

Mother of Invention

The Life and Work of Octavia E. Butler

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Topic: Octavia Butler & Afrofuturism

“Mais personne n’a te demande d’être hereux. Travaille!” Collette

Octavia Butler invented her fiction out of the necessities of her life as a black woman in America in the last half of the 20th century. Her social location as the child of a maid and a shoe-shiner presented her with every kind of challenge to a would-be writer and social critic. Economic survival, accessing her talent and learning her craft, getting published, finding her audience, sustaining her productivity, all were hurdles to overcome at a cost -- of sleep and nutrition early on; of physical and emotional stamina later on, of deep relational connections, and of personal confidence always. The daunting self-encouragement of her journals and notes reflects her awareness of the uniqueness and precariousness of her achievements; the ceaseless, isolated effort to just keep existing as that iconic figure -- the first black woman science fiction writer.

Butler grew up, lived, and wrote in the relentless racial inflection of American culture. Her mother, Octavia Margaret Guy Butler, lost four infant boys to miscarriage or stillbirth before daughter Octavia was born and survived in 1947. Other than reflecting that her life, and possibly her personality, would have been very different had any of her brothers lived, Butler never speculated on the cause of these deaths -- congenital reproductive abnormalities in her mother? inferior pre-natal care? -- nor did she assess their impact on her parents' relationship, or on her mother's enduring emotional outlook. Her father, Laurice, died early in her life, and all her memories seem to have been of her mother as a single parent.

The elder Octavia undertook with single-minded determination to give her daughter a destiny different from her own. Enduring a daily stream of humiliation and micro-aggression, she worked as a maid in the Pasadena area, sometimes living in with her employers, sometimes bringing her child with her to work when other options were not available. At a young age, Butler noticed both her mother's endless and unhonored labor, and the lifestyles of those she served. Quick-growing and physically awkward, painfully shy and acutely observant, young Octavia learned to find safety in the background. Reading came with difficulty for her, struggling with an undiagnosed form of dyslexia, but with a hunger for stories that drove her to consume whatever books she could get her hands on -- from the household shelves of her mother's employers or from the library after she got her own card at the age of six; discards that her mother would bring home, or comic books bought for a dime. Yet those narratives were more likely to feature the wealthy society of Regency London than anything about her own world or lived experience. She found that a story need not appear real or probable in order to be engaging.

Reading with difficulty, an only child with little peer-level social skill, obtrusively tall but uncoordinated, unathletic, and introverted, Butler did not thrive in school. She was continually

teased and bullied by classmates, and often considered lazy or stupid by teachers. Not until her high school years did she herself begin to recognize her own intelligence, and find ways of communicating in an academic context. But despite these doubts, Butler was fascinated by science, and mesmerized by the space race. She was ten years old when Sputnik launched, and entering Cal State with her Associates degree at 22 when Neil Armstrong stepped on to the moon. She would later suggest that accomplishing that goal may have left Americans complacent about continuing scientific progress thereafter, but the urgency of that project informed her entire adolescence.

Butler accounted for her choice of science fiction as a genre by recalling that her appetite for stories was fed by television as well as books. Her mother's Baptist convictions put movie theaters out of bounds, but movies on TV were not forbidden. Having discovered in early childhood that she could tell herself her own stories, as she entered pre-adolescence she became excited about the possibility of writing them down, and began a project of wheedling her mother to buy a portable Remington typewriter. By the age of ten she had succeeded, and was pecking out with two fingers stories about horses. She found these animals intriguing, although she had, in fact, no personal experience of them beyond observing the abuses of a carnival pony ride.

Her literary ambitions changed one afternoon, sometime between her tenth and twelfth year, depending on which report you read, when she watched with growing indignation an uninspired sci-fi movie entitled "Devil Girl from Mars." It features a black spandex clad female alien who arrives at a remote Scottish inn for the purpose of kidnapping human men to breed with on Mars. Give or take the allure of black spandex, Butler immediately felt that she could write a more engaging version of such a story. Movie critics of the time were not disposed to disagree with her. Within hours, as she tells it, she had written her first science fiction short story, about a young girl taken on a tour of the galaxy by aliens, and soon was sending that and other works to potential publishers. Though quite unsuccessful in terms of publication, she would continue these efforts throughout her high school years. The idea of being a professional writer having taken hold in Butler, she never aspired to anything else, and although she felt discouragement at times, she never wavered from this basic determination.

Meanwhile, she was reading all the science fiction literature she could find, a genre dominated almost entirely by white men. There were more women – published as women – in the field as Butler developed her career than there were sci-fi authors of color. Samuel Delany seems to be her one contemporary; at five years older than Butler, based in New York and married to a white assistant editor at Ace Books, he made his way into print in 1962, at a time when Butler was reading all the contemporary science fiction available, including his. Also notable is the black woman author Virginia Hamilton, who wrote young adult fiction often focused on cultural traditions and folk superstitions/magic. Hamilton was the first writer of color to win the Newbery Medal for children's literature, in 1974. There is now an identified timeline of a thin stream of speculative fiction by both black American and African writers going back well more than a century (see the Google article on Black Science Fiction) but it is doubtful whether Butler knew anything of these historical forerunners, at least during her early years of writing. She maintained throughout her career an enduring conviction that to be a good writer one must both write and

read constantly; there was no substitute for either practice if one wished to grow in skill over time. The extraordinary archive of material she bequeathed to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, consisting of tens of thousands of unpublished manuscript pages, demonstrates that she adhered to this discipline for the rest of her life.

Butler's mother had succeeded in keeping a dependable roof over her daughter's head, and food in her mouth; she had acquired the coveted typewriter, and she spent precious rent money at one point to induce an editor to read some of Octavia's work, to no helpful end. Her investment had set the stage for the young high school graduate to get a job, and pursue further education on her own. Working at laborious, mind-numbing jobs during the day (similar to what she describes of the character Dana in *Kindred*), taking classes at night, and rising in the early hours of the morning to write, Butler pursued her dream with little reinforcement while attaining her AA degree focused in history from Pasadena City College. She recalled a \$15 prize for winning a short story contest there as the first money she ever made by writing. Yet during this time she was starting to incubate the story lines of several novels to come, and constructing a conscious link between the alien encounters of science fiction and the racial tensions of her own world. Students gathered from across the campus to mourn and deplore the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. just a few weeks before her graduation in 1968.

Though her mother thought she would be better advised to get a steady, and easier, job as a secretary, Butler was still not satisfied that she had the tools to tell the stories that were percolating in her imagination. She enrolled at Cal State LA, but was drawn to the Open Door Program of the Screen Writers Guild of America West, where she encountered the established science fiction author Harlan Ellison. Impressed by her talent and potential, as well as her determination, Ellison arranged for Butler to attend the third annual gathering of the Clarion Writers Workshop at Clarion College in Pennsylvania. He did not actually fund this adventure; Butler had to borrow money from her aunts in order to pay for it. This program is an intensive multi-week summer seminar focused on fundamentals particular to the writing of science fiction and fantasy short stories, and functions as a proving and training ground for aspiring writers. Here Butler felt she received the first really useful feedback on her writing for publication, and by the time she left, had sold two stories. She was to become a lifelong supporter of the Clarion project, many times providing support for aspiring writers of color to attend, and teaching both there and at Clarion West in Seattle later in her career. Only one of her stories actually reached publication, but the money, little as it was, and the encouragement bolstered her commitment to the craft of writing, and to the stories she still wanted to tell.

There followed four more years of unrelenting and unrewarding effort. In 1974 Butler overcame her reluctance to attempt a full length book, and the first of her novels, *Patternmaster*, was completed rather quickly, based on one of the story lines she had been mulling since her teens. In 1976 Doubleday accepted the book and sent her an advance of \$1500. She bought a Greyhound bus pass and spent a month's vacation traveling, visiting New York and Seattle, among other places. That visit aroused in Butler an enduring desire to move to Seattle, an ambition which would not be realized for 23 years, until after her mother's death in Pasadena in 1996. Although regarded by some critics as not up to the standard of her subsequent work,

Patternmaster was sufficiently well received that she was able to bring to press a swift succession of sequels in what became the Patternist series, including *Mind of My Mind* in 1977, *Survivor* in 1978, and *Wild Seed* in 1980, all with Doubleday. The success of this series enabled Butler to stop doing other work in order to stay afloat financially, and allowed her to focus entirely on writing. In between *Survivor* and *Wild Seed*, she shifted gears to write a history-based time-travel story about slavery, published by Doubleday as commercial fiction, rather than science fiction. *Kindred* established her reputation as a respected woman author of color who was more than a sci-fi niche writer. It too was the product of a long simmering urge to portray the complex heroism of choosing to survive in a situation of oppression and violence, where happy outcomes are unavailable and complicity is inevitable.

With greater confidence in her skill and her marketability, Butler agreed to work with Martin Greenberg to edit an anthology of sci-fi stories by authors of color, to be titled *Black Futures*. She poured much energy into this project during the early 80s, exerting her public credibility and her personal urging to try to persuade noted black writers to participate. Her own agent and Doubleday were uninterested in the idea, and in 1982 she abandoned it, noting with frustration that Delany, with his publishing connections and male influence, might have been able to make it work, but she could not. That same year, she scraped together the money to join Roger Zelazny and several other sci-fi writers on a tour of Finland and the Soviet Union, presumably to see firsthand the operations of socialism and communism as alternative cultural possibilities. She was also working at this time on a new novel, called *Blindsight* in most versions, that might or might not be set in the Patternist universe, but she could never work out the storyline in a way that satisfied her. The fruitlessness of these two endeavors made her more than usually unhappy and upset with herself, as well as bringing her again into a precarious financial situation.

Returning to the universe that her readers had already embraced, and feeling that she had not been well treated at Doubleday, Butler published her final volume in the Patternist series, *Clay's Ark*, with St. Martin's Press in 1984. That same year, she received the sci-fi fan based Hugo award for her short story "Speech Sounds." The following year she received another Hugo, as well as the Nebula and Locus awards, for the novella "Blood Child." Now assured not only of a fan base, but critical acclaim as well, she embarked on a new trilogy, the Exogenesis series, later known as Lilith's Brood, publishing *Dawn* in 1987, *Adulthood Rites* in 1988, and *Imago* in 1989, all with Warner. This sequence seems more intentional and tightly integrated than the Patternist books, and represents her most mature science fiction; her subsequent work is futuristic or fantasy, but without space aliens or scientific plot devices. Butler was tired of the series before it was completed; she did not enjoy writing *Imago*, and some critics find that, unlike the Patternist books, the last of this trilogy is the weakest. The author agreed, perhaps because the premise of the story called for her to deconstruct the virtue of the 'superior' civilization she had invited readers to postulate in the first two volumes.

The success of the Exogenesis trilogy was followed by another period of creative confusion and frustration for Butler. She was intrigued by the idea of a series about different space colonies that had left earth at the same time as part of an interstellar project, and the diverse ways in which the human condition would manifest itself in the various environmental situations they

encountered. Then she got captured by the back story of these ‘earthseeds,’ and began to explore the character who would become Lauren Oya Olamina, as well as the role of religion as a tool for the cohesion of human community. Butler also used this heroine to elucidate the problem of empathy – what would it do to a society if its members experienced one another’s pain? Unable to grapple effectively with the hall-of-mirrors effect that this created for her (one example of which can be seen in *Parable of the Talents*, when Lauren’s delusion of empathy means that she must abide the perception of her rapists’ pleasure in the same subjectivity as her own trauma), Butler decided to focus the effects of empathy on a handful of characters. And although she cleverly invites the reader to ignore this, in all her commentary Butler is insistent to point out that in the story’s reality, Olamina’s empathy is both delusional and dysfunctional. So much for that solution to the human condition.

Having transposed Olamina to be young, female, and desperate enough to engage her own and the reader’s sympathy, Butler published *The Parable of the Sower* in 1993, and began work on what would now be the second chapter of the backstory for the series of Earthseed adventures she was still contemplating. Before *The Parable of the Talents* appeared in 1998, however, her life would change in several significant ways. On June 10 she notes cryptically in her journal, “Got a call yesterday.” That call would have been from a representative of the MacArthur Foundation, notifying her that she had been awarded a so-called “genius grant”; a no-strings-attached \$295,000, to be paid over the next five years. Butler remains the only science fiction writer to be so recognized. She was both astonished and guarded about this change in her circumstances; it enabled her to realize the ambition of buying her own house, there to make easy the final 18 months of her mother’s life. Octavia senior died on November 18 of 1996, freeing her daughter from the obligations of care that had held her in Pasadena for a quarter of a century. As she grieved the loss of the person who had been closest to her in the world, Butler created a powerful story of estrangement between Olamina and her daughter, later describing the book as “my mother’s last gift to me.” It won her the Nebula award, and with that project finished, she packed up her 300 boxes of books, and at last made her move to Seattle.

Octavia Butler was an intensely private person, but a responsible biographer must offer some clarity about her personal life. It is often reflexively claimed that she was a lesbian, as if she ought to represent all possible 20th century outsider labels, but this assertion has no documented basis. During college she visited the Gay and Lesbian student organization on campus twice to investigate this possibility, and ended up concluding, in her own public report, “Nope; that’s not me. I’m just a hermit.” She never married, and lived alone or with her mother throughout her life. At one point in her journals she appears to muse about what it might be like to adopt a child, but in this medium she moves so porously from practical realities to fantasy, from her actual life to the minds of other people or fictional characters, that this thought experiment cannot be said to rise to the level of her own intention, nor does it recur. On the basis of unpublished story material found in her papers, considerably toned down and in some cases unpleasant enough in the published versions, I am tempted to speculate about some kind of sexual trauma in her early life, but it would be purely that, speculation. What she wanted her readers to know about her, she told us herself. The rest was none of our business.

Butler had never learned to drive, or owned a car, and she was not interested in starting at the age of 52. She chose her Seattle neighborhood from an inner ring suburb for its walkability, and one of few ways to get to know her was to offer her rides home from errands. She used public transportation not only to get where she was going, but also to do what she called research by people-watching, and even conversational interviews. Her ambition had been that with the two pre-quals out of the way, and her move to a new city complete (she considered this fodder for understanding the experience of arriving in an alien environment), she could finally focus on the original intent of the Earthseed series. She produced scores of alternative openings, plot outlines, and character sketches for the projected *Parable of the Trickster*, but nothing jelled. The election of George W. Bush appalled her, and the attacks of 9/11 strengthened her worst fears about the human race. She was taking medication for her blood pressure, and it made her feel foggy, tired, and unable to write with any interest or pleasure. By her third year in Seattle, she had managed two short stories, "Amnesty" and "Book of Martha," and was concluding that since *Trickster* wasn't happening, she might as well allow herself to explore another project that was at least interesting her, a new take on a vampire story.

Omnibus and anniversary editions of her previous work began to appear, including a re-issue of *Kindred* by Beacon Press in February of 2004, and Butler was often asked to speak or tour on behalf of these new editions, which also took energy away from her current writing. Yet the story of the black amnesiac vampire Shori, who must discover along with the reader who and what she is, was completed and published in 2005. Butler felt she had not realized this premise as effectively as she might have had she been physically well, and she was filling her journals with ideas for possible sequels to *Fledgling*, as well as hopes of feeling better soon, in the winter of 2006. On February 24 she left the house, and apparently suffered a stroke, which caused her to fall on a stone path and hit her head. It is not clear which of these events was fatal, but she was gone, at the age of 58, leaving her fans awaiting more Parables, more Patterns, more Shori; more prophetic dystopian insistence that the future, whatever its challenges, will certainly not be the exclusive domain of white men, and perhaps not even of the human as we now understand it.

Octavia Butler seldom encountered a contradiction of human impulses that did not captivate her, or make its way into her writing. From her life and from her work, three paradoxical imperatives emerge that seem to overarch our individual and collective lives:

Suffer, but survive

Persist, but change

Despair, but bear fruit

I look forward to our exploring these ideas together.

Timeline for Octavia Butler

- 1947 born June 22 in Pasadena, Ca
- 1951 father dies February 15 (?)
- 1954 [Brown v. Board of Education](#)
- 1956 watches “Devil Girl from Mars” on TV (?)
- 1957 gets mother to buy her Remington typewriter (?);
[Sputnik launch](#)
- 1958 writes “Flash—Silver Star”;
[Marion Zimmer Bradley’s first novel, *The Planet Savers*, published](#)
- 1960 sends manuscripts to publishers
- 1962 [Samuel Delany’s first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor*, published](#)
- 1965 Graduates from John Muir High School in Pasadena
- 1966 [Ursula LeGuin’s first novel, *Rocannon’s World*, published](#)
- 1967 [Anne McCaffrey’s first novel, *Restoree*, published](#)
- 1968 AA degree from Pasadena City College;
[assassination of MLK](#)
- 1969 Enrolls at Cal State - L.A.; Screen Writers Open Door Program;
[American moon landing](#)
- 1970 Clarion workshop; 2 stories sold
- 1971 Story “Crossover” published
- 1974 [Virginia Hamilton wins Newbery Medal for *M. C. Higgins, the Great*, first black winner](#)
- 1976 *Patternmaster* published by Doubleday; visits Seattle; [Carter election](#)
- 1977 *Mind of my Mind* published by Doubleday
- 1978 *Survivor* published by Doubleday
- 1979 *Kindred* published by Doubleday
- 1980 *Wild Seed* published by Doubleday; [Reagan election](#)
- 1981 editor for *Black Futures* anthology, never published
- 1982 abandons *Black Futures*, visits Soviet Union and Finland with other sci-fi writers
- 1984 *Clay’s Ark* published by St. Martin’s; “Speech Sounds” published; Hugo Award
- 1985 *Bloodchild* published; Hugo, Nebula, Locus awards; begins teaching at Clarion conferences
[Virginia Hamilton’s African fantasy tales, *The People Could Fly*, published](#)
- 1987 *Dawn* published by Warner
- 1988 *Adulthood Rites* published by Warner; [Bush 1 election](#)
- 1989 *Imago* published by Warner
- 1992 [Clinton election](#)
- 1993 *Parable of the Sower* published by Four Walls, Eight Windows
- 1995 *Bloodchild and Other Stories* published by Four Walls, Eight Windows;
MacArthur Fellowship Genius grant
- 1996 Mother dies November 18
- 1998 *Parable of the Talents* published by Seven Stories Press
- 1999 Moves to Seattle
- 2000 Nebula Award for *Parable of the Talents*; [Bush 2 election](#)
- 2001 [9/11 attacks](#)
- 2003 “Amnesty” and “Book of Martha” published
- 2005 *Fledgling* published by Seven Stories Press
- 2006 Dies February 24 in Seattle

