



BOOK REVIEW:

Gregory J. Hampton and Kendra R. Parker, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 290 pages. ISBN 978-1-3500-7963-2.

Aparajita Nanda and Shelby L. Crosby, eds. *God Is Change: Religious Practices and Ideologies in the Works of Octavia Butler*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021, 242 pages. ISBN 978-1-4399-2112-8.

In the mid-1990s, having just decided to devote a chapter of my Ph.D. dissertation to Octavia Butler's neoslave narrative *Kindred* (1979), I wanted to read everything she had written, as well as all that had been written about her works. At that point, the latter proved to be more easily accomplished than the former. I could buy the 1988 Beacon Press trade paperback edition of *Kindred*, with a scholarly introduction by Robert Crossley, in a regular bookstore in San Francisco. The rest of her ten novels were only available as mass-market science-fiction paperbacks – if at all. It was, for example, very difficult to find *Clay's Ark* (1984), but finally a roughed up copy showed up in a small secondhand bookstore next to Hotel California in Palo Alto. The person selling it to me mentioned that Butler had just won the MacArthur "Genius Grant". I later discovered that she was the first science fiction writer to receive this award.

At the time of her untimely death in 2006, Butler had published 12 novels and a collection of short stories: *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Kindred*, *Wild Seed* (1980), *Clay's Ark*, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), *Imago* (1989), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), *Fledgling* (2005), and *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995, 2nd ed. 2005). Today, all of Butler's novels (except *Survivor*, according to her wish not to have it reprinted after 1981) are available as trade paperbacks. The novels of the Xenogenesis trilogy – *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago* – have also been published together as *Lilith's Brood* (2000) and the Patternist series – *Wild Seed*, *Mind of My Mind*, *Clay's Ark*, and *Patternmaster* – as *Seed to Harvest* (2007). In 2021, Library of America published the volume *Octavia E. Butler: Kindred, Fledgling, Collected Stories*, which includes essays by Butler in addition to the two novels and her short stories.

The academic as well as general interest in Butler has grown exponentially since 1995. A search in the MLA International Bibliography database using the words “Octavia Butler” yields 26 hits for the period 1982–1995. One of them is Joe Weixlmann’s two-page “An Octavia E. Butler Bibliography” from 1984; the first page deals with the publication histories of Butler’s works, while the second page lists some interviews and a handful of articles, but mostly book reviews and brief mentions of her novels. An MLA search 1982–2005 yields 145 hits, while 1982–2021 gives 521. Published in 2008, Ritch Calvin’s “An Octavia E. Butler Bibliography (1976–2008)” lists over 90 journal/magazine articles and 70 chapters and sections of books as well as over 80 theses/dissertations with substantial discussions of Butler’s works. So, turning to the two books under review here, *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler* (2020) and *God Is Change: Religious Practices and Ideologies in the Works of Octavia Butler* (2021), I was interested both in how they would engage with earlier research on Butler and in what new insights they could provide in this burgeoning, multidisciplinary research field.

The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler (Handbook) is a handsome, expensive hardback volume. Unfortunately, it partly literalizes the adage that one should not judge a book by its cover. Reading through it made me wonder if I had totally misunderstood what was meant by the word “handbook.” However, when checking the publisher’s website, I discovered that my expectations had been well-founded:

Bloomsbury Handbooks is a series of single-volume reference works which map the parameters of a discipline or sub-discipline and present the ‘state-of-the-art’ in terms of research. Each Handbook offers a systematic and structured range of specially commissioned essays reflecting on the history, methodologies, research methods, current debates and future of a particular field of research. Bloomsbury Handbooks provide researchers and graduate students with both cutting-edge perspectives on perennial questions and authoritative overviews of the history of research. (“Bloomsbury Handbooks”)

What is most glaringly missing, despite being promised on the cover of the book, is “a comprehensive bibliography of works by Butler and secondary scholarship on her work ...,” that is, an update of Calvin’s 2008 bibliography. There is not even a joint list of references for the individual contributions at the end of the book, and the dearth of focus on “critical reception” and “criticism and scholarship” is underlined in the index through the scarcity of page references for these entries under “Butler, Octavia E.” In this respect, Gerry Canavan’s biocritical *Octavia E. Butler* (2016) – drawing on his archival research on Butler’s personal papers, which have been available at the Huntington Library since 2013 – has more to offer the researcher or student as it includes a chronology of Butler’s life and achievements as a writer (xvii–xviii), and a fairly extensive bibliography of secondary sources (209–217).

Neither does the introduction to the *Handbook* offer an “authoritative overview of the history of research” on Butler’s works. As indicated above, this research field was wide-ranging already in 2008, and Ritch’s 30-page bibliography was published in an Octavia Butler Special Issue of *Utopian Studies* edited by Claire Curtis, which was also published by *Science Fiction Studies* the same year. This special issue is not mentioned in the first paragraph of the introduction, which appears to be accounting for previously published books and special issues entirely devoted to Butler and her works, but also fails to mention Florian Bast’s monograph *Of Bodies, Communities, and Voices: Agency in Writings by Octavia Butler* (2015), as well as *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (2013), edited by Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl. Besides these, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Octavia E. Butler* (2019), edited by Tarshia L. Stanley, focuses on how Butler’s works are taught across a number of different disciplines in the USA. So, when the next paragraph of the introduction goes on to claim the *Handbook* – at times erroneously referred to as the *Companion* (one of a number of editing or proofreading flaws) – to be “surveying past and current scholarship on Butler” as well as “point[ing] forward to new directions and new agendas in Butler scholarship on both domestic and international levels” (1–2), I am already unconvinced of it accomplishing all that.

The introduction goes on to present the Patternist series, the Xenogenesis trilogy, and the Parable series in one paragraph each, before clumping together *Kindred* and *Fledgling* in two sentences; the second of these assures the reader that “[t]hey are, however, well-written narratives that broach the issues of slavery, race, sex, gender, and identity in very similar ways to the novels that belong to the *Patternist* series and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy” (3). This treatment shows a remarkably arrogant or ignorant view of the place of *Kindred*, in particular, in Butler scholarship and teaching. As Sandra Y. Govan, who is and has been an important Butler critic from the 1980s and onwards, points out in her excellent “Foreword” to the *Handbook*, Butler informed her that *Kindred* “has never been out of print” (xv), which as indicated above is no mean feat for a speculative fiction novel published in the 1970s.

The rest of the introduction is a chapter outline of the 14 chapters or essays divided into the three parts named after Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy: “Dawn,” “Adulthood Rites,” and “Imago.” The thought behind the division of essays into these three sections is not, I think, that well explained; however, when I go through the chapters there seems to be some rough chronology, although not absolute, based on the publication years of Butler’s works. “Dawn” includes speculative-fiction writer Steven Barnes’s brief reminiscences and reflections on Butler and what she feared most about human nature; an essay employing Patternist philosophy and neuroscience to read the Patternist series

(1976–1984); one reprinted article on disability and race in “The Morning and the Evening and the Night” (1987); and an essay discussing consent in the posthuman era by looking at “Bloodchild” (1984) and “Amnesty” (2003). “Adulthood Rites” includes four essays that to varying degrees focus on the Xenogenesis trilogy (1987–1989) in terms of the motif of the vampire, posthumanism, and colonialism, respectively. In my estimation, these four are among the least interesting contributions to the volume, and the fourth, which deals with “Bloodchild” and *Survivor* (1978) as well as *Dawn*, entirely neglects to engage with previous criticism on Butler’s works. “Imago” begins and ends with essays that focus on visual elements, in the first case different covers of *Kindred* and in the second Damian Duffy and John Jennings’s 2017 graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred*. In contrast to what the introduction says (yet another a sign of flawed editing), the essay discussing the covers of *Kindred*, which is in part based on archival research and may be the best contribution to the entire *Handbook*, is followed by two essays on the Parable novels (1993, 1998), including comments on the planned third novel, “Parable of the Trickster.” The first of these essays discusses apocalypse, Afrofuturism, and theories of “the Living” beyond human rights by using a cultural analysis approach and performing an intertextual reading of the two Parable novels. The second, which draws on the Octavia E. Butler archive at the Huntington Library, focuses on trauma, technology, and the trickster in the unfinished Parable trilogy. Chapter twelve links “Bloodchild” to pregnant man stories (mpreg)

in fan fiction and explores the theme of reproductive anxiety as it is made visible through a male body. By using the concept of the taboo, the next chapter deals with how particularly *Dawn*, “Bloodchild,” and *Fledgling* (2005) can provoke discomfort in readers, and argues for foregrounding this reaction when teaching in order to encourage students to talk about it. Although the quality of the contributions are uneven, the *Handbook* thus includes discussions on all of Butler’s novels and some of her short stories, as well as, more or less rewardingly, covering a wide variety of themes and approaches. It is further framed or perhaps rather grounded by the “Foreword” by Govan and a fine “Afterword” by speculative fiction writer Tananarive Due.

Honing in on one particular aspect of Butler’s works, *God Is Change* is obviously more thematically coherent than the *Handbook*, but it still offers a wealth of different approaches to and perspectives on, primarily, the Xenogenesis trilogy and the Parable novels, and, to a lesser extent, a few of Butler’s short stories and *Wild Seed*. The title of the volume, *God Is Change*, is taken from one of the verses in the *Books of the Living* that the young protagonist and narrator of *Parable of the Sower* writes to express a new religion that she “discovers” and calls Earthseed. *God Is Change* contains 16 chapters divided into three parts: “Spiritualities and Religious Constructs,” “Trauma and Healing,” and “Black Liberation and Notions of Freedom.” Most of the chapters include cross-references to other chapters in *God Is Change*, which contributes to the coherence

of the volume, and most of them also engage with previous Butler scholarship.

God Is Change has a very good introduction with an opening that really captures the reader's attention by placing Butler's Parable novels both in the political landscape of the 1990s and in that of Trump's administration. The introduction moreover conscientiously and helpfully does the work that the *Handbook* fails to do of relating the present volume to earlier Butler research, in general, and, in particular, to scholarship on religion in and in conjunction with Butler's works. The editors claim that "critical work on her corpus has proliferated" since her death in 2006, which in one sense is accurate, although the proliferation, as I have shown, started at least ten years before her death. They then bring up a number of aspects, themes, and perspectives that Butler scholars have focused on and employed: "the dystopian and utopian dimensions," "the liberatory potential of her generic innovations along dimensions of race, gender, politics, science, and culture," "the transgressive power of erotics," and, quoting Chuck Robinson, "critical race theory, Afrofuturism, black feminism, queer theory, and ... disability studies" (3). They also highlight the importance of research drawing on the Octavia E. Butler archive at the Huntington Library. This overview, the editors admit, "represents the proverbial tip of the iceberg both in breadth and volume" (4). They then go on to sum up previous Butler scholarship on religion and position *God Is Change* in relation to it, before introducing the three parts of the volume as well as the chapters within each part.

"Spiritualities and Religious Constructs" include chapters that cover much religious ground. From editor Aparajita Nanda's discussion of Hindu evocations in *Lilith's Brood* onwards, I consider this part to be the strongest in a volume that in general contains much of interest and of high quality academic writing. Here the titles of the chapters may give some indication of the richness of this part: Christopher Kocela's "God Is Change, Impermanence Is Buddha Nature: Syncretism in Butler's Earthseed and Dogen's Zen"; Charlotte Naylor Davis's "Butler's Invention of Scripture in Light of Hebrew Literature," where Davis compares the Parable novels' *Books of the Living* to Biblical wisdom literature; Mary M. Grover's "Regarding the Other in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis: Toward a Posthumanist Ethics," in which Grover complements Levinas with Seyla Benhabib to discuss Butler's posthumanist sense of ethics; and Chuck Robinson's delightful "*Parable of the Talents* as Genre Criticism and the Holy Spirit of Speculative Fiction."

In the "Trauma and Healing" part, Kegan Osinski's chapter " 'Only Actions': Ritual and the Embodied Processing of Trauma in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*" manages to breathe new life into using trauma theory for reading fiction. Another chapter of particular interest in this part is "'We Trade the Essence of Ourselves': West African Spirituality in Xenogenesis's Oankali," in which Ebony Gibson comes out as pro-Oankali, and examines Butler's use of Yoruba culture by drawing on her own experiences of Ifa spiritual practices. Embodiment

is central in this part and also some of the chapters in the last part: "Black Liberation and Notions of Freedom." Here we find, for example, Brianna Thompson's "Erotic Pedagogy in *Parable of the Talents*: Freedom and Community through Touch." The last two chapters focus on Butler's works in the context of the US today and reconnect with the beginning of the introduction. Michael Brandon McCormack's "The Violence of Making America Great Again: Religion, Power, and Vulnerable Bodies in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*" begins by discussing the interest in Butler's Parable novels as prophecy in popular online media during the campaign for and after the election of Trump, and ends by gesturing towards the writings of womanists and social justice activists who pick up on the possibilities for surviving and thriving in Butler's works. Editor Shelby L. Crosby's "Creating New Worlds: Earthseed as a Tool for Black Liberation" (a title which Crosby seems to have changed late in the editing process, since the chapter is referred to as "Practicing the Future Together: ..." both in the introduction and by McCormack [8, 218]) highlights Butler's impact on social justice activists and how Earthseed has generated social activist communities outside the literary world such as the Wild Seed Community Farm and Healing Village in upstate New York.

So, while *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Octavia E. Butler*, despite some valuable contributions, does not live up to expectations (nor to being a handbook according to the publisher's description), *God Is Change: Religious Practices and Ideologies in the Works of*

Octavia Butler delivers more than expected. I wholeheartedly recommend *God Is Change* to anybody who is interested in Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy and Parable novels.

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