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Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton: Black Women Writers and Science Fiction

GREGORY JEROME HAMPTON AND WANDA M. BROOKS

African American literature has always had elements of what many would refer to as science fiction. As is common in a significant number of books written by and about African Americans, science fiction has historically been focused on narratives of the alienated and/or marginalized “other.” ■ In African American literature for children and adults, many authors approach the themes of alienation and “otherness” through the genres of historical and realistic fiction as well as biography. The genre of science fiction, acting as a voice that reminds humanity of the depth of alienation experienced by countless people of

color, is less often chosen. In the minds of many, it appears that science fiction is equated with robots and distant planets inhabited by aliens. Despite the lack of black characters in books of this sort, the association is a straightforward one; where there is a discussion of alienation, the unknown and “otherness,” there is an analogous link to the African American experience. This link, however, has not proven to be a strong impetus for the publication of science fiction novels written about and/or by African Americans. There is a scarcity of published works in books traditionally classified for adult readers, and there are even fewer made available yearly for teenagers and children.

Among the small but growing number of African American writers of science fiction, Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton are two worthy of mention. These authors are unique because their books examine the connections between the stories of a culture and the genre of science fiction. Butler, typically classified as a writer for teenagers and adults, and Hamilton, well known as a children’s author, are both individuals who masterfully locate

and translate cultural experiences through science fiction stories.

The Writers

Over the past three decades Octavia Butler has written eleven novels appropriate for high school and/or college readers: *Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, *Survivor*, *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, *Clay’s Ark*, *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, *Imago*, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*; and a collection of short stories, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. She has received both the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award, the highest honors in the genre of science fiction, in addition to establishing herself as a permanent fixture in the libraries of sci-fi fanatics all over the world. Butler was a young girl when she decided to try her hand at becoming a writer. She grew up in a segregated America and was fortunate to overcome the myth that the profession of writing was reserved for white men. After being exposed to science fiction that did not include images of African Americans or particularly well-written storylines, Butler decided to produce her

own version of literature. About her writing, she says, "I write about people who do extraordinary things. It just turned out that it was called science fiction" (*Bloodchild* 145). Her prose is fluid and inviting, devoid of convoluted, esoteric techno-gibberish found in some of the more "traditional" examples of sci-fi.

Butler's fiction has transcended its way far beyond juvenile literature into what might be referred to as mature African American literature. As a fifty-three-year-old black woman who has overcome dyslexia, elements of racist America, and the myriad obstacles in the publication process, Butler has become a person who does extraordinary things. In no uncertain terms, she has opened the door to the genre of science fiction for the African American novelist and theorist via the fundamental questions of the alienated and marginalized "other."

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About the same time that Butler published her first novel, Virginia Hamilton entered the world of science fiction writers for children. Interestingly enough, prior to and after publishing her science fiction works, Hamilton wrote in varied genres. Part of her success as a writer derives from her ability to constantly cross genre and subject matter boundaries. Her genres of choice were often those infrequently selected by African American authors who write for young people. In addition to realistic and historical fiction, Hamilton has written magical realism, mysteries, folktales, myths, and science fiction. Her three science fiction novels, commonly read in the upper elementary or middle school grades, include *Justice and Her Brothers*, *Dustland*, and *The Gathering*.

In her books Hamilton frequently creates plots that are infused with historical content, and she brings to life characters who are dually situated

in multiple time periods. Hamilton explains, "The time motif goes through many of my books. I have been trying to find ways to say that we carry our past with us wherever we go, even though we are not aware of it" (Apseloff 209). Hamilton's reverence for writing about the past and future simultaneously allows her to reveal the ways in which cultural traditions are transmitted intergenerationally. Keeping cultural traditions alive through her writing is one of the underlying focal points of Hamilton's craft.

In 1974 Hamilton was the first African American awarded a John Newbery Medal. From there, she was subsequently honored with a collection of significant literary awards in the field of children's literature. In fact, in 1992 she accepted the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, a prize given to her in recognition of her entire body of written work (Mikkelsen 67). Throughout her illustrious career, Hamilton wrote over thirty books for children and young adults. She is extremely rare as a children's author because many of her works challenge the norms and standards of books typically created for young readers. Indeed, her genres are often blurred; her writing style is sophisticated, and her subject matter complex. Nonetheless, the literary world and youth continue to gravitate toward her books.

Writers of science fiction like Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton entered a genre that is still being defined by contemporary history and the imagination of its contributors. It is this dynamic generic structure that allowed Butler and Hamilton to write science fiction stories that challenge commonly accepted mainstream characteristics. Robots, time travel, life in the future, and the lives of extraterrestrial beings (a figure of the "other" in general) are usually understood to connote science fiction. Butler's and Hamilton's books are somewhat different because they present unique ways to imagine and ultimately to understand the body and its plethora of identities. Their work allows alienation to be imagined outside of the traditional definitions of the term. These authors present the concepts of time travel and life in the past or future by creating characters who live in worlds where evolution is not robotically or technologically influenced. As the following analysis of excerpts from Butler's and Hamilton's stories demonstrates, the worlds created by these authors are ones where the issue of alienation exists, more profoundly, in the hearts and minds of individual characters. In addition, these characters possess the innate ability to evolve into beings

who celebrate and explore, rather than distance, the “Other.”

Butler’s Science Fiction

Butler’s Patternmaster Series takes the reader on a journey of genesis filled with shape-shifters and non-material entities who manipulate their material and spiritual worlds in order to create a new race of people or an “other.” The book of genesis for the Patternmaster Series is *Wild Seed*. Very much like the biblical Book of Genesis, *Wild Seed* is the beginning of a creation story and the introduction of a patriarch and matriarch, Doro and Anyanwu.

Anyanwu is a black woman who possesses the ability to take the shape of any animal (human or beast) whom she understands genetically or intuitively. Such understanding is obtained by visual assessment or by ingesting the flesh of an animal and simply reproducing its genetic structure and physical form. In explaining her ability to Doro, Anyanwu says:

... I could see what the leopard was like. I could mold myself into what I saw. I was not a true leopard, though, until I killed one and ate a little of it. At first, I was a woman pretending to be a leopard—clay molded into leopard shape. Now when I change, I am a leopard. (80)

A more accurate assessment of what Anyanwu becomes after tasting the flesh of an animal and imitating its form externally and internally is something very similar to Doro: an essence of an individual in the shell of a temporary body. Thus, it is this act of incorporation of another body and becoming that body that is at the foundation of the questions that act as primary engines for the entire series. Is the body dependent or independent of the notion of essence or self? Does the identity and existence of a person necessarily begin and end with a material body? In Butler’s fiction the body matters because it extends far beyond flesh and bone; the body becomes a boundless edifice for the articulation of “otherness.”

Butler places Doro in the role of a complicated patriarch. Doro’s character is not formulated from simplistic binary perspectives. He is never portrayed in the narrative as being completely evil or good. Doro is presented as a complicated and ambiguous persona focused on accomplishing his goals with the least amount of resistance and interference from his charges.

The reader does, however, learn by the third paragraph of chapter one that Doro cannot be com-

pletely or simply human. Wandering from the village, being pulled by an unexplained awareness, Doro “was killed several times—by disease, by animals, and by hostile people . . . Yet he continued to move southwest . . .” (80). Thus, Doro’s existence is independent of the birth or death of body, but is dependent upon the inhabitation of body for life. This phenomenon raises the question of who or what Doro is and how his identity is constructed.

Doro’s identity is independent of flesh and bone. The body for Doro can act as a disposable mobile home to be used primarily for reproduction and transportation, not completely dissimilar to that of a “normal” person. His physical identity changes depending on the body he inhabits, but his “essence” remains constant:

He was like an *ogbanje*, an evil child spirit born to one woman again and again, only to die and give the mother pain. A woman tormented by an *ogbanje* could give birth many times and still have no living child. But Doro was an adult. He did not enter and re-enter his mother’s womb. He did not want the bodies of children. He preferred to steal the bodies of men (12).

In the above passage Anyanwu identifies Doro as something from the spirit world that manifests only as body, in or among the world of bodies, without being only one body. Anyanwu questions her hypothesis because Doro is an adult and does not live in the womb of mothers. But as the narrative unfolds we learn that Doro does indeed operate largely through and from the reproductive systems of women and men.

Butler’s Xenogenesis Series (*Dawn, Adulthood Rites, Imago*) goes one step further by introducing the post-apocalyptic humanity to gene traders who rewrite gender and sexuality with a third gender. The second and third books in the Xenogenesis Series suggest the argument that ambiguity in regard to identity can be both empowering and necessary for survival. Through a close examination of Butler’s characters Akin (one of the first human/Oankali constructs) and Jodahs (the first third sex human/Oankali construct), the importance of ambiguity in regard to race, gender, and human identity is shown to be immeasurable. The ability of both characters, human-Oankali constructs, to act as go-betweens and bridges between human and non-human difference suggests a new way of thinking about the figure of a multiple-referenced identity. Akin’s ability to understand humanity’s need to survive independently and Jodahs’s ability to shape and

color its body to please its partners all suggest that being in a state of ambiguity is a positive attribute that should be sought after instead of avoided.

As introduced in the above analysis, Octavia Butler's fiction presents methods of imagining the body that allow us to question how and why we must be categorized as male, female, black, white, or "other." From this window readers of her work are better able to explore the meaning of various concepts such as alienation and marginalization and various identities such as race 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 uses to open the imagination of readers to the construction of "otherness" by painting the fantastic as the realistic.

In an interview with Rosalie G. Harrison, Butler says that in the standard science fiction novel the "universe is either green or all white" (Harrison 30–34). In such literature the "extraterrestrial being" or "alien" is used as metaphor and literal embodiment of the other. Butler, on the other hand, locates highly visual (race, sex, or species) and non-visual (gender and sexuality) identities at the center of her text and forces the reader to grapple with the notion of "otherness" as more than a metaphor of allusion.

Hamilton's Science Fiction

Hamilton's Justice Trilogy—*Justice and Her Brothers*, *Dustland*, and *The Gathering*—is an intriguing collection of African American children's literature because it writes black children into a future that does not seem to be concerned with the racial differences of the twentieth century. Justice Douglass and her twin brothers, Thomas and Levi, along with a neighbor named Dorian, form what is referred to as the "unit." Relying on an understanding of their own "otherness" and feeling somewhat alienated from their friends and family, the three adolescents travel beyond their physical bodies to an apocalyptic Earth on a mission to save humanity with their special collective abilities.

The East African proverb "I am because we are; We are because I am" plays a significant role in the thematic structure of the Justice series. Eleven-year-old Justice is the "watcher" and leader of the unit. As the watcher, she holds the ability to initiate the transportation of the unit from the present to the future. Her character might be interpreted as the village griot or an individual with the role of observing

and recording historical events. Justice's ability to observe the present and predict the past enables her to manifest the future. As the unit gathers around an old buckeye tree (firmly rooted in the past), the individuals are transported mentally beyond their bodies into a forward (re)memory navigated by Justice.

Justice's older brothers, Thomas and Levi, at thirteen, further the communal metaphor of the series in that they are psychically bonded twins. Thomas is an aggressive clairvoyant with powerful telepathic ability and a speech impediment, while Levi is a sickly hyper-sympathetic victim who bears the pain for the entire unit. More importantly, Levi is bullied and used as a tool to weaken the unit by Thomas, who is filled with an irrational sibling jealousy toward his younger sister, Justice.

The East African proverb

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Dorian, the healer for the unit and not a biological family member, serves as a seemingly older and rational sibling. When there is injury in the unit, he manages to provide the appropriate bandage or cure. Dorian completes a family unit that is not traditionally Western in its structure. As Justice is the leader and consequently the most powerful member of the unit, the family takes the form of a matriarchy.

Like Butler's Doro and Anyanwu, Justice and her brother Thomas act as obstacles to one another throughout the series. In *Justice and Her Brothers*, Thomas is an embittered soul who is incomplete without his brother Levi and his sister Justice, but he has not yet come to understand their connection as a family and a unit. The immature and jealous Thomas takes every opportunity to use his abilities to gain all the power a little black boy can handle in his neighborhood, even to the point of terrorizing his brother Levi through mental manipulation:

I'll take away the bars [in your mind] and everything and we'll continue this talk later. But you'll

say what I want to Mom. Because I know who has to be keeping me from Justice. (166)

Because he can enter and control the mind of anyone he chooses, Thomas suffers from the same sort of god-complex as Doro. Levi becomes a trickster-mask that Thomas wears to veil his speech impediment and any other insecurity that might limit his power. Justice ultimately establishes herself as the most powerful and clever of the two by winning "The Great Snake Race," utilizing a tool that Thomas did not consider (196). The snake that Justice captures for the race is pregnant and consequently gives birth to the largest number of snakes in the contest. Levi admits, "There's no rule I know of against having lots of babies . . . Tice [Justice], I guess you win The Great Snake Race!" (246). Through motherhood and mother-wit, Justice outwits her would-be enslaver and misguided older brother.

The rivalry between Justice and Thomas continues throughout the series until their encounter with the machines and "Slakers" of the Dustlands of the future. In both *Dustland* and *The Gathering* Hamilton's references to the African American experience and issues of alienation and "otherness" are subtle yet apparent. The unit is constructed of talented but marginalized characters who are dependent on the survival of their family. Each member plays an integral role in the success or failure of their mission to ensure the existence of extended family (humanity) in the speculative future.

For Hamilton the highest goal for humanity is survival by any means necessary, but mainly by accepting difference and acknowledging the inevitability and omnipotence of change. The synchronization of humanity is an impossibility not worthy of pursuit in the Justice Trilogy, primarily because sameness is not in Hamilton's definition of a better world. As the three books seem to suggest, sameness, or 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. Notwithstanding this fact, Hamilton constructs communities dependent upon individuals and individuals dependent upon communities.

Conclusion

Whether written for adults or children, African American literature has sought to express the humanity of black people through narratives of strug-

gle, adaptation, and survival. Many African American authors, like Butler and Hamilton, share in their desire to translate the lasting effects of one of the most fundamental motifs at the root of much, if not all, African American literature: the alienation and marginalization of a people through the possession and transportation of their bodies for free or cheap labor.

Through their reinterpretation of the issues of alienation and marginalization, Octavia Butler and Virginia Hamilton have forged a path in a genre that is prime for African American exploration. "Otherness" is posited in Butler and Hamilton's science fiction narratives as functions of difference and likeness that demonstrate both the flaws and strengths in human behavior. The genre of science fiction is the new frontier for African American literature that might lead to a more critical view of the past and a future that dismantles the concepts of alienation and marginalization, while it reinterprets the meaning of "otherness."

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