

A Brief Guide to the Many Traps of Octavia Butler's Fiction

We have talked a lot in our class about the traps that Octavia Butler sets for her readers. No matter how progressive or empathetic we thought we were, Butler's texts trapped us all at some point in a deeply-ingrained prejudice, habit of speech, or power structure we did not know we held. In the interest of aiding future readers—those who want to be aided anyway—we have compiled this very short guide to identifying the most prominent traps we encountered, navigating them, and what they may reveal about us all.

On the Traps of Consent

1. No one truly has autonomy in a pure and uninfluenced form, and yet we must respect the characters' understandings of their own autonomy and their attempts to achieve it. **2.** It is vital that readers identify characters' loci of autonomy as [allochthonous](#) or [autochthonous](#). This can save readers from making dangerous assumptions about characters and intentionality. Consider the microorganism from *Clay's Ark* which drives its hosts to food and sex and whether it can be separated from its host. **3.** Butler fashions some of her nonconsensual scenarios to lack a clear "perpetrator." We often try to blame someone when another's autonomy is violated and may try to blame characters who do not necessarily have full autonomy or consent to their own actions. Consider Shori and Wright's relationship in *Fledgling*; Shori does not realize she is making Wright addicted until it is too late for him to leave her. **4.** You will likely try to fit Butler's characters and their relationships into your own understanding of consent, but be sure that your comprehension of Butler's work is grounded in textual evidence.

1. The ooloi, the third gender of the Oankali in the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, can trap readers because we are so used to viewing gender in terms of binaries. The initial impression that we get of someone's gender is so strong that we may use the wrong pronoun without even realizing it. The ooloi go by the "it" pronoun, but many readers might gender them as male or female. **2.** Many readers default to male for the ooloi because of their perceived "masculine" behaviors; they appear to be the heads of their households, as Lilith and Paul Titus discuss in *Dawn*. Readers should try to avoid putting a human hierarchy over the ooloi and accept the terms of the text. **3.** Butler's characters act out the trap of misgendering the ooloi with their own children. Jodahs and Aaor, from *Imago*, are labelled male and female before they reach puberty even though they both mature as ooloi. Their parents refer to them with "he" and "she" pronouns because they have difficulty shaking off their initial impression of Jodahs and Aaor as male and female. **4.** This reveals our own tendency to assign gender to children, babies, and even fetuses without their consent or even without true understanding of what their own gender might be. **5.** Many of Butler's most disturbing themes relate to violations of norms; consider whether these violations intersect with gender roles and the gender binary—as they did for us in her best attempt to make a man pregnant, "Bloodchild."

On the Traps of Gender

On the Traps of the Visual

1. We define the regime of the visual as the range of possible interpretations that one can make from the imagistic components of a text. Imagery is not limited to just sight. **2.** Butler shows us both how visual aspects can bring individuals in and can exclude them, leading to the formation of a hierarchy and violence. **3.** Butler's lack of non-human descriptions is dangerous. Be wary when rushing to conclusions. **4.** Remember that human—and nonhuman—characters are not one-dimensional; be careful before judging a book by its [cover](#). **5.** Butler is intentional in her casting of character race; do not lose sight of this. Additionally, do not marry yourself to your representations of Butler's characters, as she often reveals more later. **6.** In addition to non-human characters being visually distinct, one may have to think through the context of the unfamiliar. Be wary of specific quotes. Taken out of context, statements may be easily misinterpreted.

As our professor, Dr. McCoy, has told us, Butler is never gratuitous. There will be times when her works make you deeply uncomfortable. If you can, resist the temptation to reject negative emotions provoked by the text and instead examine them carefully. You may just learn something valuable from these reactions. Finally, without negating everything stated above, remember that sometimes there is tremendous value in letting yourself be trapped.