OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

by Gregory Hampton

I feel that what people bring to my work is at least as important to
them as what I put into it.

Bloodchild and Other Stories

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California, on June 22, 1947. Butler was
raised primarily by her mother, as her father died when she was very young. To escape
the boredom of poverty, Butler began writing at the age of 10. Despite her dyslexia, by the
time she was 12, she had become an avid reader of science fiction. After seeing a science
fiction film entitled Devil Girl from Mars, Butler decided to begin producing science fic?
tion that did not ignore issues of race and gender. She studied at Pasadena City College,
California State University, and UCLA, and participated in the Open Door Program of
Screen Writers’ Guild of America, West (1969–70), and the Clarion Science Fiction Writers
Workshop in 1970.

Soon after her first short story “Crossover” was published in the Clarion’s 1971 anthol?
yogy, Butler began work on her first novel Patternmaster (1976). In brief, Patternmaster is an
Arthurian tale of two brothers seeking the throne of their father. Amber, “a golden brown
woman with hair that was a round cap of small tight black curls”, guides the younger
brother to success. Patternmaster is the first book in a series that follows the progeny of two
shape-shifters known as Doro and Anyanwu. These two very important characters are not
introduced until the 1980 publication of Wildseed, the first book in the series chronologi-
cally. Wildseed acts as a genesis/love story of a race of people who are not bounded by
their physical identities. Doro wears the stolen bodies of people like clothing, discarding
them when they have served his reproductive purposes. Anyanwu changes the shape
of her body to mimic the identity of man, woman, child, or animal, regardless of race or
gender. The offspring of these two godlike characters give birth to the pattern, which is
a telepathic matrix that connects all of the children of Doro and Anyanwu. The pattern
complete the Patternist Series.

Butler’s most widely read and most solitary novel, Kindred (1979), is often mistaken
as her first novel because of its popularity. The novel acts as a wonderful example of
Butler’s ability to blur the genres of science fiction, historical fiction, and slave narrative.
Although the plot of this feminist novel focuses on time travel, the issues of race, gender,
and survival are vital topics of discussion in the narrative.

The Xenogenesis Series, which includes Dawn (1987), Adulthood Rites (1988), and Imago
(1989), comes very close to what has traditionally been thought of as science fiction—be-
In Memoriam

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

(1947–2006)
cause it involves aliens from other planets. The Oankali, or gene traders, are an “alien race” of nomads traveling through space seeking difference to amalgamate in order to survive. The matriarch of the series is Lilith, a headstrong woman-of-color intent on saving pieces of humanity by choosing to reproduce hybrid offspring with the Oankali. In Adulthood Rites and Imago, Lilith’s children act as the ambassadors of goodwill and teach humanity that change is inevitable and survival is both relative and conditional.

Parable of the Sower (1993) and Parable of the Talents (1998) are both examples of the speculative element present in all of Butler’s writing. Both novels act as cautionary tales that seek to warn readers about what might happen if they continue along their current path of destruction. In Butler’s fiction, the highest goal for humanity is survival by any means necessary, but the means often illustrated is to accept difference and acknowledge the inevitability and omnipotence of change. The synchronization of humanity is not worthy of pursuit in Butler’s narratives, primarily because “sameness” is not in Butler’s definition of “better world.” As her narratives suggest, conformity does not ensure the survival of a species in a hostile environment. In fact, the ability to change and adapt to nonconformity is often essential if a character wishes to survive in any of Butler’s narratives. Notwithstanding this latter fact, Butler’s work constructs communities dependent upon individuals and individuals dependent upon communities.

From her very first short story to her most recent novel, Fledgling (2005), several motifs reoccur in Butler’s work, and all of them center on humanity’s struggle with identity and hegemony. Butler’s fiction is invested in the examination of narratives written on bodies—male, female, human, alien, gay, straight, or vampire. In each case Butler’s fiction states: “Bodies and the identities placed on them change.” Changes can result in a body’s survival, death, or rise to power. Change is God. These theorems are visited without exception in all of her novels and short stories. Bloodchild and Other Stories (1995, 2005) is a laboratory where the seeds of novels are germinated or left as fully independent creations of the imagination.

Octavia Butler’s fiction presents methods of imagining the body that allow us to understand how and why the body is restricted. Through her characters and narratives, readers are better able to explore the meaning of various identities such as race, sex, and gender. These terms are seen for what they are, arbitrary markers designed to give stability to that which is unstable and ambiguous. Science fiction is the window Butler used to open the imagination of readers about the problematic of the body.

While Butler would readily admit that many of the pioneers of science fiction influenced her understanding of the genre, it must not be overlooked that her writing has influenced writers as well, many of whom are long-standing science fiction writers. She paved a way for new African American men and women writers exploring the possibilities of the genre. Tananarive Due, Steven Barnes, Nalo Hopkinson, and Walter Mosley are only a few of the writers influenced by Butler’s body of work. One of the most important contributions made by Octavia Butler has been her reshaping of the science fiction genre.

To say that Octavia Butler was an outstanding storyteller would be an understatement. However, it is impossible to describe her as a writer without making such a statement at some point. Octavia Butler mastered the art of telling good stories that blurred the lines of distinction between reality and fantasy; she revealed universal truths through a genre that has historically been delegated to the fantastic.
Octavia E. Butler died on February 24, 2006, in Seattle, Washington. Her short story “Speech Sounds,” won a Hugo award as best short story of 1984. The story “Bloodchild,” won both the 1985 Hugo and the 1984 Nebula awards as best novelette. Butler was awarded her second Nebula award for *Parable of the Sower* (best novel 2000). In the summer of 1995, she received a MacArthur Fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (MacArthur Genius Award). In October 2000, Ms. Butler received a lifetime achievement award in writing from PEN. The genre science fiction claimed Octavia Butler and her art, but the audiences that will benefit from her artistry are as limitless as the identities of the characters in her writing. It is a sad thing to see an artist leave when there is so much promise for even greater signs of genius.