Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with Gerry Canavan (Sept. 2021)

Gerry Canavan is an associate professor in the English department at Marquette University, teaching 20th- and 21st-century literature. He wrote Modern Masters of Science Fiction: Octavia E. Butler. He co-edits The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction and the Journal Science Fiction Film and Television. He also edited a collection of critical essays, Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction.

Bill Rogers: Butler incorporated the symbiotic joining of human and alien into some of her stories; did she see this kind of intimate union as necessary for deeper human/extraterrestrial understanding, a metaphor for human empathy, simply a compelling plot device, or something else?

She used it in all these ways, honestly! She saw symbiosis (as opposed to other models like master/slave or parasite/host) as a way of thinking about what successful community looked like. Symbiosis doesn't imply equivalence or even equality, necessarily, but it does point us to an idea of interconnectedness and interdependence that runs across her fiction, in a large number of forms.

Bill Rogers: The Earthseed philosophy from her 'Parables' novels: did she subscribe to something like it in her own life, or was it again just a plot device?

She did. First, she wrote notes and inspirational poems to herself that mirror what Olamina writes (in some cases borrowing her own mantras for the novel); she also used the notion that "God is change" as a therapeutic way of comforting herself in moments of grief and loss, perhaps most notably when her mother died during her composition of the second Parables novel.

Teresa Alsept: What were her thought on Kindred? Did she consider it to be science fiction like her other books?

She did not! She was actually insistent that the book is *not* science fiction, but what she called a "grim fantasy." She felt that because there is no mechanism that facilitates time travel in the novel, and no explanation for what is causing this phenomenon, it didn't properly qualify.

N.T. Narbutovskih: I recently read the Parable books. What are the implications of worship of natural forces as deities, or even abstract metaphysical concepts like entropy? The edge of the meaning of life is in there somewhere, but Butler's commentary amid a post-apocalyptic society was thought provoking.

I find the concept really fascinating! It's hard to imagine people truly adopting a self-consciously manufactured religion as a genuine practice (in much the same way that Vonnegut's idea of Bokononism seems necessarily satirical). But Butler though historical religions had run their course and the necessary social function of religion would have to be replaced by some other mode. The suggestion of the second Parables book (which is borne out in some of the Trickster drafts) is that over time it *will* just become another historical religion, with myths about the miraculous life of a quasi-historical founder ("they'll make a God of her").

Catherine Berkenfield: OEB wrote many drafts of her novels and short stories. Are there any stories she wished had been published in a different form?

The strongest example of this is *Survivor,* which she felt first was unsuccessful as science fiction due to its depiction of human-alien hybrids and second thought was better in its original draft than in its revisions. She sold the book to fund her trip to Maryland to research Kindred and always regretted it, and suppressed its republication. (It still hasn't been republished.) She was also unhappy with *Fledgling* and wished she'd had more time with it. Aside from those examples, though, she mostly seems to have been happy with her finished work.

Catherine Berkenfield: Can you say anything about the impact OEB has had on artists and activists, culture more generally, outside of a narrow sf fandom?

I think this has been a snowball since her death—we've seen a huge number of Black and Black women authors in particular who point to Butler as an influence, as well as studies of activism like Adrienne Maree Brown's that use Butler and Earthseed as an inspiration. (There have even been a couple attempts at making Earthseed communes!) It says something that her books hit the bestseller list in 2019, almost fifteen years after her death—it shows how strong an influence she is still having both in the SF field and in the world of literature more generally.

Seth A. Milman: Racism and feminism are themes in at least a few of Octavia Butler's books. In real life, how did she handle racism, misogyny, and lack of diversity in science fiction authorship in the 70's and 80s? Did they present themselves as difficult obstacles to publication, especially in her early career? How did she overcome them?

Her essays, journals, and letters do reveal microaggressions of various kinds, both from racist editors who diminished her work and from well-meaning liberals who couldn't see her as anything *but* Black (and, for instance, exclusively paired her with Samuel Delany at convention after convention). Her notes reveal that certain villains in her works were based on science fiction writers of the era who she was frustrated with, or actively didn't like. But she was a very private person and mostly responded to these things through her work; I can't think of any record of her having open interpersonal conflict with anyone.

John Grayshaw: What makes Butler interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to her work?

I think her revisionist take on major tropes in the genre (like alien invasion in Xenogenesis or time travel in *Kindred*) remains really vital and original all these years later. I was also really drawn to her interest in ecology and environmental themes in science fiction, which was very ahead of its time; in an era where people were still fixated on fantastic physics and magic computers she was very attuned to how important biology is, in ways a lot of writers in the field are still struggling to catch up to.

Jamie Smith/Catherine Berkenfield: What do you feel are Butler's most significant/most definitive works? And why?

I think *Kindred* is probably always going to be the headline, as that's still the most widely read and widely studied book of hers, and the one that probably most strongly embodies how an Afrofuturist lens forces us to revise the usual terms of the genre. (After reading *Kindred* you just can't think about time

travel in the same way.) *Parable of the Sower* (and its shadow, *Parable of the Talents*) have the character of both being extremely prescient and feeling like a manifesto how to survive the 21st century, so I think that's probably always going to be the one nipping at *Kindred*'s heels. My personal favorite is *Dawn*; I think it's the key to her thought in some ways and one of the best, most challenging space operas ever conceived. I love it.

Bill Rogers: Who were some of the authors of any genre whom Butler enjoyed reading and were her inspirations?

She was extremely well read in science fiction, of course (and watched a lot of science fiction television as well—she was a huge *Star Trek* fan). But she read outside the genre, too, particularly bestselling authors in other genres. She really admired Stephen King and was always working to write a book like *Carrie* (and never quite did); she also saw Mario Puzo and *The Godfather* as a potential model for what genre writing could be like and what its larger footprint in the culture could be.

David Farnell: I have read a bit about her associations with other Black writers such as Samuel Delany, but I would be interested to hear more about that, and just about her associations with other writers in general, too—friendships, creative connections, etc.

She was friendly with Delany, and Charles R. Saunders; she also exchanged letters with Toni Cade Bambara for a time, and submitted some of her novels to Toni Morrison when she was still working as an editor. She read widely in Black literature, both in her college classrooms and afterwards, and definitely saw herself as working in that tradition alongside the historically-more-white tradition of SF. But I think her biggest impact on the field was as a mentor for the generation of writers that came after her; Nisi Shawl among others has written about how generous Butler was with her time and advice, and how she became not just an inspiration but a personal friend of people who came after her. Harlan Ellison was an early mentor of hers (they met when she took some of his writing courses in LA), and they were friendly for a time; Vonda McIntyre was one of her classmates at the Clarion Writers Workshop and they became lifelong friends as well.

John Grayshaw: Why did she stop working on Parable of the Trickster? How much of it was written?

She was blocked, both due to health issues and due to not quite knowing what she wanted to do with the story. (She always said she had a "situation," not a story.) All we have in the archive is a huge number of false starts, some of them as many as dozens of pages, but none of them really rising to the level of a possible novel—and a huge number of notes composed over fifteen years about where the story *might* go when she returned to it. Some of the Trickster manuscripts did turn into other partially completed novels, which I hope see publication someday.

Catherine Berkenfield /John Grayshaw: Why didn't Butler want "Survivor" to be reprinted? Do you think if she'd seen the high prices copies of it go for today that she would have changed her mind? Do you think OEB's estate will ever let Survivor be released?

Park Zuckerberg: Have you read Survivor? And are there interesting ideas in there that fans of hers might want to know about?

I mentioned above the reasons: she came to feel that the idea that humans and aliens could interbreed freely without scientific intervention to be embarrassingly silly, and she also felt like the novel was more

successful in its original version rather than the abridged version that ultimately saw publication. I don't know if they will ever release it! They did publish part of that original version in *Unexpected Stories* as a novella, so that's at least a hint that *Survivor* might someday be pulled out of the fire—but it's hard for any heirs to ignore such a strong directive from the author that they never want a book to be republished. I hope they do, despite that—I think the book has interesting ideas in it and that it explores an area of her thought that doesn't get its due anywhere else. (I bought my copy on eBay for way too much money like everyone else.)

John Grayshaw: Any interesting stories about her corresponding/meeting with fans? Did she enjoy going to conventions?

She was very shy, and found conventions (and public speaking) very stressful! She would rehearse not just her speeches but even her small talk in advance to feel prepared to be around that many people (especially as she became more and more the center of attention). Most of the best stories about her and fans were one-on-one; more than one people has reminisced with shock that she would give people her private phone number and tell them to call her, and write them long, generous responses in response to the drafts they sent her.

John Grayshaw: What are some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Butler?

Oh, I could go on about this all day. I'm one of the few people who has read (both versions!) of her unpublished novel *Blindsight,* which I hope sees publication someday; she wanted to sell this one, and just never successfully did, so suppressing it wouldn't go against her wishes in quite the same way as reprinting *Survivor.* I was also really lucky to read her late fragments and see the novels she was working on when she died; I talk about these a little bit in the last chapter of my book but that was an amazing privilege. My favorite thing I looked at though was the snippets from the Trickster narrative, and seeing all the different ways she thought that story might go. I sometimes fantasize about a writer or even a group of writers taking up the Parable books and writing up some of the Trickster stories she considered and abandoned; I think that would be an amazing anthology.

Molly Smith: What do you think is Octavia Butler main influence on science fiction?

John Grayshaw: What is Butler's legacy? Why was her work significant at the time? And why is it still important today?

Molly Smith/John Grayshaw: Octavia Butler books tackle issues about race and have include ideas of Afrofuturism can you discuss this more? How has Butler influenced/impacted Afrofuturism?

I mentioned this above but I think she was one of the leading lights of that wave of Afrofuturism, which sought to revise some of the baseline assumptions of the science fiction genre by incorporating Black history, Black thought, and Black people into its imagingings. She always said that because there wasn't anyone like her in science fiction stories, "she wrote herself in," and I think that's really true; after Butler and contemporaries of hers like Delany and Ursula K. Le Guin it is hard to imagine a science fiction genre that can be so exclusive and walled off. The wave of Afrofuturism we are in now (with directors like Jordan Peele and Ryan Coogler, music from Janelle Monae, and writers like Colson Whitehead, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin) is in her debt in the sense that she made space possible for other artists to enter, as well as inspiring many of these folks in different ways when they were coming up in the field.