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# Bred to Be Superhuman: Comic Books and Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's Patternist Series

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## Bred to be Superhuman: Comic Books and Afrofuturism in Octavia Butler's Patternist Series

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We were brought here to function as if we were not human but tools, machines, disposable working parts. The laws of the land were perverted to support that inhumane assumption. Black people regaining a sense of self and subjectivity beyond that of slave, and garden tool, and essentially a non-human, is a mutation of a mutation. We were also bred to be superhuman, more than human, even in our endurance for taxing labor and suffering. So becoming mortal represents a progression and regression for black Americans.

—Greg Tate (in Goodison 625)

When I was a kid, I lived on comics. My mother actually went into my room one night or one day when I wasn't home and ripped all my comic books in half. A familiar experience, I suspect, for anybody growing up when I was because they were supposed to rot your mind.

—Octavia E. Butler (in MIT 147)

Octavia E. Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), the only one of her books to be set even partially in Africa, provides the "origin story" for the Patternist series of novels that began with *Patternmaster* (1976). *Patternmaster* presents a dystopian future in which a tiny sliver of humanity has enslaved the rest through telepathic control of an energy field called "the Pattern"; *Wild Seed* explores how the Patternists first arose as the unintended consequence of a millennia-long breeding project administered by Doro, an immortal East African vampire, with the periodic assistance of his companion and lover, the shapeshifter Anyanwu (later called Emma). Here, Tate's observation about an African diasporic subject "bred to be superhuman" is rendered disturbingly literal. In the Patternist books a secret competitor to white hegemony is revealed to exist alongside modernity's actually existing history of intergenerational slavery and forced reproduction, an alternate history that is both a deviation from and a nightmarish replication of white supremacy. But despite its status as a

competitor, the results of Doro's experiments liberate neither humanity in general nor black people in particular; instead, they culminate in an even more totalizing domination by an even more untouchably powerful elite, a state of affairs to which any resistance seems utterly impossible.

The bleakly anti-utopian future history of the Patternists dominates Butler's early writing. Of her first six novels, only one, *Kindred* (1987), is a standalone work—and even *Kindred* began its life as a Patternist book before Butler concluded that “it didn't seem to fit” (McCaffery and McMenamin 21).<sup>1</sup> Butler started work on the first version of the Patternist narrative as soon as she started writing sf, at age twelve, and she would not publish a novel that was deliberately and unambiguously set outside the Patternist milieu until *Dawn* (1987). Understanding the Patternist series is thus crucial for tracing her early development as a writer and thinker. Often overlooked in favor of her superior later work, the Patternist books establish structures and themes that loom large across her oeuvre—the pliability of the human body, the cruelty of the mind, the endurance of the soul—while highlighting her trademark fascination with power: its seductivity, and its misuse.

This article rereads the Patternist fantasy and its place in Butler's sf by way of an autobiographical detail that has also been frequently overlooked: her devoted comics fandom as a young woman. Here, I propose reading the Patternists as an Afrofuturist deconstruction of the figure of the superhero so familiar to DC and Marvel comics readers of the last century. By relocating the figure of the comic-book superhuman to Africa, Butler's *Patternmaster* interrogates the racist and misogynistic power fantasies undergirding both mainstream superhero myth and progressivist “grand narratives” of the upward march of history. Only in the later books in the series—in part through rediscovery and recuperation of an Afrofuturist tradition of opposition in superhero comics—is Butler able to entertain the faint utopian potentialities that superhero fantasy can still generate, beyond its usual logics of brutality, privilege, and domination.

### Origin story

Butler's own autobiographical descriptions of her origins as an sf writer typically begin with her viewing of a black-and-white B-movie called *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954): “I saw it when I was about 12 years old,”

<sup>1</sup> In the same interview, when asked “What was the origin of *Wild Seed*?” she describes her “lingering sense that *Kindred* ... had once been a different sort of novel that somehow involved Doro and Anyanwu in early America” (22-23).

she told an audience at MIT in 1994, “and it changed my life.” Butler's characteristically ironic and self-deprecating narrative of her thought process watching this movie concedes an early understanding of sf as a degraded genre, filled with plot holes and clichés:

As I was watching this film, I had a series of revelations. The first was that “Geez, I can write a better story than that.” And then I thought, “Gee, anybody can write a better story than that.” (Laughter/Applause) And my third thought was the clincher: “Somebody got paid for writing that awful story.” (Applause) So I was off and writing, and a year later I was busy submitting terrible pieces of fiction to innocent magazines. (“Devil”)

The story she began writing that night was an early version of *Patternmaster* (Sanders).

In her MIT talk (and others like it), Butler sought to differentiate the raw narrative *badness* of *Devil Girl*'s plotting from the free space of the imagination opened up in the 1960s by the possibility of new worlds and new histories. As she told an interviewer in 2006, “I was attracted to science fiction because it was so wide open. I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining” (Balagun 226). This wide-open horizon, she says elsewhere, was so attractive to her in part because of her sense that, as a “little ‘colored’ girl in that era of conformity and segregation ... my real future looked bleak”; in response she “fantasized living impossible, but interesting lives—magical lives in which I could fly like Superman, communicate with animals, control people's minds” (Butler “Conversation” 334)—all three of which would go on to structure key moments of *jouissance* in the Patternist series.

Crucially—and characteristically—the *adult* Butler came to understand this sense of unconstrained possibility quite dialectically. She suggests in the MIT talk that throughout the 1960s both sf and “science” more generally were hopelessly imbricated in the neocolonial politics of the nation-state, from *Devil Girl*'s Mars-Needs-Men! send-up of imperial fantasy, to a Space Race inseparably bound up in Cold War paranoia about “those evil Russians” (“Devil”). Still, the dreams of empire and widespread national paranoia were good for something; they at least made the wide-ranging speculations of sf “OK ... because prior to this, there had been the idea that comic books and science fiction could rot your brains” (“Devil”).

That reference to comic books is the only one in the MIT talk—but the sudden, unexpected inclusion of comics alongside sf in Butler's origin

story is not unusual. As she frequently discussed in interviews, comic books were a principal influence on her early imagination, rivaling the impact of sf film and prose. As quoted in the epigraph for this article, she told an MIT audience during that same 1998 visit, while appearing on a panel with Samuel Delany, that she “lived” on comic books as a child, sharing with many people who were young during that period the memory of her mother destroying her comics while she was out (which, of course, was done *for her own good*).<sup>2</sup> In interviews, Butler evinces the same combination of fondness and defensiveness around comic books that writers of her generation often exhibited towards sf as a whole:

I am alarmed by adults who say to little children, “Oh, my God, I don’t want my children reading comic books,” “I don’t want my children reading the Goosebumps series,” or “I want them only to read enlightened literature,” which bores the crap out of kids. Understandably, it wasn’t written for them. I recommend anything that gets them into reading. When they’re older, when they’re in high school, when they’re in college, even then a little junk food for the mind won’t hurt, as long as that’s not all they read. (Roswell 56)

At the MIT forum, the a-little-junk-food-won’t-hurt defense of comics is combined with strong nostalgia for the comics read by her generation, which she insists had “had a lot more language, a lot more words, and a lot more story” than more contemporary comics:

It wasn’t just Jack Kirbyesque people swatting other people and standing with their legs four feet apart. And gradually, it became just that, so that there were fewer and fewer and fewer words, less and less story, and a lot more people beating each other up or wiping each other out. (MIT)

<sup>2</sup> Delany, too, has expressed his personal fondness for comic books (see *Silent Interviews*), and even wrote two issues of *Wonder Woman* in the mid-1970s. Greg Tate suggests a close connection between sf, comics, and the black experience in twentieth-century America more generally: “I’ve been reading science fiction since the third grade. So I’ve always been drawn to all of that stuff. In some ways, there is an arc or trajectory that a lot of people go through, where you start out with comic books, and that leads to science fiction, and that leads to jazz or rock, and you’re kind of interested in people doing operatic, visionary, or mythological takes on race and the future, or race and space, and technology. It permeates so much of black culture in the last thirty years or so” (Goodison 624).

An interview with *The Crisis*, while similarly seeming to choose sf over comics, nonetheless places them together on a single continuum: “People think [sf is] stuff for kids, high-class comic books, and not that high-class” (Jackson 48).<sup>3</sup>

Comic books prominently appear on the list of genres the voracious young Butler consumed even before she discovered sf novels—“fairy tales, mythology, comic books, and animal stories—especially horse stories” (“Conversation” 340).<sup>4</sup> Butler rarely spoke about the influence of comic books on her work directly, but references to her early comics fandom are sprinkled across her interviews. She told Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin in 1988 that she was “very much into comic books” from the 1960s through “the early ’70s,” beginning with “the Superman D.C. comic books first, then Marvel, and so on”; she describes herself as a collector who “went around to all the secondhand stores and bought up the back issues as fast as I could” (16-17). Butler’s comics fandom remains sufficiently central to her self-identity that years later, in a 2006 interview, it even rises to her mind unprompted as a kind of anticipatory *memento mori*:

I imagine when I’m dead someone will have a huge yard sale or estate sale and I don’t care! Some of them are worth something. Even my comic books—I have first editions of this and that, the first issue of the *Fantastic Four*. I used to collect them, not in the way that people collect things now. I didn’t put them in plastic bags and never touch them. I read them and they looked pretty bad, some of them. But they’re still worth something just because they are what they are. (Sanders)

<sup>3</sup> This same union of media forms recurs again in her late short story “The Book of Martha” (2003), when the titular character, a black writer seemingly standing in for Butler herself, is approached by a being who appears to be God, offering “work for her to do, he said—work that would mean a great deal to her and to the rest of humankind.” Martha’s reaction to this strange cosmic offer originates out of Butler’s own twin childhood obsessions: “If she had been a little less frightened, she might have laughed. Beyond comic books and bad movies, who said things like that?” (190). Despite the ironic denigration of these two forms, the vision of a life of *meaning* that arises out of comics and bad movies is something noble and vital, and deeply attractive to the character of Martha—and, of course, to Butler herself, who considered those genres the origin points of her life as a writer.

<sup>4</sup> Butler’s adolescent interest in horse fantasy, discussed again at the conclusion of this article, has clear continuities not only with the comic book fantasy of bodily transformation but also with the utopian dolphin sequence in *Wild Seed*.

As Butler was born in June 1947, her period of intense comics collection would cover her life between that crucial age of 12 (when she began writing) to somewhere around 29, the age at which she published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976. This closely coincides with the "Silver Age" in comics production, in which the "Golden Age" superhero narratives (originally marketed to adults) were repurposed for a younger, mid-century audience, typically with newfound science-fictional focus. Butler was thus reading comics at a time when they were quite purposely reimagining themselves for the postwar context.

The popular designation of comic book history into "ages" is naturally a source of great consternation whenever one tries to get too specific about it, but in general we can delineate the eras as follows. The Golden Age of Comics is typically dated from the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (April 1938), and ends with the crash in superhero comics sales following the end of World War II. The Silver Age of Comics began in the mid-1950s with the reintroduction of DC superheroes in a more science-fictional register; the Green Lantern, for instance, now wields alien technology rather than a magical ring. In the middle period, Silver Age comics also saw the debut of the popular Marvel stable of characters, including the Fantastic Four (1961), the Incredible Hulk (1962), Iron Man (1963), and the X-Men (1963). The late Silver Age and early Bronze Age saw the introduction of black superheroes, such as the Black Panther (1966), the Falcon (1969), the Green Lantern John Stewart (1971), and Luke Cage (1972); prior to this, comics heroes had been almost exclusively white.

The Silver Age was characterized by both a shift in marketing towards children and teenagers, which tended to make the stories "safer" and frequently sillier, but also by the introduction of more three-dimensional, tortured heroes, such as Marvel's Spider-Man and The Thing, both unwilling recipients of superpowers that frequently complicated or destroyed their lives and the lives of those around them. This constitutive tension was ultimately resolved in the early 1970s shift to the Bronze Age, which saw comics shift permanently to more adult themes, in the process becoming significantly more violent, with a new focus on anti-heroes and no-win situations. The current era of comics production, dated from the publication of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* (1986-87) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), is commonly called the Dark Age of Comics, in which these more pessimistic themes are now hegemonic. As I will argue, Butler's Patternist series, with its abiding suspicion of power, and its anti-utopian pessimism about the prospects of changing the world for the better through force, would be quite at home in the Dark Age of Comics.

In some sense, one might be tempted to take comics as the secret key to much of Butler's fiction, from the infinite recombinations of biological form in the *Xenogenesis* series (1987-89) to the superpowered subjectivity of Shori, the mutant Ina, in her final novel, *Fledgling* (2005). Comics—and especially 1960s Silver Age comics—open up a field of imaginative potential that makes anything seem possible with the right combination of technology and DNA. The biological sublime that so fascinated Butler has its juvenile echo in midcentury superhero comics, whose characters are continually at risk of discovering that their brains and bodies are fundamentally different than they have always appeared to be, in ways that can be both empowering and terrifying. But nowhere in her work is this influence clearer than in the Patternist series, which finds the logic of superpowered mutation taken to its limit point in an apocalyptic future history of endless struggle. In the next section, I begin to build the reading of the Patternist series that emerges when we foreground this interest in comic books running across Butler's adolescence and young adulthood. My claim here is that *Patternmaster* shares key narrative structures with superhero comic books, which Butler reappropriates to produce an Afrofuturist and feminist critique of the very stories that first sparked her imagination. In the final section of the paper, I extend this analysis to two of the prequel novels, *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and *Wild Seed* (1980), which function in classic comics fashion as the "origin story" for the anti-utopian narrative situation depicted in *Patternmaster*, while also providing faint hints of a history that might (at least potentially) have gone another way. In the process, I explore Butler's critical engagement with an American pop cultural form whose preoccupations with whiteness and masculinity she transformed and reimagined from a perspective outside both.

*"I wanted to live forever and breed people"*

*Patternmaster*—the first book published in the series, the last in terms of internal narrative chronology—takes place after the new Patternist hegemony has been so long established that our contemporary moment is but a distant memory. Centered on Forsyth, California, the world of *Patternmaster* is dominated by "Houses" of telepaths participating in a network of psychic communication called "The Pattern"; the Patternists are organized as a kind of feudal aristocracy according to each telepath's strength in the Pattern, with a monarch, the Patternmaster, "holding" the Pattern and therefore controlling the network. We see an early glimpse of what this power entails when the current Patternmaster, Rayal, flexes

his psychic muscles to score a point in an argument with his wife (who is also his biological sister):

Royal jerked the Pattern sharply and Jansee jumped, gasping at the sudden disturbance. It was comparable physically to a painless but startling slap in the face.

"You see?" he said. "I've just awakened several thousand Patternists by exerting no more effort than another person might use to snap his fingers. Sister-wife, that is power worth killing for." (4)

The argument concerns the inevitability of violent struggle for control of the Pattern, particularly with respect to the couple's two sons, Coransee and Teray. Children of the strongest Patternist and his powerful wife, these two are the natural candidates for control of the Pattern in the next generation—and they will, insists Royal, have no choice but to kill each other. Royal asks, "Didn't I have to kill two brothers and a sister to get where I am?", and notes that he only survived these battles by marrying his "strongest sister" (3). Jansee remains "bitter" about this necessity (5), wishing her sons could save their violence for the Patternists' enemies, the Clayarks—but the ultimate trajectory of the narrative proves Royal right, depicting the struggle for the inheritance of the Pattern between its two possible heirs that only ends when Teray kills his older brother (191).

Through its flattening of the vast complexities of contemporary power relations into a single omnipresent and omni-oppressive force (the Pattern), narrativized as a power struggle within a single family, the book deploys the narrative strategy that Fredric Jameson—writing about Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and *The Dispossessed* (1974)—famously called "world reduction." Like Le Guin's ice world Gethen and desert planet Anarres, Butler's future Earth is an "experimental landscape in which our being-in-the-world is simplified in the extreme ... [so] as to vouchsafe, perhaps, some new glimpse as to the ultimate nature of human reality" (269). But whereas Le Guin's "operation of radical abstraction and simplification" is her "instrument in the conscious elaboration of a utopia" (271-72), Butler's world-reduction lays bare the monstrousness of power and the ease of human cruelty. In a history whose normal progression has been interrupted by shattering Events giving humans immense power—including an alien plague and the rise of telepaths—we can still think of nothing better to do but enslave and murder each other.<sup>5</sup> First-time

<sup>5</sup> The echo of Badiou suggested by the capital E of "Event" is intentional; the discovery of the Pattern is treated by the Patternists, however many centuries hence,

readers of *Patternmaster*, drawn into the narrative of struggle between feudal telepaths, may miss entirely the significance of the "mutes" who populate this world and serve the Patternists' houses. Anticipating the inescapable silence at the heart of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1987), these subaltern mutes are in fact *us*, normal, unaltered humans without telepathic ability; their individuality and self-determination has been completely subsumed into an even more monstrous version of slavery than that with which modernity began.<sup>6</sup> Some are beloved servants, even friends, while others are subject to constant rape, murder, and abuse—but none possesses a subjectivity that is independent from or capable of resistance to the superhuman Patternists. In the prologue, we even find that "hajji" mutes occasionally pilgrimage to Forsyth to worship the Patternmaster as if he were a God (*Patternmaster* 5).

Butler was adamant in interviews across her career that her books were not to be read as moral fables:

One of the things I've discovered even with teachers using my books is that people tend to look for "good guys" and "bad guys," which always annoys the hell out of me. I'd be bored to death writing that way. But because that's the only pattern they have, they try to fit my work into it. (qtd. in Glickman 40)

When Juan Williams used the word "evil" to describe the Oankali aliens in Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, she completely refused his terms:

Oh, no! No. No. No. No. I don't write about good and evil with this enormous dichotomy. I write about people. I write about people doing the kinds of things people do. And, I think even the worst of us just don't set out to be evil. People set out to get something. They set out to defend themselves from something. They are frightened, perhaps. They set out because they believe their way is the best way to perhaps enforce their way on other people. But, no, I don't write about good and evil. (Williams 164)

Butler's rejection of a comic-book logic of heroes and villains is explicit. As her explanation goes on, however, it seems perhaps better to say that

as an Event to which they all owe fidelity, which has permanently shaped all of their institutions and swept away everything old from its path.

<sup>6</sup> As Butler herself puts it, this is a worse form of domination than any around us today, because "the mutes don't know what's happening to them" and consequently "don't stand a chance" (McCaffery and McMenamin 15).

what she means is that she does not write about *good*—that she thinks people “doing the kinds of things people do” necessarily entails struggles for domination and control, the strong exerting themselves (to some degree or another, with some amount of restraint or another) on the weak. “Evil” is a forbidden category in her work precisely because she sees those behaviors we might naïvely wish to call “evil” as in fact completely ubiquitous. This is part and parcel of the explicitly Darwinist biologism that characterizes her later works, including both the *Xenogenesis* and *Parables* books; in the Williams interview, for instance, she says that human competition is easily mappable onto “the kinds of things you find in the lowest plants and animals,” and the specific model she offers for human sociality is the mindless competition of two algae growths as they spread across a rock (178-79).

What we find in *Patternmaster*, then, is a vision of the superhero transformed from its familiar comic-book context and stripped of several key legitimating factors that ordinarily license its violence, leaving behind simply the raw struggle for dominance that Butler believed was integral to all life. From the seven defining motifs of the superhero detailed by Richard Reynolds (16), *Patternmaster* loses the hero's devotion to justice, the mundanity of the superheroes' urban milieu, the drama of the alter-ego, and the loyalty to the existing regime of laws, leaving only the hero's isolation from society, particularly his parents,<sup>7</sup> the hero's immense power, and the mythic nature of the stories. Therefore, *Patternmaster* is, in effect, a superhero story stripped of basically all constraint, in which the power fantasy escapes the ideological bounds that usually rein it in. The Patternists are superheroes in a world in which human beings are primarily driven by Darwinist urges rather than ethical considerations—which is to say, the world as Butler understood it actually to exist. The telepathic powers of the Patternists are primarily deployed against the mutes (to make them perfect slaves), against the Clayarks (for the purposes of mass killing), and against each other (in psychic combat for supremacy); dominating each other, Butler suggests, is what we would actually do with superpowers.

<sup>7</sup> This is a crucial element of the narrative in the Patternist stories; telepaths going through adolescence find most telepaths extremely unpleasant to be around, and are thus nearly all raised in isolation from their parents. When *Patternmaster* opens, Tera is just leaving “school,” where he has been living throughout his teenage years (7); we see the origin of this child-rearing practice in *Mind of My Mind* (185-186). Butler was personally quite aware of the way the loss of her own father shaped her literary fascination with “parents who are unable to raise their own children” (McCaffery and McMenamin 15). It perhaps goes without saying that all of the most prominent superheroes—including Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man—are orphans.

Butler is quite open in interviews that the fascination with power across her work originated precisely within her own childhood fantasies of power. “I wrote about power,” she told Carolyn Davidson, “because I had so little” (35). In the Patternist series in particular, the fantasy of power and its absolutely free rein, however unappealing its presentation and however anti-utopian its politics, contains nonetheless an animating spirit of *jouissance* (provided of course that one gets to be Doro or the Patternmaster). Asked about the importance of immortality in her work, Butler makes her own personal identification with this fantasy of power clear:

When I was in my teens, a group of us used to talk about our hopes and dreams, and someone would always ask, “If you could do anything you wanted to do, no holds barred, what would you do?” I’d answer that I wanted to live forever and breed people—which didn’t go over that well with my friends. In a sense, that desire is what drives Doro in *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*. At least I made him a bad guy! (McCaffery and McMenamin 18)

To the extent that Doro and his Patternist descendants are a critique of power, then, they are a universal and anti-humanist one—a critique that crucially begins with tendencies that Butler identified within herself.

How, we might ask, did a loyal reader of Superman comics ever become so *cynical*? Superman—as every child knows—views his power through the lens of *noblesse oblige*, deploying the fantastic abilities given to him by Earth’s yellow sun to help the helpless; the first page of his introduction in *Action Comics* #1 famously refers to him as the “champion of the oppressed.” The Fantastic Four, and other superheroes of the early Marvel Silver-Age era, such as Spider-Man, received their powers through cosmic accident rather than through inborn superiority (Superman) or deliberate choice (Batman)—and yet, by and large, these superheroic characters choose to use their powers for good as well, even when (as with the Thing, Spider-Man, and many of the X-Men) their powers are disturbing, painful, or have deeply isolating side-effects.

Butler’s vision of superheroes and superpowers, drawing from her anti-utopian beliefs about the centrality of power, competition, and domination in human life, is quite different. In fact, she anticipates developments in superhero comics that would only begin to take shape significantly after she stopped reading them in the early 1970s. *Patternmaster*’s vision of superhuman telepaths using their gifts to fight each other and enslave humanity would be more at home not in comic’s optimistic Silver Age but in its so-called “Dark Age,” in which

superheroes are insecure, angry, selfish, jealous, and frequently deviant subjects, inflicting violence not in the name of some ethically rational, absolute notion of "justice" but for their own petty and flawed reasons. Indeed, the plot outline for *Patternmaster* sounds quite similar to the future imagined for the DC Universe in Alan Moore's proposed *Twilight of the Superheroes* series, which would have been dominated by feudal "Houses" sparring under one or another superhero's banner: the House of Steel, the House of Thunder, the House of Lanterns, and so forth. Pitched by Moore as "a spectacular and epic finale to the whole essential superhero dream," *Twilight of the Superheroes* would have found the superheroes acting as "new royalty" in the face of widespread social breakdown (Moore).

The elements of Moore's uncompleted story that eventually appeared as Alex Ross and Mark Waid's *Kingdom Come* (1996) are, if anything, even more pessimistic about the possibilities of a better world inaugurated through violence; in that story the next generation of superheroes following the familiar Justice League are far more interested in asserting their privileges and furthering their own advancement over their peers than in helping people, laying waste to huge swaths of the country as they fight. Such recent stories as DC's *Infinite Crisis* (2005-06) and Marvel's *Civil War* (2006-07) and *Avengers vs. X-Men* (2012) have begun to bring the narrative *telos* of *Twilight of the Superheroes* and *Kingdom Come* into official comics continuity, with the supposed superheroes now having done away with the villains altogether and instead directly fighting each other for supremacy. A number of recent productions—Warren Ellis's *The Authority* (1999-2010), which sees a Justice-League-style superhero team decide to cut out the middle man and just take over the world; Robert Kirkman's *Invincible* (2002- ), whose version of Superman is an alien from a space empire sent to lay the groundwork for eventual invasion; Mark Waid's *Irredeemable* (2009-12), which sees a Superman stand-in suffer a psychological breakdown and attack the planet; even DC's own alternate-reality video game, *Injustice: Gods Among Us* (2013), in which a version of the actual Superman does all this and worse—demonstrate that Butler's suspicion of the superhero's great power, and the uses to which it might be put, anticipates what has become the inescapable central theme of the superhero genre today.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The indistinguishability between good and bad uses of violent force has arguably defined the genre since its inception; the superhero narrative begins when "the costume of the burglar becomes ... a sign of the vigilante hero," with masks quickly becoming signifiers not of "ethical status" but of "a morally indeterminate 'superfiness'" (Bukatman 214).

Perhaps she was able to see this aspect of the superhero power fantasy so early because of the race and gender differences that worked to separate her from the archetypal figure of the white, male superhero. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's use of Tarzan in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) as well as Gil Scott-Heron's "Ain't No Such Thing as Superman" (1975),<sup>9</sup> Adilfu Nama writes of the "problematic incongruity" for black readers "who as victims of white racism are further victimised by reading and identifying with white heroic figures in comic books" (134). *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #76 (1970), published when Butler was still reading comics, raises this objection explicitly within the world of the comics themselves. An African-American character on a street corner confronts Hal Jordan, the Green Lantern:

I been readin' about you.... How you work for the blue skins ...  
and how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins ...  
and you done considerable for the purple skins. Only there's skins  
you never bothered with....! The black skins! I want to know  
... how come? Answer me that, Mr. Green Lantern!" (O'Neil 6)

Jordan is stunned into silence; he knows the criticism is accurate, and can only resolve to change.

Here the characteristic whiteness of the superhero comes into sharp relief; white superheroes like Superman and (especially) Batman and Spider-Man police precisely the kinds of urban spaces (Metropolis, Gotham, New York) that have been increasingly devastated by "white flight" since the characters' first introduction a half-century ago. Superheroes' very presence in their own stories, and the overwhelming whiteness of their supporting casts, has now become a kind of obvious anachronism, as Marvel itself noted in 2011 in its self-congratulatory announcement of Miles Morales as a new half-black, half-Hispanic Spider-Man in their "Ultimate" line: "We are on the cutting edge of having our books reflect the real world," Marvel editor-in-chief Axel Alonso said, "Our heroes live in the same world you and I do" (Cavna). In this context, Scott Bukatman suggests, we might read all contemporary superhero fantasy as a kind of "blacking up," with the superhero "also a kind of hipster, seeking to swoop down and possess the life of the street" (217). This hipster superhero naturally does precious little to alter the basic coordinates of class struggle in the city, or to offer any serious challenge to the logic of capitalist white supremacy that has

<sup>9</sup> Scott-Heron implores his implied audience "You was on the Nile / You went to see great Egypt fall ... So tell me why, can't you understand / That there ain't no such thing as a superman?"



left city spaces devastated by the withdrawal of economic capital and political influence to suburban enclaves; rather, he fights to defend and preserve this status quo.

As Umberto Eco argues, efforts on the part of heroes to make *genuine*, permanent difference for real justice in the world are necessarily doomed to failure by the consumer nature of the comics medium. Superheroes—because they aspire to be “myths” (16), and because they are consumer goods to be sold and resold on newsstands indefinitely (19)—can never take any transformative action in society. Instead, their adventures offer only the barest illusion of plot; events only happen to comics superheroes insofar as they can be undone later, restoring the original status quo. A being with Superman’s capabilities “could exercise good on a cosmic level,” Eco writes, but

Instead, Superman carries on his activity on the level of the small community where he lives (Smallville as a youth, Metropolis as an adult)... He is busy by preference, not against blackmarketing drugs, nor, obviously, against corrupting administrators or politicians, but against banks and mail truck robbers. (22)

Reynolds similarly notes that, from a narratological standpoint, superheroes are the antagonists rather than the protagonists of their stories; it is the villains, after all, who have plans to change the world, and the superheroes who set out to stop them from succeeding (50–52). This passivity marks the traditional superhero as a fundamentally conservative, even reactionary figure.<sup>10</sup> Recent alternate-universe reconsiderations of Superman—in *Superman: Red Son* (2003), the Kryptonian infant crash-lands in the Ukraine and, consequently, fights for truth, justice, and the Soviet Way; in the Earth-10 alternative universe that appeared in several 2007 titles, there is a Nazi Superman, appointed by Hitler himself—make clear how little the authoritarian figure of the superhero would have to change to be legible within other systems of social organization. But, as Dan Hassler-Forest has recently noted, quoting Hardt and Negri on Empire’s similar formal flexibility, the superhero operates not so much “on the basis of force itself” as “on the basis of the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace” (qtd. in Hassler-Forest 5). From this perspective even the nominal conservatism of the superhero is just a rhetorical posture; it is force itself,

<sup>10</sup> In a piece that ultimately seeks to defend the superhero from its critics, comics writer Kurt Busiek ventriloquizes common criticisms of the superhero fantasy when he calls them “an adolescent male power fantasy, a crypto-fascist presentation of status quo values” (8).

as such, that is the ultimate truth of the superhero, behind all the slogans and all pretension to ethical investment. The recent degradation of these stories into so many incarnations of *Götterdämmerung* only reveals, in this sense, what has been going on all along.

Butler’s approach to the superhuman archetype is thus better understood not as “abandoning” certain aspects of the superhero myth, but as cutting through the layers of obfuscations and nominal justifications that legitimate superhero fantasy in order to lay bare the power fantasy that is the true engine of these narratives. For Jameson’s Le Guin,

Utopia is not a place in which humanity is freed from violence, but rather one in which it is released from the multiple determinisms (economic, political, social) of history itself: in which it settles its accounts with its ancient collective fatalisms, precisely in order to be free to do whatever it wants with its interpersonal relationship. (275)

But in Butler’s superpowered anti-utopia, the violence and those “ancient collective fatalisms”—power as such—are all that remain. The state (and its attendant procedures of legitimation and restraint) is abstracted away in favor of a return to the patriarchal family, where absolute authority is distributed across individual houses and culminates within allegiance to a single universal Father (*Patternmaster*’s first sentence highlights this new structure of authority: “Rayal had his lead wife, Jansee, with him” (1)). Citizenship has been eliminated, as has any notion of meaningful labor, as has the middle-class, as has money—nothing exists beyond the originary power relation between master and slave. All human interactivity is thus reduced to the domination of the strong over the weak.

The discovery of the Pattern, then, is framed as a revolutionary change to human existence, but in fact simply replicates the same brutal historical “pattern” of oppression and domination in a new register and with new power technologies. *Patternmaster* offers nothing outside this logic; even the telepaths whose specialty is healing are simultaneously recognized as brutal potential killers:

She glared at him, radiating resentment, and he found himself recalling what he had learned in school—that even Housemasters were careful about how they antagonized healers. A good healer was also a terrifyingly efficient killer. A good healer could destroy the vital parts of a person’s body quickly enough and thoroughly

enough to kill even a strong Patternist before he could repair himself. (64)

Here, Butler reconsiders a superpower nominally devoted to care—and thus marked as “feminine”—and reveals it too to be a powerful weapon.<sup>11</sup>

The internal logic of *Patternmaster*'s narrative situation mirrors the way character interactions in comics work more generally, especially when read across an entire line of comics as produced by DC or Marvel. One of the most important ways in which comics companies produce a shared universe across multiple titles is to foreground power relations, following the metanarrative technique of “hierarchal continuity”—the principle that “if superhero A defeats supervillain B in one comic and superhero C is defeated by supervillain B in another comic, then ... superhero A is stronger than superhero C and should be able to defeat him in a head-to-head combat” (Reynolds 40). “This sort of situation,” Reynolds dryly adds, “regularly arises, and from the myriad meetings and conflicts ... an overall hierarchy of superbeings is continuously shared and redefined” (40). Thus, in the first meeting between any two characters, especially if one is being introduced for the first time, comics will typically contrive a fight scene through confusion or misunderstanding. *Patternmaster* simply makes the backgrounded and disavowed principles structuring comics explicit: the future as an endless series of males pummeling each other, with a strict hierarchy already known in advance.

In both comics' and *Patternmaster*'s forms of hierarchal continuity, the non-superpowered characters do not rate at all. Named characters like Commissioner Gordon and Lois Lane, ordinary citizens waiting to be rescued, and the legions of faceless thugs apparently available for any villain to hire at a moment's notice, all have the same relational status as *Patternmaster*'s “mutes.” From the perspective of hierarchal continuity, they are essentially non-entities. In *Patternmaster*, because any notion of a nominal concern for “justice” has been completely stripped away from the figure of the superhero, this aspect of hierarchal continuity becomes particularly unforgiving. Without anyone looking to save them, and with no opportunity for an unpowered mute to elevate themselves to the level of the superhuman through cleverness or technical artifice (à la Iron Man or Batman), the mutes are purely expendable, and endlessly

<sup>11</sup> A similar inversion happened within the pages of *Fantastic Four* comics themselves, when Sue Storm's purely defensive power of invisibility was, beginning in *Fantastic Four* #22 (October 1963), rewritten as a power to create and manipulate force fields, giving her an offensive capability more powerful than any other member of the team.

subject to sadistic experimentation, murder, torture, and rape, even in well-run Houses (68). The mutes exist in the same relationship to the Patternists as the normal inhabitants of the city do to the superhero: an out-of-focus, background detail.

The sole competitor to the unchallenged hegemony of the Patternists, beyond the social instability implied by their own endless internal struggle for dominance, comes in the form of the Clayarks, mutated humans sick from an interplanetary virus, who are partially immune to Patternist control and who exists in the wild spaces between their enclaves. *Patternmaster*'s narrative crisis begins with a Clayark sneak attack on Rayal's compound that kills Jansee and leaves him so weak that he must use the bulk of the Pattern just to keep himself alive; in the absence of a strong Patternmaster, the Clayarks become an even greater threat, making once-ordinary trade and travel between enclaves impossible (75). What has been world-reduced here is the complicated politics of postcoloniality. The Clayark-Patternist conflict replicates the colonial frontier in which the white settler has no restraint on the violence he inflicts on the colonized subject. The arrival of the Clayarks thus “resets” human history into the mythological time of frontier fantasy, but introjects nothing new beyond mere replication of the past:

He could not memorize the locations of Clayark settlements because the Clayarks inside Patternist Territory had no permanent settlements. They were nomadic, roaming in great tribes, settling only long enough to strip an area clean of food. They had been known to eat Patternists, in fact. (76)

As Teray begins to come into his powers, he finds he is able to murder Clayarks by the dozens, treating them as if they were unthinking brutes even as he knows, from his telepathic contact with them, that they are actually thinking subjects capable of complex reasoning (20-22). He even carries on a lengthy conversation with one (79-80).

Having killed his brother and secured his inheritance, Teray turns his newfound total mastery of the Pattern to the Clayarks, as Butler offers up the novel's most transcendent vision of superpowered consciousness alongside its most genocidal violence:

Feeling like some huge bird, he projected his awareness over the territory. He could see the distant ranges of hills, was aware of the even-more-distant mountains.... He swooped about, letting his extended awareness range free through the hills and valleys. Then, finally, he settled down, and focused his awareness on

the Clayarks who formed a wide half-circle around the party. He swept down on them, killing.

Teray's final seizing of the mantle of the superhero—that ecstatic vision of flight—goes hand-in-hand with unlimited, total violence. Now he slaughters the Clayarks by the “hundreds, perhaps thousands”; he kills until he can sense no more Clayarks at all (198). For their part, the Clayarks are filled with endless hate for the Patternists, seeing them as implacable “enemies” and “not people” (79). Indeed, they only cannibalize Patternist flesh “to show, symbolically, how they meant someday to consume the entire race of Patternists” (76).

By the time one has finished *Patternmaster*, one feels desperate for the Clayark prophecy to be true, and to see the Patternist stranglehold over Earth's future somehow swept away. The reader expects, and yearns for, the inevitable sequel, in which we might see Patternist society forced to become more inclusive and egalitarian, or at least see it all collapse. But this is a pleasure Butler denies us; the end of the *Patternmaster*, with its crippled patriarch Rayal longing for death, is the furthest we see into her future history. Expressing precisely the reader's own feeling of exhaustion with power, with violence, with empire, and with the fruitless struggle for domination, Rayal psychically calls out to Teray in the last sentence of the novel to come and finally kill him: “Hurry and get here. You have no idea how tired I am” (202).

#### *Origin story 2: Mind of My Mind and Wild Seed*

Rather than pushing onward towards the longed-for fall of the Patternists, later books in the series instead turn their attention to the past. Butler originally conceived the series as a trilogy, following *Patternmaster* with *Mind of My Mind* and *Survivor* (1978).<sup>12</sup> *Survivor*, which she later disavowed as her “*Star Trek* novel” (Littleton), was even excluded from the 2007 *Seed to Harvest* Patternist omnibus. It takes place off-world, early in the Patternist future and well before *Patternmaster*. Inverting an infant Superman's removal from a doomed Krypton, the superhuman Patternists send several unpowered “mutes” into outer space in an attempt to ensure the survival of the human race

<sup>12</sup> The extension and elaboration of the basic Patternist story consumed Butler's imagination during her teenage years: “When I got the idea for *Patternmaster*, I was twelve, but I had no idea how to write a novel. I tried, but it was quite a few years before I was able to write it. When I got the idea for *Mind of My Mind*, I was 15. When I got the idea for *Survivor*, I was 19” (Sanders).

should cosmic disaster befall Earth.<sup>13</sup> The Patternists are unable to go themselves because the Pattern binds them together too closely, their strength becoming a weakness that traps them all on a single world; thus, *Survivor* offers the series' one and only glimpse of a future for the human race beyond Patternist control, although the escape is difficult and only partial.

*Mind of My Mind* reveals the origin of the Patternists as the culmination of Doro's breeding experiments in 1970s California, and depicts the first discovery of the Pattern; when this breakthrough is made, the telepaths turn on him and establish control over the planet themselves. *Wild Seed* traces this story backwards to its origins in early modern Africa; a planned follow-up, never completed, would have gone back even further, showing Doro's Ancient Egyptian origins (Harrison 4). Finally, *Clay's Ark* (1984) shows the return of an interstellar spaceship carrying the Clayark virus at the dawn of the Patternist age, while their network of control is still being established. In another inversion of the Superman origin story, the spaceship's crash-landing (and the escape of the Clayark disease) totally destabilizes modernity's existing power structures, creating the space for the alternative power structures of *Patternmaster* to gain control, while simultaneously introducing the seeds of its possible destruction. Thinking in these terms, it is hard not to hear in “Clayark” a stuttered variation on Superman's human forename: Clark.

In the reading advanced thus far, one might be forgiven for assuming Butler's perspective on the superhero was purely negative, especially as *Patternmaster* focuses, to the exclusion of all other possibilities, on the dark side of the power fantasy and its attendant abuses. But in the prequel material, particularly *Mind of My Mind* and *Wild Seed*, more utopian valences of the superhero fantasy are voiced, if not exactly ratified. In both cases, the glimpses of a possible utopian “outside” to anti-utopian superhero fantasy draw their power from the relocation of the action to black diasporic contexts: a predominantly African-American community in *Mind of My Mind*, and Africa itself in *Wild Seed*. Consequently, the internal logic of the Patternist prequels is oppositional to traditional superheroics in a new sense—almost a new history of the superhero genre “from below,” from the perspective of those who are disfavored in the usual rhetoric of privilege, “special gifts,” and “master races.” Doro's project thus emerges as a dialectical challenge to traditional forms of race fantasy. By positing a eugenic project in the heart of Africa, beginning millennia before Europe's parallel project and selecting against whiteness

<sup>13</sup> Among other things, this reasoning puts the lie to *Patternmaster*'s hyperracialized division between humans and mutes; in the face of potential extinction, the Patternists identify the mutes as continuous with themselves, as human after all.

in favor of superpowered blackness, Doro challenges the racial fantasies that have undergirded modernity. America itself—now transformed into a blip sandwiched between the secret history of Doro's experiments and the brutal aftermath of their horrible success—becomes retold here as an African story, in an Africanist recentering of history that serves as a strongly anti-colonialist provocation, even if the results are mostly anti-utopian.

At the same time, as Ingrid Thaler notes, *Wild Seed*'s repeated references to the already-existing practice of racial slavery are primarily deployed as a rhetoric by Doro himself to "manipulate the reader into accepting his 'breeding program' as a viable alternative to Western modernity" (27), where in fact it is primarily a replication of those practices (35-37). As *Wild Seed* makes clear, there is little difference between Doro's eugenic exploitation of his charges and the breeding practices of slave-owners in the antebellum south (215), while at the same time the incestuous, inward-turning nature of Doro's breeding project—in which Doro breeds with generation after generation of his daughters—mirrors and mocks the most extreme fantasy of whiteness as "purity."<sup>14</sup>

As with the non-Event that Eco argued was the deeper structure of superhero comics, the existence of a huge number of Africans with superpowers does nothing to stop, or in any way challenge, the slave trade; in fact, nothing goes differently at all, and the implication is that this could just be the secret truth behind official history. The narrative stability of history is thus revealed as the same kind of anti-utopian blankness Eco earlier identified as symptomatic of comics—a story whose ending we always already know, in which nothing could ever be any different than it already is.<sup>15</sup> Doro, for his part, has no interest in either the politics of slavery or of abolition, except insofar as it impacts his own projects; he is, after all, a vampire, and began breeding people not to perfect the human race but because he noticed that certain types of people with certain types of abilities tasted better than others. Thus he stands in for practices of power and domination that are utterly ahistorical, and in this sense *cannot* be resisted; in Thaler's terms, the immortal Doro "personifies time and history itself," particularly the

<sup>14</sup> Such violations of the incest taboo are totally normalized by the time of *Patternmaster*'s future.

<sup>15</sup> Think of the moment early in *Clay's Ark* in which a Patternist insists that, despite their evident powers, the Patternists are "not superhuman": "We're not anything you won't be eventually. We're just ... different" (26). From this perspective, too, the Patternists represent an intensification of human history, rather than a deviation from it.

way that "human history's gendered, unequal power structures circulate around and return to control over reproduction" (37).

This dialectical approach—the endless, horrible return of the same—can be seen elsewhere in the series' approach to race fantasy in general. In *Patternmaster*, our historical categories of race had been supplanted by the future's new racial dynamic between the powerful Patternists (as a colorblind replacement for white privilege) and its Others (the mutes and the Clayarks)—a grim reminder of Isiah Lavender III's enjoinder to recall the difference between "the ability to imagine a world without racism [and] to imagine a world without race" (192). Racial markers in that novel are completely incidental. Teray's closest companion and love interest, the healer Amber, is described in passing as a "golden-brown woman with hair that was a round cap of small, tight black curls" (63-64)—but what matters about her is her power and independence as a Patternist. The Clayark is "tanned" (78), but marked not by skin color but by the Sphinx-like mutations of the disease. One enslaved mute woman is described as "blond" (41). The skin color of Rayal and his heirs is never specified at all. And yet this "colorblind society" (Lavender 192) has reinscribed the privileges of whiteness into an even more monstrous and permanent form; the novel even begins with the unwilling sale of Teray into Coransee's service in a lengthy sequence that reveals that slavery has become a universal condition for all but the most privileged Patternmasters (24-35).<sup>16</sup>

The prequels, however, make the Patternist project's status as a competitor to contemporary racial forms much clearer while softening their more brutal excesses. The first explanation of Doro's project is that "for all but the first few centuries of his four-thousand-year life, he had been struggling to build a race around himself" (*Mind* 8). Chief among the side effects of Doro's body-switching power is his ability to switch between black and white bodies, allowing him to pass perfectly as either. When his daughter, Mary, the first Patternmaster, sees him after a long gap, she notices "Doro was a black man this time ... a relief, because, the last couple of visits, he'd been white" (19). Mary's skin color is "a light coffee," like her immortal grandmother's, though her "traffic-light green" eyes are "gifts from the white man's body that Doro was wearing when he got Rina pregnant" (22). As *Wild Seed* reveals, all of these characters

<sup>16</sup> Butler held the same anti-utopian perspective on "progress" across her career. In a 2000 interview, when asked "Will racial and sexual attitudes improve in the 21st century?", she replied "Absolutely not.... In countries where there are no racial differences or no religious differences, people find other reasons to set aside one certain group of people and generally spit in their direction.... It delights people to find a reason to be able to kick other people" (Marriott).

have African ancestry; Doro initiated his experiments in Africa before transplanting his charges to the New World, so every superpowered character in the Patternist series is actually a black superhero.<sup>17</sup> In the prequels, the emergence of the Patternists is thus much more explicitly framed as a challenge to white supremacy—a challenge that is unhappy for us simply because we have had the bad luck to read the last book in the series first and already know that challenging white supremacy still is not quite enough. Mary, finding out that Doro was born in Africa, tries to explain to him that this makes him black, too, so as to assert some sort of racial solidarity between them that, she hopes, will cause him to behave more decently towards her. He devilishly replies, “I’m not black or white or yellow, because I’m not human, Mary” (87). Doro understands his charges as his cattle rather than his equals, and for millennia simply slaughters the failed experiments before Anyanwu, in *Wild Seed*, made him promise to at least let his failures live. No mutual recognition—much less solidarity—is possible under these assumptions. What is monstrous about Doro is what was monstrous about the Patternmaster Rayal, and what is monstrous about power as such: its radical loneliness, its refusal of commonality and human connection. It falls to the women in Doro’s life, his daughter Mary and his consort Anyanwu/Emma, to make the case for connection in his stead.

In the prequels’ opening up of other possibilities for Africanist superpowers beyond domination, Butler again draws on and distances herself from comics, in two senses. First, and most obviously, there is the impact of black superheroes being introduced in the later part of the Silver Age, although this may be less influential than one might expect. The most famous of these is Marvel’s T’Challa, the Black Panther, the king of the fictional African country of Wakanda, who was introduced in *Fantastic Four* #52-53 (1966). Wakanda, beneficiary of a meteor strike containing an extremely valuable rare mineral not normally found on Earth, is a technologically advanced African country that has closed itself to the outside world while sending scholars and agents out to study it, turning both the logic of historical progress and the logic of imperialism on its head. Wakanda “represents a fusion of African tradition and high technology” that “rejects common depictions of the continent as being

<sup>17</sup> The Patternist series as a whole can thus be read as a very subtle entry in the “kill-the-white-folks” tradition of “black militant near-future fiction” that Kali Tal traces back as far as Sutton Griggs’ *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) (66-67). White people are either assimilated into Doro’s generational breeding program (with their children, in accordance with the racist logic of the “one-drop” rule, thereby becoming black) or else they are left outside it to die at the hands of the Clayarks or to become the Patternists’ eventual slaves.

mired in a primitive past, building on the image of advanced ancient African civilizations found in, for example, Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1903) and Sun Ra’s astro-black mythology” (Bould “From Panther” 299-300). It offers—at least in its most politically progressive depictions—the possibility of an Africa that could be the site of the good future, rather than simply the bad past;<sup>18</sup> however, as we have already seen, Doro’s own quasi-scientific experiments in eugenics throw this resistant, Afrofuturist/Afro-utopian vision into sharp relief.

Marvel followed T’Challa with the Falcon (1969), a Harlem resident who accompanied Captain America and even shared cover billing between 1971 and 1978, and Luke Cage/Power Man, who received his great physical strength and endurance from “Tuskegee-like” (Bould “From Panther” 300) experimentation on prisoners, and became a “Hero for Hire.” Cage’s mercenary tendencies offered a new take on the superhero, including the capitalist pressures so commonly occluded by the immense wealth of white superheroes like Bruce Wayne and Reed Richards.<sup>19</sup> DC introduced their first black superhero, the Green Lantern John Stewart, in 1971. Marvel’s Blade (a Black British vampire hunter)<sup>20</sup> and Storm (a weather-controlling mutant born in Kenya who married the Black Panther in a 2006 issue) were introduced in 1973 and 1975, around the time Butler stopped reading comics altogether. In terms of mainstream comics, this is a more or less complete list of major black superheroes, even today.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Of course, not every appearance of the Black Panther is so enlightened. As Marc Singer notes, comics’ reliance on “visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances” makes “the potential for superficiality and stereotyping ... dangerously high,” and this is especially true of characters, such as Black Panther and Black Lightning whose very names suggest reduction to their skin color (107). Nama, while generally impressed with the depiction of T’Challa, expresses particular irritation with his years spent appearing in *Jungle Action* (1973-76) precisely because they reinforced rather than challenged colonialist stereotypes of Africa (138). Cf. De Witt Douglas Kilgore’s essay in this issue.

<sup>19</sup> Luke Cage and his blaxploitation roots were later parodied in African-American publisher Milestone Comics’ *Icon* #13 (1994), with the introduction of Buck Wild: Mercenary Man.

<sup>20</sup> It would be interesting to read Blade in particular against *Fledgling*’s Shori, since both share a genetic trait unique among ultra-white vampires (and seen from their perspective as an impurity) that allows them to walk in the daylight.

<sup>21</sup> Comics publishers were extremely anxious about the introduction of black characters. Jim Shooter and Mike Grell were forbidden by their editors to introduce black heroes in the *Legion of Superheroes* in the mid-1960s (Cadigan 61, 89; cf. Singer on racial identity in Legion history). In 1965, copies of the first issue of *Lobo*, a western comic with a headlining African-American character, were returned unopened to Dell Comics by retailers: “They stopped production on the [second] issue. They

With so few black superheroes to draw upon, and with nearly all of them figurations of black masculinity that focused on physical strength and endurance, thus replicating racist tropes about the superhumanity of black bodies,<sup>22</sup> Butler seems to have been more inspired by supervillains. The time-traveling Kang the Conqueror debuted in *Avengers* #8 (1964), claiming to have previously been the Ancient Egyptian king Rama-Tut. The Savage Land—another “hidden land” jungle fantasy, this one preserved in the center of Antarctica—was introduced in *X-Men* #10 as a setting for the Tarzan-like Ka-Zar. The millennia-long career of DC’s immortal Vandal Savage, introduced in 1943 as a Green Lantern villain and reintroduced for the Silver Age in a 1962 Flash comic, offers the possibility of an Africanist “secret history” that might have partially inspired Doro—as might the breeding experiments of geneticist Herbert Edgar Wyndham, who became the supervillain The High Evolutionary in the pages of *Thor* in 1966. Ra’s al-Ghul, an Arabic supervillain introduced in 1971, who controls a vast secret network of assassins that has dominated world history in the Batman universe, has similarly obtained immortality. These figures, in their pointed rejection of an historical order dominated by white supremacy, may have perversely appealed to Butler in much the same way that Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra rejected values like freedom, peace, and equality as false virtues established by the powerful in the service of social control.<sup>23</sup> Moreover,

discovered that as they were sending bundles of comics out to the distributors and they were being returned unopened. And I couldn’t figure out why? So they sniffed around, scouted around and discovered they were opposed to Lobo, who was the first black western hero. That was the end of the book. It sold nothing” (Coville). Dr Bill Foster was introduced as a supporting character for the Avengers in 1966, but did not gain his Black Goliath giant-man powers until 1975.

<sup>22</sup> The black superhero frequently replicates ideological depictions of the black male body, which “has been subjected to the burden of racial stereotypes that place him in the symbolic space of being *too* hard, *too* physical, *too* bodily” (Brown 170). Rob Lendrum takes this point up in more detail, noting the ideological paradox in black superheroes, despite their hypermasculinity, *still* being subordinate to white superheroes even within the hierarchy of physical combat (367).

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Sun Ra’s interview at *Blastitude*: “So actually, if I was ruling, I wouldn’t let the people talk about freedom. I wouldn’t let the people talk about freedom, I wouldn’t let them fight for it, I wouldn’t let them speak of it ... I wouldn’t let them talk about peace, I wouldn’t let them picket for it, I wouldn’t let them have anything to do with peace. Because the whole thing is very simple: they’re free when they’re dead, and they’re at rest, and at peace when they’re dead. It actually says so: Rest in peace. So when the United States be talking about peace, it’s talking about death.... The only equality they got too, is that all of them die. I notice that all of them don’t have the same amount of money, though, or the same amount of opportunity—so it’s not really true” (Sinclair). Thanks to John Rieder for bringing this connection to my attention.

as Samuel R. Delany provocatively suggests in *Empire Star* (1966): “The only important elements in any society are the artistic and the criminal, because they alone, by questioning the society’s values, can force it to change” (84). It is only in the villains, after all, that we see some possibility of a future that could be different to what already exists; as we have seen, the nominal heroes of comic books are all-too-happy to function as the enforcement arm for an oppressive social order that “persists precisely through rendering its own acts of violence normative, legal, and effectively invisible” (Bould “Come Alive” 233). The libidinal joy of the supervillain emerges precisely in their interruption of that terrible stability.<sup>24</sup>

Like immortality’s violation of the “natural order,” the powers Butler gives to Doro (body-switching), Anyanwu/Emma (shapeshifting), and Mary (mind control) are, by their sinister nature, more closely associated with supervillains than with superheroes, especially black male ones, who generally have more straightforward fly-and-smash powers. “When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn’t in any of this stuff I read,” Butler once noted, “the only black people you found were occasional characters or characters who were so feeble-witted that they couldn’t manage anything, anyway. I wrote myself in, since I’m me and I’m here and I’m writing” (Marriott). In setting out to “write herself in” to the comics stories she adored but from which she came to feel excluded, Butler seems to have been naturally attracted to those figures on the other side of the privilege line, those who stand not in lockstep with the system but for various reasons, both noble and selfish, oppose it.

*Mind of My Mind* is the only book in the *Seed to Harvest* collection to use either the word “mutant” or “superman”; the latter is deployed in the negative as a rejection of romantic infatuation, while “mutant” (and more commonly “mutation”) is deployed in a biological register as part of a description of Doro’s project.<sup>25</sup> Doro views himself as a mutation in the sense of being a singularity, radically alone among human beings (88)—but from the perspective of his daughter Mary and his consort Anyanwu, these “mutant strains” are a “people” (8-9). The latter use suggests the way the term was used in *X-Men* comics of the period to figure “social and cultural difference,” typically from a left-wing perspective of racial tolerance (Fawaz 357). The “whole

<sup>24</sup> See Canavan for a similar against-the-grain reading of supervillainy in Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008).

<sup>25</sup> *Survivor*, for its part, uses the word “mutant” twice, once to characterize the Clayarks (28) and once to suggest the alien Diut as a parallel “monster”: “huge and physically powerful, and hideous” (92).

theme of the X-Men," writes Reynolds, "the isolation of the mutants and their alienation from 'normal' society—can be read as a parable of the alienation of any minority" (79). However, neither Mary nor Doro have much interest in liberal tolerance or in a demand for equal rights under existing laws, and both adopt a position that has more in common with the mutant separatism of Magneto and his "Brotherhood of Evil Mutants" (typically understood to be an analog for Malcolm X and black nationalism) than Professor X's more conciliatory X-Men (standing in for Martin Luther King, Jr.).<sup>26</sup> The primary difference between them is that Doro views himself as a radically atomic singularity while Mary views herself as the organ of a new collectivity. This element of the story, too, points towards a minoritarian reading of *Mind of My Mind*: Mary, living in the economically depressed slum of Forsyth, gathers the first Patternists from the ranks of Doro's unstable telepaths, the rejected and failed "experiments" he would have simply exterminated before Anyanwu's intervention forced him to relax his brutality. Mary is able to unite these misfits into a collectivity that allows their powers to flourish in a way atomism could never allow. In the end, it is this new collectivity that, after millennia, is finally able to match Doro's power; as Sandra Govan puts it, the Patternists win because Mary "is the symbiont, not the vampire" (84). But perhaps Mary turns out to be truly her father's daughter after all. The startling ending of the novel reveals that the newly empowered Mary is just another vampire: "Now she took her revenge. She consumed him slowly, drinking in his terror and his life, drawing out her own pleasure, and laughing through his soulless screams" (215). The pleasure with which she psychically eats Doro casts her relationship with the other Patternists in new light. They are actually her instruments, not her partners, and as the Patternmaster, she is—like her ancestor Doro and her descendent Rayal—radically alone.

Violence cannot beget anything but violence in these stories; the attempt to overthrow systems of domination only result in their replication, typically in even more monstrous form. In a 1997 interview, Butler repeats her anti-utopian claim that human beings are basically flawed at the most fundamental level, suggesting that "even ... the most absolutely homogeneous group you could think of" would "create divisions and fight each other" (Fry 129-130). But before this there is a glimmer that some historical difference might be possible. She suggests that Doro's people—Mary and the other proto-Patternists—do "nasty

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, Butler's pessimism can again be said to anticipate what would happen to comics over the later Bronze and Dark Ages; of all the time-travelers who visit the X-Men, hardly any originate from a future in which Magneto was wrong and Professor X was right.

things" first to Doro and then to everyone else "because they've learned that's how you behave if you want to survive" (129). Mary is "not a good person. But how can she be? She wouldn't survive if she were 'good'" (McCaffery and McMennamin 15). Butler relates this deforming quality of survival to the ongoing question of black radicalism: "I don't think black people have made peace with ourselves, and I don't think white America has made any kind of peace with us. I don't think we really know *how* to make peace at this point" (129).<sup>27</sup> She argues that the Patternists were "so awful" precisely because "they had a bad teacher" (Roswell 94). This formulation, too, she says, is linked back to "some comment on Black America ... a comment on learning the wrong thing from one's teachers" (94). Survival-at-any-cost is what you learn when history has been a nightmare—but this framing suggests that, in other times and other histories, there are other things one might learn instead.

In *Mind of My Mind*, we discover that Doro similarly had a "bad teacher," that his experiences have likewise taught him that he has no way to survive aside from hurting other people.<sup>28</sup> Doro tells Mary of his lost childhood on the banks of the southern Nile, ruined when a resurgent Egyptian Empire—"our former rulers, seeking to become our rulers again"—invaded Nubia and massacred his village and family (87-88). (This blood-soaked origin story is, crucially, the moment in which Mary declares, to Doro's refusal, that no matter what skin he wears he is as black as she is.) Doro describes the process of dying for the first time while going through his own traumatic, unaided transition to telepathic

<sup>27</sup> This question also drove her writing of *Kindred*. Variations on this backstory for *Kindred* are told in interviews with Charles Roswell, Charles Brown, and Daniel Burton-Rose, in all three of which she recalls a conversation with a college friend who described a desire to "kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long" but "I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents" (Roswell 51). This conversation became the philosophical conundrum at the center of *Kindred*. Patricide similarly unites most of the major characters in the Patternist series, in which any desire to sever oneself from one's parent only turns one into them.

<sup>28</sup> This necropolitical equation between survival and murder is foregrounded in a conversation between Doro and Anyanwu late in *Wild Seed* (213). As Achille Mbembe has put it:

... the survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive. Or, more precisely, the survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing. Canetti points out that in the logic of survival, "each man is the enemy of every other." Even more radically, in the logic of survival one's horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. It is the death of the other, his or her physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure. (36)



adulthood, and how in his terror he consumed first his mother, then his father: "I didn't know what I was doing. I took a lot of other people too, all in a panic." Fleeing the village in the body of a young girl—one of his cousins—he ran "straight into the arms of some Egyptians on a slave raid" and "snapped" (88-89). Doro loses the next fifty years of his life, awakening in an Egyptian prison in the body of a middle-aged man, who he again must murder to escape, only then concluding that his strange vampiric power means that, despite all appearances, he has been "favored by the gods" (89). Doro, too, turns out to be both another orphan-superhero and another diasporic subject, wrestling with a colonial wound that includes imperial aggression, kidnapping, and slavery, as well as the radical severing of his own connection to history: "I never saw any of the people of my village again" (89). This was not for lack of trying; he leaves the prison and searches for his home only to discover "it was no longer there ... he was utterly alone" (178). *Wild Seed* reveals that this sense of total alienation includes disassociation from his own body; "this body needs rest," he says, rather than *I* need rest (8). From this perspective, Doro himself is yet another victim of yet another set of bad teachers; if Butler had ever completed her planned book about Doro's youth in Egypt, which would have fleshed out his own trauma in more detail, he might now seem as tragic a figure as Mary. In this sense, Mary certainly has the better of her argument with Doro; Doro is black, after all.

It is only in *Wild Seed* that we begin to see the glimmers of what a history outside the path-dependent cycle of bad teachers and angry, resentful students might be like. Anyanwu, who appears as Doro's accomplice Emma in *Mind of My Mind*, begins *Wild Seed* as still another diasporic subject, the victim of white slavers who destroyed one of Doro's "seed villages"—breeding sites—in the Ibo region of what is now Nigeria. Anyanwu is, like Doro, an immortal, but unlike him, her immortality originates not in body-theft but in the power to shapeshift. However, her power is somewhat closer to Doro's than this description makes it sound; for most of her career she learns the code for the person or creature into which she wants to shapeshift by consuming their flesh. Doro has the power to steal another person's body, but Anyanwu has the power to transform herself into whatever she likes: old, young, man, woman, black, white. Anyanwu has not lived as a saint. Over the centuries, she participated in the slave trade in order to survive, because "it is better to be a master than a slave"—but "her own experience had taught her to hate slavery" and she immediately reformulates this as "Sometimes, one must become a master to avoid becoming a slave" (9). This strikes a chord with Doro, who in that moment at least recognizes it as the key to his own behavior.

The erotic connection between Anyanwu and Doro binds her to him—they are each the only equal the other has ever met—but the relationship in its first century is rarely a happy one as the two struggle for dominance. Lewis Call presents this relationship as "the possibility of a liberating, egalitarian, consensual form of erotic slavery" (288), "a sadomasochistic love story" (283). Doro's repeated demands for Anyanwu's total submission, and her ability to manipulate and selectively sate his desires, bind him ever tighter to her, culminating in his agreement to alter the terms of the breeding program that has sustained him for millennia. Anyanwu finally threatens suicide rather than participate in Doro's project any longer (*Wild Seed* 276-77). He begs her not to leave, and begins to weep, not just for this moment but for "all the past times when no tears would come, when there was no relief. He could not stop" (277). Anyanwu relents and takes care of him in his panic, becoming a replacement for the mother he unwillingly killed in the agonized moment of his transition; he sleeps on her rising and falling breast until morning. After this moment, "there had to be changes": Doro agrees to no longer kill his "breeders" once he is done with them, and never to kill any member of Anyanwu's household (277-78). Thaler reads this romance in quite Hegelian terms, seeing in Doro's romance with Anyanwu his final recognition of "the Other within himself" in which he becomes totally vulnerable to her, as she had previously been to him (40). Ironically, these concessions set the stage for Mary's rise and the ultimate overthrow of Doro in *Mind of My Mind*.

It is only from Anyanwu's experiences in *Wild Seed* that any outside to the Patternist hegemony looks possible at all, even conceding Thaler's acerbic observation that "the novel's closure offers a 'generous interpretation' of male sexual abuse, to put it mildly" (41). However, the faint alternative historical possibilities offered in *Wild Seed* originate not so much in the "therapeutic process of the male master's codes of recognition" (41) as in the refusal of the terms of the master altogether. In *Wild Seed*, at last, we find again that utopian vision of superpowers that comforted a young Butler when she was unhappy as a child—those imagined pleasures not linked to the mere expression of power or controlling people's minds, among them flight and communication with animals. Isaac, the husband Doro pairs Anyanwu with in the slavery era, is able to use his telekinetic ability to fly (86); she, too, can use her transformative powers to transform into an eagle and fly "as no human was ever meant to fly" (80-81). The two share this pleasure together well into Isaac's old age, infuriating Doro, who sees it as a "stupid risk" in an age of firearms (140-41).



Anyanwu's shapeshifting power, too, allows her to commune with animals—commune, that is, with genuine alterity—in ways that expand her consciousness rather than igniting new cycles of violence and domination. When she is in animal form, Doro cannot track her; she is totally free from him and the historical processes of domination he represents. This aspect of *Wild Seed* suggests again Butler's adolescent fantasy of a life as a "magical horse" on "an island of horses," on which she and her horse friends "made fools of the men who came to catch us" ("Conversation" 334). This sense that one might become an animal as a Trickster-like means of escape rather than for domination and violence is a rare place in the Patternist series where these characters' incredible powers are used joyfully rather than dyspeptically. In the freest section of any of the Patternist books—perhaps their only genuinely liberatory, genuinely utopian moment—Anyanwu transforms herself not into the horses of Butler's childhood fantasies but a dolphin.<sup>29</sup> She revels in her new strength and speed, in the heightened senses and new sensations to be found in a life underwater (83). Hearing their speech and witnessing their complex interactions, she is able to recognize the dolphins as persons: "Alone, but surrounded by creatures like herself—creatures she was finding it harder to think of as animals. Swimming with them was like being with another people. A friendly people. No slavers with brands and chains here" (84). Removed from the water by Isaac, she makes him promise never to eat dolphin-flesh again (91).

Following Isaac's death, Anyanwu flees Doro's control and lives as a dolphin for many years, believing that the dolphins offer a life more noble than humanity's: "Perhaps when she learned their ways of communication, she would find them too honorable or too innocent to tell lies and plot murder over the still-warm corpses of their children" (196). When she reaches a dolphin community, she is initially frightened, believing—because of her bitter experiences with humans—that they might attack her as a stranger. But instead "they only came to rub themselves against her and become acquainted" (198). The dolphins welcome her into their community; they do not enslave, they do not kill, they do not molest or rape. Anyanwu lives with them for decades; she bears dolphin children that she views as equal to her human ones. She alone in the series is able to have the kind of transformative encounter

<sup>29</sup> Butler highlights this facet of the dolphin sequence in *Clay's Ark*, in which a character describes the trove of religious movies in the library of the place where they are staying: "Some were religious, some antireligious, some merely exploitive—Sodom-and-Gomorrah films. Some were cause-oriented—God arrives as a woman or a dolphin or a throwaway kid. And some were science fiction. God arrives from Eighty-two Eridani Seven" (179).

with difference that Rayal, Teray, the Clayarks, Doro, and Mary are offered but all fail to honor—the cannibalistic absorption of the Other into the Self that is a "delight" rather than a "horror" (Sands 7). Even as Anyanwu uses animality as the marker for how forced breeding (as with slavery or with Doro's eugenics) degrades the human (*Wild Seed* 215), animality offers us the glimpse of a life outside the human cycle of failure that might uplift the human.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps this communion with radical alterity might anticipate (or could inspire) the utopian countermovement to follow the long Dark Age of Comics—if, that is, there is any possible future at all for the superhero outside the current moribund cycle of violence. What other worlds might superheroes make visible, if they were not always beating someone up? In the Patternist books, dolphin life offers the brief, tantalizing possibility of a social order where violence and power (elsewhere asserted as inescapable facts of human history) are finally irrelevant. Among the dolphins, at least, strength seems not to beget domination, and genuine historical difference becomes possible—dolphin life as a more peaceful, fuller life, barred perhaps to we who have had so many bad teachers, but from whose radical otherness we might nonetheless be able to learn.

<sup>30</sup> As Sherryl Vint notes, *Clay's Ark* similarly takes up the blurriness of the human/animal boundary at the moment of the Clayarks' origin so as to suggest that "such a radical transformation is necessary if we hope to imagine another way to be human subjects" (288). One might even imagine the never-written sixth book in the Patternist series, taking place after *Patternmaster* and inaugurating a Clayark utopia of radical hybridity, after the last Patternmaster has been eaten.

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