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## **(RE) IMAGINING RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS AS CHOICE IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *WILD SEED***

**Abstract:** For generations black writers have been searching for ways to insert their voices into larger societal narratives of race, gender, and class. They began using the genre of science fiction to create characters and stories that embody, deconstruct, and rearticulate many of the taken for granted assumptions regarding aforementioned intersections. The field of black science fiction has enabled authors to (re) imagine socially constructed dichotomies of black/white, male/female, and rich/poor through their texts. This essay examines Octavia Butler's use of race, gender, and class in *Wild Seed* to create narratives that transcend essentialist ideologies. In this essay, essentialism refers to social positioning in which the worldview of individuals or groups challenge prevailing social narratives while giving new life to these older beliefs. In this essay the following guiding questions are used: In what ways does Butler use *Wild Seed* to explore essentialism across intersections of race, gender, and class? What role does her characters play in the deconstruction or development of these discourses? How does she use her protagonist and antagonist to reflect and (re) imagine the attitude or narratives of the larger society? Utilizing relevant examples and excerpts from the novel, I consider how Butler situates essentialism in the lives of her characters as overlapping narratives in which her characters endeavor to establish their own ideas of race, gender, and class. Additionally, I employ narrative inquiry as my multifaceted research methodology to evaluate and to clarify Butler use of *Wild Seed* to move her characters from essentialism to choice.

**Keywords:** *Wild Seed*, Butler, (re) imagining, choice, race, gender, class

What is essentialism and how is it portrayed in literary works by black authors? In what ways have these writers used tropes of science fiction and superhuman abilities to challenge essentialist narratives? For generations black writers have been searching for ways to insert their voices into larger societal narratives of race, gender, and class. They have used the science fiction genre to create characters and stories that embody, deconstruct, and rearticulate many of the taken for granted assumptions regarding such intersections. The field of black science fiction has enabled authors such as Samuel Delaney, Tananarive Due, and Octavia Butler to (re)imagine socially constructed dichotomies like black/white, male/female, and rich/poor in ways that redefine these categories beyond standard conceptions. I use the novel *Wild Seed* to explore how Butler integrates the concept of choice to challenge the aforementioned categories, her depth handling of these complex issues through the use of choice to present her characters' narratives. In *Wild Seed* Butler employs the characters of Doro and Anyanwu to challenge essentialist notions of race, gender, and class as static classifications. She endows Doro and

Anyanwu with special abilities in which race, gender, and class are fluid and malleable exchanges that allow each to determine the best course of action to take based on their lived experiences.

The prequel to Butler's *Patternist* series (also known as *Seed to Harvest*), *Wild Seed* is the origin story for Doro and Anyanwu (Caravan 2013, 241). An immortal spirit who can transfer his essence into the body of any host, Doro is the novel's antagonist, while Anyanwu, the protagonist, is an Ibo woman, who can transform her body from human to animal at will (Keenan 1991, 497; Okorafor-Mbachu 2006, 241). Together they embark on a journey from Africa to the New World, where they must learn to negotiate with one another and the larger society. Each embraces or exhibits their understanding of one another beyond their outward physical appearance by redefining social expectations and deconstructing stereotypical representations. Butler accomplishes this task by incorporating African and African-American folklore with science fiction tropes as a vehicle for addressing larger social narratives across intersections of race, gender, and class.

Following the tradition of black science fiction, Butler uses *Wild Seed* to deconstruct the essentialized narrowness of these dichotomous categories by providing the reader with choices. Utilizing Susan A. Gelman's explanation of essentialism, as a "the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share" (404), I investigate how Butler uses her novel to (re) imagine the possibilities and limitations of choice with regards to narratives of race, gender, and class. Drawing on essentialism as a conceptual perspective in which innate attributes are used to classify individuals or groups based on a set of socially constructed traits, Butler employs *Wild Seed* to re-imagine the possibilities and limitations of choice with regards to narratives of race, gender, and class. In this essay, essentialism is a set of behaviors adopted by an individual or a group to present a particular image to the larger society.

The idea of essentialism is personal and not biological enables it to acts as a site where choices are made. From this perspective, essentialism is a form of social positioning in which the worldview of individuals or groups challenge prevailing social narratives while giving new life to these older discourses. Butler uses *Wild Seed* to create liminal spaces in which fact and fiction are used to "rewrite" (Scanlan 2004, 7) the narratives of Doro and Anyanwu from multiple points of view, an approach that enables Butler to,

[destabilize], at least momentarily, our understanding of the distinction between the reasonable and unreasonable, a reason itself, the proper and improper, and propriety itself, by bringing into the field of play those we have forgotten, or do not believe accessible or feasible. (Iton 2008, 289)

This essay examines Octavia Butler's use of race, gender, and class in *Wild Seed* to create narratives that transcend essentialist ideologies. Utilizing relevant excerpts and examples from the novel, I consider how Butler situates essentialism in the lives of her characters as overlapping narratives in which her characters endeavor to establish their own ideas of race, gender, and class across time and geographical spaces. As a result I view, *Wild Seed* as storied text detailing Butler's literary endeavor to provide her readers with alternative interpretations that (re)imagines socially constructed categories across intersections of race, gender, and class. Additionally, I utilize narrative inquiry as my multifaceted research methodology to evaluate and clarify the ways that Butler uses *Wild Seed* to move her characters from essentialism to choice.

In this essay, I employ the following guiding questions: In what ways does Butler use *Wild Seed* to explore essentialism across intersections race, gender, and class? What role does her characters (Doro and Anyanwu) play in the deconstruction or development of these discourses? How does she use her protagonist and antagonist to reflect and (re) imagine the attitude or narratives of the larger society? First, I explain Butler's use of choice in *Wild Seed*. Next, I explore how Doro and Anyanwu deconstruct and develop these narratives. Finally, I analyze the ways that larger social attitudes or narratives are reflected or (re) imagined in the novel.

### **Hidden secrets, signifying what, and other common practices**

The use of essentialism in *Wild Seed* is presented as a series of interconnecting narratives and social interactions among characters in which each endeavors to navigate between the intersections of race, gender, and class. This enables Butler to position essentialism in the context of choice using characters such as Doro and Anyanwu. These characters are then free to embrace, change, or reject traditional notions of race, gender, and class. Each possesses special abilities that both attracts and repulses the other. What began in Africa as a chance encounter between the two becomes a rediscovery of humankind's interconnectivity to one another and the larger society. This is evidenced by Doro's breeding program, which exceeds contemporary descriptions of race, gender, and class as fluid and malleable discourses. These intersecting narratives are used in *Wild Seed* to deconstruct essentialist concepts of beyond arbitrary attributes such as skin color, sex organs, and socioeconomic status. For instance, the residents of Wheatley Plantation provide insight into conversations race, gender, and class as a set of behaviors that the characters choose to portray in their public and private lives. Isaac tells Anyanwu that

Wheatley is Doro's 'American' village. He dumps all the people he can't find places for in his pure families on us. Mix and stir. No one can afford to worry about what anyone else looks

like. They don't know who Doro might mate them with—or what their children might look like. (Butler 1980, 102)

In the novel the words “wild seed” and “pure” (Butler 1980, 102) are used to describe individuals who were or were not part of Doro's eugenics program. This also places these individuals into hierarchal categories of specialness even at Wheatley. The plantation provides insight into conversations of race and class with the wealthy slave owners (e.g. Doro) at the top, while the slaves (e.g., Isaac, Anyanwu) occupying the spaces at the lowest end of the continuum. Isaac uses the words “mix and stir” (Butler 1980, 102) as if Doro were making a cocktail for consumption or cooking for his guests. This statement by Isaac also includes him as a product of a white mother and the body of a black man, borrowed by Doro for Isaac's conception. The population is comprised of individuals that failed to meet Doro's superiority criteria. While touring Wheatley with Anyanwu, Isaac explains why Doro established Wheatley. Isaac states that although he is “white and black and Indian” (Butler 1980, 102), he is able to reside on the plantation without any problems. Butler redefines race beyond skin pigmentation as evidenced by a conversation between Isaac, Doro's son, and Anyanwu. He states that, “As a white man, he knows what he is but he was raised white. This is not an easy place to be black. Soon it will not be an easy place to be Indian” (Butler 1980, 94/95). Isaac is describing the social climate of the United States during the nineteenth century. He acknowledges that his cultural heritage includes African-American and Native American ethnicities; however, he understands why he must embody the mannerisms of the dominant white culture. He also states that he possesses special abilities (telekinesis) that separate him from his indoctrinated race and categorizes him as other in this ethnic group. Essentialism emerges from Doro's separation of his people based on their abilities versus race, gender, or class; however, he unwittingly gives them a choice—whether to accept his decision or discard it. Innately, the residents of Wheatley are fearful of defying Doro; yet, in their own way they re-establish their independence by making the best decisions for their lives under extremely difficult circumstances. Many physically accept Doro's mandates, while verbally rebuffing them. For instance, Isaac disagrees with Doro's breeding program, although he silently and readily accepts Anyanwu as his wife and fathers her children at Doro's urging without question. This places Isaac in a feminized role by showing his subjugation at the hands of Doro.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler contends that social categories are performative texts whose narratives place individuals or groups into socially assigned roles. She argues that these discourses also contribute to the formation of designations that are used to marginalize or oppress specific individuals or groups. The author suggests that extensive revisions are necessary if individuals or

groups are to determine their own markers of identity in order to deconstruct and re-define larger social narratives on their own terms. This is represented by Doro's American colony on Wheatley Plantation. This estate is a diverse community in which each of the recognized classifications are its residents and "no one can afford to worry about what anyone else looks like" (Butler 1980, 102) because they do not know who they will be mated with. Doro has brought together individuals or groups that he perceives as inferior with regards to their abilities. These are persons who are too valuable for Doro to discard, but not extraordinary enough to reside in one of his more advanced colonies.

Narratives such as these are interwoven in *Wild Seed* and are presented in the language and accepted meanings associated with dominant discourses of race, gender, and class. For example, the term "wild seed" is first used by Doro in Africa to describe Anyanwu. During his conversation with her, Doro decided "he had to have the woman. She was wild seed of the best kind. She would strengthen any line he bred her into, strengthen it immeasurably" (Butler 1980, 22). The phrase "wild seed" is later repeated by Isaac in reference to other characters in the novel. Isaac uses this terminology as he introduces Anyanwu to the newest family on the plantation. He tells her that

The Sloanes were the newest wild seed—a couple who had found each other before Doro found them. They were dangerous, unstable, painfully sensitive people who heard the thoughts of others in intermittent bursts. (Butler 1980, 137)

In reference to Anyanwu, "wild seed" is used by Doro to categorize her as an individual with special abilities who was not a direct product of his selective breeding program. Whereas, its use by Isaac places the Sloanes in a realm of inferiority in which Doro has to implement strategies that will weaken their abilities and strengthen that of their off-springs. This label is a common term applied to individuals or groups that Doro considers inferior to himself as inferred by the words "dangerous" and "unstable." They are people such as Anyanwu and the Sloanes who possesses superhuman abilities, born free, and resistant (temporarily) to Doro's breeding program. These are people that Doro feels he has little or no control over, as a result, he captures them through charismatic seduction or physical intimidation and then brings "them to Wheatley" (Butler 1980, 137).

On Wheatley Plantation "wild seeds" are the lowest of all the residents because they were born free, but like their fellow residents each are property in the eyes of Doro. This is evidenced in the language Isaac uses in his categorization of these people. The Sloane's display characteristics such as "dangerous," "unstable," and "painfully sensitive," which are attributes often associated with black people, specifically males, and those of other ethnicities as well as those of low socioeconomic status. These descriptors are essentialist representations used to classify individuals or groups without the use of

dichotomies, hence, subverting while contriving conversations across intersections of race, gender, and class in ways that open critical social spaces as discursive sites of resistance that disrupts essentialist underpinnings. From this perspective, Butler creates characters who challenge essentialism through their choices. She uses *Wild Seed* to transgress static narratives of race, gender, and class in ways that enable Doro's and Anyanwu's actions to act as ciphers into larger discourses.

### **Intangible secrets, ancient knowledge, and new recollections**

The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu began as one of admiration and trust, but became a journey in which choice was embraced as an alternative to essentialism (Eshun 2003, 291). Their interactions signified an acceptance and a rejection of socially constructed narratives of race, gender, and class, which evolved over time through a series of exchanges. For example, while Doro assists Anyanwu in getting dressed, he thinks aloud as she listens. Doro states, "Someday...we will both change. I will become a woman and find out whether you make an especially talented man" (Butler 1980, 100). This offer is quickly rebuffed by Anyanwu; however, Doro's words "we will both change" suggests that gender is malleable, as indicated by "change" suggests that abstract narratives constructing social idea associated with gender are fallible and easily modifiable. During their brief exchange, Doro insinuates that one may "become a woman" or a "talented man" simply by choosing to adopt the attributes ascribed to these categories. Anyanwu's refers Doro's idea as an "abomination" which demonstrates her essentialist underpinnings that highlights the internalized belief held by the larger society that gender is static.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha proposes the development of a third space as a site where individuals or groups are able to interact beyond socially imposed limitations of race, gender, and class. Using Doro's and Anyanwu's special abilities, Butler establishes a third space in which Doro is able to learn from his mistakes and co-exist with Anyanwu as equal partners. This is evidenced in Frank's, a plantation resident, expressing his disdain for the ways Doro's and Anyanwu's freely "[change] sex, [change skin] color, breeding like" (Butler 1980, 266) before trailing off. Frank's accusations against Doro and Anyanwu demonstrate the movement of narratives of sex, race, and procreation from that of static social expectations to that of free will and individual choice, where Doro and Anyanwu behaviors determine their own categorizations. Frank's assertion is countered by Doro, who offers to discuss Frank's pedigree, a proposal he quickly declines. However, Frank's comments illustrate the fluidity with which Doro and Anyanwu are able to deconstruct essentialist views of race, gender, and class simply by choosing an alternative path. Both Doro's and Frank's aforementioned

statements provide a glimpse into the ways that essentialism functions in Doro's narratives and explains his desire to create a sense of belonging in himself, hence, offering ways to frame, understand, and articulate these discourses in the larger society. Choice, then, becomes a form of concealment in which Doro and Anyanwu are both complicit with regards to hiding their true nature or appearance from others by changing their physical appearance and other attributes.

The relationship between Doro and Anyanwu represents one marked by essentialism in which larger social narratives are used to categorize them based on their perceived race, gender, and class. Their story is as old as humankind and fits into the current social climate of the United States. Their connection to one another transcends traditional ideas by enabling each to make choices based on their understanding and experiences (Enshu 2003, 291). Their relationship is one of consensual slavery in which Doro consumes Anyanwu's "life essence, taking her as close to death as he can without killing her" (Call 2011, 142). This enables Doro to challenge larger social ideas of race, gender, and class by living his life as spirit, while Anyanwu holds steadfastly to the many of the rigid expectations embedded in these larger social narratives. In *Wild Seed*, essentialism is a worldview imposed on Anyanwu by Doro as a normative practice through artificial constructs that he uses to reinforce his larger ideological practice. Anyanwu's movement towards choice began on her journey from Africa to the New World. It continued when Anyanwu became a plantation owner in Louisiana where she not only housed slaves, but also individuals with special gifts. She created a site, unlike Doro's colonies, where people were allowed to choose their partners and make many of their own decisions. Although Anyanwu admonished Doro for his desire to breed the people in her care, she ultimately does the same. Butler uses Anyanwu's choices (e.g., procreation, gender, race) to recontextualize the relationship between her and Doro by strategically placing their narratives in larger social conversations across the intersections of race, gender, and class.

### **Hostility, commonalities, and enemies**

The novel chronicles Doro's obsession with his "breeding program" (Call 2011, 139) which he imposes on Anyanwu and the citizens of Wheatley Plantation. His ambivalence towards his residents is a form of essentialism used by Doro to separate his colonists from those of the larger society. Wheatley Plantation is a community Doro established for the purpose of furthering his dream of creating a superior group of people. Doro brought persons with varying abilities there in hopes of pairing the right partners to create children equal to him, but not his immediate superior. For instance, Doro chose a twenty-year-old man from the Whitten family to mate with his daughter

Nweke. Doro believed that the young man was of “fairly good breeding stock” (Butler 1980, 145) and that the boy’s “family would be worth more in generations to come” (Butler 1980, 145). Doro selected the young man because the Whittens “had a sensitivity that puzzled” (Butler 1980, 145) him. Doro concluded that, “They [the Whittens] were a pleasant mystery that careful inbreeding would solve” (Butler 1980, 146).

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explored the role of language and meaning in the facilitation or deconstruction of an individual’s or group’s unique traits. Fanon found that such distinctions were partially responsible for the arbitrary categorization of such populations. He concluded that each generation must assume responsibility for deconstructing and replacing the older, often essentialist, ideologies. Doro’s use of the phrases “good breeding stock” and “worth more” as well as the word “sensitivity” to determine and rationalize the fitness of the Whitten bloodline to intermix with that of his. His actions (verbal or physical) are a form of essentialism in which othering across intersections of race, gender, and class is used to physically separate Wheatley Plantation citizenry from those of the larger society and their fellow residents (Call 2011, 142; Lingoria 2011, 4). Embedded in his use of coded language, Doro’s essentialist assessment of the Whitten family justifies his decision to mate his daughter, Nweke, with the young Mr. Whitten. These choices transform Doro into a system of control, an essentialist power structure devoid of humanity who entices people to follow him and do his bidding (Wanzo 2005, 72). However, Doro realizes that he has a choice, whereas Anyanwu represents choice through her ability to conform, adopt, and modify the expectation of her new community and in many ways the demands of Doro. Yet, Anyanwu uses essentialism to explain her decisions. Through years of combativeness and quiet contemplation, Doro and Anyanwu are able to determine the best course of action for their lives. This idea is embedded by Butler throughout *Wild Seed* as special abilities enabling Doro and Anyanwu to communicate with one another and make their own choices individually as well as collectively regardless of their geographical locations.

## Conclusion

This essay examined Octavia Butler’s use of narratives of choice in *Wild Seed* to transcend essentialist ideologies. The novelist presents the characters of Doro and Anyanwu who are interconnected and conflictually relatable to one another in ways that reflect the social climate of the larger society. They are two sides of the same coin in which their many facets are fluidly exchanged for categories of other that exist across the intersections of race, gender, and class. These characters serve as representations of marginalized groups, specifically people of color and women, as each engages in the task of establishing an identity and a culture of their own design in an every chang-



ing world. Her reappropriation of dichotomies of black/white, male/female, and rich/poor transgresses these older discourses through the creation of choice. Their narrative transforms discourses of race, gender, and class from their essentialist associations to that of choice as all characters redefine these terms for themselves.

Using tropes of science fiction to deconstruct categories of race, gender, and class, Butler provides her readers with alternative ways of viewing these discourses through their engagement with her characters, Doro and Anyanwu. She creates embodied locations "across multiple sites and terrains" (Nunley 2008, 338) where her characters abilities to choose are based on their "understandings of the world (Youdell 2006, 37) and one another. Doro and Anyanwu are able to co-exist as well as "rewrite" their socially imposed classifications. Their special abilities enable each to challenge the essentialist world views imposed on them by one another and the larger society by using their lived experiences and social interactions to choose the best path for themselves. Given the view of the larger society, Octavia Butler, like other black science fiction writers, uses her text to demonstrate the constantly evolving and expanding interpretations of narratives of race, gender, and class by (re)imagining their associated meanings.

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