Speculative Fictions of A Divided World: 
Reading Octavia E. Butler in South Korea 

Shelley Streeby 

I. Introduction: Science Fiction, Space, and World-Making

The great writer and literary critic Samuel Delany defines science fiction as the genre that uses the narrative device of the future to offer “a significant distortion of the present that sets up a rich and complex dialogue with the reader’s here and now” (165). While Delany refers here to time and temporality, space and spatiality are also central to how science fiction significantly distorts the present. Indeed, insofar as the genres of science fiction and fantasy—today often conjoined under the umbrella term speculative fiction—fundamentally depend on world-making, on creating compelling secondary worlds, space and spatialities are also central to their operations. In what follows, I suggest that especially since the 1990s, what I am calling speculative fictions from below or visionary fiction (Brown and Iamarisha 2015) has much to contribute to the lively conversation about space and the spatial turn currently taking place across multiple fields of study in different parts of the world.

In Anglophone contexts, the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction are inseparable from histories of nation-states, colonialism, and imperialism in which spaces are remade, often in violent and exploitative ways. The imaginary voyages of Jonathan Swift and global contagions, last men, and Frankenstein monsters invented by Mary Shelley, as well as the utopias and dystopias devised by Sir Thomas More and others, all respond to these long histories of the spatial reshaping of a divided world. Fredric Jameson, author of Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (2005), writes suggestively about how utopias, for instance, depend upon a spatial distancing from our world, a foundational breaking away, which means utopia is always a kind of spatial enclave made possible by leaving or pushing some people outside it. This spatial externalization of the other, this enclave existence, can shore up settler colonialism, xenophobia, and rac-
ish, the imagining of the other as an alien, an invader, a contaminating force, and so forth, as we often see especially in 20th century Cold War science fiction. What is more, the inverse of utopia which today is much more popular globally—dystopia—also fundamentally depends upon a spatial logic that divides up the world in ways that significantly distort the divisions, hierarchies, and boundaries of our own world.

This has led some to wonder whether science fiction and fantasy are quintessential genres of the colonizer, easier for readers and viewers to enjoy who come from colonizing nations, and less pleasurable and illuminating for those who have been colonized. In the United States, in an article from the Atlantic magazine that recently circulated widely on social media, entitled “Why Science Fiction Keeps Imagining the Subjugation of White People,” comics scholar Noah Berlatsky, for instance, claims that “sci-fi is often obsessed with colonialism and imperial adventure, the kind that made the British Empire an empire and that still sustains America’s might worldwide.” Inspired by his reading of John Rieder’s book Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction (UPNE 2008), Berlatsky emphasizes that science fiction “doesn’t just demonstrate future possibilities, but future limits—the extent to which dreams of what we’ll do remain captive to the things we’ve already done.” Others have argued that this limiting obsession with colonialism and imperial adventure has made science fiction unpopular specifically in South Korea over most of its history.¹

On the other hand, I argue that the late great Octavia E Butler’s work is an example of a Black diasporic speculative fictional practice from below that harshly illuminates and meaningfully responds to migration and demographic change; an emergent neoliberalism and ongoing imperialism and colonialism; the destabilization of national boundaries through global forces such as climate change; the eventual depletion of fossil fuels; and

¹In 2001, Sellar suggested: “South Korea offers a striking example of a highly industrialized society saturated with technosocial change” but without, until recently, “more than marginal localization of the SF genre in literary or cinematic form.” He speculates that one of the biggest reasons why is that “many of the most common of popular SF tropes are strongly rooted in the specific circumstances, viewpoint, and language of European colonial and naval history and literature—the colonizers, not the colonized” (5). I believe examples of these genres from different times and places will offer different possibilities and limits and that it is reductive to make the huge generalization that science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction are simply and only genres of the colonizer.