

Bc. Magdalena Hejna
The Xenogenesis Trilogy: The Utopian Writing of Octavia E. Butler
MA Thesis
Supervisor's Report

Besides reviewing the thesis, the first chapter introduces several of Octavia E. Butler's remarks on utopia, along with the focal text: her *Xenogenesis* trilogy. The gist of the chapter is an introduction to the genres of (critical) utopia, (critical) dystopia and anti-utopia, and a presentation of the main argument of the thesis, namely that Butler is "a utopian writer because of the way she writes about and embraces change" (7). Chapters two to four are devoted to each of the novels that the trilogy consists of. The conclusion highlights what Magdalena Hejna suggests are the utopian aspects of Butler's writing and it draws links with the author's two other works, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.

The introductory matter concerning utopia and the related genres is clear, sufficient given the focus of the thesis on Butler's writing. In a longer work, a number of questions could be developed; for example, on page 15, it could be explained what is meant by different types of the utopian impulse (rather than different genres or different types of utopias underwritten by the utopian impulse). Also, should not *eutopie* and *outopie*, several lines above on the same page, be *eu-topos* and *(o)u-topos*? Further down, the link of utopias to perfection, "ideal" societies and dictatorships, is a stereotypical (often prejudiced) view which does not consider utopias as literary works, in various ways self-reflexive and consciously speculative. Finally, while the conclusion of the section "What is utopia?" states that *Xenogenesis* exemplifies "a quest to preserve utopian hoping in an often overwhelmingly dystopian world" (21), it does not define the trilogy in terms of genre. At later points in the thesis, several possibilities are mentioned: dystopia, anti-utopia, critical utopia (though not critical dystopia?)—can this be clarified, considering also the questions below?

Whereas chapter one could have perhaps drawn on further criticism, both in its introduction of Butler's writing and the discussion of utopia (were the thesis to be extended), the subsequent interpretation of the trilogy draws on substantial criticism of Butler's fiction as well as a selection of theories by Donna Haraway, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari. (As their theories have been applied to Butler's novels already, there are references to this criticism, too.) The trilogy has nevertheless divided critics and since my reading resonates with Hoda Zaki's and Gerry Canavan's rather than with the main argument advanced by the thesis, the link to critical utopia appears to me unconvincing. Besides the idea of the genetic "human contradiction" and the highly questionable practices of the Oankali, critiqued accurately by Zaki and Canavan, is there any better community that emerges in *Xenogenesis* (as it does in the two *Parable* novels)? How, specifically, is the world at the end of the series better? What about Butler's own comments about the novels, cited also by Canavan?

The final chapter, same as the entire thesis, is very eloquently written. Interestingly, the passages about utopia as continual change, dreaming and an endless journey are presented as questions. What, then, are the answers? Leaving aside the problem that Kenneth M. Roemer called "[a] preoccupation with 'stuckraking,'" what about dystopian change and dystopian means of change?

Throughout the writing process, I have raised most of the above issues but the defense could perhaps return to some. In conclusion, however, let me emphasize that the thesis represents a significant piece of scholarship, written in a difficult situation, in support of Butler's writing and highlighting the positive aspects of her work. I recommend the thesis for defense and propose a preliminary grade "výborně" (1).

Pavla Veselá, PhD.
Prague, 17th January 2024



