FLORIAN BAST

Of Bodies, Communities, and Voices

Agency in Writings by Octavia Butler

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

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For my dad,
in loving memory

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Leipzig, June 2015

Contents

1 Introduction

A young, black, female, vampire-human hybrid overcomes racist and speciesist prejudice by way of both physical and legal battle; a massive, worm-like alien asks a human teenager whether he really prefers death to bearing her progeny; a religious group settles in the hills of northern California after the US devolves into a third-world nation, only to see their settlement turned into a brutal 'reeducation camp' by Christian fundamentalists; aliens with three biological sexes force survivors of World War III into tentacle sex to create alien-human children; and a small group of humans hides in the mountains to keep from following their biological urges and spreading the alien microorganism that has invaded their bodies. This small potpourri of plots snippets from texts by Octavia Butler—the first African American woman to gain renown as an author of science fiction[1]—demonstrates the diversity with which her works think through, complicate, and negotiate agency. As Butler's characters struggle, resist, and compromise and as they, in many cases, narrate their own stories, her works delve deeply into the complexities and consequences of different notions of agency. It is these manifold conceptualizations of agency with which my study most centrally concerns itself: I argue that within Butler's oeuvre there are specific texts that not only make in-depth investigations of the intricacies of agency their narrative projects but also engage in a dialogue with each other about these conceptualizations.

Agency and African American Literature

African American literature has always been complexly tied to conceptualizations of and struggles for agency. Within this rich and diverse tradition of oral and written narration, claiming the capacity to make a choice about oneself and implement it, as this study defines agency, has continuously held a crucial place in the literary expressions of African American experiences from manifold different viewpoints and with highly heterogeneous agendas. From the Middle Passage to the slave plantations, from the Reconstruction South to the March on Washington, from the Black Panthers to responses to current contentions that the US is a postracial nation, notions of agency have been and remain at the heart of many of the central is-

[1] Especially African American authors have, at times, favored the term 'speculative fiction' because of their works' blurring of boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and other fantastic genres (cf. Löffler 48), preferring "a flexible genre term that defies clear-cut boundaries and revels in the mixing of tropes and genres" (Thaler 9). I employ the term 'science fiction' here for three reasons. First, Butler's texts, in featuring time travel, genetic manipulation, alien invasion, etc. often employ themes more commonly associated with traditional science fiction than the ones employed by other authors of color using the mode of the fantastic (although certainly with unique twists and perspectives that clearly differentiate her work from canonical science fiction). Second, Butler's work in particular is much more frequently characterized as science fiction than as speculative fiction in scholar-

sues of African American (women's) literary tradition,[2] such as subjectivity, freedom, racism and sexism, the body, community, and voice.

Both its centrality within this tradition and its complex intertwining with other abstract themes of black literature in the United States thus make agency a potent object of analysis in American studies. Work on the intricate complexities of the issue of agency, a further unfolding of its many facets, hence promises to contribute significantly to our understanding of (African) American literature overall. While there is certainly a plethora of studies that engage with agency-related dynamics in relation to African American literature in general or to specific authors and genres—in fact, I would argue that most studies that deal with African American literature deal with agency-related issues in some way—there is, to the best of my knowledge, no book-length study singularly devoted specifically to agency and its expression and conceptualization in African American literature.[3] Part of my project's purpose is to provide a first programmatic and elaborate venture into this territory.

In pursuing this goal, I argue that the interpretation of writings by one particular author yields especially insightful and relevant results: My study

ship. In fact, even Thomas, in her introduction to *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, which itself does not clearly differentiate the terms, mentions Butler and Samuel R. Delaney as the leading black authors of the genre of science fiction (xi). Third, I share Vint's opinion that Butler's texts, rather than being excluded from the definition of science fiction because of their difference from the canonical works of white male authors, should encourage a broader definition of the genre that is mindful of the prejudiced shortcomings of previous, canonical definitions. As she argues in relation to the Butler text whose genre categorization has vexed scholars the most: "Instead of trying to sort out whether *Kindred* is 'really' sf (how are we to understand its refusal to provide a scientific rationale for time travel?), we should instead consider how it enables us to think about sf in new ways. Just as realist representations must be understood not as the neutral reflection of 'the way things are' but as ideological constructs, so traditional claims about what 'counts' as sf should be understood as tending to exclude the perspective and experience of people of color" ("'Only'" 241-42).

2 Throughout my work, I will, at times, use this parenthetical construction to denote the fact that certain statements apply to African American literature in general but apply particularly and with added dynamics to African American women's writing. Moreover, in speaking of a tradition here, I do not proceed from a monolithic notion of this highly heterogeneous body of texts, being aware of the constructedness and mutability of delineated notions of tradition and canon. Rather, throughout this study, I seek to highlight the ways in which Butler's texts engage with literary features, writerly techniques, and philosophical concerns that hold a prominent place within this multifaceted body of texts as a whole.

3 The only book-length study focusing on agency in literature at all that has come to my attention is Livingston's *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction*. Livingston's work, however, in its near equating of agency and rationality and its twin project of generating both theoretical and literary findings, is far removed from my study.

demonstrates the productivity of analyzing the dynamics of agency within selected works by Octavia Butler, "the first black woman to take on science fiction and make the genre her own" (Govan, "Sometimes" 12).[4] To be sure, a study of agency in African American literature could take a number of different approaches. A historical overview of the issue's occurrences and treatments could be conducted, a comparison of the many theoretical engagements by black authors with the topic, or an analysis of the discourse on agency in writings from a specific period. But as I delineate throughout the following study, Butler's work not only evidences particularly multifaceted constructions of agency on several literary levels, utilizing a host of literary features, but, in doing so, is also deeply aware of and makes innovative use of African American literature's rich and heterogeneous tradition of negotiating and addressing the complexities of agency.

Why (Only) Butler?

Butler's oeuvre is uniquely suited for a study with this analytical interest for a number of reasons, which I will unfold much more elaborately throughout the coming chapters: Most fundamentally, there is a complex discussion of agency taking place on many levels within some of her writings. These texts engage with different aspects and realizations of agency in a variety of ways and through a variety of literary tools; they include their respective plots, character constructions, narrative perspectives, utilizations of different literary traditions, and imagery in their narrative projects. This results, as I centrally argue, in multifaceted and prolific contributions to ongoing agency debates.

Indeed, a number of scholars have noted the importance of themes like hegemony, independence, autonomy, and other concepts related to agency in Butler's writings. In all manner of academic contexts, emphasis is frequently and consistently put on issues such as power, subjectivity, and racial or gendered oppression as conspicuous foci in Butler's work. As early as 1984, Sandra Y. Govan notes in a survey of Butler's fiction up to that point that "the core at which all comes together in Butler's universe is the delineation of power. […] Power, then, is clearly at the center of Butler's novels ("Connections" 82). In an overall appreciation of her work published more than 20 years later, Andrea Hairston states that Butler is a "prophetic feminist artist" who "never lets us forget that we are all agents of change" (288). The title of Lauren J. Lacey's study of Butler's final three novels speaks for itself: "Octavia E. Butler on Coping with Power in *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*, and *Fledgling*." Even Butler's obituaries bear out this trend as Gregory Jerome Hampton notes that

[4] Govan elaborates: "While she was not the first African American to venture into speculative fiction, or science fiction, her preferred term, she *was* the first to truly open up the genre, first to mark the path others now follow" ("Sometimes" 12).

all of the various motifs that "reoccur in Butler's work […] center on humanity's struggle with identity and hegemony" ("Octavia" 247). Some of these texts mention agency explicitly, many touch upon related concepts such as self-efficacy or self-definition.[5] However, for all the work closely related to, even touching upon, agency in writings by Octavia Butler, no analysis of all or parts of her work has made constructions of agency its central analytical focus.[6] By choosing Butler's works as its primary texts, my study thus connects to a large corpus of existing scholarship on issues related to my main concern in order to offer in-depth and innovative readings of selected Butler texts that focus on a heretofore underdiscussed aspect of her work.

There are a number of additional reasons for the suitedness of Butler's works to an investigation into the complexities of agency in African American literature. First, Butler's texts tie their discussion of this issue to complexes of meaning at the heart of African American (women's) literature: the body, community, and voice, around which the three main sections of my analysis are structured. Second, by employing the mode of the fantastic, Butler's texts consciously participate in a longstanding tradition of women's, and in particular women of color's, writing: They forego a strictly realist portrayal of the lives of the oppressed in part because it would make many agential scenarios for them appear absurd and, somewhat ironically, unrealistic.[7] Instead, as Anne Koenen has noted in *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power: The Fantastic in Anglo-American Women's Literature*, "by using the fantastic, women writers can create plots of power openly and

5 I will provide an argument on the specific productivity of agency as opposed to other, related terms, in the following chapter.

6 N. Jacobs's "Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis*" perhaps comes closest to my project but differs significantly in scope, length, and focus. After the conclusion of my work on this book, I have also come across a dissertation by Algie Vincent Williams III submitted in 2011, made available in open access form in the Temple University Libraries Digitals Collection at an unknown date, and only listed in the MLA database as a dissertation abstract. While the text's title, "Patterns in the Parables: Black Female Agency and Octavia Butler's Construction of Black Womanhood" would seem to indicate major overlaps between its project and my own, the studies differ fundamentally: Williams's dissertation is much less concretely focused on agency and its construction and more concerned with situating Butler's works within the African American canon, with questions of identity and the construction of black womanhood, and with the potentials and dangers for agency which are arise specifically from the black female body. In terms of its object of study, Williams's dissertation focuses on a corpus of five novels of which only two are part my project. Methodologically, Williams's work is much more author-focused and less concerned with situating the texts within a context of agency theory.

7 As examples, Koenen offers two prototypical American plots put forth in gender-reversed setups by Joanna Russ ("Working" 99): "Two strong women battle for supremacy in the West" and "[a] young girl in Minnesota finds her womanhood by killing a bear" (Russ 3).

radically, without having to comply with the rules of plausibility" (229).[8] Third, and more specifically, as the first African American woman author of science fiction to rise to prominence, Butler produced texts that not only constitute sophisticated negotiations of agency-related themes in African American literature but also utilize elements of a literary genre that has its own tradition of investigating agency. While African American (women's) literature's general engagement with agency is of a different nature and arises out of different historical contexts,[9] science fiction—with its themes of body snatching, alien invasion, mind control, and genetic determinism and with its incessant interest in investigating and blurring the boundaries of humanity, all of which are present in Butler's work—adds yet another aspect to the polydimensional engagement with agency taking place both in and between some of her writings.[10]

Approaching my selection from a different angle, it bears noting that, because of its pioneering status for African American science fiction, and black feminist science fiction in particular, Butler's work has repeatedly been considered highly influential: It has both inspired authors who followed in her footsteps and helped to broaden previous definitions of science fiction and African American literature. Any study offering new insights into the body of her work is thus a highly relevant contribution to the field of American literary studies. In particular, however, Butler's writings constitute a potent site of investigation for a study interested in negotiations of agency in African American literature.

There are, of course, other African American[11] women whose works use science fiction tropes or who at least centrally include the fantastic in their utilizations of African American literary traditions—such as Jewelle Gomez, Tananarive Due, J. M. Jeffries, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Nay-

8 Cf. Löffler for an engagement of African American women's vampire fiction in part within this paradigm. Especially the use of the fantastic in postmodern literary works about the history and representation of slavery has been an object of copious and diverse scholarship, cf., for example, Spaulding's work in *Re-Forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative.*

9 As Dubey notes: "Nowhere has the humanist legacy been interrogated as sharply or deeply as in African American literature" (55).

10 As Hampton states, "[i]n a practical sense, Butler's writing can be located between traditional African American literature and traditional SF. Both genres have historically included elements of social commentary and allegories that involve spaces/scenarios that are uncommon in mainstream (white) American literature" (*Changing* 69).

11 The utilization of fantastic tropes by women writers from the African Diaspora is, of course, not limited to US-American literature but rather includes works by a host of authors from other countries, Caribbean-Canadian writer Nalo Hopkins's work in *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and *Skin Folk* (2001) and British author Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is For Witching* (2009) perhaps being the most prominent examples. Cf. also Löffler 43.

lor.[12] Including their work would have made this more of an overview of the dynamics of agency in African American women's fantastic literature. I have chosen to focus my study solely on works by Butler[13] because this choice allows for the in-depth analysis required in order to account for the specificities, ambiguities, and complexities of Butler's work, on which scholars have repeatedly remarked.

The Theoretical Work of Narrative Texts

In focusing on the constructions of agency in texts by Butler, I base my work on the notion that narrative texts can significantly contribute to abstract philosophical debates. This kind of participation has been discussed, perhaps most canonically as it applies to people of color, in Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory," in which she posits that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create" (349). I take Christian to point to a particular tradition within the literature of people of color but to not necessarily and explicitly exclude narratives of white authors from the possibility of such theorizing in the narrative. That is to say that, at the most fundamental level, I take her to posit that narrative theorizing is a general possibility of narrative texts. Additionally, I propose that texts in general, and literary texts in particular, can be said to perform theoretical work, somewhat analogously to the notion of cultural work that texts can perform—one of the foundations of American studies after the cultural turn. By this I mean to say that literary texts can not only "[help] construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world," as Paul Lauter famously defines cultural work

12 Thomas's canonical anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* provides a number of examples and can serve as a starting point for investigations of fantastic African American literature from the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

13 Though I focus on one author, the goal is certainly not to ascertain knowledge about Butler's intention in writing these texts or her position on agency. However, the fact that literary scholars generally no longer seek to unearth an author's 'true intention' and no longer take her statements about her works as the definite interpretation of them does not mean that the category 'author' has lost its cultural significance. Whether in the form of conferences, special issues of academic journals —there are, for example, special issues of *Science Fiction Studies* (37.7, 2010), *Utopian Studies* (19.3, 2008), and *Obsidian III* (6.2/7.1, 2005/2006) on Butler's work—or the shelf at the local bookstore, there is a cultural construction of these texts forming a collective of some kind, of them belonging together. Moreover, the writings of Octavia Butler constitute a critically delineated corpus, a body of texts that has been identified, commented upon, analyzed, classified, etc. by a number of literary scholars.

(23).[14] They can also investigate the philosophical frameworks of concepts and use their narration and their aesthetics to think through the consequences of philosophical stances, to personify competing arguments and their ethical consequences in characters and conflicts, and to exploratively literalize the metaphors of abstract discourse. In this fashion, literary texts can provide significant contributions to philosophical discussions in a way that abstract treatises cannot.[15]

In this context, it is crucial to note that this is a work in literary and cultural studies. Its goal is to produce knowledge about the meanings of literary texts within cultural and theoretical contexts, and it is not interested in creating any knowledge about agency as a theoretical concept. Accordingly, I will read the narratives within my corpus as works of art with complex political, philosophical, aesthetic, and cultural facets and with previously undiscovered meanings rather than reducing them to simple or direct narrativizations of one philosopher's or one school's highly specific conceptualizations of agency. Butler's works are more than stories told to didactically illustrate a certain theory as "Butler resists the temptation of basing fictional exploration on the simplified and generalized solutions that theoretical discourses offer" (Melzer, *Alien* 85). While this may, in some cases, mean foregoing incremental details of some highly specific agency philosophy potentially to be found in them, my approach is designed to interpret my chosen corpus of primary texts, whose "rejection of any one-dimensional theoretical approach is one of Butler's most powerful contributions to feminist debates" (Melzer, *Alien* 69).

Generality and Specificity

In approaching works of African American literature in order to analyze their conceptualizations of agency, it is crucial to point out that I consider their theoretical work to lie in contributing to *general* philosophical debates about the category of agency as opposed to, for example, in providing concrete conceptualizations of agency in specific historical situations, such as slavery. This is not to say that agency is a capability that can be assessed and judged outside of a concrete historical dialectic of enablement and constraint, nor to make any false claims to universality myself or to attest them

[14] Cf. also Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* for an early and canonical engagement with the notion of cultural work.

[15] Though it bears explication in this introduction, this is, of course, an opinion shared by many scholars of literature and evidenced in their studies. Melzer's *Science Fiction and Feminist Thought* and Fishburn's *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative* are two examples that have been particularly influential for my study. As Robertson notes of Butler's works, "[h]er fiction has already proven itself to be adept at producing theoretical concepts" (377). Moreover, Luckhurst notes that Butler is cited in Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" as "a principal 'theorist' for a post-essentialist cyborg feminism" (Luckhurst 30).

to Butler's texts. In fact, I posit that one of the most forceful arguments of Butler's texts lies in their *general* insistence on the *specificity* of agency. But it is to say that limiting the texts' ability to bespeak agency to the concrete historical contexts black women have faced constitutes a counterproductive narrowing of these texts' potential, in which this study, for both literary studies and political reasons, does not seek to participate. Just as Herman Melville's novel featuring a whaling journey in the nineteenth century has been read as commentary on themes as abstract and general as the human condition itself,[16] Butler's narratives of post-WW III alien-human forced breeding and of a fantastic disease that makes people literally disembody themselves to death should not be limited by what is often termed "the burden of representation" (Shohat 169):[17] They should not be limited to what they may have to say about the agency of black women in the United States in the past and/or the present.[18]

Consequently, I argue that what Butler's narratives do have to say about the agency of the oppressed and even agency in a specific situation of oppression—such as the portrayal of slavery in *Kindred*, which is part of my reading in 3.2.1[19]—can, and I believe should, be read as speaking to agency in general *by way of* speaking about the agency of the oppressed. These texts, performing their theoretical work from the epistemically privileged position of the marginalized,[20] are able to offer insightful commentary on general philosophical conceptualizations of agency and on the consequences that such general conceptualizations have on those who face (mul-

16 I thank Katja Kanzler for this poignant example.

17 The term is generally used to denote the fact that any text by a minority author represents that minority as a whole and thus creates overly monolithic impressions of it. As Shohat elaborates: "For artists and cultural critics on the margins, speaking, writing, and performing are a constant negotiation of this burden. Representations tend to be taken as allegorical, that is, every subaltern actor/actress, character, filmmaker, and even scholar is seen, at least partially, as synecdochically summing up a vast and presumably homogenous community" (169). However, it certainly also calls attention to the fact that texts by minority artists are rarely, if ever, read to speak to abstract, general ideas or issues but rather to speak to the specific situation of the section of the population to which they are seen as belonging.

18 In fact, it seems especially problematic both politically and epistemically to generalize and universalize the meanings and statements of texts that speak from and about a position of privilege rather than those that speak from and to a position of marginalization.

19 Even in regard to *Kindred*, I would argue that the text is not, or at least not primarily, interested in ascertaining the possibilities and conditions of agency under slavery as it creates a protagonist whose agential potential, as my reading in 3.2.1 seeks to demonstrate, is significantly different from that of her slave ancestors.

20 A multitude of scholars have elaborated on this privilege. Cf., for example, 47-53 in Hartsock's "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," Meyers's "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!" and Haraway's canonical "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective."

tiple forms of) oppression and thus to intervene in ongoing philosophical discussions for ethical reasons.[21] Hence, I treat Butler's *Kindred*, a time-travel novel painting a detailed and historically plausible picture of the possibilities of agency under the specific oppression of slavery in 19th-century Maryland, similarly to her alien-invasion novel *Dawn* and her vampire tale *Fledgling*: While fantastic texts can be allegorical of concrete social circumstances, I argue that the texts at hand are more beneficially read as using the mode of the fantastic and, at times, historic specificity to speak to general, overarching philosophical aspects of how to conceptualize agency (especially but not exclusively in the face of oppression) than as concrete comments on what constitutes historically specific threats to agency or as even tips on how to deal with them.[22]

To be clear here, I discuss agency as culturally constructed and historically contingent—a notion that needs to be contextualized and historicized—and I perform this contextualization and historicization both in the following chapter and in the "Contexts" sections of each topical chapter. Moreover, the texts I analyze, being fictional literary narratives, necessarily present and discuss agency in concrete contexts, and they do insist on it as a situated notion. However, while I am interested in the concrete politics of African American literary traditions as productive influences on Butler's decidedly general work on conceptualizations of agency, they are not the main goal of my analytical project. I see the primary texts of my study not just as reflections of the agency of the oppressed but as reflections of agency in general from the perspective of the oppressed and by way of engaging with a literary tradition at whose heart the search for agency in the face of oppression has always been.

A Dialogue on Agency

In order to thoroughly investigate the complex discussion of agency that occurs between parts of Butler's oeuvre, which I see as encompassing her novels and her short stories,[23] I will provide close readings of a corpus of

[21] In this way, my work may be said to constitute ethical criticism as it is interested in ascertaining the ethical position of a literary text. Put differently, my work is part of a school of literary criticism (African American studies) that has always been devoted to reading texts as to their ethical statements about dynamics of oppression and that, in the wake of the ethical turn, is often seen as ethical criticism. It is, however, decidedly not interested in judging a text's quality on the basis of its ethical stance, as some variants of ethical criticism do.

[22] This is not to say that Butler's *Kindred* cannot be gainfully read as insightful commentary on the specific atrocities of slavery and their concrete philosophical underpinnings and consequences. But it is to say that, even while my text will, at times, discuss the novel's portrayal of slavery, my primary analytical goal lies elsewhere.

[23] This study will, thus, forego an engagement with the oeuvre's paratexts, such Butler's interviews or her nonfictional essays, since it is the primary, narrative texts which hold the above-described specific literary potential for theoretical work.

six texts: the novels *Kindred* (1979), *Dawn* (1987), *Parable of the Talents* (1998), *Survivor* (1978), and *Fledgling* (2005) and the short story "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987). These texts will be read both for the ways in which they themselves deal with dynamics of agency and for how they interact with other texts within the corpus that pursue a related objective. They are read, that is, as specific, concrete, and unique examples of a dynamic in some of Butler's writing, not as representative of the oeuvre as a whole. While they do, upon closer examination, reveal general tendencies within those works of Butler that engage in a discussion of agency, I choose them much more for their diversity, the tensions between them, than for any homogeneity within the oeuvre they may speak to.

In fact, another of the main tenets of my work in this study is that, in their shared interests, these texts can be read as engaging in a form of intertextuality that goes beyond their rootedness in African American literary tradition, their usage of science fiction elements, and their contribution to ongoing agency debates: They are in dialogue with each other. By this I mean to posit that the texts of my corpus foster intertextual relationships with each other that not only create a heightened analytical potential when the texts are considered individually as well as comparatively. These relationships themselves should furthermore, I argue, be seen as distinct contributions to a sophisticated communicative process occurring within writings by Butler, a communicative process on conceptualizations of agency. Befitting a body of work known for its programmatic ambiguities and its refusal to be pinned down to any one generalized abstract philosophical position, an Archimedean point outside of the messiness of concrete intersectional subject positions, the theoretical work of Butler's texts cannot be adequately read as resulting in one clear statement. Instead, their theoretical work emerges as an unfolding, complex, ambiguous dialogue between some of her texts, which—the insistence on some core positions they share notwithstanding—allows these works to collectively demonstrate the complexities and necessary ambiguities involved in conceptualizing a category as philosophically fundamental, as intricately interconnected with other categories like subjectivity and oppression, and as ethically and politically charged as agency. This dialogue in its complexity and depth mandates a book-length study, further separating my work from somewhat related projects on power, hegemony, etc. in Butler's writings as it is only the second book-length study of Butler's work to be published.[24]

I am, hence, interested in precisely those instances within Butler's works in which individual texts create more complex relationships with each other than agreement or mutual reinforcement—i.e., in which one cautionarily demonstrates an extreme of a philosophical stance the other argues, in which texts approach similar dynamics from different angles or

[24] Hampton's *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires* is the only book-length study published so far.

utilize different literary traditions, or in which texts use the same agency-related narrative technique in following different narrative projects overall. I thus point to the texts within my corpus as narratives that are of interest because they are deeply concerned with constructions and complications of agency in diverse—sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory—ways and thus in ways that befit the complex and ambiguous character of agency as they discuss it. These narratives share a number of theoretical concerns and thematic interests but express and realize them in highly different ways. It is their diversity of approaches to similar concepts which enables them to question these concepts in different ways, come to different answers and provide different perspectives. The goal, then, is to critically explore this corpus in order to contribute to the understanding of this complex negotiation within some texts by Butler, not to provide a study of the entire oeuvre of Octavia Butler. Thus, my arguments about the interrelations between the texts are neither chronological nor teleological.[25]

Situating the Project

Most fundamentally, my work situates itself within the field of American studies. This is evidenced not just by its primary objects of analysis being works by an American author but also, even more so, by its methodology: My project in literary analysis chooses a cultural studies approach to literature, specifically to artifacts from the realm of popular culture. Both in my readings and in the contextualization of my primary analytical category, I draw from an interdisciplinary corpus of secondary texts that originate from fields as diverse as legal studies, theology, and science fiction criticism. Moreover, in both my analyses and my contextualization of ongoing debates about agency, I am specifically concerned with the impact of culturally constructed categories of difference such as race and gender, most conspicuously, but also class (such as in my reading of *Parable of the Talents* in 4.2.1), and ability (such as in my analysis of "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" in 5.2.1).

More specifically, my work in this study contextualizes itself primarily within the scholarly discourse of African American literary criticism both because the texts I have selected choose to negotiate agency by way of narrating, most frequently, specifically black experiences and because I see African American literary history as the strongest and most productive source of intertextual references in them. One genre warrants specific, albeit brief, mention here as it forms an important aspect of my selection of agency as my central analytical category.[26] In the slave narrative, as a host

[25] On a practical level, this also means that dates of publication are of no significance to my argument as to whether one text elaborates on another's point or shifts its emphasis.

[26] The "Contexts" parts of the following analytical chapters will provide much more in-depth engagements with the importance of African American literary history in

of scholars have noted,[27] black men and women write themselves into existence by narrating their escape from slavery to freedom as a journey to personhood, to subjectivity. Their narratives constitute concrete agential acts aimed at changing their philosophical status as subjects. As Hazel Carby poignantly summarizes specifically in relation to slave narratives by black women,

> [t]he authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects; represented as acting their own visions, they are seen to take decisions over their own lives. They document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of resistance to that brutality. (36)

Hence, from some of its first iterations, African American literature has been centrally concerned with investigating both the subject status of African Americans and the potential of agential acts in the face of the double jeopardy of racist and sexist prejudice.[28] In seeking to uncover the ways in which Butler's texts reference and utilize African American literary traditions' critical engagements with agency, I draw particularly from analytical approaches to the issues at the center of my work—the body, community, voice—that originate in such discourses as black feminist criticism and critical race theory or that these discourses take up from other fields and develop further in regard to the specific issue of black (women's) writing. Concepts such as intersectionality, multiple jeopardy, and situated knowledges thus play a major part in my readings.

A number of other scholarly discourses have also influenced this project. I draw substantially on feminist theoretical work on agency, as both the following chapter and the "Contexts" parts of my analytical chapters evidence.[29] This is largely due to the fact that feminist philosophical and legal scholarship has been most prolific and heterogeneous in critically assessing the Enlightenment's legacy in common conceptions of agency as a necessary category of resistance. This discourse provides my study with

general and the slave narrative in particular for Butler's texts' sophisticated engagements with contested conceptualizations of agency.

27 Cf., most canonically, Davis and Gates, "Language," among many others.

28 Cf. Rushdy, *Neo-Slave* 7, as well as Fishburn, among others.

29 The following anthologies were particularly important to my work here: Campbell et al.'s *Embodiment and Agency*, Gardiner's *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*, Glenn et al.'s *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, MacKenzie and Atkins's *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, and Mackenzie and Stoljar's *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. Notably, none of these anthologies are black feminist works. But they do all consider themselves third-wave feminist texts that, the inherent possible problems of this approach notwithstanding (cf. Broeck, "Subject" 106), do not intend to limit the definition of 'woman' by way of racial, class, or other factors and include contributions that address the respective anthology's topic from nonwhite perspectives.

many of the theoretical tools it uses to both position and broaden its own approach and to situate Butler's work within ongoing agency debates. Its multiple critical and broad assessments of the complexities involved in including the body in agency conceptualizations and of more relational constructions of autonomy—the central theoretical issues of my first two analytical chapters, respectively—are just two of many examples of this discourse's immense productivity for my work.

Furthermore, while I primarily focus on the context of African American literary history and the corresponding critical approaches, I wholeheartedly agree with Roger Luckhurst's assessment that doing justice to "Butler's slippage between the strictly demarcated sets of science fiction, African-American fiction and post-coloniality" cannot be achieved by strictly "separated approaches" as any such approach "paradoxically works to contain the 'hybridity' that is produced *between* her generic translations" (30-31).[30] My work thus also, at times, analyzes the use of science fiction tropes and subgenres in Butler's texts' theoretical engagement with the category of agency. This is the case, for example, when I point to the contrastive narrative and theoretical capabilities of her neo-slave narrative *Kindred* and her alien invasion tale *Dawn* in chapter 3. Moreover, the abundant corpus of science fiction scholarship on Butler's narratives and on the tradition of humanism and liberalism in science fiction has been highly influential in my work, allowing me to provide more nuanced readings of the dynamics at play in Butler's texts. These approaches, of course, overlap in African American and/or feminist literary criticism dealing specifically with the use of the fantastic, for example Koenen's *Visions of Doom, Plots of Power*, and in science fiction criticism that deals with the role of race, such as *Race in American Science Fiction* by Isiah Lavender III. Lastly, as the following chapters will show, Butler's texts, which, in all their "redoubled and rebounding slippage between constituencies" (Luckhurst 30), "fall out of a lot of margins (Mainstream, African American, Feminist, SF and F)" (Hairston 293), have invited readings using a host of other approaches, ranging from the theological to the legal. These approaches' arguments and conclusions have, of course, been considered in my own analytical work.

The Structure

The goal of my study is to create knowledge about (African) American literature by looking at a corpus of texts by Octavia Butler that are particularly fertile objects for an analysis of the complexities of agency as they prolifically contribute to ongoing debates about the topic. In order to do so, I seek to arrive at new readings and more complex understandings of the narrative dynamics of six individual texts—as reading them in relation to each

[30] Vint similarly notes of a particular Butler novel that "both moves of genre policing limit how we read *Kindred*" ("'Only'" 241).

other and in the context of the corpus produces additional, valuable insights into their individual narrative projects—and of my corpus overall. I pursue this project throughout the course of four chapters: One theorizes and contextualizes my main analytical category and the ongoing debates it engenders, and three analytical chapters focus on the body, community, and voice, respectively.

The following chapter, then, serves as a succinct and focused introduction to those dynamics related to the philosophical category of agency that are important for my analytical project and to the immense analytical productivity of the category. The chapter's work is amended by the "Contexts" sections in the analytical chapters, each of which engages with the complex intersection that agency creates with the topic of each respective chapter. The chapter thus briefly defines and historicizes agency and outlines some of the numerous postmodern challenges to the notion's conceptualization in the Enlightenment's liberal humanism. Sketching the ongoing agency debates that I read Butler's texts as engaging, the chapter furthermore delineates the mutual influence of subjectivity and agency and points to postmodern theoretical reactions to the threat of foregoing the possibility of agency and resistance by abandoning traditional notions of the subject. Lastly, the chapter specifically elaborates on the necessity of intersectionality, gradability, and situatedness in conceptualizing agency, to which a number of theorists have pointed.

The three analytical chapters, which follow this introduction to my central analytical category, all adhere to a similar design. Each introduces an important aspect related to discussions about agency and begins with a subsection mapping the theoretical and cultural contexts that I read my primary texts as addressing. In different ways, these subsections all explore the relevant dynamics in theoretical discussions and in African American (women's) literary history regarding the specific connection of agency and each chapter's topical focus. They thus introduce the respective chapters and their topical foci as well as provide specific elaborations and complications on the agency theorizations provided in the chapter that precedes them. Furthermore, each chapter performs readings of two different Butler texts within that chapter's thematic focus on an aspect of agency, specifically looking at the different stances these texts take individually and in relation to each other, thus elaborating on the way in which they engage in a dialogue on the conceptualization of agency.

The first analytical chapter is dedicated to the question of agency's embodiment. The chapter opens with an introduction to the Enlightenment's legacy of disembodiment in common notions of agency and to specific problematic dynamics that exist in African American literary history as the slave narrative is a genre both deeply devoted to the Enlightenment's definition of subjectivity and inescapably bound to narrating the bodily consequences of slavery and escape. Following this, I offer a reading of Butler's neo-slave narrative *Kindred*, arguing centrally that the novel insists on the