

Octavia Butler Strategic Reader

collected from the Octavia Butler Symposium, Allied Media Conference 2010
and

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Table of Contents:

- Intro
- What is Emergent Strategy
- Octavia's Work as a Whole
 - Identity
 - Transformation
 - Apocalypse
 - Impact
- Specific Series/Stories
 - Patternist (*Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clay's Ark, Patternmaster*)
 - Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis (*Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago*)
 - Parables (*Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents*)
 - Other Stories
- Other Relevant Work Mentioned (music, writers, etc)

Intro

This reader emerged out of the Octavia Butler Symposium at the Allied Media Conference in 2010. The symposium happened in 3 parts - a) an initial presentation by host/editor Adrienne Maree Brown, b) a fishbowl conversation where everyone in the group participated in addressing meta-questions about Octavia's work, and c) several small group conversations on particular series.

Groups have since started reading circles, strategic circles and other gatherings around Octavia's work in their local cities/regions.

This is by no means a comprehensive or complete reader - there are books (Kindred, Fledgling, Survivor) that are barely touched on. We hope that this can be a growing reader which both helps people see Octavia's work in a new light and serves as a collecting point for thinking about her work.

What follows are strategic questions to consider about Octavia's work as a whole, and then about specific series/stories. We invite feedback and additions.

"We are all vibrations. The moment we share here is a preparation for the next moment. Octavia leaves her writing in order to prepare us for the next meeting."

"Being able to create and imagine bigger is a process of decolonization of our dreams. Our dreams have gotten smaller and smaller, but as we engage sci-fi in reading and in dreams, our imaginations can grow and decolonize."

On Octavia's work as a whole:

- Is Octavia's work Science Fiction, in your opinion? Why or why not?
- How does Octavia Butler's work sit in the field of science fiction?
- Was Octavia a prophet or a futurist? Did she see something unimaginable, or just conclude the next logical phase of our current behavior?

On Identity in Octavia Butler's work:

- Is it useful to decontextualize the experiences of people of color by writing them in different times, settings?
- Why is important that Octavia's protagonists are strong black women leaders?
- How does Octavia relate to disability? Does it become a strength – and what does it mean for folks who can't farm 8 hours a day?
- Many of Octavia's stories feature two characters with a generational gap meeting each other, being repelled by each other, but working out a way to relate to each other. Can you imagine settings in your own work/life where that occurs or could occur?
- How do people experience their class identity in Octavia's work?
- What does Octavia's work say about rape, incest - nonconsensual acts?
- "Most of Octavia's books have a capitalist mistake that provides an opening for her protagonist"...can you point these out?

On Transformation:

- Where do you see characters transforming in Octavia's work? [Transformation which is not a slight improvement on what you are, but becoming something completely new. In science it means a cellular change.]
- What creates the setting for transformation in Octavia's work?
- Do Octavia's stories ever feel like they end?
- Are Octavia's characters superheroes - can you imagine yourself in their shoes?
- Are we in the midst of a spiritual awakening?
- How does the Earthseed religion compare to current active religions?
- What would be different in our world if we practiced Earthseed?

On Apocalypse:

- Based on Octavia's writing, particularly the Parables, how far do you think the apocalypse is into the future?
- Does Octavia see apocalypse as inevitable?

- Which of Octavia's characters do you most identify with? (or...What will YOU do during the apocalypse?)
- In terms of apocalypse and prophecy, today's obsession is the 2012 phenomenon (we've already lived through the end of the last century). What does Octavia's work yield to these apocalyptic obsessions, where the end comes from destiny or an external force?

Impact:

- How does Octavia's work make you feel? Are these hopeful stories, or hopeless? Do they uplift you or scare you?
- How do Octavia's books make you reconsider your world, your work?
- After reading Octavia's work, how do you think Octavia would answer the question, "Do humans need to be here?"

Specific series/stories:

Patternist Series

(Wild Seed, Mind of My Mind, Clay's Ark, Patternmaster)

Relating Patternist to our own world:

- Are you currently suppressing or hiding a skill/ability because it would make you stand out from others?
- How do we learn to apply our skills/abilities in positive ways?
- What does interdependence mean to you?
- What do the actual lines of decentralized leadership look like in your work/world?
- Are you willing to be transformed in the service of your political work?

Themes to Discuss:

- Networks and decentralized structures
- The power of collectives and collective action
- Power dynamics across different abilities
- Interdependence

Additional Questions:

- What can we learn about decentralized networks through this series?
- What's missing from this series?
- Who do you identify with in this series?
- For Doro and his children, death is not really seen as a consequence for their actions - how does immortality or longevity relate to morality?
- What is the relationship between immortality and privilege? (Longevity as privilege at the expense of other peoples' lives)
- The role of the patternmaster is presented as both a problem, a point of resistance, and a safety. What does it mean that there is a patternmaster (leader, center)?
- The female leader/patternmaster was able to kill the male immortal through the power of the network – she was both a conduit for

their power, and controlled by them (the network) – what does this teach us about the patterns of decentralized leadership?

- What does this series suggest about how do we go about accounting for the disabled (i.e. people born with the alien (Clayark) disease, people that are disturbed by that/them). Can we affirm bodily differences in the world that we create?
- What does this series suggest about the ideas of a scarcity mind-set vs an abundance mind-set? How does this play out in behavior patterns?
- How do we do the emotional work to help each other after the trauma? “Is there more than just getting through the day?”
- In Wildseed specifically there’s a reliance on a gender-based binary set-up. How does this impact the story? Are there moments of gender subversion?
- There are serious patterns of people grouping together around ‘differences’ – is there a way to group in this way w/o one or the other eventually rising above in privilege?
- Does a “middle class” exist in this series?
- This series can be read as a new Adam and Eve narrative, with Africa as an Eden. What is similar and different about this from other creation myths?
- How does this series relate to Darwinism with its presentation of the struggles between human vs. superhuman vs. subhuman?

Lilith's Brood/Xenogenesis **(*Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago*):**

Relating Xenogenesis to our own world:

- What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be alien?
- How do we frame the other? How do we define the other/alien/immigrant?
- How do generations surpass each other? How can we see more possibilities than those that come before us?
- What is the place of pleasure in our work?
- How can we raise our children recognizing they are totally separate/different/other beings?

Themes to discuss:

- What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be alien?
- Gender identities, love and attraction within and beyond gender binary.

- Singularity (“the hypothetical future emergence of greater than human intelligence”) as an organic occurrence, rather than mechanical.

Additional Questions:

- What would you do if you were Lilith?
- How do we deal with our complicated reactions to difference? (looking at Lilith’s first experiences with Oankali)
- Is the pleasure Lilith succumbed to a tool for domination?
- Explore cancer as a metaphor. In Lilith's Brood, it's the way the Oankali can survive. (How can we take what we see as inherently destructive and make it healing and liberatory?)
- Lilith's Brood offers an organic (alien) alternative to a mechanized future. How does this relate to the concept of singularity? Is the form of the technology the difference, or something else?
- What does this series teach us about organic evolutionary potential?
- What are the connections between Lilith and the Lilith in the bible? Within traditional Jewish beliefs?
- How do the Oankali explore gender in ways that are helpful/transformational to us? Related to how we see it? Limited?

Parables (*Parable of the Sower, Parable of the Talents*):

Relating Parables to our own world:

- Does this series make you feel more prepared for the future? [Is it a dry run, a role play?]
- When we have overwhelming feelings, how do we strategically deal with them in our work?
- What are our rituals?
- How do women assert our strength in our own form, as opposed to transitioning to someone else?
- How do people assert strength in their true form, without being oppressive?
- How do we (Can we) develop technology for social change in a hostile environment or co-opt technologies that have been used for say military defense?
- As our work requires an immense amount of empathy, how do you distance yourself in your work and be in it at the same time? Carrying and balancing empathy?
- How do we really find ways to heal intergenerational tensions within our movements ?
- From perspective of having power, how does one learn the difference between sympathy and empathy?

- In the Parable of the Talents, the story doesn't end when Acorn is taken over. What can this suggest for planning you can do to move towards liberation when much of what happens is out of our control?

Themes to discuss:

- Empathy in relation to power structure
- Role of faith and religion as an organizing tool
- The collective super-power of change
- Agriculture, seeds, as related to food and freedom, and control
- Disability as strength, as community, as weakness, as vulnerability
- Gender and body identity

Additional Questions:

- Octavia's characters seem to get put in more and more difficult situations - what can this teach us about resilience?
- Is this a science fiction series? Readers pointed out that many of the things in these books - people cooking babies over a spit - ARE happening now. How does naming this work science fiction impact our ability to apply the lessons to our own world?
- How does placing this work in the future allow us to explore issues that people not read if it were an essay or non-fiction book about current conditions?
- How are these books closer to reality than fiction?
- What does it mean to feel empathy in this series?
- What is the relationship between healing, empathy, creativity, movement in this series?
- Gender in the Parables: Lauren takes on a more male appearance for safety in the beginning of this series. Later, there is a gendered expression of feelings and responses in these books, particularly in how women are treated when they express their feelings vs. how men are treated when they express their feelings. How is this relevant for today's work?
- Octavia proposes that the pain people inflict on others is hurting them too...what would it look like to organize a world on that belief?
- What does Octavia seem to believe her characters learn from trauma and how does that trauma help them approach their work, guides and motivates their work? In your own experience, can wisdom and strength come from pain and trauma?
- In our reality, how can we respect and hold the wisdom that comes from pain/trauma, while healing from it? How can we respect the wisdom, while working to stop the trauma from happening to other people?
- How is pain healed, or not healed, in this series? [Do people take time to heal? Tree planting funeral ceremony, etc]

- How does distance from feelings help in the Parables? How does it cause problems? Can you conclude that Octavia felt logistics and emotions could be separated?
- One major source of pain for Lauren is her stolen daughter, Larkin. How does she use that pain as a driving force?
- Even if we have different values, how can we still relate to each other without disrespect? (*based on Lauren and Marcos' relationship, Marcos keeping Lauren's daughter away from her, brainwashing her to keep away from Acorn*)
- What can Larkin (Lauren's daughter) offer us?
 - What kind of commentary is she offering through her resistance to Earthseed?
 - How does she process her mother's obsession with 'the cause' at the expense of family? (Often times we have outsider status within our own families because of our political work, where we are so often organizing other people's family members and not our own.)
- Related to Lauren's hyperempathy: We have to deal with so much oppression that numbing ourselves can become a form of survival. How do you envision we could create spaces where people can strongly empathize what other's feelings in that setting?
- What role does faith play in this narrative?
- In Parable of the Talents one of the major conflicts arises when a character exposes a lesbian couple. How do we maintain trust and build relationships in the midst of oppressive/life-threatening situations?
- The end of the second book serves as the end of the series, as Octavia got writer's block when she attempted to write the 3rd book. Earthseed are presented as successful because they are imagining a way to move forward: They leave for the stars, and one of the ships is called the Christopher Columbus. What is Butler saying there? Is Earthseed beautiful as something that works right here right now, but eventually demands the move to colonize another planet?

Stories (*Bloodchild and Other Stories, Fledgling, Kindred*):

- What does Octavia teach us about creativity and creation in this series of short stories and essays?
- In the story "The Evening, The Morning and The Night", we are presented with an alternative to traditional schooling. Do you know of programs doing similar work today?
- What does Octavia tell us it means to be a writer?
- What role does trauma play in transformation in Octavia's stories?

Bloodchild (specifically):

Question:

1. Octavia Butler says in the comments of Bloodchild that she is not writing about slavery unless she explicitly is writing about chattel slavery. Do we agree with that? Do we believe her?

What are some reasons she might have said this?

- Pigeonholed as an African-American author
- Slavery as a specific historical institution
- Thinking about other forms of oppression

2. What do we understand as the relationship between Octavia Butler as an author and the statements of her narrators?

3. In "Bloodchild", Octavia evolves the idea of family. How does this relate to current political and cultural shifts, particularly in the US?

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Other relevant works:

Listen to:

Nina Simone's 22nd Century

Tamar Kali's Warrior Bones

Janelle Monae's whole songbook!

Join/Attend:

Carl Brandon Society – sci fi readers and writers of color

Think Galacticon - speculative fiction from a radical left perspective [conference and reading group]

Authors/Essays/Collections to Read:

Minister Faust, Tanarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson, Jewelle Gomez, Nnedi

The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative Edited by [Sandra Jackson](#), [Julie E. Moody-Freeman](#)

Upcoming: Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction and Social Movements, Adrienne Maree Brown & Walidah Imarisha

