

FLORIAN BAST, *Of Bodies, Communities, and Voices: Agency in Writings by Octavia Butler*, (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 221 pp.

In April 2014, the *Guardian* caused a stir by announcing that two previously unpublished stories—a novella entitled “A Necessary Being” and a short story, “Childminder”—had been found among notes and papers at a library in San Marino, CA.<sup>1</sup> The author of these texts was none other than Octavia Butler, the first black woman writer to gain fame in science fiction and the first to receive a MacArthur Fellowship for outstanding achievements in writing. The pieces were published in June 2014, immediately triggering a multitude of reviews in magazines, newspapers, and blogs within and outside of academia as well as an initial round of academic articles. The renewed attention around Octavia Butler thus highlights her continuing relevance within and influence on the cultural landscape of the United States, not only as a black woman writer who has considerably changed the ways in which we define the genres of science fiction and of African American literature, but as an iconic literary figure whose artistry touches audiences “as limitless as the identities of the characters in her writing” (Hampton 248).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Florian Bast’s monograph arrives at a particularly exciting time in Butler scholarship.

In his book, Bast analyzes selected works of Butler’s oeuvre through the lens of a central philosophical category, agency, arguing that Butler’s writing encompasses numerous texts that are centrally engaged with exploring the intricate ethical and theoretical complexities of agency—not only as individual texts but also in intertextual dialogue with each other. In so doing, Bast asserts further by echoing Barbara Christian’s “Race for Theory,”<sup>3</sup> Butler’s work both contributes to theoretical conceptions of agency by engaging with

ongoing philosophical debates around it and exposes “the consequences that such general conceptualizations [of agency] have on those who face (multiple forms of) oppression” (18–19). Agency, as Bast points out, has been and continues to be paramount to African American (women’s) literary history, particularly with regards to constructions of the body, of community, and of voice (each of which is addressed in one of the three analytical chapters in this study) as well as to issues such as subjectivity, freedom, racism, and sexism, among many others (12). Yet this study’s focus on agency not only brings to the forefront the complex dynamics of oppression and marginalization in Butler’s texts, a notion that resonates particularly with a doubly-marginalized writer of black feminist science fiction. Even more importantly, Bast utilizes a highly productive analytical tool that does justice to and allows for the multifaceted—and often highly ambiguous—intersections between Butler’s heterogeneous works, which time and again balk at one-dimensional perspectives, narrow political agendas, strict ideological dogmas and simple or preconceived conclusions.

By identifying and analyzing the many aspects of agency found in and between Butler’s works, Bast’s study thus fills an important desideratum, as he provides the first book-length study on agency in Butler’s oeuvre (and, in fact, in African American literature overall)—a considerable achievement given the vast and continuously growing body of scholarship on the fiction of this author.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a multitude of influential scholars, ranging from Donna Haraway, Sheryl Vint, and Roger Luckhurst to Angelyn Mitchell, Sandra Y. Govan, and Caroline Rody, have addressed various agency-related themes in Butler’s work, including constructions of power, subjectivity, freedom or hegemony. It is a major achievement of Bast’s study that he productively draws on and successfully ties into his own project this vast polyphony of theoretical voices, which not only resonate in the conceptual chapter on agency following his introduction, but particularly come to the forefront and are engaged

<sup>1</sup> Alison Flood, “Unseen Octavia E. Butler Stories Recovered,” *Guardian*. *Guardian* (2014): n. pag. Web. 8 March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Jerome Hampton, “Octavia E. Butler,” *Callaloo* 19.2 (2006): 246–48. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory.” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 348–59. Print.

<sup>4</sup> To get an impression of how much Octavia Butler’s fiction has piqued the interest of scholars, one only has to look at the sheer number of articles and book chapters published on *Kindred*, Butler’s famous neo-slave narrative, which amounts to over 40 publications alone.

with in each of his subsequent analytical chapters that turn to six selected primary works by Octavia Butler: *Kindred* (1979), *Dawn* (1987), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), *Survivor* (1978), *Fledgling* (2005), and “The Evening and the Morning and the Night” (1987). In so doing, *Of Bodies, Community, and Voices* succeeds in an in-depth analysis of a “heretofore underdiscussed aspect of [Butler’s] work” that proves a highly productive contribution to the newly reinvigorated discussion of her work (14). Besides engaging with various theoretical approaches that have been applied to the works of Octavia Butler, Bast also directs the reader to a wide scope of scholarly works within extensive footnotes and features an impressive range of secondary sources within his comprehensive bibliography.

In particular, the second chapter lays the theoretical basis for the study as Bast theorizes a concept of agency that is concretely applicable to the primary texts selected for his readings, defining agency as “an individual’s capability to reach a decision about themselves and implement it” (25). Moreover, Bast asserts that within Butler’s texts, agency manifests itself through what he refers to as *agential acts*, that is, acts that are “intended to achieve a higher degree of agency, explicitly to express, defend, or expand agency” (25). Furthermore, with Bast treating the concept of agency as historically contingent and culturally constructed, this chapter lays the groundwork for contextualizing and historicizing this philosophical category within discourses of the Enlightenment’s liberal humanism. It also turns to (ongoing) postmodern theoretical debates that have fiercely negotiated liberal humanist conceptualizations of agency. In this regard, the study focuses on challenges that have been articulated in particular within feminist and black feminist theoretical work on agency which—together with African American literary criticism and science fiction criticism—form the backbone of Bast’s own approach to selected primary works by Butler. These theoretical debates on agency are picked up again with more topical foci in the subsections introducing the three analytical chapters of this book, with each one focusing on one specific conceptualization of agency—in connection with the body, community, and voice, respectively—that is then analyzed in two different primary texts.

The first topical chapter of Bast’s study turns to the complexities of agency’s em-

bodiment in two novels by Butler: *Kindred* and *Dawn*. Against the backdrop of African American literary history—and particularly the slave narrative as inherently tied to the embodied experiences of its narrators—Bast argues in his reading of *Kindred* that Butler’s novel openly negotiates and dismantles the Enlightenment’s legacy of disembodiment. According to him, it simultaneously “insists on the embodiment of agency and subjectivity, choosing to reference and to complicate African American literary traditions of narrating and negotiating issues of agency, subjectivity, and the body from a postmodern perspective” and in “persistently choosing to narrate agency through and in terms of the body [...] actually performs this central concern” (49). This assessment is put into stark contrast in the second reading of *Dawn* (the first part of Butler’s Xenogenesis trilogy) which, in Bast’s reading, lays bare the drastic and dangerous consequences that an ideology of total embodiment can have for conceptualizations of agency.

Chapter four, “Community: The Relationality of Agency and Relational Agential Acts” similarly explores the wide and highly complex spectrum of Butler’s negotiations of specific conceptualizations of agency, focusing on a facet of agency that has played a particularly central role within black feminist literary criticism and black women’s fiction: its relationality. Similarly to the previous chapter, the study first introduces a central notion of liberal humanist constructions of agency—the connection between agency and autonomy—which, as Bast’s readings subsequently argue, is forcefully challenged by Butler’s fiction as the “two strikingly different texts” (102) selected for this chapter, *Parable of the Talents* and *Survivor*, exemplify. By putting the two novels into dialogue with each other in order to “shed light on their interconnection and on shared narrative projects within the oeuvre” (102), Bast asserts that each of these texts insists on a relationality of agency on various textual levels, including their respective diegetic set-ups, yet expresses this notion through different agential acts: *Parable of the Talents* lays open the oppressive undercurrents of the Enlightenment’s constructions of autonomy and rugged individualism and explores the central agential act of community building. *Survivor*, on the other hand, foregrounds relational agency through the agential act of community choosing.

The study's final analytical chapter turns to a conceptualization of agency that has always been central in African American literature: the deeply entwined connection between agency and homodiegetic narration. In his readings of Octavia Butler's short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" and the vampire novel *Fledgling*, Bast illustrates the complexity and ambiguity that the textual agential act of first-person narration can entail: "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" emphasizes the immense agential potential of voice as a means to establish a coherent self against the threat of deterministic destruction and marginalization. In stark contrast, as Bast points out, *Fledgling*—while following the plot structure of what Bast has elsewhere referred to as a "black female vampiric Bildungsroman"<sup>5</sup>—nevertheless unsettles any simplified reading of the empowering potential of self-narration by using an ethically unreliable narrator and revealing her highly problematic treatment of those close to her. In numerous detailed and nuanced close-readings that shed new light on key scenes of the novel—a characteristic that applies to the analyses of all of Butler's texts he engages in and that constitutes one of the central strengths of Bast's work—he convincingly argues that the novel "fundamentally questions agency as the *conditio sine qua non* of human happiness" (215), choosing instead a "programmatic ambivalence that prioritizes a minute dissection of the multilayered dynamics of oppression over both a definite judgment of the arrangement and a clear binary of oppressor and victim" (215).

In so doing, Bast's analysis of "The Evening, the Morning and the Night" and *Fledgling* gives the reader yet another example of the wide and diverse scope of the intricate complexities and highly multifaceted engagements with agency that can be found in and between selected texts by Octavia Butler, thus underlining the effectiveness of his choice to focus solely on one author in his study. Given the structure and depth of the topical chapters—both in their theoretical subsections focused on specific conceptualizations of agency

and in their close-readings of primary texts by Butler—they can well stand on their own and give strong evidence for the central arguments Bast lays out in his introduction. Yet, by also entwining and cross-referencing Butler's heterogeneous reflections on agency between chapters, Bast simultaneously manages to tie this back into his overarching discussion of agency in Butler's works and thus to give his study a coherent framework.

However, while Bast's conclusion opens up other potential ways to investigate as complex a concept as agency and points to continuing desiderata in this field—not only in other novels by Octavia Butler but also in other genres of African American literature, such as black poetics—it would have been welcome to have a more elaborate outlook on other works by African American women writers using the fantastic in their negotiations of agency. Among those who very consciously followed in Butler's footsteps—demonstrating that "[f]antasy, [...] whether expressed in separate genres like science fiction or [...] as an integral element of folk culture, allows for fantasies of power" (Koenen 212)<sup>6</sup>—one might think of Tananarive Due, Nisi Shawl or Andrea Hairston, among many others. This notwithstanding, Bast's *Of Bodies, Community, and Voices: Agency in Writings by Octavia Butler* is a well-structured, highly insightful and impressively researched study that constitutes a significant contribution not only to African American literary criticism but to the field of American Studies. As Bast rightly points out in his conclusion, turning to the category of agency always also brings us, as Americanists, to issues of social justice that lie at the heart of our discipline. Thus, it can only be hoped that this study will inspire more scholars to further explore the intricacies of agency in American literature and, in so doing, to follow Bast's venture into this field of research. As he concludes: "Countless other possibilities of engaging this ethically charged, literarily crucial, and philosophical complex concept beckon" (221).

Marie-Luise Löffler (Bremen)

<sup>5</sup> Florian Bast, "I Won't Always Ask': Complicating Agency in Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*," *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* 11 (2010): n. pag. Web. 10 March 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Koenen, *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power: The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women's Literature* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 1999), Print.