

Ultra-human Aliens. Gerry Canavan. *Octavia E. Butler*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. xviii + 225 pp. ISBN: 978-0-25-208216-0. \$22.00 pbk.

Reviewed by Everett Hamner

Are the Oankali saviors or monsters? This is hardly a new question for readers of Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* trilogy, but Gerry Canavan's literary biography makes a gripping case that many critics come down on the wrong side. Acknowledging that Butler "stacks the deck" in favor of the aliens and even that she eventually intended for them to be read sympathetically, he protests that "the Oankali do almost *nothing* but harm the humans, in almost literally every possible way" so that "when we strip the novel's events of their specific science fictional context, they become a plain retelling of the brutal history of imperialism" (104). Canavan simultaneously fleshes out Butler the person and illuminates her fiction. The book's success here is unquestionable, and it immediately becomes required reading for anyone who wishes to understand Butler or her work as fully as possible. Canavan clearly took seriously the responsibility of being the first academic to delve into Butler's papers at the Huntington, making constant, fruitful use of the archive to uncover how her obsessive rewriting practices yielded multiple alternate versions of almost every major tale she told. While theoretically informed, this study is accessible even at the introductory undergraduate level, and it is as close to a page-turner as scholarly analyses come.

The Octavia (or Estelle, that middle initial's referent and the name by which Butler's friends addressed her) who emerges here is both profoundly insecure and wonderfully confrontational. Her shyness has never been a secret, but Canavan tactfully reveals the depth of her anxiety: how Butler would compose and rehearse small talk in advance of public encounters, how she feared judgment of her sometimes improper grammar, how she obsessed about money even after she was relatively secure, and how her episodes of self-hatred and compositional immobility perpetuated themselves across her lifetime, seemingly only worsening the more awards she received. Canavan's discretion in selectively detailing this history while guarding against exposé for its own sake is a gift in itself.

What makes this book far more significant than many literary biographies is how deftly Canavan mobilizes the material to evoke a deepened understanding of Butler's *oeuvre*. Those of us who have read from the Patternmaster novels through *Fledgling* (2005) are likely in for the greatest treat, as Canavan moves in roughly chronological order across Butler's development as a thinker and storyteller. But even for audiences who only know Lilith, Lauren, or one of

Butler's short story protagonists, the volume offers far more than an overview of the landscape, as it touches down regularly for soil samples that cannot help but enrich future reading. Through Butler's published and unpublished work alike, we rediscover a writer who was insatiably experimental: even when one vision succeeded, she would reframe and try it another way, like a director never quite satisfied that an even more brilliant take might not be lying in wait, were she just patient enough.

Canavan's patience in tracking these revisions pays off many times, but I want to focus on the core argument with which I began and which gains momentum across these chapters: Butler's corpus is ultimately a profound challenge to humanity's penchant for colonialist exploitation. Like Noah Berlatsky, who engaged Canavan in an epic (but civil) Twitter debate on the subject in summer 2017, some readers are likely to continue resisting that conclusion. Nonetheless, *Octavia E. Butler* shows that the Oankali's coerciveness haunted Butler's creative vision throughout her career. In tracing how the Oankali operate from their first appearance in unpublished work from the 1970s to their mutation in *Fledgling*, "a transgenre, first-person rewrite of *Dawn*, this time from the perspective of the Oankali invaders" (165), Canavan renders inescapable Butler's lifelong disturbance by purportedly polite forms of oppression.

What catches my ear most about this pattern, especially considering the virtuality of Butler's holodeck in *Dawn* (1987) and her new religious movement's planned departure from Earth in the *Parable* books, is its insistent Earth-centeredness. Canavan detects a red flag in the fact that the aliens we encounter in *Xenogenesis* are "only one tiny sliver of a larger Oankali race/civilization that travels the full galaxy and whose form is totally protean, unmoored from any specific relationship to biology, environment, economics, or politics that might endanger species survival" (101). This adaptability may be enormously successful, but it implicitly condones humanity's actual consumption of our home planet's resources as if they were infinite, assuming that the more our technology advances, the sooner we can move elsewhere. Canavan points to this problem's emergence in the *Parable* novels as well, recognizing that "Earthseed's ambition to flee to the stars is in the end as much the nullification of the possibility of historical change as it is any type of realization of it. For better or worse, we live on the Earth; if there's going to be any change, it's got to happen down here, not out there" (139). In short, Canavan's tour of Butler's corpus surprised me by gesturing to ideas in Butler's writing that I more quickly associate with Bill McKibben and Kim Stanley Robinson.

So does the book convince me that the Oankali are monsters? Yes . . . and I still like them. Stockholm syndrome, one might claim, because I cannot applaud enough Canavan's insistence that "the Oankali do not genuinely oppose hierarchy, despite their self-aggrandizing claims; they just propose a different one, with themselves on top" (119). How else could we reasonably understand the situation into which they force Lilith in *Dawn*, wherein she must manipulate other humans just as they are coercing her? But I also take quite seriously Canavan's suggestion that we view the Oankali "not as *anti-human* but as *ultra-human*, constantly on the cusp of disaster through their total inability to curtail their consumption, always (just like us) in need of more, more, more" (119). The gap between saviors and monsters is often perilously thin, depending heavily on interpretive location, and the Oankali evolve substantially across the trilogy, just as Butler did in composing it. Was this just a matter of assimilation, a gradual accommodation to an unspeakable offense? Maybe. Canavan's attention to Tino's suspicion in *Adulthood Rites* (1988)—that perhaps the Oankali actually fomented World War III in order to cast themselves as virtuous rescuers—is brilliant, but I cannot confidently assume this theory without clear evidence the Oankali are lying, however remarkable the timing of their arrival into Earth's orbit. I will say only that the Oankali's behavior may indeed have been reprehensible, but their ultra-humanity leaves me incapable of casting the first stone. It is this kind of situational complexity and ethical ambiguity that makes Butler's art so significant—and, by extension, Canavan's richly rewarding analysis.

I Know What You're Doing. Jad Smith. *Alfred Bester*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 208 pp. ISBN: 978-0-25-208213-9. \$22 pbk.

Reviewed by David Ian Paddy

All reet! Like a beatnik James Joyce haranguing chess players in Washington Square, Alfred Bester burst his way into the sf world with a new kind of linguistic flair, manic energy, and narrative experimentation. It is hard to imagine what Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany, and even *Rick & Morty* would feel like had he not intruded on the scene. And intrude he did. As Jad Smith argues in his excellent study, Bester was one of sf's great outsiders. He stepped in and out of the field, and he never stayed long enough to become a VIP at the club. Publishing his first stories in the late 1930s, he left for work in comics, radio, and television in the 1940s. Returning to sf in 1951, he wrote genre-changing, prize-winning short fiction and novels, notably *The Demolished*