

## Octavia Butler: What is Vision but Speculation Persevering?

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Octavia Butler ends her short essay on writing, “*Furor Scribendi*” with a single word: persist. Her work and contribution to science fiction broadly and afrofuturism has been her work envisioning a multiplicity of futures--and what is vision but speculation that persisted? This annotated bibliography tracks several of Butler’s novels and short stories which were written as acts of speculation and which have persisted as key narratives for authors at the intersection of disability studies and Black women’s speculative practices.

Sami Schalk, Therí Pickens, and others draw on Butler’s work in their tracking of Black women’s speculative visions to theorize in their respective texts *Bodyminds Reimagined* and *Black Madness::Mad Blackness*. In order to craft alternatives to present practices of speculating on the future, Pickens argues that Butler’s work “suggest[s] that the unmooring of time, space, and culture in science fiction prompts the necessary tumult required to reimagine the world” (Pickens 13). As such, earlier afrofuturist writers have positioned Butler as an essential figure, describing her among Sun Ra and George Clinton as “sides of that Giza-like pyramid you find” (Womack 2). Both her original writings and lasting presence within the scholarship of Blackness, speculation, and the future locate Butler within the growing scholarship of afrofuturism.

In this annotated bibliography, I follow two strands of Butler’s speculation-turned-vision: that which has since come to pass, and that which remains among a thousand future possibilities. In the year 2000, Butler wrote “A Few Rules for Predicting the Future” for *Essence Magazine*, in which she recalls a conversation about the world of the *Parable* series: “I didn’t make up the problems... All I did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters’ (Butler). By drawing on the limited scope of the present in her work, Butler was able to create harrowing predictions and prescient suggestions for manifesting multiple futures.

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows. 1993.

Set in 2024, this dystopian novel follows the narrative of Lauren Oya Olamina as the forces of climate change, political upheaval, wealth inequality, and an ineffectual policing system steadily force the collapse of her walled community in California. Olamina must navigate the cruelty of the world while manifesting a condition called “hyperempathy” or “sharing” that causes her to feel the pain she perceives in others. By layering narratives of Blackness and disability, this text is a vision of the future of America that Butler perceived in the 1990s. Of particular note is the presence of a disability that is free from preconceived metaphorical weight, which Sami Schalk argues “disallows readers the ability to overlay preconceived notions about disabilities we recognize from our own world” (Schalk 95). Readers are instead presented with a unique view of navigating the twinned oppressions of racism and ableism as Olamina sets out from the ruins of

her home to form a new community around her vision/religion of Earthseed, whose maxim is “God is Change.”

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Seven Stories. 1998.

This sequel to *Parable of the Sower* follows Olamina into the future, the foundation of the first Earthseed community, “Acorn,” its occupation and conversion into a prison camp by militant white supremacist forces, and its destruction by those who survived the occupation. It is composed of fragments of diaries and fictional texts from Olamina, Bankole (her husband), and Olamina’s daughter, Larkin. Of note is the text’s now-realized vision of a Presidential candidate tapping an evangelistic voting base and running under the slogan, “Make America Great Again.” Twinned with continued struggles of wealth inequality, Butler also describes the return of the company town, which distinguishes itself from slavery in name only. As social media and online retail companies have recently begun to undertake these practices, it seems that Butler’s vision manifested a few years early.

Butler, Octavia. “The Evening and the Morning and the Night.” *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. New York: Seven Stories. 2005.

This novella, originally published in *Omni* in 1987, is told from the perspective of Lynn, a woman who lives with a fictional condition entitled “Duryea-Gode Disease.” As the story unfolds, Lynn describes the social stigma that follows diagnosis, social narratives of tragic violence, uncertainty, and pitiful prodigiousness. The narrative follows Lynn through two institutions, the university and the hospital, as it unwinds the twinned visions of embodied disabled experience and socially-structured responses to being disabled. By envisioning and following both social and genetic structures that disabled characters, Butler speculated on the possibility of care that is attentive to redressing stigma and supporting bodyminds outside of a narrowly defined norm.

Butler, Octavia. “Bloodchild” *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. 2nd ed. New York: Seven Stories. 2005.

This short story, originally published in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*, tells the story of Gan, a boy on an extraterrestrial human settlement who will be impregnated with eggs by the sentient parasites which control the world on which humans settled. This text questions the idea of the sovereign self, interrogating the dividuality of an individual from networks of life and material which sustain it. In *Becoming Human*, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson offers a readings of the way in which the text directly presses against tropes of science fiction as genre and how it has been “shaped by racialized, gendered, and sexual histories of conquest, slavery, and colonialism” (Jackson 123). “Bloodchild” creates a space from which to consider the multiplicity of potential ways forward for humanity, as hybrid, as communicating with parasitic nonhumans, and as tenants upon (rather than conquerors of) other worlds.

Butler, Octavia. *Lilith's Brood*. New York: Grand Central. 2000.

The trilogy of novels, *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), of *Lilith's Brood* follow post-catastrophe humanity to its end and the beginning of something else. In a genealogical fashion, the novels follow Lilith (*Dawn*), Akin (*Adulthood Rites*), and Jodahs (*Imago*) as they are slowly integrated at a genetic and sociological level with a race of aliens called the Oankali. Throughout the texts, Butler offers criticism of the hierarchical way in which humans use power over one another and instead posits a radical form of hybridity. The permeable category of human is slowly undone, with the implication that it is only something more than human or other than human that will eventually have the capacity to live beyond Earth. As a corpus, these novels nod to the necessity of a multiplicity of hybrid ideas and players that are necessary to enact new and varied futurities.

#### Additional works cited

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