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## Radical Reproduction: Octavia E. Butler's HistoFuturist Archiving as Speculative Theory

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The archive the late, great speculative fiction writer Octavia E. Butler created over the course of her lifetime (1947–2006) was massive. From early school days, Butler saved almost everything relevant to her life as a researcher and writer, along with many other kinds of material. Now rearranged in ways that respect Butler's own organizational schemas whenever possible, the more than 350 boxes that make up Butler's Papers at the Huntington Library impress with their sheer extent. The finding aid authored by Curator Natalie Russell is over 500 pages long. Butler's prodigious archiving activity makes it clear that this work was a central focus of her life, along with writing the speculative fiction for which she is now famous. What was Butler's purpose in assembling this archive? How did she use it? Who did she imagine the recipients and users of this archive would be? I have tried to sit with these questions both in my own research and in the work I have done with others since 2013. I often wish Butler were still here to see how her Papers are presently inspiring a new wave of art, scholarship, and robust collective world-making.

In what follows, I speculate about Butler's archiving as a material, theoretical, and political practice and situate it within the Black Radical Tradition. Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* is the most influential naming and analysis of such a tradition. Centering long histories of Black people's revolutionary activity and resistance to racial capitalism, the last third of Robinson's indispensable work turns to three Black male theorists and writers—W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and C.L.R. James—who engaged Marxist theory. Robinson includes a long chapter on Historiography and the Black Radical Tradition in which he focuses on the contributions of Du Bois, whom Robinson situates as “one of the deans of radical historiography” (186), important for his insights in rethinking knowledge production and the writing of history. In works such as *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, Robinson suggests that Du Bois confronted and critiqued white supremacist historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras as well as capitalist and Marxist narratives of progress and development. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley builds on Robinson's counter-history of a Black Radical Tradition by adding more people, notably including women, to the mix.

Kelley observes that the position of women in histories of Black radical freedom dreams has been “prone” to “disappear,” less because of “deliberate exclusion” than “conception” (136). When Black people are considered an undifferentiated group and gender and sexuality are not deemed important as a lens, the significance of radical Black feminist theories of knowledge production and historiography may not be visible. As Kelley and many other critics remind us, however, Black women have been writing alternative histories and providing counter-documentation (Schreiber, 14–18) to white supremacist and nationalist historiographies since at least the nineteenth century, as the examples of Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and others make clear.

Butler’s archive helps us see her significant contributions as a radical Black feminist theorist, historiographer, and researcher across fields and disciplines. Through her archiving, Butler imagines and performs a kind of reproduction with a difference. She preserves pieces of the past and present but changes them as she constellates and annotates them with a speculative eye toward the future. Building on Walter Benjamin’s insight in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* that ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars, it is illuminating to situate Butler’s constellating—her selection and organization of items for the archive and theorizing of connections among them—in relation to other interventions into materialist critical historiography such as those of Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, and other Black Radical theorists of history as well as to the work of Benjamin himself. Indeed, I suggest that Butler’s Papers are akin to Benjamin’s Arcades Project in their scope and significance as experiments in materialist historiography.

In what follows, I use the verbs *archiving*, *constellating*, and *annotating* in order to emphasize that Butler was an active agent in creating counter-histories and alternative futures by saving, organizing, connecting, and speculating on these disparate materials. In analyzing the significance of Butler’s extensive annotations found throughout her Papers, I am also inspired by literary critic Christina Sharpe’s theorizing of “practices of Black annotation” as “wake work,” which requires “new modes of writing, new ways of making-sensible” in order to “imagine otherwise” (113). As well, we might consider Butler’s archiving a form of “speculative documentary,” as Alexis Pauline Gumbs names the form of her own recent book, *The M Archive*, which she explains involved assembling “an imagined archive that troubles” the “systems of knowledge” she is involved in, “especially the social sciences and anti-social sciences” (Gumbs 2017). This last connection also suggests how important feminism was to Butler’s visionary materialist critical historiography and how Butler’s life and work continue to inspire and shape women of color feminisms today, partly by modeling counter-histories, intervening in knowledge production, experimenting with writing, and refusing linear progress narratives in ways characteristic of women of color feminism since at least the 1980s.

The collection of Butler's papers is so large that it is difficult to adequately describe it. It includes 165 boxes of manuscripts, encompassing drafts, notes, outlines, and fragments from every piece of fiction and non-fiction Butler ever published or did not publish, as well as school papers, poetry, screenplays, diaries, journals, and many other kinds of writing. There are dozens of notecards Butler created for different purposes, including making speeches, which was very difficult for her as a painfully shy person. She also used the notecards to compile bibliographies, take research notes, and construct a thesaurus of names. The Papers also includes dozens of wire-bound notebooks in which Butler records her everyday life, brainstorm, and drafts pages of her novels and stories. More than 40 boxes contain thousands of letters Butler received and copies of letters she sent to others, as well as hundreds of photographs, including many she took on research trips to places such as Peru and Alaska. Other photographs document Butler's public life in the science fiction world, at conventions and awards ceremonies. Butler also kept extensive research files covering a wide array of topics, with annotated clippings from the *Los Angeles Times* an especially prominent source. Finally, Butler's Papers encompass more than 50 boxes of ephemera, including awards, contracts, royalty statements, datebooks, greeting cards, periodicals, printed materials by and about herself, documents connected to travel, including local bus trips, her many speaking engagements, and much, much more.

As I suggest in my recent book *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (Streeby, 24) in Butler's notebooks of the 1980s, she named her speculative writing, theorizing, and archiving practices HistoFuturism, which she defines as both an alternative to and a merging of the work of historians and Futurists. In the paragraphs where she coins the term, Butler briefly alludes to the Futurians, "a specific old time fan group," and "Future History," a sub-genre of science fiction, as she considers the word's different variants and meanings. She also criticizes "Futurists" who study the "recent past and present" in an effort to "forecast the future" for making people into "puppets" or leaving "them out entirely" to vindicate particular systems and champion new technologies as the main drivers of history. Claiming the HistoFuturist as her "own invention" (OEB 3221), Butler imagines this figure, in contradistinction to historians and futurists, as one who extrapolates from the human and technological past and present by researching, archiving, and then working over research materials to speculate about possible futures that might materialize on their foundations. As well, Butler's research often explores what we might call forms of radical reproduction, as she imagines otherwise knowledge production, memory, historiography, racial capitalism, ecology, climate change, environmental justice, schooling, and education while critically documenting the history of the privatizing, tax-cutting, public-destroying, deregulating Reagan-Bush administrations.

When Butler invented the figure of the HistoFuturist as an aspirational ideal in late 1981, she was still considering pursuing formal education, specifically to gain expertise in history, although she soon ambivalently abandoned that idea in favor of spending more time immersing herself in writing and self-directed research. On November 24, 1981, she wrote in a notebook that she wanted a “bachlor’s degree, a Master’s, and a PhD in History,” and that achieving these degrees would mean she “had become an historian, truly educated, first made aware through facts new to me of new possibilities for study, for thought, and most important, through writing fact or fiction” (OEB 3221). Even then, Butler recognized that her interests did not lie at the center of the discipline of history as it was currently institutionalized but rather were closer to “Cultural History and Applied Anthropology.” In her notes on the HistoFuturist, Butler distinguished what she hoped to do through her archive-making and speculative fiction writing from the work of the historian, as she understood it. Complaining that too many historians have “axes to grind,” she charged that “Groups are ignored—their contributions coopted, their deficiencies magnified and added to, their humanity denied, the crimes against them ignored.” In the United States, she suggested, “Women, Indians, Blacks have had long-standing harm done to them” (OEB 3221). In 1989, when she briefly considered making the protagonist of the novel that would become *Parable of the Sower* an historian, she further reflected in one of her many notebooks that her own interests had been in “the history of science and nonwestern history,” as well as “Africa, the near and far east,” and “the middle east” (OEB 3240). By inventing another word in 1981 that incorporated the historical and the futurist, Butler signaled her investments in rethinking historiography and knowledge production, creatively providing counter-documentation by annotating, organizing, and speculatively transforming the historical and other research material she collected, which focused on different subjects and parts of the world than did most US disciplinary histories. At the same time, Butler insisted on the necessity of taking an historical and political perspective on technology rather than making people into puppets in the service of narratives of techno-futurity as she claimed Futurists too often did.

Butler’s archiving activity is a kind of knowledge production, an apparatus for producing counter-historical narratives and forms of radical speculation that provide alternatives to dominant histories and ways of knowing. Some of the entries in the large, wire-bound, red Meade spiral notebook, dated October 1980–1983, one of dozens Butler filled with ink during the 1980s and 1990s, illuminate how she was thinking about archiving and HistoFuturism at the moment she defined it, one year into Ronald Reagan’s first term as US president. On the cover, Butler listed the writing projects, research topics, and other subjects discussed within its pages, including ideas related to her novel *Clay’s Ark* (1984), the short story “Speech Sounds”

(1983), and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. In relation to each, she made notes on research she did on topics such as “Being a Hospital Patient,” “Seizures,” “Fathers & Daughters,” “Igbo & Chinese Names,” cancer, biology, and more. Butler also emphasized in her writing on the notebook cover that it contained information related to “History, Educa & Career.” Throughout much of 1981, she speculated about what she should study and what kind of career pathways she should take in order to improve as a writer. Suddenly in November, at the top of a page, Butler writes the word “Histo-futureist” over a paragraph in which she wonders whether animism, the so-called primitive belief that all things possess souls, should be tried as an “advanced doctrine” for “living as a true part of the environment” rather than trying to “control” it and “pretending to be apart from and above” (OEB 3221).

It is notable that the figure of the HistoFuturist emerges in the context of Butler’s research on and ruminations about the destruction of the environment, an ongoing concern that intensified during the Reagan-Bush years and that was a major shaper of the Parable novels Butler started writing in the late 1980s. At the same time, Butler’s work as a materialist critical historiographer became much more abundant in the 1980s as she constellated and annotated newspaper stories and commented in her notebooks at a much more torrid pace in response to the political, economic, social, ecological, and global dimensions of the hard turn to the privatizing, tax-cutting right in the United States in the Reagan years. In 1981, when she invented the HistoFuturist in her notebook, Butler was 34 years old, just a few years away from winning a Hugo Award for her short story “Bloodchild” (1984) and publishing the great novels of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1999). She was already thinking about *Parable of the Sower* (1993), although the story did not really begin to take shape for her until the early 1990s, especially after the Los Angeles uprisings of 1992. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Butler constellated, annotated, and speculated on her extensive research on climate change, privatization, deregulation, the rise of transnational corporations and disposable workers, tax cuts, and the repressive efforts to roll back gains made by the civil rights, women’s, LGBTQ, and anti-war movements, to name a few key research topics.

All of Butler’s writing projects of what we might call the HistoFuturist moment, like Butler’s earlier novels *Kindred* (1979) and *Wild Seed* (1980), were very research-intensive. Indeed, Butler stepped up her research for these last two novels, checking out hundreds of books from the Los Angeles Public Library and traveling to Washington, D.C. and Baltimore to do research for *Kindred*. Of that experience, she wrote in another wire-bound notebook: “Trips were underfunded and hurried but productive in teaching me how to travel and do research” (OEB 3217). Later in 1977, she reflected that her “second home” was the Los Angeles Public Library, where she sat “furtively taking notes and in brighter days, feeding the copy machine,” on an array of

topics, including “the human brain, Colonial New York, Nineteenth Century Maryland, guns, sailing ships, space ships.” She further observed that every “novel I write takes me off in several new directions, most of which prove both fascinating and frustrating, because I must leave them so quickly to give attention to some other subject” (OEB 3217).

Butler began *Wild Seed*, which spans centuries and continents, partly because she still had “a lot of research” she had not “used” in *Kindred* (OEB 3220). In a Notecard on Research, Butler wrote of her *Kindred* protagonist Dana: “My Ignorance” was “Hers” (OEB 3035). On another card Butler wrote in pencil that “Research” was “scary, essential, a mystery to me” and suggested she only had “10 books of black history” (OEB 3035) in her library when she embarked on the project. Marker, pencil, and ink pen are overlaid, palimpsest-style, on this card, suggesting Butler went over it multiple times, pausing to make new highlights while trying to commit the words to memory in order to work them into conversations and speeches on the topic. The cards are the pedagogical technology of an autodidact who is determined to keep learning even when money, time, transportation, social and disciplinary boundaries, and the limits of official institutions get in the way. And often they did get in the way, since no school schedule left enough time for Butler to immerse herself in writing fiction as she longed to, since Butler was often disappointed in the education she received, and since financial pressures and the difficulties of getting around the city, especially for night classes at UCLA that she wanted to take, were prohibitive for a non-driver reliant on the city bus as her main mode of transportation.

For the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, Butler briefly took classes in Biology and Anthropology at California State University, Los Angeles, of which she later wrote “I was introduced to facets of anthropology and especially biology that set me afire” (OEB 3227), even though she dropped out because getting to and attending class and studying took too much of her writing time. Still, it is fascinating to see parts of her great human-alien captivity, survival, and reproduction novel *Dawn* emerge in juxtaposition to Butler’s lecture notes for her classes during these years. Later in the HistoFuturist notebook I discuss above, Butler’s notes on taxonomy, phylogeny, comparative anatomy, cellular biology, and embryology appear on one side of a page, while the facing page features Butler’s red-inked speculation on how Oankali-human reproduction might work in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Around this time, Butler was also taking extensive notes on Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cells. In the medium-sized and more portable notebooks Butler used to record shorter snippets of thought, jot down bibliographical references, worry over finances, and more, she wrote in 1983 that the “HeLa cell line is immortal with no hint of senescence,” exemplifying “endless, *uncontrolled* reproduction.” Shifting to the speculative mode, she next wondered what “If it were endless, controlled reproduction...? Consider” (OEB 3179) and then drafted several



paragraphs of fiction that play with this theory, in line with Butler's idea, provoked by her research, of using cancer as regenerative.

The connections between Butler's research and speculative theory are also visible in another set of notes from this era. In notes on writing she compiled in a three-ring binder around 1980, just before she conceived of the *Histofuturist* (OEB 2716), she taped two blank index cards on the top of a page: the left one distills important insights about research, while the one on the right insists on the importance of dramatizing action and struggle. On the top left, she extracted key points from 5 pages of a 1979 issue of *The Writer* featuring science fiction author Ben Bova. Butler emphasized the idea that "Research is Vital to Realism" by writing in bright red ink and giving this card a special place at the top. She also listed three important forms of research that were crucial to her own archiving, constellating, annotating, and speculative fiction writing. The first was Extrapolation, defined by the phrase "If this goes on..." and a basic tool in the toolkit of the science fiction writer. The second was Speculation, the method of asking "What if" based on research material. Butler explained the third method, Projection, in the following way: "Take an incident from history and project it into the future." All three of these methods fundamentally depend on research, and again and again throughout Butler's papers the keyword "research" pops up in connection to her deepest aims and ambitions as a thinker and writer.

In 1983, Butler told an audience of aspiring writers that she "learned most" of her science" after she "left school" (OEB 3226), and this self-taught knowledge is abundantly evidenced in the extensive reading, constellating, and annotating Butler did of the items now collected in the Subject Files and Research Materials series. As curator Russell explains, the Subject Files follow Butler's own organizational schema according to which Butler constellated clippings within manila envelopes that she arranged chronologically after writing the relevant dates and titles of the clippings on the front. There are many envelopes filled with dozens of clippings on Science and Medicine, organized into categories such as Physical Health, Mental Health, Cancer, Molecular Biology, Ob-Gyn, The Brain, Biomedical Science, and Physical Science. Other subjects of interest for Butler include Cults and Religions, Women, Black People and Latinos, Minorities, History and Anthropology, Occupations, Latin America, Crimes and Laws, Politics and Power, Reagan and Reaganism, Social Conditions, Disaster, and the Environment. The Research Materials encompass many of the same categories and kinds of material but were organized by Russell into their present clusters. There are thousands of newspaper and magazine articles and other material in the Subject and Research files, many of which Butler extensively annotated.

The front of one of the "Environment" envelopes, on the back of which Butler added the date pre-1981, just before she invented the *HistoFuturist*, exemplifies



Butler's constellating to make generative intersectional connections, in this case among science, politics, social issues, and the environment. Articles clipped from the *Los Angeles Times* emphasize the smog problem in the city, which threatened to worsen due to the Reagan administration's emphasis on deregulating industry and Reagan's ignorance about how air pollution worked, which Butler extensively documented through cartoons, *Los Angeles Times* editorials, and news stories. Several articles in Butler's constellation focus on Secretary of the Interior James Watt's plans to open up Western lands for logging, mining, and oil extraction, while others document how Agent Orange, used by the United States in the Vietnam War, was coming "home" to harm former soldiers. Still others expose environmental racism, including what "it is like to live by a chemical dump" (OEB Box 288) and the problem of toxic waste, and pesticide exposure on the job. Years before large movements formed around environmental racism and climate change, Butler was already connecting the dots through her Histofuturist archiving, constellating, and annotating. Indeed, as early as the late 1970s and early 1980s, Butler was constellating in her "Science" envelopes material about New Mexico resisting nuclear waste burial plans and on how "Toxic Dump Sites Keep Popping Up" (OEB Box 277).

Later, in 1991, Butler extensively annotated a *Los Angeles Times* editorial entitled "Conservative Rehnquist Court Unmasks Its Naked Activism" (OEB Box 294) to connect intersections of race, ecology, neoliberal economics, right-wing politics, the expansion of imprisonment and policing, and attacks on education in the Reagan-Bush years. The editorial's occasion was the Rehnquist court's decision in *McCleskey v. Zant*, which undermined habeas corpus—the doctrine that "entitles every person to challenge his or her unlawful confinement" and "is the basic check on a police state." Butler annotated these sentences, and many others in the article with a pink highlighter, drawing a bright pink box around the claim that the decision was an "overturning" of "long-established judicial doctrine." She also highlighted the details of the ruling, which limited the rights of prison inmates to challenge the constitutionality of their sentence "even when the state had knowingly used perjured testimony" or had otherwise concealed from the defendant facts that would have led to a reversal of the sentence. As well, Butler highlighted a paragraph that put the decision in the larger context of the conservative court's overturning of "decades of civil rights legislation," its elimination of "fundamental deterrents to unlawful police practices," the gutting of "the longstanding protection of religious practices by persons other than those belonging to a 'majority' religion," the sanctioning of "the invasion of the bedroom and the criminalization of homosexual conduct," and the court's proclamation of "its eagerness to overturn the right to abortion."

Butler used a red ink pen profusely at the top of the page to constellate several problems she traced to the Reagan-Bush administrations and right-wing neoliberal policies: "Disintegrating economy, Deteriorating Infrastructure, Deteriorating

Education <public>, Disintegrating human structures + protections, Global Warming, Ozone deterioration, Institutionalized Corruption, Newly acceptable racism.” At the bottom, also in bright red ink, Butler wrote: “It’s, as I said: We will be dealing with the effects of Reagan Bush S. Court appointments for at least thirty years—and like the R-B harm done to the economy and the ecology, these effects will make us suffer individually and as a nation.” Like Walter Benjamin’s materialist historiographer, Butler thereby searches in the detritus of history for those pieces of the past and present that resist incorporation into a triumphal story of capitalism—specifically Reagan-Bush right-wing, privatizing, tax-cutting, deregulating neoliberal capitalism—as endless progress.

In addition to constellating and annotating newspaper and magazine articles, Butler also did extensive research at the Central Library in downtown Los Angeles, which she refers to as the LAPL in hundreds of notations scribbled in her notebooks, journals, and notecards throughout her life. Indeed, the public library is a recurring figure in Butler’s papers, showing up in multiple forms as a crucial enabler of Butler’s own research and self-education, as a space for writing outside the home, and more broadly, as a sign of the damage done by neoliberal policies that privileged quick fix budget cuts and short-term thinking. Along with the downtown Central Library, which was a long bus ride away, the Pasadena Public Library was also an important space for Butler, especially during her childhood. In autobiographical notes, Butler suggested humorously that “the general section of the ‘Peter Pan’ room, the children’s room at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, California is where I was born and raised” (OEB 95). In notes scattered throughout Butler’s papers and in an essay published in the magazine *Omni* entitled “Free Libraries: Are They Becoming Extinct?,” Butler insisted on the significance of public libraries for her self-education and research. As the “child of a shoeshine man who died young and a maid who was uneducated but who knew her way to the library,” Butler suggested that her own “access to public libraries” crucially enabled her to become a writer. She recalled being taken to the Pasadena Public Library to hear librarians read to groups of “avid little kids,” while teaching them to look for “books about mythology and horses, dinosaurs and stars.” These experiences made Butler, at six years old, ask her mother if she could have a library card. In her *Omni* essay, she credited the public library with allowing her to access “books my mother could never have afforded on topics that never would have occurred to her.”

During the 1970s, when Butler was working alienating blue-collar temp jobs in the Broadway area of downtown Los Angeles, the Central Library became a semi-utopian alternative space for her that was proximate but other, a kind of portal through which to time travel by doing research and a key site of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney refer to as “black study. (105)” Starting in 1970, Butler kept hundreds of call slips of books she

checked out from the Central Library, including Jacques Barzun's and Henry Graff's *The Modern Researcher*, a guide for graduate students in History on doing research and writing research reports. As I mentioned earlier, while Butler did research at the LAPL for all her early novels, she drew especially heavily on the Library's collections when doing research for *Kindred*, her novel that hurls its protagonist, a Black woman named Dana, back and forth across time, from 1970s Los Angeles to a plantation worked by slaves in antebellum Maryland. Butler checked out many books on Nigeria, including mid-nineteenth-century travel narratives, such as one by an English doctor (Perkins, *Nigeria: A Descriptive Geography*) that provoked her to annotate the call slip with the words "not very useful" (OEB Box 310). She also borrowed books on life in colonial New York, on the Ibo people, hypnosis, the Andes of South Peru, ships and sailing, and many other topics.

As an appreciative and heavy user of public libraries, by the 1970s Butler was already thinking about how political and economic shifts were imperiling them. In 1978, she wrote in one of her large wire-bound notebooks (OEB 3216) that California's Proposition 13, the measure that reduced property taxes and mandated a two-thirds majority to approve new taxes and that had recently passed, "was an indicator of a rightward swing" in which "those who have, keep," and "those who have not lose what little they were gaining." She also complained that "top level high salaried types with access to public funds" helped themselves and their cronies while "janitors, teachers, library clerks" and other public workers lost their jobs. At the end of the 1970s, Butler criticized L.A. city councilmen (OEB 3220 1979) for failing to maintain the material structure and resources of the library, cutting staff and services to save money, and not understanding that one "of the most useful and valuable tools our society has is a strong public library system available for education, research, and enjoyment of all of the people." In the ephemera section of the archive, Butler also saved material that claimed the LAPL "serves the largest population of any public library in the world."

During the early 1980s, Butler continued to write and do research at the Central Library right up until its closure in 1986 after an arsonist set a fire that Butler often referred to as a traumatic episode in her life, charged with powerful significance as a metaphor for the attacks on public libraries and public education in the neoliberal era. In 1981, she was still enjoying the library as a research site, work space, and complicated space of sociality where she made friends with clerks who checked out her books, sometimes fantasized about men sitting at nearby tables, and tried to ward off loud and annoying patrons while hard at work in the history room, her usual spot. Preparing for a speech in 1981, she admitted to her imagined audience that she had been nervous and did not know what to say until she followed her established research habits and "took a bus to the library, took my regular seat in the history room, and picked through a few lib books until ideas

began to come” (OEB 3221). In this way, Butler suggested, “worlds are born out of the chaos of my reading and living.”

It was a major crisis, then, when on April 29, 1986, “a tall thin black woman” who “looked familiar” came up to her on the street and said “It’s the library,” after Butler stepped off the bus and stood staring at the smoke “through tears.” “No doubt she had seen me around the library,” Butler surmised. “I know,” Butler responded to the woman, and then “began to rail” about politicians who tried to save money by not fixing the library; budget cuts that happened in the wake of Proposition 13; custodians whose work was split between multiple libraries; and damaged books not being repaired. “I repaired several myself,” Butler remembered. She called the downtown library not only a “loved friend” but also “teacher, lover, home” (OEB 3188).

We can see the creative, speculative memory work of the Histofuturist in the multiple ways the Central Library fire shows up in the archive, in how Butler constellates pieces of her present and juxtaposes and connects all the different times to illuminate how the short-sighted thinking and tax cuts of the neo-liberal era were already destroying public education. Even before the fire, Butler carefully preserved a January 22, 1982 issue of the now-defunct alternative weekly *Los Angeles Reader* featuring a cover story entitled “We Know You Don’t Care About the Central Library, That’s the Problem.” This story ominously warned of the “serious threat” posed by a lack of funding due to “budgetary constraints” and of the “violation of fire health, and safety standards” four years before the fire happened. Butler had this and other stories in mind years later in the nineties when she began drafting her essay on the public library for *Omni*. “The newspapers printed stories about what a fire trap the old building” was, but it was “living on borrowed time,” almost “dying of neglect” when the fire broke out. “I didn’t realize at that time,” Butler reflected in 1991, that what “I was watching was a metaphor for the future of libraries in America.” Public libraries, she argued, became victims of “short-sightedness” and “neglect” in the wake of the so-called “tax-payer’s revolt” of 1978 and the victory of Proposition 13. In the 1993 *Omni* essay, which appeared the same year the Central Library reopened after being temporarily relocated to a downtown insurance building in 1989, Butler explicitly connected the fire to *Parable of the Sower*, which she called the coming of age story of a young woman living in a “poorer, dumber, near future time.” Butler also emphasized the irony that the Central Library’s long-needed renovations had finally been completed “just in time for another, broader library crisis” caused by several years of “cutting school budgets, closing school libraries, raising university tuitions and fees, and diminishing or closing public libraries.” These short-sighted, “self-destructive” moves would cause dire problems in the near future, Butler predicted, since she saw public libraries as “the open universities of America,” offering “worlds of possibility” to those confined by “ignorance” and “poverty”: “They’re free, they’re accessible to everyone; they may offer special

services to shut-ins, to children, even to non-readers.” Thus she criticized “saving money by cutting school budgets, closing school libraries, raising university tuition and fees, and diminishing or closing public libraries” Arguing that “public libraries and public schools” are “among our best tools of adaptation,” Butler warned that the “ephemeral good of quick-fix budget cuts” was doing “lasting harm” and advised her readers to “consider the consequences” and make “the necessary changes.”

Considering how important public libraries were to Butler’s formation and life as a writer, it may come as a surprise that she left her own papers to the Huntington Library, located in San Marino, California, across town from where she grew up in a Black, working-class neighborhood in Pasadena. The Huntington must have loomed large as an elite local institution when Butler was a young woman. Yet tucked away in a rich neighborhood and difficult to access by bus lines, which would have been an obstacle to Butler as a lifelong non-driver, expensive to visit, and with research collections that are impossible to access without two letters of recommendation and a formal application, it is unlikely Butler spent much time there before agreeing to donate her papers. This happened after recently retired curator Sue Hodson saw Butler give a talk and became convinced Butler was one of the great ones whose papers the Huntington would be lucky to acquire. Hodson invited Butler to speak at the Huntington and on one visit Butler told Hodson she was leaving her papers to the library. Even after Butler was invited to the Huntington to give talks, however, she still felt nervous speaking there, wondering in her journal in 2000 “What to say at Huntington,” wishing she were doing something “fancier, more ‘Huntington,’” and wryly reflecting that “it’s terrible enough that I will arrive wearing polyester” (OEB 1104). At the same time, the fact that the Huntington wanted her papers was a significant mark of the high position she had achieved as a writer, which was definitely important to Butler.

Given Butler’s distress over the political failure to materially support public education and public libraries she was witnessing in the 1990s and early 2000s, it is also possible that Butler may have feared public libraries would soon no longer exist in the short-sighted, tax-cutting, rich people-aggrandizing neoliberal dystopia she saw on the horizon. Remember that Butler often deplored the poor condition of many of the public library’s materials, to the point that she repaired them herself. In this context, it is noteworthy that a 1991 *Los Angeles Times* article on research at the Huntington Library that Butler saved in a cluster of material on education and intelligence (OEB Box 295) emphasizes that “Because of the fragility of the manuscripts, as well as the difficulty in using them, only the most experienced scholars are given access to the inner library of the Huntington.” In the article, *Times* Education Writer Ann Roark called the Huntington “one of the world’s richest sources of research material in the

humanities, particularly in British and American culture,” which must have appealed to Butler as a researcher. The article also claimed that “Scholars in the humanities are among the lowest paid in a profession that is known for its generous remuneration” and that many scholars funded their research “from their own limited salaries,” which were rarely enough to “cover the high cost of living in Southern California.” The article was written just as the Huntington was starting to offer fellowships to researchers, which have expanded over the years, but today access is still very restricted and the social and economic boundaries of using the Huntington’s collections are palpable. All of the busts of eminent figures in the Huntington Library reading room are of white men and there are still too many days when only white people are doing research there.

In this context, making Butler’s Papers more accessible is of utmost importance. I have been lucky to be a small part of the collective project to move some of the knowledge Butler produced out of the archive and into the world. The most important person in this endeavor is Ayana Jamieson, the founder of the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network, the digital hub that she and Moya Bailey created to bring together activists, artists, writers, scholars, and fans. Another significant creator of Butler-focused arts and humanities programming is Julia Meltzer, whose arts collective Clockshop produced a year-long series in Los Angeles called “Radio Imagination: Artists and Writers in the Archive of Octavia E. Butler,” which included ten commissioned works of speculative writing and art by a lot of wonderful people that has recently been memorialized in a limited-edition book. In June 2016 I co-organized with Jamieson a conference at the University of California, San Diego on Butler’s Papers, writings, and legacies called “Shaping Change” where artists, activists, writers, students, and community members came together to talk about the significance of Butler’s body of work for activism, art, and world-making. The interdisciplinary conference on Butler’s papers co-organized by Ayana Jamieson and Moya Bailey in June 2017, which coincided with a Huntington exhibit on Butler, was a major event in the history of Octavia E. Butler Studies. All of these different projects aim to extend access to the archive, to interact with it in order to argue for Butler’s significance as a major intellectual of the Black Radical Tradition and help inspire new art, speculative writing, and collective activity. In all of these ways, Butler’s archiving activity and the responses to it create new historical meanings to help us think outside discourses of progress and development. The juxtaposed fragments of Butler’s past and present produce constellations from many luminous points, comprising star-signs that bring time into a critical state and thereby illuminate pathways to imagining otherwise.

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