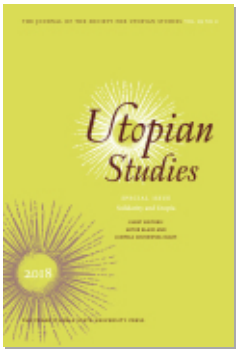
Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler ed. Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal (review)



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just abundance. One contributing factor to contemporary obesity is that Americans need do little, physically speaking, to survive. A philosophical consideration of this utopian/dystopian element of American culture might have enriched the book's introduction or conclusion. Do the diet books not address exercise and activity?

Finally, Bitar draws from Lewis to acknowledge early on that our work as scholars is not to determine right or wrong but "to divine the 'images and story that animate the ideas.'" Nonetheless, her highly optimistic introduction and conclusion frame the text as a jeremiad of sorts—similar to the Eden diet books she describes: "Diet books . . . reveal . . . a story about a fallen civilization that might just still do right" (4). In both the introduction and conclusion, contemporary alternative food movements become the utopian possibility. Foodies interested in "flavor," environmentalists "concern[ed] about sustainability," and activists "suspicious of industrial production, global capital, and federal regulation" hold our hopes. In spite of accusations of self-indulgence, such "foodies unite factions of food reform . . . that have always fought" (24). In sum, Bitar celebrates the way that contemporary food movements are uniting Americans who want social change.

In spite of this utopian optimism, Bitar's very well-researched and intriguing analysis is worth the read, perhaps to those more interested in American studies than in utopian studies. For those whose interests overlap in the two areas, *Diet and the Disease of Civilization* is ideal.

Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal, eds. *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler.*

Yokine, Australia: Twelfth Planet Press, 2017. 442 pp. Paper, $30.00, ISBN 978-1-922101-42-6.

Reviewed by Sean Guynes-Vishniac, Michigan State University

Octavia E. Butler was notoriously skeptical of utopian science fiction, and though she desired very much to write it, she found herself unable to do so "because I don't believe imperfect humans can form a perfect society."[1]

In interviews and in practice through her fiction Butler rejected the possibility of an ideal society and instead found her way to what Jim Miller has called "a post-apocalyptic hoping informed by the lessons of the past."[2] This is to say that, as a black woman science-fiction writer who had witnessed the pains of systemic racism, patriarchy, and oppressive violence against the communities to which she belonged, and who was particularly affected by the Religious Right–backed racist and classist policies of the Reagan administration, Butler found it ethically untenable to imagine societies that had eradicated such pain and struggle. Rather than postulating human futures that transcended the inequalities of her present and past, Butler showed instead how we might respond to the dystopian forces of the present and, as Sheree Renée Thomas puts it in her letter in the present volume, "how art and literature could help use navigate our past and present, help resurrect a future" (14). Butler died in 2006, leaving behind a dozen novels and nearly as many short stories, as well as several unfinished or abandoned novel projects and several important essays on the genre—all completed between 1971 and 2005. Her writing, her work in the science-fiction community as an instructor at Clarion, her candid discussion of being a black woman science-fiction writer on panels at science-fiction conventions and in numerous interviews, and especially her support for and mentorship of women writers and writers of color left an enduring legacy. *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, edited by Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal, speaks with many voices to remind us more than a decade after Butler's passing that her legacy was manifold. It was undeniably literary, profoundly communal, and, as is so clearly and affectively highlighted by the contributions gathered in *Luminescent Threads*, deeply personal.

Luminescent Threads is primarily a collection of letters addressed to Butler by her friends, colleagues, students, and those inspired by her. It also collects essays about her work, either appearing for the first time or reprinted from academic journals. The volume brings together fifty-five entries divided into eight sections that revolve around themes in the contributors' responses to Butler's work, life, and legacy. The first section is made up of letters addressed to Butler in thanks and remembrance, reflecting on the influence Butler had on the contributors' lives, whether they knew her or not. It is an appropriately short introduction to Butler as a personal motivator for many writers, activists, and scholars and is aptly followed by two longer sections that together make up half of *Luminescent Threads*. Contributors reflect in section 2 on Butler's

relevance to contemporary social and political struggles, and in section 3 they offer sustained readings of her fiction. The latter fit her work into the broad range of black speculative fiction (Salvaggio), offer "A Biologist's Response" to Butler's aliens (Slonczewski), go on thematic dives looking for continuity across her writing (Govan), provide literary-critical readings of her key texts (Jeffers, Baccolini), or suggest how we might best (and ethically) use her archives (Canavan). Section 4 gives voice to Clarion's Octavia E. Butler Scholars, writers given scholarships in Butler's honor, funded by the Carl Brandon Society, to attend the prestigious Clarion and Clarion West science-fiction writing workshops and to use their talents to breathe new life into science fiction, to diversify and decolonize its themes, its institutions, its contributions to literature and life. (Collection co-editor Mimi Mondal was herself a Butler Scholar.) Section 5 follows aptly from the Butler Scholars' testimonies, with contributors here speaking about the influence of Butler on their writing, as either a former teacher, mentor, or exemplar of the success a minority writer might have despite racial, gender, and even ability-based inequality. Section 6 continues the trend of the previous section and offers what co-editor Alexandra Pierce calls "love letters" to Butler, offering insight into the ways that Butler and her fictions personally touched the lives of science-fiction authors (and some scholars), whether it be through helping them cope with the traumatic past of slavery and gendered or racial violence or through teaching them how a better world might be lived (x). *Luminescent Threads* concludes with two final sections that reprint, in section 7, De Witt Douglas Kilgore and Ranu Samantrai's memorial to Butler published in the Butler special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* in 2010 and, in section 8, an interview with Butler published in the same journal in 1996.

Luminescent Threads covers a massive range of responses to Butler's work, nearly all of it tinged with an understanding of Butler as a paragon of a new kind of utopianism that she, and others with similarly pessimistic views of human society, wove into science fiction from the 1970s onward. The contributors themselves reflect the spread of Butler's vision, encompassing science-fiction writers young and old, editors, academics across the disciplines, community organizers, and educators. The opening section, for example, demonstrates this breadth and offers a microcosm of the collection's dedication to showcasing the range of contributors to whom Butler meant so much. Here, for example, are young adult fiction author Alaya Dawn Johnson, Afrofuturist and anthologist Sheree Renée Thomas, sf writer Karen Lord, Butler's Clarion student and science-fiction/fantasy/horror

writer Nisi Shawl, digital media scholar Moya Bailey, and poets Tara Betts and Z. M. Quỳnh. Their letters attest that *Luminescent Threads* is not only a trove of personal responses to a beloved author that scholars looking to pinpoint Butler's influence will find useful in years to come but also a locus of insightful analyses of Butler in relation to utopianism.

Arab American Hoda Zaki, a longtime scholar of Butler's fiction, comments in her letter about Butler's profound abilities to postulate the horrors of the present, that her fictions, almost always dystopian, told of characters who strived against hegemony to build new communities of hope. But Zaki also notes that perhaps Butler's legacy is itself an impulse toward utopia, a liminal always-coming that emerges from the influence she had on Afrofuturism, new science-fiction authors, and now literary critics, who "use your work to understand desire, sexuality, gender, race and evolution" (45). Naijamerican science-fiction writer and scholar Nnedi Okorafor extends Zaki's enumeration of Butler's influence, reprinting and commenting on e-mails she and Butler exchanged at the beginning of George W. Bush's post-9/11 "War on Terror." In recalling the power of these exchanges, both as modes of in-the-moment political critique and as manifestations of the personal link between two black science-fiction authors invested in building a better tomorrow, and extending all of this to the body of fiction that Butler bequeathed to so many, Okorafor concludes that "Octavia left us with so much to chew on. This is the beauty of the written word. It lives on when you are gone. . . . The written word continues to have the power to affect and change long after its creator has moved on" (301). Okorafor poignantly captures why a book of largely personal letters to Octavia Butler is necessary, even for academics and especially for those crawling toward the hopes at the heart of utopian studies. *Luminescent Threads* is both personal and political, embodying in its ethos Butler's own approach to writing science fiction—what it should be about, what effects and changes it should seek to make in others, in the world—and to creating communities of hope in the midst of dystopias that already seem to have arisen around us. Lesbian black/Native science-fiction/fantasy/horror writer Jewelle Gomez attests that Butler's fiction and her efforts at utopian world-making in the science-fiction community confronted "the friction between known and unknown" and in doing so generated "the energy" in her readers' lives and in their writing that could transform the political horizon of the future (111).

Pierce and Mondal's *Luminescent Threads* is a needed volume for those familiar with or interested in learning more about Butler's writing, how her

very presence—as a black woman, as a pessimistic utopian thinker—in the science-fiction community changed it for the better, and how she continues to do so over a decade after her death, her own history reaching into the present just as she sought to learn the lessons of the past to manifest new temporalities. The collection will shine brightly where it finds a home among sympathetic utopianists, Afrofuturists, science-fiction scholars, and scholars of black (women's) literature. As a case study in Butler's significance and impact, not just as a science-fiction belles lettrist but especially as a shaper of the genre's community and an exemplar for people of color and especially black women writers, there is no better testament. For those in utopian studies, *Luminescent Threads* is an object lesson in the practice of utopia; here we see that utopia lives in the literary work and world-making struggles of writers to change the conditions and possibilities of the production of literature for those historically shut out.

Notes

1. Frances Beal, "Black Women and the Science Fiction Genre," *Black Scholar* 17, no. 2 (March/April 1986): 14.
2. Jim Miller, "Post-apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Utopian/Dystopian Vision," *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 2 (July 1998): 336.

Alessandro Maurini. *Aldous Huxley: The Political Thought of a Man of Letters.*

Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2017. 269 pp. Cloth, $90.00, ISBN 9781498513777.

Reviewed by Vita Fortunati, University of Bologna

Alessandro Maurini's book follows in the stream of a series of recent studies that have attempted to reread Aldous Huxley's thought, highlighting the extent to which, especially in his later essays (collected in *The Human Situation*, 1959) and his novel *Island* (1962), he expressed ideas and proposals that