

## Posthumanism in “Amnesty” by Octavia Butler: A Feminist Theological Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the tension between the humanistic, eugenic concept of identity and that of posthumanism in Octavia Butler’s “Amnesty” (2005). Using Daphne Hampson’s feminist post-Biblical perspective, the article argues that the story exposes a posthumanist perspective where the existence and subjectivity of human kind is defined based on a mutual, non-hierarchical relation between the human and nonhuman worlds. This article suggests that “Amnesty,” reflecting an unorthodox perspective of life through an unorthodox theological perspective, illustrates the potential for a more humanitarian life on Earth.

*Keywords:* “Amnesty”, Daphne Hampson, Octavia Butler, post-Biblical feminism, posthumanism

### INTRODUCTION

“Amnesty” focuses on a mission from plant-like Communities for a black woman to connect them to human societies. In “Amnesty”, Butler is obsessed with a concept of survival, which embodies a postmodern “dialogic” interaction between post-Biblical

and African-American slavery discourses, as well as “sociobiological” determinism, to use a phrase by Cathy Peppers (1995, p. 48). By adopting these discourses, “Amnesty” creates a context which represents a feminist ecotheological sensibility, which beyond the traditional Christian hierarchical view on woman and nature<sup>1</sup>, puts nature and woman on par with men.

In an interview with Frances M. Beal, Butler denies that there are utopian tendencies in her writing, “I don’t believe that imperfect humans can form a perfect society” (1986, p. 14). Zaki (1990) believes

<sup>1</sup> Refer to Hampson, 2002, pp. 6-9.

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that this statement is linked to Butler's deterministic view towards human nature which she denounces as fundamentally "violent" and "flawed" (p. 241). What we are going to explore in our discussion is what could be seen as a promising reflection of characters as posthuman in "Amnesty," using a post-Biblical feminist perspective.

Posthumanism considers the human being as a "subject" who "comes to be by conforming to a strictly dialectical system of difference" (Wolfe, 2010, pp. 11-12). This dialectical system is based on the recognition of communication between divinity, human, and nonhuman worlds in a way which exceeds the fixed boundaries between divinity, as a "Transcendent" entity<sup>2</sup>, humanity, the natural world, and "the mechanical or technical" world (p. 6). Due to its egalitarian stand, which unlike the orthodox Biblical perspectives, does not presume the hierarchical dominance of God on human and human on nature, Hampson's post-Biblical feminist perspective provides us with a useful tool to understand this posthumanism in "Amnesty". As such, Hampson's perspective provides a base to investigate the potency in "Amnesty" to embody a humanitarian life free from violence.

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<sup>2</sup> A transcendent monotheism believes in an Almighty God who, "set over against" universe, exerts His power unilaterally, beyond the natural, causal system of universe (Hampson, 2002, p. 244). For further information refer to Daphne Hampson's *After Christianity*, chapter VI, and Griffin's *God and Religion in the Postmodern World*.

## METHODOLOGY

From the post-Biblical standpoint, "Amnesty" enacts the spiritual sensitivity that Hampson (2002) recognises as the right of "other life" to live (p. 259). From her perspective, any attempt to control "other life" whether that of "other persons" or "animal creation" is a practice "inimical to being a spiritual person" (p. 259).

Hampson (2002) introduces three practices for being spiritual: "attention," "honesty," and "ordering." "Attention" or "attending" is "an ethical stance" which entails "listening to, and watching both oneself and others" and in so doing, helps a person "to grow and change and so make appropriate response when response is called for" (p. 260). Based on this definition, the practice of "attention" is "caring for that to which one attends" (p. 260). By "honesty," Hampson explains that she means "seeing oneself in a true light," that is "to be integral to one's whole self-understanding" and "gain a sense of oneself" (p. 265). She furthers her debate by connecting "honesty" to "attention," saying that "honesty" is to have a "fundamentally friendly attitude towards others rather than a tendency to take oppositional and defensive stance (p. 265). The third practice "ordering" is "having a certain control over one's time and one's affairs" (p. 266). "Ordering" is related to the other practices because "[a] person drowning in the chaos of her own life is unlikely to be free in herself to be present to another" (p. 267) that is to say to practise "attending".

## SYNOPSIS AND CRITICAL BACKGROUND

"Amnesty" reflects the mutual "attentive" practices of sample representatives of humanity and the alien communities of special plants who have settled on Earth and strive to have a symbiotic, non-hierarchical coexistence with humanity. This attentiveness is embodied in a discipline of "honesty" through which a chosen representative of humanity and a bunch of these Communities work together to put in "order" and harmonise the relationship among humans, on the one hand, and humanity and the Communities on the other hand. Butler, as will be argued, accomplishes this in "Amnesty", which demonstrates the embrace of difference by humanity as a means of survival.

The notion of survival reflects "a new beginning." This new beginning entails the acknowledgment of a new way of life that, in its postmodern nature, negates the "outmoded reifications of humanist, essential notions of identity" (Peppers, 1995, p. 47). It embodies the recognition of the "'post-gender' origin-less" concept of the posthuman body and identity that confronts the Othering eugenic as well as sexist notions of identity. Peppers explains the eugenic concept as the modern preference for safeguarding the purity of race and species through limiting the scope of relations within approved boundaries. She relates it to the Darwinian notion of "natural selection" as

a means to determine the survival of the fittest (pp. 47-48)<sup>3</sup>. "Amnesty" confronts such a eugenic understanding.

The entire story concretises the confrontation between two eugenic and post-human concepts of humanity. The representation of this eugenic consideration turns "Amnesty" into a narration that one might suspect reproduces the wicked side of human nature. But the characterisation of Noah Cannon in the story reflects the Other of the eugenic, "humanist," essentialist (biological) perspective. By humanism, we are referring to modernist "scientism" which, presuming human kind as the exclusive representative of God, regards the human being as the master of the universe, whose mission is to discover the mechanism of natural laws governing the world (Griffin, 1989, pp. 2-3). This focus creates a kind of centrism on the human being which continues to threaten "*the very survival of life on our planet*" (p. xi). "Amnesty" challenges this centrism. "Amnesty" presents a post-modern notion of humanity – posthumanism – which challenges the traditional "humanist" reflection of femininity as the other of the perfect human who is always a male in science fiction even in science fiction by women – which usually presents weak, masculinised women (Hollinger, 2003, pp. 129-134). They are humanist in the sense that they focus on the human being, disregarding non-human world.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, London: John Murray, 1859.

The plot of “Amnesty” revolves around the interactions among the Communities, free human beings, and those ones who have already been abducted by the Communities and started to have a coexistence with them. There are six free humans who have applied for “translating” work in one of the Communities that is the stranger-Community. The depicted free humans represent an aggressive perspective which views the other two groups as unintelligent in the case of the Communities and betrayers in the case of the pre-abductees.

The Communities are interested to expand their relations with humanity. The coordinators of this communication are “Translators” like Noah who are pre-abductees and have developed a signifying code of communication with the Communities.

From the beginning it becomes evident that communication is the major concern for all the three groups. Nevertheless, it is also shown that this concern is accompanied by a deep sense of hatred and distrust in both the humans and the Communities:

*Her employer had warned her that the job ... would be unpleasant not only because of the usual hostility of the human beings she would face, but because the subcontractor for whom she would be working would be difficult. (Butler, 2005, p. 150)*

The quote reflects the unwillingness of the free humans to deal with difference and points to the difficult conditions that living and working with strangers will impose on humanity.

The story seems to support a pessimist and dystopian reading. However, the ensuing discussion hopes to show that a consideration of the presence and function of the Communities, the free and abducted humans, as represented by the protagonist, suggest another possible reading. Noah’s role will also be investigated in order to ascertain whether she does indeed epitomise an alternative version of human understanding in the face of difference.

## **DISCUSSION: POSTHUMAN VERSUS HUMAN**

To start, we will regard the concept of survival in “Amnesty.” It is the central theme of the story. To figure out whether the concept embodies a negative view about imperfect human nature or a positive one which sees the overcoming of the schism between Self and Other, it is necessary to investigate if survival in “Amnesty” represents a merely physical notion or a sustainable concept. If we accept the biological determinism that Butler argues for (i.e., the imperfect nature of human beings), it would mean that physical survival is the story’s main concern. In such a case, the Darwinian concept of “natural selection” comes to the fore and a reconsideration of the perfect/imperfect reflection of human nature becomes indispensable.

As pointed out in the previous section, survival reflects a new beginning. “Amnesty” is about the emergence of an alternate life. It is about the “immersion and gradual orientation in its wholly

other structures of kinship and relation" (Luckhurst, 1996, p. 35) in the text to reflect a new understanding which is tolerant and receptive of what has already been Othered as alien or strange. These new structures take root in the biological, historical, and theological background of the story and illustrate how the protagonist's growing awareness equips her with the necessary knowledge to "attentively" cooperate in the reshaping of a new life of coexistence on Earth. These structures will be explored in the following discussion.

In the case of natural selection in "Amnesty", one point must be stated. The story "is not about a stronger race annihilating a weaker, or incorporating weaker difference into its sameness," a model which Luckhurst (1996) distinguishes as a reflection of a "racial science" (p. 36). On the contrary, it illustrates "another, muted Darwin – one of the view that 'man resembles those forms called by naturalists protean and poly morphaic'" (p. 36). What Luckhurst terms as "racial science" here points to the eugenic notion of "purity" that, according to modernist notions of the "integrity of the same" (p. 37), confers a rigid notion of human identity. According to this view, what has emerged as "pure humanity" is due to the evolution of the fittest and, therefore, embodies a final version of the perfect species. "Amnesty" challenges this understanding. Imagining a mutual striving for coexistence between humanity and the Communities of the unicellular-like plants, the story envisions a new picture of human

identity whose essence is redefined in direct contact with the Communities. This mutuality implies sameness of essence between the two species and connects the apparently independent and intelligent humans to the unintelligent, unicellular entities. Based on this, "Amnesty" emerges as a reflection of a postmodern identity that deconstructs the unified sense of self as an isolated entity.

Butler's Noah represents the embodiment of the postmodern view about "decentered subjects and bodies" (Luckhurst, 1996, 30). Paralleling it, "Amnesty" envisions the "dissolution of the boundaries between human and the alien" (Wolmark, 1994, p. 38):

*The tips of what looked like moss-covered outer twigs and branches touched her bare skin. ...*

*This subcontractor enfolded her immediately, drawing her upward and in among its many selves, first hauling her up with its various organisms, then grasping her securely with what appeared to be moss. ...*

*Enfolded ... She closed her eyes ... She felt herself surrounded by ... dry fibres, fronds, rounded fruits of various sizes, and other things .... She was at once touched, stroked, massaged, compressed in the strangely comfortable, peaceful way ... She was turned and handled as though she weighed nothing. ... She had lost all senses of direction....*  
(Butler, 2005, p. 151)

This violation of bodily boundaries by the Communities concretises a new structure of physical body which decentres the modernist human concept of physical integrity. This new concept of body, metaphorically, suggests the emergence of a new sense of relation and communication.

Besides references to Noah's captivity and blackness in the story, the extract automatically provides readers with an understanding of the text as dealing with the theme of sexual harassment in the narratives of slave history. Accordingly, one wonders if the text puts forward a reverse irony, recreating the same imperfection recorded in humanity's unpleasant past history of slavery. The currently dominant plant-like Communities seem to apply a modern system of slave holding. However, considering the overall concerns and arguments of the text, we cannot accept this view.

Despite the vivid images related to slavery, there are scenes that both embody the longing of the Communities to know humanity and reflect Noah's compassionate concern for her fellow beings, despite the terrible experiences she had with them. The feelings come from a conscious belief in the possibility of constructive communication and understanding from both the Communities and Noah:

*The communities liked her signs to be small, confined gestures ... She had wondered ... if this was because they couldn't see very well. Now she knew that they could see far better than she could ...*

*[T]he reason that they preferred large gestures when she was out of contact and unlikely to hit or kick anyone was because they liked to watch her move. ... the Communities had developed a real liking for human dance performances and for some human sports events—especially individual performances in gymnastics and ice skating. (Butler, 2005, p. 152)*

At the beginning of the extract, Butler reviews Noah's gradual understanding of the capacity of the Communities. Though they are concerned with physical abilities but, as the rest of the extract reveals, there is also a strong hint at the wide scope of the Communities' perspective. Theirs is an inclusive perspective which observes and understands humanity not only as a biological entity, but also as the embodiment of a specific sociocultural heritage. As such, this highlights an "attending" practice. According to Hampson (2002), attending "can also involve allowing oneself to be affected by art or great literature, or being observant of nature" (p. 260). It is because of this understanding that the Communities are determined to start a new form of communication and safeguard a peaceful coexistence with human beings. They do not want to fix the bases of their dominance on Earth, which then would reflect narratives of colonisation and slavery.

One of the strategies that the colonising powers used against the colonised nations was to learn their language and culture. They groomed a generation of locals who

were trained in the dominant language and once they internalised the alien culture and values, they acted as agents of change to render the native culture more malleable in the hands of the coloniser. Noah's mission as a "Translator" to train other human translators, is in line with the stories of slavery or colonisation. Nevertheless, the attitude of the Communities towards humans does not coincide with what Coogan-Gehr (2011) describes as the "homogenising" attitude of coloniser towards colonised culture. Based on her explanation, colonisation is a homogenising practice through which the cultural differences of the colonised are ignored or obliterated (p. 94). The Communities of "Amnesty" do not follow such a policy. In the entire story, they appear as eager learners who struggle to know much about humanity and use that knowledge for a constructive relationship. They never consciously force any human to behave as they do or follow their habits.

One reading of the story could be that the abduction of humans from their homes and their transfer into the Communities symbolise the hunting of slaves in Africa and their transfer to America by white colonisers. In this huge transfer, big groups of people were abducted from their homeland and smuggled to America where they gradually dissolved into an American way of life. Clarifying the motivation of the Communities in "Amnesty" to kidnap humans, Noah explains that the Communities abducted humans because they wanted to know and communicate with the human species; they had no

understanding that this was an act of abduction. This fact distinguishes their act from that of humans. The actions of humans were based on consciousness and free will, while what the Communities did were based on unfamiliarity with human behaviour and needs:

*"The Communities didn't know anything about us." ...*

*"They wanted to understand us and communicate with us. ... They wanted to know how we got along with one another and they needed to know how much we could bear of what was normal for them."* (Butler, 2005, pp. 159-60)

After the Communities release Noah, humans capture her:

*"the so-called human beings knew when they were hurting me. They questioned me day and night, threatened me, drugged me, all in an effort to get me to give them the information I didn't have."* (Butler, 2005, p. 170).

As the story stipulates, some Communities and abducted humans have succeeded "to put together a code—the beginning of a language" (Butler, 2005, p. 161) that has helped the two species to start communicating and, consequently, understanding each other. The Communities have not imposed their language and culture on human societies. Moreover, the launching of this new

system of communication, as appears from references like “without hands, God knows how they manage to sign anything” (p. 157), is due to the biological limitations of the Communities that prevent them from using human ways.

Humans are not under the control of the Communities. Though there is a mission from the Communities for Noah which suggests a hierarchical order of control, yet the nature of the relationship and the physical unity that the story reflects, embody a horizontal sense of understanding where human free will and control are recognised. It is particularly reflected in the permission of the Communities to those humans who wanted to return to their own human societies:

*“Years later when the Communities ... understood more of what they’d done to us, they asked ... whether we would stay with them voluntarily or whether we want to leave. I thought it might have been just another of their tests, but when I asked to go, they agreed.”* (p. 169)

Noah goes towards her fellow beings. But she encounters their dark side and returns to the Communities. Experiencing peace and serenity when co-living with the Communities, she ends up sharing these feelings with her fellow humans. It is a practice of “attending” and “honesty” through which she struggles to advise her people to guarantee their survival through conscious control of their negative views

towards the Communities and starting friendly relations with them. We cannot assume that Noah’s attempt to reconcile humans and the Communities demonstrate her dependence on the Communities. What is discernible from her explanations is that it is human society which, diverted from its essential nature, has threatened natural life and, therefore, needs to change.

Moreover, according to the explanations about the habitat of the Communities, they have settled in deserts. It shows that the settlers had no intention to occupy human settlements: “They’ve taken over big chunks of the Sahara, the Atacama, the Kalahari the Mojave and just about every other hot, dry wasteland they could find. As far as territory goes, they’ve taken almost nothing that we need” (Butler, 2005, p. 181). Nowhere in the text have the Communities appeared as colonisers who usurp and exploit human habitats.

Reviewing Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, Apap (2011) distinguishes a cultural homogenising policy, followed by the American Colonisation Society (ACS). The policy, propagating the relocation of blacks to their ancestral land (Liberia as part of Africa), “envisioned a nation void of racial differences, in which undesirable others, whether African or Indian, were continually and safely “outside” of the nation’s borders” (p. 326). The Communities do not follow such a policy. Their interest to contact and mix with humanity contrasts with homogenising colonisation. Though they are settled in locations far removed from

human settlements, they are determined to be connected to these societies. In addition, after gaining the knowledge and ability to communicate with humans, the Communities never try to drive them away from their lands. The fact that Noah invites her people's representatives to learn to live with the Communities shows that there is no obligation on them to leave their home, Earth.

In addition, the Communities have come to stay. When they started to land on Earth, the allied forces of several countries had tried "to knock them out of the sky" but had failed (Butler, 2005, p. 183). Later, they "coordinated nuclear strikes at the aliens when it was clear where they were establishing their colonies" (p. 183). But these attacks had been repelled and "half of the missiles that had been fired were returned. ... armed and intact" (p. 183), whereas, it seems the other half were in the hands of the Communities "along with whatever weapons they brought with them and any they've built since they've been here" (p. 184). This hints at the Communities' invulnerability. Therefore, it would be reasonable to avoid any tension with them.

Claire Light (2005) believes that Butler's protagonists are characters who are balanced between two hostile cultures, and choose to absorb that hostility to create a bridge. They allow her to put them through hell, so that she can report on what hell is like, and maybe report a way out of it. (para. 2)

This pattern is true when applied to Noah Cannon. Noah embodies a character who vacillates between choosing the perspective of two species who have their separate cultural and biological lives. Despite the hostilities, "Amnesty" reflects a struggle towards mutual understanding and unity. Noah acts as an agent to fulfil this unification.

The mechanism that Butler uses for this end is the recreation of a context that is reminiscent of the historical condition of slavery. This racial dimension helps Butler to replace the "amnesiac severance from the past ... by an assumption of some kind of responsibility" (Luckhurst, 1996, p. 32). This responsibility is fulfilled by "confrontation with a disavowed history" (p. 32). As Butler in her interview with Randall Keenan (1991) explains, black history is a background which black generations have not been eager to bring to the fore during their activities for social recognition and equality in the recent century (p. 496). Referring to this past through a reflection on the postmodern dimension, "Amnesty" allows the readers, particularly its black addressees, the opportunity to face and deal with their racial heritage. This illustration acts like a healing model through which the protagonist gains the knowledge and ability to manage and control her life through connection with others. It enables her to familiarise her people with the same understanding to help them live meaningfully in radically different conditions.

Connecting the historical allusion to slavery with the coming of the interplanetary aliens, “Amnesty” reflects the permanent presence of the Othered figures in human life. Wolmark (1994) believes that “Butler uses the device of the alien being to explore the cultural determinants of definitions of the other as a signifier of threat” (p. 29). “Amnesty” deals with this concept of Othering when it reflects the hatred and distrust of the free humans and the Communities towards each other. Yet this is not the only voice heard in the story. “Amnesty” also reverberates with the promising voice of change which works to bring together the Othered, separated voices of the story. This is done through focusing on the concept of communication between the two communities of humans and plant-like beings. The strategy employed for this development is training and learning. It is reflected in Noah’s mission to train translators and the Communities interest to learn human culture.

Noah is a woman who is determined to start a mental change in humans. Discussing her mission with her employer, she says:

*I want to make them think. I want to tell them what human governments won't tell them. I want to vote for peace between your people and mine by telling the truth. I don't know whether my efforts will do any good ... but I have to try.* (Butler, 2005, p. 155)

The quote reflects Noah’s sense of responsibility. Despite the disappointing feature of humans in the story to Other not only the Communities, but also people of their own kind, Noah represents an emblem of hope to change this propensity. Her sense of responsibility is actualised through an “attentive” commitment to train a generation of translators who will work to bridge the gaps between human and non-human societies. The commitment, verbalised in “I want to vote for peace ... by telling truth,” entails a conscious practice of “honesty” to establish “a fundamentally friendly attitude towards others rather than a tendency to take an oppositional and defensive stance” (Hampson, 2002, p. 265).

Noah has an open view towards others. This openness, gained from her interaction with the Communities, enables her to adopt the spiritual practice of “listening” with some representatives of her own people. Embedded in her patient dialogue with these people, the practice works as a therapy that reduces the tensions by “speaking and being listened to” (Hampson, 2002, p. 263). The excerpt above highlights the protagonist’s dedication to work towards complete acceptance between her people and the Communities. Noah is fully aware that dialogue is key to creating peace and integrity on Earth and, therefore, uses her knowledge and experience to establish communication between humans and the Communities and, in this way, heal the scars of misunderstanding.

Another post-Biblical aspect of the concept of survival in the story is its name symbolism. The symbolism offers a post-Biblical retelling of a Biblical story and connects it to the posthuman historical and biological dimensions of the story. As a female, the protagonist has the name Noah which is entirely strange and uncommon for a woman:

*"Noah Cannon," Rune Johnsen said, ... I remember seeing your name on the lists of abductees. ... you were listed as female. I had never run across a woman named Noah before". (Butler, 2005, p. 159)*

The name Noah alludes to the Biblical name of Prophet Noah who, under God's guidance, made an ark and saved selected members of humanity and natural life from global destruction and extinction. Butler's post-human recreation of Noah in "Amnesty" embodies a post-Christian theological discourse of selection different from the Biblical one. It also challenges Butler's deterministic view of human sociobiological entity.

Noah does not go through the same process of selection as the traditional Biblical Noah. Her concern for the unification of humanity and the communities does not exempt any one as "unwanted" in both groups. She embodies an attending guide who does not neglect or banish any one. On the contrary, she represents an ideologically open-minded figure that stands ready to accept the world around her.

Through the entire interactions with her fellow humans and the Communities, Noah attempts to remove the tensions between the two species. To achieve this, she struggles to cope with the condemnation she receives from her fellow beings. Unlike her Biblical forerunner, she does not embody a missionary who leaves the majority of her people, denouncing them as cursed ones.<sup>4</sup> Embodying a threatening situation of annihilation similar to the Biblical Flood story, "Amnesty" narrates a saving story in which the saving function is not practiced though selection of a chosen group to the destruction of the Others. Noah does not limit the scope of her mission to either humans or the Communities. Her vision includes both of them, working hard to help them understand and come together. This theological non-selectivity has a natural-biological dimension as well.

In the traditional Biblical story, Noah selects pairs of various animals to save their species. The Communities in "Amnesty" reflect this same sense of ark. But this is a post-Biblical ark which epitomises postmodern co-existence. The gathering of biological types in these Communities does not follow a natural or biological selection to ensure preservation. On the contrary, the argument of the story follows a non-essential biology in which the symbiotic co-existence of all is sought as the best way to achieve sustainable survival. Though the early random locating of the kidnapped

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<sup>4</sup> For the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood, refer to Genesis 6:11-7:5

humans by the Communities embodies a natural selection, this practice is abandoned when the Communities learn more about humans. In natural selection, survival is the result of natural abilities. "Amnesty" is not only obsessed with the natural abilities and experiential knowledge of the survivors. It also considers the factor of awareness. This awareness emerges from a conscious assessment of experiential knowledge and is practiced via recognising, and not ignoring or deleting, the presence of others.

## CONCLUSION

Hampson (2002) argues that "a disregard for the beauty and integrity of other life, an inclination to stamp it out, does seem to me to be contrary to what I could count a true spirituality" (p. 259). "Amnesty" entirely enlivens the same spiritual standpoint. It constructs an imaginary world in which the disappearance of hierarchical classifications works to envision a more fully integrated co-existence. Recruiting the historical discourse of slavery, which philosophically rests on the New Testament implication "that the use of slaves, provided it is humane, does not contravene the will of God" (Hampson, 1991, p. 26), the story transforms this history to develop alternative, non-Christian theological and sociobiological discourses. In the new conceptual world that emerges in "Amnesty", Noah is convinced that cooperating for openness towards difference is vital in paving the way for an "integrated" life.

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