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OF GODS AND TRICKSTERS: THE MAKING AND KILLING OF GODS IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S PATTERNMASTER SERIES

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Of Gods and Tricksters: The Making and Killing of Gods in Octavia Butler's *Patternmaster*

Series

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In the future, Black people will be gods.

Octavia Butler outlines this vision in the prologue to her first Patternist novel, *Patternmaster*.¹ Two powerful Patternists, Coransee and his sister-wife Jansee are talking about some people called mutes who lack psionic powers called mutes and come to solicit favors by petitioning and praying to Coransee, the dominant local force in the pattern. Jansee observes “[t]hey’ve come here because they think you are a god...” Coransee replies “...Making a religion of their gratitude was their own idea.” Jansee muses, “Not that you mind, Power. In fact, since you hold the pattern, you’re even a kind of god to the Patternists, aren’t you?”² Jansee discusses how important power is to the head of the household in the paternalistic, plantation-like, hierarchical society and how Patternists find it necessary to fight and kill each other to achieve ascendancy. Butler’s social structure includes other Patternists with distinct powers like psychokinesis or healing and roles in protecting their mutes and less powerful Patternists from the ClayArk archenemies. Butler’s Prologue sets the stage for the remaining novels in the series introducing the winner take all nature of the pattern based on telepathic power, the hierarchical feudalism of patternist social structure and its incestual eugenics. Patternist society mirrors plantation chattel slavocracy of the colonial US, yet it is meritocratic as ascendancy transfers to the most power Patternist after s/he vanquishes the current most dominant leader. The series depicts a broad set of master-slave narratives and hierarchical power imbalances. *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind* (hereafter *MOMM*) chronicle the development of the Patternist race and their

god-like pretensions. The life and death parameters of the Patternists' powers give them god-like status and pretensions. However, those on the lower frequencies of the hierarchy resist in order to achieve transformative change as in Haiti, throughout the Caribbean, colonial Africa and antebellum United States.

Butler liberates future Blacks from binary Black/White othering by positing alien others that accentuate the humanity of African descendants. Each Patternist novel explores unique aspects of othering and inevitable resistance in societies where dominant entities fashion hierarchies of the powerful and powerless others reminiscent of ex-slave narratives. The powerful cultivate hegemonic processes and use otherness as a reason to oppress. People then defined as "others" need to resist in order to maintain and develop a full sense of their humanity. The history of White supremacist chattel slavery manufactured enslaved Africans as the ultimate other. Reading *Kindred* as a postmodern slave narrative, Marc Steinberg writes: "It is not simply Butler's account of Dana's enslavement and escape that resemble antebellum slavery narratives', but also her novel's concentration on rhetorical strategies of subterfuge, its record of resistance and oppression, and its concentration on the separation of families."³ The Patternist novels form recurring slave narratives that demonstrate these characteristics over vastly different settings. These novels represent the unwilling immigrants' perspective on the inhumanity of trading in human flesh as do the early ex-slave narratives.⁴ Butler presents Africans as coming from a civilized cultural background another important contribution of the narratives.⁵

Butler recasts the three phases of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in *Wild Seed*. Doro and Anyanwu view the capture, sell and transport phase from inland African ethnic groups to coastal barracoons.⁶ The first vision of chattel slavery is a branding in the holding pens, ". . . a smell of cooking flesh in the air and the sound of a slave boy screaming."⁷ That chapter goes on to detail

Anyanwu's introduction to White traders, their African suppliers, their cultural differences and the greed that binds them.⁸ The exigencies of the slave trade require that families be sundered as Steinberg notes. Okoye and Udenkwo display the characteristic displacement from loss of family and indigenous language.⁹ *Wild Seed* presents a benevolent version of a middle passage from the coast of Africa to the New World. The transatlantic voyage shows the suicidal depression but lacks the crowding, malnutrition, sickness and death associated with versions of the middle passage.¹⁰ Doro takes Anyanwu and the rest of the people he brings from Africa to Wheatley a settlement up the Hudson River after landing in New York Harbor.¹¹ Once in Wheatley, Butler's focus on maintaining or developing communities rather than separating families defines one pattern of resistance that distinguishes the Patternist novels from Steinberg's assessment. When nuclear families cannot be maintained, Butler fashions communities of extended families that assume familial functions.¹² Butler portrays plantation lifestyles in family groupings in Wheatley, Redhill and Forsyth.¹³ The second half of *Patternmaster* amounts to the story of runaway slaves Teray and Amber leaving Redhill seeking the haven of freedom in Forsyth. The unwilling immigrant becomes a willing resistor.¹⁴

Butler's creative worlds feature power abuses and hierarchal conflict. Humanity co-exists in disharmony with extra-terrestrial aliens on a distant planet in *Survivor*, where fur color denotes status in martial ability and skilled labor hierarchies and colonists become enslaved to the additive meklah fruit.¹⁵ *Wild Seed* narrates the stories of Africans Emma Anyanwu a long-lived shapeshifter and Doro an essentially immortal psychic body-snatcher. Doro functionally enslaves and breeds psis, people with psionic powers or potential.¹⁶ Their stories span the time and space of pre-colonial Africa to post-colonial United States. *MOMM* continues the saga of Doro and Emma into the mid-nineteenth-century, introducing Mary, a new protagonist who

creates the first pattern and then goes on to kill the god-like Doro. *Clays Ark* chronicles the arrival of the symbiote virus via a spaceship returning to earth that changes human progeny into sphinx-like quadrupeds with heightened senses and physical abilities. Humans infected by the ClayArk disease are slaves to its will including a strong desire to breed. *Patternmaster* is set in a future where the society evolves into two groups in constant conflict: humanity comprising both Patternists and powerless mutes and the ClayArks, who are intent on conquering humanity. Patternists use their psionic powers to protect a fragile equilibrium between the two races.

The Patternist series details the construction of a hierarchical society plagued with both beneficial and malicious uses power. Doro uses his breeding plan to develop a broad array of mental powers: telepathy, empathy and psychokinesis. Psionic power enables definitive control over beings with lesser or no power. Butler presents domineering psis who instigate conflict intensifying intersectional matrices of gender, race and class. Psis' power constitutes a dominance that becomes a lightning rod for resistance, a factor in their lives ambitious less powerful humans need to change. "Imagination, hope, and the *expectation for transformative change* is a through line that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music and, criticism."¹⁷ Transformative change, removing powerful social and political constraints, requires both vision and consistent effort. Butler's Afrofuturist writing emphasizes the obligation to resist the oppressive forces of any established order. This essay will analyze the Patternist novels for their portrayals of oppressive power, control over sex and procreation and resistance to those forces deleterious effects. The goal of transformative change drives the characters in the societies Butler creates. Tricksterism and collaboration are dynamic resistant processes that lead to successful transformative change. In her Introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, Walidah Imarisha contends that, "Butler explored the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of

race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and—most important—hope.”¹⁸ Hope fuels disparate acts of resistance in spite of negative odds for success.

Afrofuturism is about Black texts of the future. Is it enough to simply posit Black people in the future re-writing them as if they were merely Ken and Barbie in blackface? Or does Afrofuturist literature and criticism express something of blackness, something of black literature either deeply structural or intensely experiential/phenomenological. Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theory of signifyin’ applies directly, “The Signifying Monkey tales, in this sense, can be thought of as versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiasitic fantasies of reversal of power relationships.”¹⁹ The Signifying Monkey is a series of Black folktales, epic rhyming toasts featuring a Monkey that gets into conflicts with Lion, King of the Jungle. Monkey convinces Lion that the Elephant insulted him causing the Lion to pick a fight with the Elephant who then beats down the Lion. The Monkey slips and falls to the ground while gloating about his victory. The Lion catches Monkey who talks his way out of a beating.²⁰

Butler does not limit her signifyin’ to the texts where Mary replaces Doro in *MOMM* or Teray replaces Coransee in *Patternmaster* or the many times in *Wild Seed* where Anyanwu survives Doro’s murderous intentions. Butler’s genius positions Blacks in speculative fiction (SF) as more than merely present, but present in positions of power. Butler’s Afrofuturism projects Blacks into the future as beyond a chiasitic slave master. The Patternist series portrays Black characters as powerful or even gods whereas in most SF they are either missing or die early. Womack comments on this propensity in science fiction movies, “On occasion, the black character in such films popped up as a silent, mystical type or maybe a scary witch doctor, but it was fairly clear that in the renderings of the future by pop culture standards, people of color weren’t factors at all.”²¹ Butler invests her characters with character, unique humanity and the

vagaries of personality. Mary is a rebellious teen loves Doro and grows to hate him. She is lost and lacks direction but finds a purpose, matures and rises to the responsibilities of leadership.²²

Samuel Delany writes about Black characters by White sci-fi writers, “there does not seem to be much about black characters as such in the plots I have summarized for you. . . they function basically as well-loved servants to others in the group.”²³ He concludes on Afrofuturism: “It is a Johnny-come-lately to the attempt to encourage equality.”²⁴ Afrofuturism, for this writer, is a recent step in a long tradition of working toward freedom and equality that spans abolitionist and anti-slavery writing, ex-slave narratives, polemic journalism, the protest novels, the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance movement and the Black Aesthetic. Butler’s connections to the slave narrative clearly link her to African American literary traditions. I contend that Butler’s Afrofuturism also connects to folklore, one of the oldest forms of African oral literature. Anyanwu convinces her grandson that she is indeed his grandmother by reminding him of how he sat with her, listened to stories and watched her change shapes.²⁵

Unlike the majority of European folktales, Afro-American tales invariably terminate in a condition of disharmony between the two principal actors caused by a violation of an agreement and an unreciprocated exchange of value. . . Had Africans migrated voluntarily into the New World, and had they found social and economic equality here, the pattern of tale types selected into their repertoire would probably have been substantially different.²⁶

Early African American folklore with its undeniable entertainment and didactic affect also represents an early version of Afrofuturism. This folklore imagines and metaphorically expresses futures that influence the creative motifs Butler uses in her Patternist novels. The trickster role prevalent in African and African American folklore is sometimes a folk hero, sometimes a villain, depending on perspective. The trickster is always a disruptive presence, a person or being of lesser stature or status who uses his, her or its wits to achieve a desired goal. The trickster’s goal is in direct opposition to established power and order.²⁷ The trickster

unsettles the power brokers in society who wish to maintain dominance over the lower frequencies that the trickster represents. Paul Watkins makes connections between Ralph Ellison, “lower frequencies” and Afrofuturism.²⁸ The tricksters’ actions occur over matrices of resistance, counter-resistance and complicity. The trickster whether as a rabbit or spider is the being of lesser stature or status corresponds to the enslaved Africans. The Wolf or Fox is the predator and being of greater stature and status intent on consuming the powerless Rabbit completing the metaphor of master/enslaved relationships.

The master/enslaved relationship is a persistent metaphor Butler employs in many of her works including the Xenogenesis series and *Kindred*. The protagonists in *Wild Seed* and *MOMM* display trickster sensibilities that help them evade master slave relationships with Doro. As with the recurring slave narrative motif, Butler re-envisioned her trickster theme.²⁹ Butler intended to name her next novel in the Parable series *Parable of the Trickster* signaling the importance of this motif.³⁰ Butler articulates that she creates problems to solve within her novels: “One of the things that I do with my books is set up problems for myself. In *Parable of the Talents*, the problem was how to continue this character in a way that would make her the kind of person who might sometime after death be thought a god. How to build a god.”³¹ The Patternist series prefigured the combination of god and trickster Butler was working out in the Parable series with the ultimate result being the destruction of a god.

“As one of the best-known and most widely told of Br'er Rabbit's adventures, the tar baby tale has appeared in countless contexts”³² In brief, the predatory Brer Wolf finally captures Brer Rabbit using a mute clay doll covered in tar as bait. Angered by its lack of response, Brer Rabbit attacks the Tar Baby, attacking all four appendages. Brer Rabbit escapes Brer Wolf's designs by assuring him that the various ways he contemplates killing and cooking Br'er Rabbit

are fine but don't throw him in the briar patch. Wolf succumbs to Rabbit's bait, throws him in the briar patch allowing Brer Rabbit to roam in the place he was born. Mary is the Tar Baby that Doro catches and won't let go in the battle royal between Doro and Mary, catching him in the trap he intends for her. Mary now runs the briar patch and Br'er Wolf can do nothing but die. Mary is John, High John the Conqueror, the trickmaster who has beguiled the masses and truly beats the master at his own game, making money.³³ Doro's currency is power and control over psionic talents, along with those whose bodies house paranormal potential. Mary beats Doro and now controls all of it.³⁴ Mary turns the tables, reversing the power balance but more importantly she is now free to transform society.

Sexuality/procreation and life/death are sociopolitical levers in the Patternist series as they are in Black history. Four of the five novels in the achronologically published series tell the story of the Patternists and why they are so important to the survival of the *Homo sapien* species on Earth. Butler repudiated *Survivor*, set in a far distant universe, as her Star Trek novel that featured "humans traveling to the stars and mating with the sentients they found there."³⁵ Certainly, Jim Kirk was a randy fellow, but Butler's concerns seem a bit contradictory. She self-consciously infuses her novels with sexiness.³⁶ Butler's Afrofuturist visions introduce us to the Patternist series' ClayArks and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy's Oankali. Both are sentient extraterrestrial groups that come to Earth to forcibly "mate" with earthlings, changing the genetic structures of each. The ClayArks and Oankali behave similarly to the Kohn in *Survivor*, who also forcibly and fertilely mate with travelers from Earth, producing hybrid offspring. Throughout most of Butler's novels that deal with extraterrestrials, humans are relatively powerless chattel, bred and used for their genetic potential.³⁷ The first published novel, *Patternmaster*, is set in the most distant time. All other Patternist novels occur chronically before and set the backstory for

Patternmaster. The human starship Clay's Ark returns from the second planet of Proxima Centauri with a symbiotic virus-like organism, named the ClayArk disease. *Patternmaster* documents a world where human gods battle the ClayArks, resisting succumbing to the symbiotic organism. *Survivor* denotes another aspect of Butler's transcendent view of a humanity that survives whatever the cost, whatever the obstacle, even if they have to leave Earth to do it.

"Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us."³⁸ The trope of genetic manipulation ably explored in the *Xenogenesis* novels is a hallmark of Butler's writing. ~~XXXX~~ Eugenics is essential to the creation of the Patternists. *Wild Seed* introduces Doro a spirit god that breeds talented psis against their will to create stable, powerful beings. In his death, Doro achieves a version of immortality, having created a race that, as individuals will die but who as a people, will outlive him. *Wild Seed* and *MOMM* chronicle both the creation and the killing of gods.

Butler shows that the human will bends but cannot remain too long subservient to the will of others, even a god. This natural inclination to resist oppression manifests in Butler's *Patternist* and *Xenogenesis* novels. This struggle involving resistance, counter-resistance and compliance is identified as a defining construct of Africana Studies.³⁹ The Patternist series god, Doro, is an oppressive force that humans must resist.⁴⁰ Doro reacts to resistance by attempting to reinstitute order, by political manipulation where possible or by killing resisters where brute power fails. The battle between the established order and those who resist is not fought in a social vacuum. Many people choose to comply, to varying degrees, with the wishes and caprice of god. Butler's Patternist novels are as much an account of human nature in conflict with oppressive forces as an Afrofuturist vision. Butler's status as Black and Woman cannot be neglected in this analysis, in

particular since her protagonists are often Black and often heroes; she writes through intersectionality as a norm. Butler's Afrofuturism allows her characters resist or comply, but ultimately, as both women and Blacks, seek to shape their present and work toward a better future.

The Patternist novels display basic human patterns of behavior associated with repressive and oppressive behavior. Maulana Karenga notes resistance is "any and all individual or collective acts designed to: deny support to, challenge or overturn the established order; deny, diminish or eliminate its hold; force changes in its structure and functioning, and/or; escape its control and jurisdiction."⁴¹ Counter-resistance occurs when agents or beneficiaries of the established order attempt to thwart or quash the resistance. Extrapolating from Karenga's definition, resistance to the oppression, followed by a cycle of counter-resistance that breeds more resistance. Compliance to or victory over individual components of systemic oppression and repression break the cycle of counter-resistance. In its worst manifestations from the perspective of the oppressed, complicity becomes counterinsurgent, active agency supporting the established order. Yet, complicity may be only strategic and tricksterish or a pragmatic concession rather than a transformative conversion.⁴²

Resistors may temporarily act complicit and the complicit may move toward resistance based on the exigencies of personality and situation, often to the effect of becoming agents of the established order. Complicity is the range of individual and collective acts that support institutional order. Humans resist along a continuum from passive to active to violent. Doro demands that his people follow his directions especially regarding his breeding plan. Doro's slave trader and post manager Daly is the most glaring example of complicity. The sycophant Daly would rather go to the New World and lackey there with Doro, but he stays where Doro

says stay.⁴³ Emma Anyanwu works with Doro nurturing problematic psis he brings her and breeding as he commands.⁴⁴ Mary and Karl comply with Doro's arranged marriage although neither want it.⁴⁵ These actions appear as compliance but each character passively resents Doro's actions and actively state their opposition. Mary is the only one that attains enough power to violently challenge Doro after she combines her individual telepathic power with more than fifteen hundred others in her pattern.⁴⁶ Butler's expounds the hopeful message to resist wherever and however possible, unite and someday change will come.

The Making of a God.

Butler makes corporeal gods in *Wild Seed* and *MOMM* that are not supernatural. Butler's gods' power exhibit arise from human mutation bred and inbred over millennia. Doro and Emma Anyanwu are unique, long-lived, superior beings, without peer. Doro believes himself to be invincible.⁴⁷ Though beings with strong psionic skills exist in the human population, none have his abilities or strength. As a result of these states of uniqueness and longevity, the god Doro becomes lonely, a state that allows him to accept some levels of resistance from his minions from whom he has also demanded fealty and obedience. Doro takes responsibility for both the creation of "better" human beings who in due course ensure the survival of the human species. Doro remakes these preferred humans in his image and directs them toward his ideals. Conversely, as god is responsible for creation, god must also be willing to kill. Doro interacts with exemplars from his people with direct warnings and often kills humans to make them object examples of his predatory nature. Doro kills by necessity to maintain his power. He is also a predator who feeds on the bodies he kills then inhabits. Butler demonstrates Doro's multifaceted, murderous nature. She links Doro's literal cannibalism of consuming bodies to Christians' hypocritical duplicity in the slave trade. "Well, no doubt the missionaries will reach them eventually and teach them to practice only symbolic cannibalism. . . . Spare me your

mythology, and your righteous indignation. . . . We don't pretend as you slaver do to be acting for the benefit of our victims' souls. We don't tell ourselves that we've caught them to teach them civilized religion.”⁴⁸

Butler explores conceptualizations of a pragmatic god, rather than a theoretical, theological construct—a civilized religion—in the Patternist series. People see and touch this pragmatic god in the Patternist novels. This god does not build a religion, instead it uses its powers to create or destroy and demand fealty. In *MOMM* and *Wild Seed* Butler presents Doro as a long-lived being who senses humans with psychic abilities and husbands these special humans who ultimately develop into telepathic and telekinetic patternmasters. Doro is more or less than a god. He is a witch, breeding witches.⁴⁹ He is a spirit.⁵⁰ Doro is a mutation, parasite god and devil.⁵¹ Doro is the pragmatic god who exists in real, tangible time and space, having immediate and unmediated interactions with humanity. Anyanwu is witch or a god in her native Iboland.⁵² However, Anyanwu use her godhood to protect herself. She does not impose her will on others' lives, kill or attempt to breed others although she has babies. Butler's gods in the Patternist novels do not rely on doctrine and sacred texts to represent them: either they interact directly with humanity or their wishes are conveyed by chosen human agents who have their patent support. Butler's god constructs, Doro, Mary and Emma/Anyanwu focus attention on human reliance on and attraction to a superior, inexplicable being. At the same time, these texts explicate the intricacies of humankind's fear of and resistance to any force that attempts to control individual and group expression or freedom. When humans resist the god, the god must counter-resist, acting to maintain the order he or she imposes on humanity. Ultimately, humans must make the fundamental decision: to comply and live or to resist and die. Doro is the ultimate “established order” a progenitor god and murderer humanity is destined to resist.

Mary achieves her goal with trickster patience and planning. “She had used her mental closeness to him to draw him into her web. Her Pattern.”⁵³ Butler’s description of the pattern as a web that ensnares other actives and Doro emulates the Afrikan symbolism of Anansi the Spider, the greatest of tricksters. Garry and El-Shami, describe Anansi as “clever and treacherous by spinning webs to catch their prey.”⁵⁴ The folktale “Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money” tells the story of a master (Massa) who resents John an enslaved Black man because he has a skill in making money. John lords his proficiency over the master by repeatedly proclaiming in dialect, “Ah’ll Beatcher Makin’ Money!” John repeatedly beats the master in contests of making money, allowing Massa to do what he did to make the money. In the end, the master first places John in a bag, ties the ends and throws it into the river. John escapes with the help of Mr. Hoptoad. When John comes back with more money, the Massa allows John to tie him up in a bag and throw him in the river.⁵⁵ This is exactly what happens with Doro. Mary’s fledging pattern is effective in alleviating pain, preventing injury to latents and forming a previously unsettled and disparate group into a cohesive, constructive community something Doro has been unable to accomplish. He becomes jealous of Mary’s skill in handling the latents and bringing them through transition to become a part of *her* pattern. Mary’s success as the creator of the pattern beyond Doro’s control stimulates a battle royal just like the one between Teray and Coransee at the end of *Patternmaster*.⁵⁶

At the end of his life, Doro has engineered the first Patternist, a woman capable of bringing together and controlling the volatile talents of Doro’s strongest people as well as forcing ‘latents’ (Butler’s label for those with unexpressed talents) shepherding them through transitions. Doro creates Mary and with Emma’s support he erects the framework for a community of psionic talents. Mary has the strength to forge a stable society out of telepaths, empaths, healers,

telekinetics and latents by bringing them into a mutually supportive “pattern” with her as leader. This society later provides humanity’s only defense against the mutant ClayArks.⁵⁷ The ClayArks threaten to absorb all of humanity. Possessing the strength and agility of the big cats and a limited but cunning intellect, the Patternists, who do not need to be near the ClayArks to kill or repel them, hold the ClayArks at bay. Butler envisions a world where the Patternists are respected, feared leaders who maintain social order in addition to the martial function of protecting normal humans against the mutated extra-terrestrial symbiotic ClayArks. *Survivor* deals with neither the pattern nor the ClayArks directly, but is set in a future where “normal” humans have migrated to the stars to escape what the Earth has become with the ClayArk mutation and its Patternists who cannot leave Earth because of the pattern that ties them in close community to their leader.

The Pattern gives godlike power. The Pattern’s power is beneficial but carries the potential for abuse by the humans who wield it. Coransee takes Iray his brother Teray’s wife demanding her sexually like she is a chattel.⁵⁸ Coransee attempts to limit Teray’s ability to use and develop his strength in the Pattern similar to the ways systems in the US function to marginalize its defined others, women and people of color. The unreasonable fear that fuels current racist and sexist practices has nothing to do with the oppressed intentions. Neither Teray or Mary originally intend to harm Coransee or Doro but their fates are sealed because they are perceived as threats. They are chattel who reject their treatment and therefore become threats. In fact, the words their father Rayal uses to debrief Teray could apply to the relationship between Mary and Doro. “*He had already made up his mind about you—and from his point of view, he was right. You were definitely a danger to him even though at first you didn’t want to be.*”⁵⁹

Butler’s Afrofuturist message of hope and transformational change promotes the awareness that

the power brokers who victimize segments of the population will oppress until confronted with powerful and committed resistance. We must continue to resist even if the oppressors wield the power of gods.

Conclusion

I was always an avid reader. My early exposures to science fiction made me ask what happens to the Black, Brown, Red and Yellow people and their progeny, their distinctive cultures in the multifarious futures I saw in the books I loved to read? I already knew that we Blacks and people of color were part of a “white washed” past, albeit vastly underrepresented in most history books. “Mainstream, American corporate culture “white washes” all culture—past, present, and future—giving people the false impression that America has been, is, and *always will be* the “White Man’s Country.”⁶⁰ I knew about our participation in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, Deadwood Dick in the wild West. I even knew about ancient Kemet and Zimbabwe, trivia about George Washington Carver, Madame C.J. Walker, Elijah McCoy, Zora Neale Hurston and Frances E. W. Harper. I saw the non-violent Civil Rights Movement unfolding before me on the six o’clock news. I read Charles Waddell Chestnut’s folkloric stories along with Homer, Confucius, Shakespeare and Jules Verne. But while I did not have the academic intellect to articulate it as a boy I sensed that we belonged in representations of the future, the same as we belonged in re-presentations of the past and belonged in the present I was living. This Earth is peopled with disenfranchised, second-class humans denoted by sociopolitical constructs like race, gender and ethnicity. The US labels some others illegal aliens and these perceptions significantly influence social, cultural, political and economic practices. Why was so much mainstream SF so blind to or ignorant of these structures in its creative futures? “Visionary fiction is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has

relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power.”⁶¹ This is where Butler’s presence and virtuosity is so crucial, she resists those dominant narratives of power. She is a visionary, an intersectional writer who refuses to ignore the many folk who are othered outside of her personal being or the Black and female others who share her perceived identity.⁶² Butler fills in the gap of Black females being missing from the science fiction canon, challenging the status quo of a “White Man’s Country” with a Black Woman’s Afrofuturist creativity. Black women’s voices are important to contemporary literature with women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor whose contributions represent valuable additions to the mosaic of multicultural humanity. Butler is so revered, in part, because she is both a great writer and a great Black female writer, representing the others within her identity matrix. Adwoa Afful writes “It is my contention, then, that the Black feminist elements of her work along with its shared tenets with the notion of Black woman’s writing mean that Butler’s novels, especially *Wild seed*, are among the earliest of the texts defining the emerging sub-genre of feminist Afrofuturism.”⁶³ Where she was alone in her generation, she has inspired a new generation of Black females writing science fiction. Imrisha testifies, “Her work has taught us so much about visionary fiction, inspiring us.”⁶⁴ Emily Temple pays tribute to Butler for inspiring writers like Tannarive Due, N.K. Jemisin and Nnedi Okafor among others.⁶⁵ Butler’s career demonstrates the same kind of resistance she portrays in her novels. The odds are not relevant, these women pursue and achieve their goals in spite of the obstacles to their success. Imarsha suggests that *Lilith’s Brood* is about “adaptation as a necessity for survival.”⁶⁶ I argue that Butler’s Patternist novels are about *resistance* as a necessity for survival. I further contend that Butler’s characters seek more than survival, they seek “thrival” a state where they thrive not simply survive.⁶⁷

Butler's human pre-Patternists in *Wild Seed* and *MOMM* are essentially an "other" group, unable to be comfortable in or accepted by mainstream society. Emma's and Mary's racial characteristics, along with Anyanwu and Doro's origins in Africa, inform the cultural background of the novels. Perhaps writing futures where all the human "races" participate in universes with sentient alien races is enough of a radical statement but Butler, through her symbolism and imagery, occasions revolutionary critiques of contemporary and past human society. Butler's multiracial worldview encompasses using the symbols and imagery of chattel slavery, displaying the folly of interracial insensitivity and ethnocentrism, ultimately making a powerful political statement by having strong, successful Black female heroines in her novels.⁶⁸ She also manipulates the imagery of slave ships, maroon societies, the hypocritical paternalism of colonization, the history of ancient Africa as a developed culture and the resistance of "othered" subcultures.⁶⁹ Butler champions difference while challenging the mindset of compliance to established norms. Her characters, her vision of humanity is one of unity in difference. Science fiction promotes the idea of aliens, supernatural abilities, fractured societies and apocalypses. Butler is not satisfied with oppression or compliance, her characters struggle against imposed normal existence.

This potent sense of otherness suffuses Butler's works. Unlike the almost purely aesthetic tokenism of the *Star Trek* series and its spinoffs where the distinctly different alien races exhibit human characteristics (human natures,) Butler brings racialized and gendered realities to the forefront. She provides targets for all the boxes Womack outlines when discussing professors who write on Afrofuturism, "They use it as a platform to assess humanity issues—including war, apartheid, and genocide—while also exploring class issues, spirituality, philosophy, and history."⁷⁰ Butler's humanity resists oppression from human and alien origins. In the struggle to

overcome, her humans use whatever powers they have: their wits, patience, creativity and any power they have. This is a refreshing and inspirational presentation of reality for those who must live with diversity and oppression in their lives. Butler unlocks new avenues of sociopolitical critique—and many critics have pursued the implications of Butler’s genius. Butler remains a superb storyteller and sci-fi technician the essence of her popularity. Butler broke the unwritten rules and followed no muse but her own. She wrote of Black time travelers and Black vampires. Her creativity encompassed blue and green humanoids who communicated via changes in the coloring of their fur. She wrote of aliens, multi-armed, multi-sexed genetic engineers coming to save a dying Earth. Butler’s characters live and function at every level of society more than mere “well-loved servants to the group.”⁷¹ Butler writes of a future where Blacks go, as part of a multicultural crew, to other galaxies and one came back, a Survivor bringing a symbiotic virus. Butler’s Afrofuturist vision was clear and radical enough to create Black gods in her Patternist novels. Octavia Butler is bad enough to create a female character bad enough to kill . Though she has now passed on, her work and her example remain to guide us.

Gods and Goddesses bless Octavia Butler.

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[man/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWho%20knows%20but%20that%20on,%2C%20I%20speak%20for%20you%3F%E2%80%9D&text=Set%20primarily%20in%201948%20tumultuous,%2C%20racial%20oppression%2C%20and%20invisibility.](#)

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¹ Butler, Octavia. *Patternmaster* (New York: Warner, 1976).

² Butler, *Patternmaster*, 5.

³ Steinberg, Marc. "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative," *African American Review*, Volume 38, no. 3 (2004): 467-468.

⁴ See Equiano, Olaudah. "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, First Edition, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1997), 138-164.

⁵ Equiano's first chapter outlines the details of Ibo (Eboe) architecture, fashion, manners, cuisine, religion, economy, agriculture, circumcision, security and healthcare. Butler's genius accomplishes many of the same aims in setting the first two chapters of *Wild Seed* in a village rural Africa. Butler problematizes this issue of civilization without pursuing answers later in the book. See Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner, 1980), 95-96.

⁶ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 15-36. These chapters detail Doro finding Anyanwu, convincing her to come to the New World with him and their trip from her village to the coastal port and barracoon. The journey showed more of Doro's character and his ability to kill by taking another's body.

⁷ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 37.

⁸ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 37-49.

⁹ Anyanwu finds Okoye one of her grandchildren only to learn that all her other kin had already been sold and shipped out. Butler, *Wild Seed* 41-42. Udenkwo's also revels in hearing Anyanwu speaking her language that she thought to never hear again. Butler, *Wild Seed* 56-57. Olaudah Equiano documents how in Virginia ". . . we saw few or none of our native Africans, and not one could who could talk to me. . . . I had no person to speak to that I could understand." Equiano, *Narrative*, 161.

¹⁰ See Butler, *Wild Seed*, 67-68 for Doro's lecture on comparisons between his ship and the standard slaver's ship. Equiano, "Narrative," 157-160 offers an account of the middle passage that supports Doro's analysis. Butler, *Wild Seed*, 60-61 shows Anyanwu's aborted suicide attempt.

¹¹ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 93.

¹² See Octavia Butler, Marilyn Mehaffy and Ana Louise Keating, "'Radio Imagination': Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment" *Varieties of the Ethnic Experience* 26, no. 1, (Spring 2001): 60-61. In response to an interview question about ". . . 'new orders of difference,' communities with different categories of kinship relations and racialized gender." Butler states "I'd say more that I don't try to create communities; I always automatically create community."

¹³ Wheatley is in Butler, *Wild Seed*, 93. Redhill is in *Patternmaster*, 45. Forsyth is the home of the Patternmaster Royal. Chapter 11 in *Wild Seed* introduces the community in “Avoyelles Parish in the state of Louisiana” that serves as the setting for the rest of the novel. Butler, *Wild Seed*, 201.

¹⁴ Doro’s superior power coerces Emma in Butler, *Wild Seed* and Octavia Butler, *Mind Of My Mind* (New York: Warner, 1977) along with Mary in Butler, *Wild Seed* to go along with his plan. Both eventually resist.

¹⁵ In *Survivor*, Garkohn and Tekhon social structure are based on colors of fur ranging from the lowly yellow to green to the highest blue. The darker hues are more highly esteemed. The green and blue are hunters, fighters valued for martial skills. The darkest blues are judges, the best fighters also valued for their wisdom and leadership.

¹⁶ Psis is a catchall label that lumps together people with diverse mental sensitivities, abilities and talents. See Butler, *Mind of My Mind*, 90.

¹⁷ Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 42. Italics added.

¹⁸ Imarisha and brown, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 3. Megan Osbourn also adds (dis)ability to this list. Her analysis of the Xenogenesis trilogy resonates with the Patternist novels. In *Survivor*, humans lack physical strength, colored fur and the ability to resist the addictive meklah. In *Patternmaster*, psionic ability sets the hierarchies, but mutes are disabled, relying on the pattern for protection. Similarly, Doro (*Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*) creates a standard of psionic abilities or potential that makes people either targets or disabled, dispensable bodies. Osbourn, Megan. “Octavia Butler’s Disabled Futures.” *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 1 (2013): 109-138.

¹⁹ Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 59.

²⁰ See Gates. *The Signifying Monkey*, 55-63. See also Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. “The blackness of blackness: a critique of the sign and the Signifying Monkey,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge 1984), 288-299.

²¹ Womack. *Afrofuturism*, 7.

²² Butler, *MOMM* details this transformation. Mary bashes a would-be rapist in the head at the beginning of the novel hospitalizing him. This initiates a conflict with her two guardians, Rina and Emma. *MOMM*, 15-19. Butler, *MOMM*, 31-43 documents her initial interactions with her arranged husband Karl. Mary meets with the seven psis in her pattern after she survives transition delineating antagonistic relationships and sealing her fate as leader. *MOMM* 119-130.

²³ Delany, Samuel. “Mirror of Afrofuturism.” *Extrapolation* 61, nos. 1-2 (2020): 175.

²⁴ Delany, “Mirror of Afrofuturism,” 184.

²⁵ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 50-53.

²⁶ Edwards, Jay. “Structural analysis of the Afro-American trickster tale,” in *Black Literature & Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Routledge: New York, 1984), 92.

²⁷ Jane Garry and Hasan M. El-Shamy. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*. (Routledge, 2005), 476. for a discussion of the tricksters Eshu and Anansi in Africa and the Caribbean. See page 160 for a general discussion of trickster figures.

²⁸ This refers directly to the last sentence in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Watkins, *On Lower Frequencies: Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*. <https://pauldbwatkins.com/2014/11/12/ralph-ellison-invisible-man/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWho%20knows%20but%20that%20on.%2C%20I%20speak%20for%20you%3F%E2%80%9D&text=Set%20primarily%20in%201948%20tumultuous,%2C%20racial%20oppression%2C%20and%20invisibility>.

²⁹ Madhu Dubey explores themes of slavery in three Butler novels, *Kindred*, *Wild Seed* and *Parable of the Sower*. Madhu Dubey “Octavia Butler’s Novels of Enslavement,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 46, no. 3 (FALL 2013): 345-363. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43829973>

³⁰ Littleton, Therese. “Octavia Butler Plants an Earthseed,” accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/11664/>

³¹ Littleton, Therese. “Octavia Butler Plants an Earthseed,” accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/11664/>

³² p128 in *Writing Tricksters Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* by Jeanne Rosier Smith.

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- ³³ Br'er Rabbit, John, High John the Conqueror and the Tar Baby are all popular trickster characters in traditional African American folklore. The briar patch is where the Tar Baby lives. Beating the master making money and catching Br'er Wolf in the pot intended for him are references to folktales involving Br'er Rabbit and John, respectively.
- ³⁴ Butler, *MOMM* 212-215
- ³⁵ Littleton, Therese. "Octavia Butler Plants and Earthseed," accessed September 9, 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/11664/>
- ³⁶ Butler, et al., "Radio Imagination", 50-51.
- ³⁷ Even in *Kindred*, Edana is victimized by her genetic history, pulled into the past because of her genetic ties to Rufus.
- ³⁸ *Octavia's Brood* 5.
- ³⁹ Kamau Kemayo, "Africana Cultural Studies: A Critical Perspective," *3rd Annual International Conference on Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCS 2015)*: 49-50. doi:10.5176/2382-5650_CCS15.11.
- ⁴⁰ They cannot beat Doro but they can resist him. "Resistance is futile" is Star Trek jargon. Butler's characters Mary and Emma Anyanwu nevertheless resist/attempt to resist Doro as the humans, Picard, Hugh and Seven of Nine resist the Borg. Butler's characters defeat their oppressor like humans overcome the Borg.
- ⁴¹ Karenga, *Introduction*, 128.
- ⁴² Kemayo, Kamau. *Africana Studies and Research Methodology* NAAAS Regional Conference Tampa, FL 6/6/15.
- ⁴³ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 40-47. This passage outlines the business relationship between Doro and Daly and Daly's desire to please and work for Doro.
- ⁴⁴ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 224. This is the same agreement Emma makes in the Prologue to *MOMM* when Doro informs her that he is bringing another latent three-year-old girl to care for. *MOMM* 7-12.
- ⁴⁵ Butler, *MOMM* 23-26.
- ⁴⁶ Butler, *MOMM* 209. Mary brings 1,538 psis into her pattern before the final confrontation with Doro.
- ⁴⁸ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 43-44.
- ⁴⁹ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 29.
- ⁵⁰ Butler, *Wild Seed*, 36.
- ⁵¹ Butler, *Mind of My Mind*, 88.
- ⁵² Anyanwu speaks with the voice of god. Butler, *Wild Seed*, 19. Doro describes her as a witch. Butler, *Wild Seed*, 29.
- ⁵³ Butler, *Mind of My Mind*, 215.
- ⁵⁴ Garry and El-Shami, 476.
- ⁵⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1990), 42-46.
- ⁵⁶ Butler, *Patternmaster*, 188-191.
- ⁵⁷ Butler, *Clay's Ark*, Butler, *Patternmaster* and Butler, *Survivor*, recount various aspects of this storyline. Butler, *Clay's Ark* details how the mutation comes back to Earth and spreads as an epidemic. Butler, *Patternmaster*, details the political and physical struggle for dominance that results in the ascendance of a new "Patternmaster."
- ⁵⁸ Butler, *Patternmaster*, 29-34 outlines the outsider restrictions that allow the house's master to take the wife of any man declared to be an outsider. This behavior mimics the way the master class visited the slave quarters taking any woman they wanted.
- ⁵⁹ Butler, *Patternmaster*, 202. Italics in the original denote a telepathic conversation.
- ⁶⁰ See Bill Campbell's comments in the Introduction to Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall, eds., *Mothership Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond*, (College Park: Rosarium Publishing, 2013). I must admit that as a boy in the 1960s I heard about the bra-burning movement but feminist perspectives did not register with me in any meaningful sense until I started high school.
- ⁶¹ Imarsha and brown, *Octavia's Brood*, 4.
- ⁶² See Butler, et al, "Radio Imagination
- ⁶³ Afful, Adwoa. "Wild Seed: Africa and its many diasporas," *Critical Arts* 30, no. 4 (2016): 97.
- ⁶⁴ Imarisha and Brown, *Octavia's Brood*, 3. See <https://lithub.com/the-grand-cultural-influence-of-octavia-butler/>

⁶⁵ Emily Temple, "The Grand Cultural Influence of Octavia Butler," Literary Hub, June 21, 2019. Accessed June 25, 2020, <https://lithub.com/the-grand-cultural-influence-of-octavia-butler/>.

⁶⁶ Imarsha and brown, *Octavia's Brood*, 3.

⁶⁷ Maslow might call their striving being motivated to self-actualize. *Clay's Ark* is an outlier in this sense. It is a tragedy. Its ending looks like humanity will be overcome by the ClayArks. However, this ending only appears to lack hope. It is a prequel to novels that show people as gods and space travelers who did not succumb to the ClayArk symbiote. *Survivor* also appears to have tragic components. Alana rejects the other colonists and chooses to stay with her Tehkhon husband when they migrate over the mountains in search of a place where they can live without fear of the Garkohn. The ending is not tragic because Alanna is a wild human who never accepted Christianity so their "mission" was meaningless to her. She is at home with the Tehkohn because they respect and value her something she lacked with most of the missionaries.

⁶⁸ The protagonist Edana in *Kindred* is an African American. One of the protagonists Anyanwu/Emma in *Wildseed* is an African and appears as a Black woman in *Mind of My Mind*. The protagonist Lilith in the Xenogenesis series is a Black woman. The protagonist Alanna in *Survivor* is mixed Asian and Black. Although contemporary constructs of race appear to be meaningless in *Patternmaster*, Amber the bisexual healer is "Honey-colored. The cap of black hair was softer than it looked . . ." Butler *Patternmaster*, 96. Mary and Emma/Anyanwu encounter racist societies and do their best to avoid them where possible. Mary sends a would-be rapist to the hospital. Emma chooses to be a White man at times to legitimate the Warrick plantation. She chooses to be an old woman at other times so as not to be a sexual target.

⁶⁹ See the earlier discussion on the recurring slave narrative.

⁷⁰ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 23.

⁷¹ Delany, "Mirror of Afrofuturism," 175.