

Scenting Community: Microbial Symbionts in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*

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The final courtroom scene in Octavia Butler's vampire novel, *Fledgling* (2005), has perplexed readers as something of an anticlimax. As Gerry Canavan (2016) notes,

When I have taught *Fledgling* to my students, I have been struck by their widespread sense, despite enjoying the novel, that the ending is abrupt, or that the book even seems unfinished. The ending is also deeply unexpected: what begins as a vampire fantasy novel ends, weirdly, in an Ina [vampire] courtroom, hashing out the peculiarities of Ina legal traditions and the complex nature of Ina citizenship. (p. 167).

It does indeed seem strange that a novel that began with the visceral drama of Shori (a hybrid Ina/human with black skin) surviving a fire and gradually building back up her human symbiont family through various acts of seduction would conclude with senior Ina sitting in chairs in a courtroom debate. It is strange, that is, unless you read the novel not only as a fantasy, but as a detective story or as a fantastical spin on an ancient Greek Tragedy. Because *Fledgling's* courtroom scene centers around questions of justice—were Shori's families murdered by the Silk family out of racial/species prejudice?—it offers striking similarities to the third play in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy called *The Furies*, which famously settles a series of intra-familial murders in an Athenian courtroom, where citizens surrender vigilante justice to a (presumably) impartial judge.

Yet what is notable about the courtroom scene in *Fledgling*—despite its philosophical rather than action-packed nature—is its ambience, and the role of sense of smell in scenting out truth. *Fledgling* is an ecological fiction not only through its vampiric focus on “companion species” relations in the fullest sense of Haraway's term—eating together—but also through its attention to smell as a particular mode of environ-

mental sensing and world-building. Although the Ina see themselves as superior to humans (who they can control through their venom), the Ina have an acute sense of smell which would seem to place them closer to the domain of animals according to existing Western assumptions. Hsuan Hsu (2018) notes the “long-standing denigration of smell in Western aesthetics,” and that Kant once “categorized smell and taste as ‘chemical’ senses with lower aesthetic capacities than vision and hearing.” Butler turns this assumption on its head in the scene of the courtroom, which relies not only on verbal testimony, but also on the Ina's sophisticated ability to read and interpret smell and body language. As Shori's romantic interest, Daniel Gorton, explains to her, “Our judges are our elders, people who have lived three, four, five centuries. They sense truth more effectively than people my age, although I can sense it, too,” (220). Daniel notes that friendship and family connections can get in the way, hence the stipulation that council members be related by blood to both sides. “At best, they can be fairly certain when someone fully believes what he's saying. They sense stress, changing degrees of stress. You do that yourself, don't you? You smell sweat, adrenaline, you see any hit of trembling, hear any difference in the voice or breathing or even the heartbeat,” (245). As is true of many non-human others in Butler's fictions, words are not the only semiotic medium, but exist in parallel to more sophisticated forms of biochemical literacy. Like the Oankali in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the Ina are sophisticated readers (smellers?) of the body as a dynamic text that constantly exudes its own subconscious signs and signals.

However, what is on trial is not just the “truth,” of whether or not the Silk family intentionally murdered Shori's female and male families (they did); what is on trial is the objectivity of olfactory judgment itself. Katherine Dahlman, the Silk family's advocate, complains of Shori: “No one can be certain of the truth of anything you say because you are neither Ina nor human.

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Your scent, your reactions, your facial expressions, your body language—none of it is right,” (272). While it would be tempting to pass this off as racist/speciesist prejudice, there seems to me an unresolved question regarding the objectivity of her—or anyone’s—sense of smell. Is it prejudice that is affecting Katherine’s interpretation of smell and body language, or the other way around? Is she bothered by not being able to get a “read” on Shori? Or might it be the case that Katherine and the Silk family, who (as do all Ina) pride themselves on the truth-sensing value of their own sense of smell, find themselves so convinced that Shori smells “wrong” that they leave no room to question their own olfactory interpretation?

Right from the beginning of the novel, Butler raises the possibility that one’s sense of smell can lie. When Shori (before she knows her own name) wakes in a cave in severe pain and sensory disorientation, all she knows is that she is hungry. She attacks and eats a deer that approaches her—the Ina eat meat instead of blood only when they need to recover from extreme injuries—only to later discover that it wasn’t a deer, but a man (Hugh Tang), one of her relative’s symbionts who was looking for her. This realization deeply disturbs her, not just on an ethical level, but because it so clearly demonstrates that even her sense of smell can be completely deceived under certain circumstances. If injured, she could accidentally mistake one of her own treasured human symbionts for mere meat, instead of a companion from whom she needs emotional as well as physical nourishment. This precedent for the misinterpretation of olfactory signaling shows that the Ina’s sense of smell is not necessarily the ultimate lie detector, but an instrument that is itself, perhaps, situationally and environmentally dependent. Like language, scents do not mean things in a vacuum unto themselves, but are subject to conflicting interpretation. Thus Shori’s observation that “The tension in this place is like a bad smell” (304) is as much a literal statement as it is figurative, describing the courtroom as a scene of olfactory conflict—of dueling interpretations and, at the same time, dueling pheromones.

Putting olfaction on trial is itself a crisis, in part, because of the long history of forensics and olfactory sensing that places trust in the sense of smell. As Judith Roof has pointed out, the homonym of nose/knows carries weight through the association of smell with the direct sensation of reality. What is “scents-able” is detectable, and often an affirmation of presence. Hsuan Hsu (2018) traces metaphors of scenting back to 19th century detective fiction, including Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories, where an unusual odor is often a clue that discloses some underlying truth. Thus, despite the devaluation of smell as a more animal or lower sense, there is also a longstanding cultural tradition of linking smell with the undeniable, with truth-finding itself.

While *Fledgling* does conclusively reveal that the Silk family murdered Shori’s families, it does not fully explore the implications of the possibility that Shori smelled “wrong” to the Silk family. This is not to side with the obvious racial and species prejudice of the Silk family, but rather, what I want to point out is that Butler did not quite push past an anthropocentric view as much as she could have. When I have taught the novel, my students have commented on how Butler seemed a bit restrained in her descriptions of smell, or what smell is “like” for Shori and other Ina, holding back from any rich sensory comparisons. While Butler does (as with many of her other novels) consider genetics and hybridity, she could have gone even further in teasing out the implications of the symbiotic microbes that all bodies live with.

To really understand the production of bodily smell, you have to consider the holobiont, the sum of the body plus its microbes. In his book *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes Within us and a Grand View of Life*, science writer Ed Yong (2016) shows how important microbes are to the development and health of humans as well as other megafauna. Yong describes being human as being a kind of archipelago for communities of microbes, with particular communities (like the assemblage under the armpit) producing an espe-

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cially distinct smell from the byproducts (metabolites) of their own biotic processes. Here the human body is not just an individual, but also an environment that hosts a whole community of microbes whose composition varies from person to person. The implication is that what we think of as a person's individual smell is actually the collective exudation of our symbiotic microbial communities. Smell is collectively authored, even as it is subject to reader reception.

Yong's synthesis of microbiome science and its implications for reading smell offers a different way to read the racism and speciesism in *Fledgling*. If we take the Silks at their word, and that what is objectionable is Shori's smell, then what the Silks are really objecting to is the scent of her microbial assemblage. The smell of this assemblage likely does contain some human-associated microbial symbionts that allow Shori to do things like walk in the daylight with only a mild burn, or to digest some human foods. For example, Shori's human symbionts "dared me to taste the coffee, and I tasted it. It was less appealing than plain water, but not disgusting. I wondered what other human food or drink I could tolerate," (305). Since gut microbes are key in any digestive process in animals, it seems that Shori is not only part genetically human, but also has some of the same microbial partners as humans. Butler's focus on genetic engineering and DNA as the source of Shori's species difference is thus only part of the picture—this difference also includes microbial symbionts.

We might re-narrate the situation thusly: to the Silks, it is not that Shori herself smells off, but rather that her particular assemblage of symbiotic microbes smells off because it includes both Ina and human associated strains. This invisible microbiome enralls some, while repelling others. Although there is a long history of racial prejudice tied to smell, it seems odd to me that what the Silks find offensive about Shori is tied to her microbial symbionts, because in a way, the Ina as a species already have a deep cultural and material appreciation for their own reliance on macro-symbionts—humans. They literally cannot survive without blood nourishment, but also

come to depend on humans for emotional care and support as well. The Silks seem tied up with the hierarchical view of being Ina (at the top of the food chain) despite their immediate knowledge of being reliant, in physical and emotional ways, on their human symbionts. What they demonstrate, I argue, is not just racial prejudice and aversion to human/Ina genetic hybridity, but a failure to fully extend the posthuman (post-Ina) logic of living with symbionts and its full implications, of a self whose olfactory signature and signaling is collectively composed. Shori does not control or choose how she smells, but rather, her scent is authored by her microbiome. Prejudice against smell is an instance of racism that is not precisely about color, but about the skin as the site of a microbial community whose thriving and maturation produces a variety of individualized scents.

For all the veracity that the Ina grant to olfaction, it turns out that sense of smell is not as pure as they would hope. To play on words, smell is always susceptible to... taste, if we take taste to mean personal opinion and its sway over the interpretation of signals. What is perhaps remarkable in *Fledgling* is how resilient Shori's microbial community is, for despite the burns of the fire that take her skin away, Shori recovers and still smells familiar to those who knew her—even if she cannot recognize herself, a vampire who is figuratively rather than literally invisible in the mirror.

References

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