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"Shaping God": The Power of Octavia Butler's Black Feminist and Womanist SciFi Visions in the Shaping of a New world – An Interview with Adrienne Maree Brown

Moya Bailey

Audio transcript available **here** (<https://adanewmedia.org/baileybrowntranscript/>)

"God is Change." These are the captivating introductory words to the Earthseed sacred text, *The Book of the Living*. Bourne of the prophetic mind of Octavia Butler, this lasting truth is but one example of the visionary themes that populate her narratives. The works of science fiction writer Octavia Butler have long been gateway texts for feminists and womanists of color curious about the genre. For Adrienne Maree Brown, Octavia Butler's work is more than just an interesting read: it's an opportunity to think critically about what tools and skills we need as human beings to create the world we want. Emboldened by her own love of Butler's work, Brown has been pulling people towards each other with the words of Butler in gatherings that mirror many of the important themes that course through the texts.

Brown is a patternmaster. She brings communities together through the thread of Octavia Butler's writing in collaborative sessions that emerge around the curated content of her *Octavia Butler Strategic Reader*. On June 19, 2010, Brown facilitated the first session that created the reader at the Allied Media Conference in Detroit. The crowdsourced document included the questions and musings of nearly one hundred Octavia enthusiasts. Edited by Brown and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, it was made **available online for free** (<http://d2oadd98wnjs7n.cloudfront.net/medias/882540/files/20130620110750-OctaviaButlerStrategicReader.pdf?1371751674>) to anyone interested in working with the texts.

Part of the symposium description read: "From faith to facilitation, interpersonal relationships to trans-local networks, survival of the body versus survival of values and spirit and culture, and above all, communication, Butler foresaw the patterns we are currently participating in and offered guidance for how to navigate them with integrity." I had the pleasure of being in the room as Brown expertly facilitated the group to bring forth our collective wisdom surrounding Butler's work. She set up the space by explaining her deep connection to Butler through the identification of major themes from selected texts. The crowd broke apart into groups where we discussed

different books and generated questions for the reader. We also participated in a fishbowl discussion, where different people came in and out of the conversation as the group listened.

Brown shaped the conversation to reflect the Butlerian, feminist, and womanist principle of collectivity. She helped hold the space, but required the active participation of all the people in the room. We created a non-hierarchical, interdependent community as we experienced multiple forms of knowledge creation and expansion. These themes in particular come through in the following interview.

The *Reader* has grown from these crowdsourced questions into emergent strategy sessions that Brown facilitates across the country, as well as the forthcoming anthology that includes movement leaders thinking through the issues of our world by writing their own science fiction. The crowdsourcing model is utilized again as Brown and co-editor Walidah Imarisha used **Indiegogo** (<http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/octavia-s-brood-science-fiction-stories-from-social-justice-movements>) to raise nearly twice the amount needed to fund the publication of the anthology.

When I heard about the *Ada* special issue I reached out to Brown immediately because her projects show the real world possibilities that prolonged engagement with Feminist Science Fiction can generate. In the following interview conducted through the digital co-mingling of our voices via Google Hangout, Brown and I cover a lot of ground. Please see the list of questions below.

Who are you and how did you find out about Octavia Butler?

Do you see Octavia Butler using Science Fiction to deal with the "messiness" of human beings?

What makes her work feminist? What do you think about the issues of consent her work raises?

What lessons have you learned from Octavia?

What was Octavia's Brood? How did that project begin?

What has Octavia taught you?

What do you think about how technology is discussed in her work?

How did you decide to make the reader? What made you want to create a collaborative process with this work?

How did you become such an excellent facilitator?

I've read and seen you talk about how Octavia's work asks you to redefining "strategy." You mention moving toward a model of emergent strategy as her characters do via their relationships, being present, and communication. How do we build these strategies?

What does embodied organizing feel like? How do we think about ableism and class as it relates to embodied organizing?

How does your food and education justice work fit into your conceptualizing of the Reader and the world we want?

What do you want for folks who engage the Reader?

What do you want for the legacy of Octavia and your work in the world?

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Moya Bailey (<https://adanewmedia.org/author/moyabailey1>)

Moya Bailey is a graduate of the Emory University Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department. She is interested in how race, gender, and sexuality are represented in media and medicine. She is the founder and co-conspirator of Quirky Black Girls, a network for strange and different black girls. She loves all things Octavia Butler and is part of a group planning a series of events to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Butler's passing in 2016.

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