Tlics. If "[p]recarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency" as Judith Butler notes (148), then care secures the vital and inevitable links with others.

With the extension of the idea of family to that other species one cohabits with, there should also be a widening of our scope for caring and mutual responsibility. The "we" that is constantly in the making, requires us to adapt and to care for and about the others around us. Haraway also relates family to responsibility: "Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible" (2). The idea of *duty* can be observed in Gan's mother who passively resists and opposes Gatoi which becomes care in an unassuming way; Gan remarks that he "[knows] she loved me under all the *duty*, pride and pain." While Gan's mother begrudgingly calls Gatoi a part of the family, she also asks him to "*take care of her*". A similar revision of family relations happens in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where the family tries to accept Gregor as an insect because "it is the commandment of family duty to swallow their disgust and endure him" (29, my emphasis). Gregor Samsa overnight turns into an entomologically ambiguous insect—like the Tlics in "Bloodchild"—causing havoc in the Samsa family of which he is the sole provider. As in "Bloodchild", Gregor's transformation creates a hybrid family whose obligation it then becomes to take care of this "monstrous vermin". "The Metamorphosis" also offers a useful comparison in that while humans occupy the dominant position over the beetle, family obligations complicate matters. Butler's "Bloodchild" reverses the power dynamics and defamiliarizes our interaction with other species by contesting the presupposed dominance of humans.

In the unequal social order of "Bloodchild", the boundaries between mutuality and hierarchical dependence blur. It is, however, worth questioning whether family relations are ever "equal"/non-hierarchical in human contexts, let alone in interspecies contexts. While Gregor initially enjoys the respite from his "gruelling" job as a travelling salesman, the inability to provide for his family (something he has worked towards for five years), fills him with feelings of "shame and grief" (Kafka 21). In a psychoanalytic reading of Kafka's fiction, Anne Fuchs notes:

The metamorphosis thus allows him to abandon a social identity which is based on the son's obligation to clear the parental *Schuld*, a term which connotes both financial debt as well as guilt. By repudiating a commonly shared code through the metamorphosis, Samsa revolts against the omnipresent and stifling law of the father by crawling with enjoyment up and down the walls of his room. (37)

Even in his state, he is riddled with thoughts of people in authority, like his boss and his father. These thoughts along with the realisation that the savings of the Samsa family was grossly understated (or not stated) to Gregor imply that "His life of self-abnegation had been... a kind of social game he had actively worked to perpetuate" (Santer 198). From these details of his life before his metamorphosis, one can see that the family relations—even in human form—are rarely simple or non-hierarchical. With time, Gregor notes that "the money [he earned] was received with thanks and given with pleasure, but no special warmth went with it anymore" making it an expected subservience to the family (Kafka 20). Dagmar Lorenz in his analysis of Kafka and gender goes as far as to say that the Samsa family's overdependence on Gregor reduces them to a "parasitic existence" and that it is only after his death that they "take responsibility for their lives and prosper" (171).

Post metamorphosis, Gregor's sister Grete feeds him with leftovers, cleans his room, and tries to make life easy for him. Despite Gregor's efforts at being "considerate" towards his family, it is made clear, especially by his father, that he is not welcome outside his room. Even Grete cannot stand being in his room without opening the windows, showing how she sets aside her instinctive repulsion for Gregor. This is reminiscent of Gan's shudder when Gatoi talks about how the Terrans once tried to oust the Tlics by "[killing] them as *worms*" ("Bloodchild" 25, my emphasis). Mr. Samsa expects the worst from Gregor and his "break out" from his room is followed by Mr. Samsa's attempts to stamp on Gregor, eventually injuring him by throwing apples at him. This instance with the apple "imbedded in his flesh" served as a "visible souvenir" that "reminded his father that Gregor was a member of the family... it was the commandment of family duty to swallow their disgust and endure him, endure him and nothing more" (Kafka 29). The family obligation in this case, does not translate into care for Gregor's wellbeing, rather becomes a restraint from harming him. After Gregor's presence drives some lodgers away, Greta disavows Gregor saying "We've done everything humanly possible to take care of it and put up with it; I don't think anyone can blame us in the least" (Kafka 37, my emphasis). The change in addressing Gregor from him to it suggests a denial of his personhood and thereby, the responsibility that comes with it. Without realising the sentience of Gregor she also adds that,

“..if it were Gregor, he would have realized long ago that it isn't possible for human beings to live with such a creature, and he would have gone away of his own free will. Then we wouldn't have a brother, but we'd be able to go on living and honour his memory. (Kafka 38)

Subsequently, Gregor limps to his room and succumbs to his ailing injuries; performing the final sacrifice for his family. In this case, the family takes precedence over the individual, the way to be honoured by the family is through death. While Gregor's death offers a way out

for the Samsa family from cohabiting with another species, Gan realises that a single death will not alter the conditions of existence for Terrans. The dystopian nature of “Bloodchild” is different from the existentialist nature of “The Metamorphosis” as interdependence and precarity are embedded in the social context of the interspecies family and life on the Preserve.

While Gregor has no means of communicating with his family, the Tlics and Terrans can have a dialogue. Gan’s negotiation turns the interdependence of the two species to his advantage as he tries to reform the expectations from the Tlic-Terran family. As Virginia Held observes “Our responsibilities as not freely entered into but presented to us by the accidents of our embeddedness in familial and social and historical contexts. It often calls on us to *take* responsibility” (14). While the Tlics can shrink from taking responsibility, our ethical obligations of cohabitation urge, if not require, us to care for those we share ties with. The story ends with Gatoi saying “I’ll take care of you” moving towards a more genuine symbiotic relationship- one of “becoming-with, not becoming”.

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