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Pasadena on her Mind: Exploring Roots of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction

Carl Abbott

Portland State University, abbottc@pdx.edu

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Pasadena on Her Mind: Exploring Roots of Octavia E. Butler's Fiction

Octavia Estelle Butler published her first science fiction story in 1971, at age 24, and built an increasingly successful and important writing career until her death in 2006, winning major science fiction awards and a MacArthur Fellowship. In her dozen novels, this California native crafted stories about the struggles of mutants and misfits to build community, about the symbiotic coupling of humans and alien species, about a time traveler discovering how to survive in a past society, and about a visionary rebuilding society around a new religion.

An African American woman who pioneered in the historically white and male field of SF, Butler has become a model and inspiration for younger writers who have produced collections with titles like *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* and *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*.¹ When the Huntington Library opened her voluminous papers to researchers in 2014, they immediately drew scholars and artists. One of the Library's most heavily used collections, the papers have already provided the basis for scholarly articles, a literary biography, and significant public programming ranging from an exhibit at the Huntington to a year-long program in 2016 called "Radio Imagination" in which artists and writers artists responded to her archive.²

As a historian who has long worked on the history of western cities and more recently on the relationships between the American experience and science fiction, I felt the same magnetic pull, although in a somewhat different direction. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* opens with a powerful picture of near-future Los Angeles in gradual but terminal decline, and the availability of her papers raised the intriguing possibility of finding clues to how she transformed

her experience as a southern California resident into depictions of the region's future. This opportunity, I hoped, would help me build on some of my previous work on depictions of southwester cities by writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Rudolfo Anaya.

When I began to open those boxes in the stillness of the Ahmanson Reading Room and noisily extract spiral-bound notebooks from their manila envelopes, I was envisioning an article about Butler and the greater Los Angeles metropolis. What emerged instead is the central role of her hometown of Pasadena, a subject that I am exploring by tacking back and forth among her stories and novels, her life in Pasadena, and the city's history and geography in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In effect I have been trying to combine the roles of historian with those of biographer and literary analyst, seeking to understand how Butler's own past may have shaped her thinking about alternative presents and futures.

Starting as a teenager, Octavia Butler filled dozens of notebooks with observations, research notes, drafts of letters, outlines, and trial runs at stories. These commonplace books are a fascinating and sometimes intimate entry into the mind of one of California's master writers. They include discarded fragments for her novels and her own comments on her work. At the end of 1977, when she was thirty years old, she included a short autobiographical statement: "I was born in Pasadena, California in 1947 and except for scattered months of living in the desert just outside Victorville, California, I have lived in Pasadena until 1970 when I escaped to Los Angeles, did some sort of psychological somersault and began writing about Pasadena. It seemed a much nicer place as soon as I didn't have to live there."³

Why did this ambitious science fiction writer turn back to Pasadena, even with Cal Tech not the most futuristic or exotic of everyday locales? Butler recognized that one of her recurring themes was the tension between otherness and community.⁴ My suggestion is that repeatedly

writing versions of Pasadena into her speculative fiction was one way for her to deal with her own otherness within a quintessentially California city, to stake a claim in a place where she had grown up as a marginal citizen.

The Pasadena of Butler's childhood had grown since the 1880s as a self-satisfied municipality of wealth and conservative politics, serving as a bedroom for Los Angeles businessmen but also proclaiming a strong identity as a separate and distinct community (with its own unincorporated "suburb" of Altadena just to the north). From a political base of business-class Republicanism, it became a center for militant anti-Communist conservatism in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ It was also a city where racial tensions grew the African American population increased from roughly 3000 in 1940 to 14,587 in 1960, or 12.5 percent of the city total. More than 60 percent of Pasadena residential properties at mid-century carried racially restrictive covenants, a measure actively promoted by the business community in the years around 1940. Although declared legally unenforceable by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948, such covenants continued to be invoked into the 1950s. Many businesses followed southern-style segregation policies into the same decade, and the city integrated a public swimming pool only after persistent pressure and legal action from the local NAACP chapter.⁶

Butler saw herself as an outsider not only because of her race but also from personal characteristics. An only child raised by a mother who was a domestic worker, she grew into a tall, gawky, and "tiresomely shy" adolescent whose second home was the Pasadena public library.⁷ Her size was occasionally an advantage, as when it helped her access the adult sections of the library at an early age and when it later allowed her to take physically demanding jobs like warehouse work while she struggled as a writer. It also made it hard to blend into the

background. She was sometimes misperceived as male because of her height, short hair style, and deep voice and at other times mistakenly assumed to be lesbian.

As her mother moved several times, the everyday world of Butler's childhood was the section of Pasadena and adjacent Altadena bounded by Colorado Boulevard to the south and Lake Avenue to the east. She passed through two different elementary schools and two junior highs before graduating in 1965 from John Muir High School, a massive comprehensive school of 3000 students with middle class white students from Altadena and La Canada Flintridge as well as black students from northwest Pasadena. She had the support of an extended family, but she remained awkward and self-isolated, living in books and starting to write stories in her early teens. As her friend Steven Barnes commented, the adult Butler was someone who lived very much in her head, and she got an early start.⁸ Her race was a source of tension even in her multi-racial neighborhood and required constant vigilance when she visited other parts of Pasadena and Los Angeles.⁹ She graduated from high school only weeks before the Watts Rebellion, and she could observe the rising racial tensions in Pasadena in the second half of the 1960s while attending Pasadena City College and participating in the black student union.

Data from the U.S. Census offer a snapshot of Pasadena's racial geography during Butler's childhood. African Americans concentrated in Pasadena's northwestern quadrant—the neighborhoods where Butler lived in several different houses and apartments, played, and went to school. Census tracts are imperfect representations of living neighborhoods, but they are useful for sketching social geography. Two Pasadena census tracts were majority African American in 1960, both located north of Orange Grove Boulevard and west of Fair Oaks Avenue and extending roughly to Arroyo Avenue. Two other tracts counted more than 1000 African Americans, one located from Orange Grove south to Colorado Boulevard west of Fair Oaks and

the other bounded by Orange Grove, Fair Oaks, Washington Boulevard, and Los Robles Avenue. Together, the four contiguous tracts housed eighty percent of the city's African American population. Their 20,394 residents divided among 11,645 African Americans (57 percent of the area total), 6820 whites (33 percent), and 1929 "other races" (10 percent).

Pasadena school policy reflected this racial geography. The city gained national notoriety in 1950 for hiring and then quickly firing a noted progressive educator as superintendent of schools. There were multiple issues, including instructional approaches, budget increases, and the supposed influence of the United Nations, but school segregation was also central. The need for new schools for a growing population, including more students of color, entailed adjustments to attendance boundaries. This in turn raised the question of racial balance within each school, including whether white students from affluent enclaves like the East Arroyo neighborhood would be able to bypass their closest schools, which had substantial African American enrollment. The battle lasted in different forms from 1950 until courts forced the school district to mitigate *de facto* segregation in 1970.¹⁰ In the meanwhile, Butler attended several of the substantially minority schools that some white families wanted to avoid—Lincoln and Garfield elementary schools, Washington Junior High, and Muir High School.

Octavia Butler thus grew up in a local daily environment where people of color were the norm, but where African Americans shared streets, parks, and schools with whites, Asian Americans, and Latinos (the census recorded 8 percent of the residents of the four tracts as having Spanish surnames). Residents in this sort of community could seek everyday interaction across racial boundaries, or they could choose to build their networks from family, friends, and acquaintances of the same race. Given Butler's self-professed shyness, presence of an extended family, and her mother's insistence on participation in their Baptist church, the latter seems more

likely for her. At the same time, she necessarily interacted with white teachers, librarians, bookstore owners (she haunted used bookstores as well as libraries), and all the other representatives of Pasadena's dominant culture. The results were mixed; some of her teachers considered her lazy because of her shyness while others were supportive of her ambition to be a writer.

Her daily routine continued to be spatially limited for many years, in part because she never learned to drive. Indeed, I had easier mobility than she ever had as I drove my rented Nissan Versa around northwest Pasadena to search out and photograph her old addresses and to pull into the parking lot at the Central Library to get a feel for one of the most important places of her childhood. She first left California in 1970 on an exhausting cross-country bus trip to participate in the Clarion Workshop for fledgling SF writers at Clarion State College in the hills of northern Pennsylvania. On her return she moved less than twenty miles to West Boulevard in Los Angeles, where she lived for eighteen years, regularly taking the bus to research and write at the Los Angeles Central Library, to Santa Monica to write while looking at the ocean, and back and forth to Pasadena to visit her family. She returned to Pasadena in 1989 to be closer to her mother, living in a bungalow court on East Washington and then, with the help of increasing royalties and advances and with the backstop of her MacArthur Fellowship, purchasing a house in Altadena all of one block from the Pasadena city line in 1995.¹¹

She wrote "Child Finder," her second professional sale, in the pressure-cooker of the Clarion Workshop. Sequestered on a college campus in an unfamiliar landscape, and plunged into high intensity writing and critique sessions where she was the only student of color, she reached back to Pasadena for her setting. The story centers on a woman who can sense the latent psionic power in children and wants to hide her finds from an aggressive group of psis.

Away from the organization. As far away as I could get. 855 South Madison. An unfurnished three-room house for \$60 a month. . . . Most of the electrical outlets not working. Most of the faucets working all the time whether they were turned off or not. Tenant pays utilities. My house. And there were seven more just like it. All set in a straggly row and called a court.¹²

The city is unnamed, but Madison is a Pasadena street on which Butler had lived in the late 1960s. She depicted the bungalow court as especially seedy, but the basic description could fit plenty of places in her familiar quadrant of the city. The only masking was the address: “855 *South Madison*” is an actual house two miles from her own neighborhood. The story’s conflict mirrors the racial tensions that Butler knew from childhood, for the “child finder” and the young girl she is trying to protect are African Americans and the “organization” is white. In the climax, several other psi-active black children band together to protect the child finder and form a racially separate psi-active group.

A few years later, Butler’s home ground figured in the frame of *Kindred* (1979), a powerful novel in which a modern African American woman is abruptly and repeatedly transported backwards in time to a plantation in antebellum Maryland, where she must learn to live in a slave society. The transitions between present and past are especially jarring because Dana’s life initially reads like a realization of the author’s aspirations. Butler wrote the novel in her small duplex on West Boulevard, while Dana has been living in a “sardine-can sized apartment on Crenshaw Boulevard.” Dana is also an aspiring writer who has been surviving with crummy temp jobs before she meets and marries another writer, an element that might be read as implicit wish fulfillment. Because Dana and her husband each have apartments crammed with books “shelved and stacked and boxed and crowding out the furniture,” like Butler’s own

overflowing rooms, they find a small pleasant house in Altadena.¹³ “The moving was celebration enough for me,” Dana comments. The unpacking challenge is all the books, which Dana is energetically sorting into fiction and nonfiction . . . when she is thrown violently into the previous century, bouncing back and forth several times to recover physically and mentally in California before being flung back to Maryland.

Butler treated Pasadena more elaborately in *Mind of My Mind*, a novel that she began thinking about as a teenager and published in 1977 at age thirty. The book details the gathering of a group of “Patternists,” superhuman psionic adepts who can control “mutes” and bend them to their purposes. Early drafts placed the opening scene in a fictionalized Victorville,¹⁴ but Pasadena’s pull was too strong and Butler relocated the same action to “Forsyth.” Using the inside of a grocery bag, she drew a map of Forsyth that looks very like Pasadena. The actual north-south arteries of Lake and Fair Oaks are included and circled in ink to anchor the map. Other streets have conjectural equivalents: “Lago” may be Los Robles, “De Oro” may be Del Mar, “Western” may be California, and “Richmond” may be Colorado Boulevard. Both Lake and Fair Oaks are bus routes that Butler would have traveled, as are several of the likely equivalent streets. The map carefully identifies sections of Forsyth in ways that mirrored Pasadena’s social geography: an “old upper class area” southwestward of Fair Oaks; a “mid class area” and “new mid class area” east of Lake; an “old section lowest class” north on Fair Oaks; and an “old section lower lower middle” north on Lago/Los Robles.¹⁵

The published version of *Mind of My Mind* did not utilize the map directly, using different street names and transposing the poor, multiracial neighborhood to the southwest side, but Pasadena of the 1960s is still recognizable as Butler’s unenthusiastic image of Forsyth: “A dead town. Rich people, old people, mostly white people.” The action moves between a modest

duplex where African American Mary Larkin has grown up and a house easily recognizable from Pasadena and San Marino equivalents: “three-story white stucco mansion, Spanish tile roof, great arched doorway, clusters of palm trees. “

Something more than simple background is also involved. Butler used *Mind of My Mind* to wield symbolic power over a community where she had grown up far from the centers of power. The Patternists too are outsiders, but with great mental powers, and they make Forsyth a target of a quiet invasion. The “actives” infiltrate the city house by house as they expand their own numbers and mentally compel normal people to foster their children and perform other useful tasks. In two years the Patternists number 1500. They take over the best section of town, repurpose the elite private school, and quietly control the city government. Butler imagined even more rapid growth in one of the drafts: “From seven to over seven thousand, in two years . . . we increased our population geometrically almost every two months.”¹⁶

Butler played with the response of the normal Forsythers as she worked on the manuscript. In one discarded version, the locals resist, much as people of Missouri and Illinois fought the Mormons. After what she apparently imagined as an anti-psi riot, she has one of the Forsythers talking to a reporter: “These people just aren’t like us. They aren’t . . . Well . . . they aren’t even human. . . . We aren’t a prejudiced people. Take a look at our schools and businesses. Black white and yellow working side by side. . . . It’s just a matter of whether or not we’re going to tolerate this sort of godless insanity in our midst.” As she revised, however, Butler made the interaction more subtle. Because Patternists have no outward difference from normal residents, she decided that they could quietly expand until “Forsyth, California . . . has been completely taken over by Patternists.” When they are finally noticed, they are well established, superficially respectable, and able “to pass themselves off as one of Southern Calif’s many cults.”¹⁷

Butler found capturing and controlling Pasadena by proxy to be an appealing idea, whether consciously or not, and she toyed with the same scenario as she struggled to craft the story that became *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a powerful novel of near-future California that went through many very different versions before she was satisfied. *Sower*'s protagonist Lauren Olamina is a gifted teenager who slowly comes to realize her capacity for leadership, but she started in Butler's mind as a mature and powerful adult who has successfully articulated a religious philosophy and created a community under her autocratic control. In an early fragment, "Loren" Olamina plans a stealthy takeover of northwestern Pasadena. This version of Loren can again be read as a stand-in for Butler, being described as someone who was born and raised in the neighborhood, went away to college, and returned against her expectations in her mid-thirties to plot its conquest—whereas Butler was forty-two when she picked out this version on her typewriter and had recently moved back to Pasadena herself.

In this fragment, the city's identity is front and center as Loren instructs her lieutenants about how to take over "a not-very-nice neighborhood in Pasadena, California." They should look for churches and houses to purchase in the area bounded by Washington Boulevard, Woodbury Road, Fair Oaks Avenue, and Lincoln Avenue—that is, the Pasadena neighborhoods where Butler grew up. The purchases will be made under multiple company and individual names to keep things quiet, and she plans to place a few of her followers at city hall to make sure that the local government continues to ignore the neighborhood. As the community grows, "eventually, we'll take over the area across Lincoln—all the way over to the arroyo and in the other direction over to Lake Avenue."¹⁸ In the process they will gradually be making converts among black Protestants and Latino Catholics by force of example. "Best to settle among them

Octavia Butler was well aware of the problems facing a science fiction writer who tries to follow the standard maxim to “write what you know,” given that she is writing about the unknown. As she put it in a speech about how to get published, “Well, frankly, what I knew I considered boring. I lead an unexciting life and I wrote, at least partly, to add a little excitement.” Nevertheless, she admits, she *did* write what she knew, time and again: the San Fernando Valley in the final version of *Parable of the Sower*, the very familiar No. 12 bus in “Speech Sounds,” and, of course, Pasadena.¹⁹

Sometime before 1970, Butler wrote in an autobiographical note that “I was born in Pasadena, California in 1947 and except for some scattered months of living in the desert just outside Victorville, I’ve lived in Pasadena ever since. This is a terrible thing to have done and I hope to leave soon, if only for Los Angeles.”²⁰ As we’ve seen, her explicit opinion changed after she accomplished that move, but her literary response remained complex. Pasadena and Altadena provided conveniently familiar places for an author who always wanted to visualize the settings for her stories in detail—Humboldt County for *Parable of the Talents*, the Chesapeake tidewater for *Kindred*, and the North Cascades for *Fledgling*, in addition to Southern California. But the towns were more than a convenient source of houses and streets, for Butler used her fiction to stake her own claim over her home ground as a place both to aspire to and to control.

Fiction is only one way to insert oneself into the narrative of a community. Butler also attended her 20 year reunion at John Muir High School and participated in other Pasadena events when invited. When her career was well established and sanctioned by the MacArthur Foundation, the Pasadena Arts Council in 1999 honored her with a Gold Crown Award for contributions to the region’s cultural landscape.²¹ Indeed, one reader of this essay has pointed out that she used her high school alumni bio to list the books she’d published and awards won as a

reminder to people who might have disregarded or bullied her. It most surely have been satisfying for someone who had grown up poor in Pasadena to have the Huntington Library, an elegant legacy of the white elite, eager to acquire her papers.

Octavia Butler was a complex and compelling artist who did not fit easily into common patterns. She grew up a shy, bookish outlier in her own community. She built a career as a professional writer in a field where she was instantly recognizable as only its second major African American writer. Pasadena was home, where she grew to adulthood from 1947 to 1970, where she regularly visited family members from 1970 to 1988, and where she lived again until 1999. It was a familiar place where she had found support and opportunities and where her mother lived until her death in 1996. It was also a place where her race, economic status, appearance, and gender stereotypes could make her an outsider.

Science fiction may seem a peculiar arena of study for historians interested in the past, but we are already accustomed to seeking insight from realistic fiction, reading William Dean Howells for help understanding New York, for example, or James T. Farrell for Chicago. This exploration suggests that speculative fiction can sometimes have similar value in illuminating an author's world. For this project, I took a trip into alternative futures in search of past time. The ways that Octavia Butler depicted and transformed Pasadena offer a window into her own thinking, but also into the power of race and class in the very real Pasadena that shaped that life. As a writer of science fiction, she imagined alternative futures in which her city's trajectory diverges radically from its mundane development. Pasadena was background and heritage that she processed and utilized in multiple ways, sometimes as neutral or positive setting, and sometimes as a

place that she could freight with symbolic meaning and perhaps even symbolic payback. In either way, she was a writer who had Pasadena on her mind.

¹ Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2015); Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl, ed., *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2013).

² See <https://clockshop.org/project/radio-imagination>. There have also been special conferences at the University of California-San Diego in 2016 (Shaping Change: Remembering Octavia E. Butler through Archives, Art, and Worldmaking) and the Huntington in 2017 (Octavia E Butler: Convergence of an Expanding Field). Gerry Canavan, *Octavia Butler* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016) is the best short introduction to her life and work.

³ Large Commonplace Book, Folder 3126, Octavia E. Butler Papers, Huntington Library. Further citations to the Butler Papers will be by folder number, as OEB 000.

⁴ Interview by Cynthia Lowenthal, Nov. 3 1998, p. 10, OEB 903.

⁵ Michelle Nickerson, Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁶ Michael E. James, The Conspiracy of the Good: Civil Rights and the Struggle for Community in Two American Cities, 1875-2000 (New York: Peter Lang 2005), 245-48.

⁷ "Telling My Stories," draft revision of a short piece for Maureen Michelson, *Women and Work*, ca. 1990, OEB 2488.

⁸ Steven Barnes, Skype interview by author, August 8, 2017.

⁹ Her papers include accounts of racially charged incidents at the Ralph's supermarket at Walnut and Lake in Pasadena, close to her neighborhoods and still a bustling business today (typescript "For 'Journeys'", OEB 759) and at a movie theater in Los Angeles when she tried to see *Apocalypse Now* (Commonplace Book, Oct 9, 1979, OEB 3175). There were undoubtedly other incidents that she did not record.

¹⁰ David Hulburd, *This Happened in Pasadena* (New York: Macmillan, 1951); Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism*, 67, 80-88; James, *Conspiracy of the Good*, 275-76. Cross-neighborhood busing for school integration implemented in 1970 quickly generated political pushback. See Tom Wicker, "Integration in Pasadena," *New York Times*, April 27, 1973. <http://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/27/archives/integration-in-pasadena-in-the-nation.html>.

¹¹ In 1999, after her mother's death, she moved to Seattle for the cooler climate and the high green mountains, especially Mount Rainier. Phone interview with Leslie Howle, March 22, 2017.

¹² Octavia Butler, "Child Finder," *Unexpected Stories* (NY: Open Road Integrated Media: published electronically). The story was written in 1970 and acquired by Harlan Ellison for the anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*, which was never published.

¹³ Butler's Los Angeles home and neighborhood are described in Larry McCaffery, *Across the Wounded Galaxies: Interviews with Contemporary American Science Fiction Writers* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 54-70. Steven Barnes suggests that she never felt completely safe and at home there, and her papers are filled with thoughts about the kind of house that she hoped to buy, perhaps in Santa Monica.

¹⁴ Outline for *Mind of My Mind*, ca. 1975, OEB 1313.

¹⁵ The map is OEB 1285. Also see a typescript fragment dated May 5, 1975, in OEB 1341.

¹⁶ Draft fragment for *Mind of My Mind*, OEB 1327.

¹⁷ Handwritten notes for *Mind of My Mind*, ca. 1975, OEB 1305 and OEB 1306.

²³ Typescript titled “Loren Olamina--Shape God,” ca. 1989, OEB 1720.

¹⁹ OEB 828: Draft of speech: “How to Write Fiction, Get it Published, and Get Paid for It” (ca. 1983). Her example here was “Speech Sounds,” a story in which Pasadena figures as an unobtainable refuge from a chaotic Los Angeles where everyone has lost the capacity for intelligent speech. In notes for “Blindsight,” a novel that she labored over for many years but never published, she also drew the setting directly from her earlier life: “When he [Aaron] leaves his Aunt Sibyl for his mother’s new house (Our place in Altadena—two bedrooms, big lot, old but handsome and comfortable). Only genteelly shabby. Next door is a newer handsomer little court of two-bedroom houses with small yards” (OEB 119).

²⁰ Autobiographical statement, OEB 101.

²¹ Folder 343 (23): Newspaper clipping May 28, 1999: “Pasadena’s supporters, stars will take a bow.”