

OCTAVIA'S BOOM!

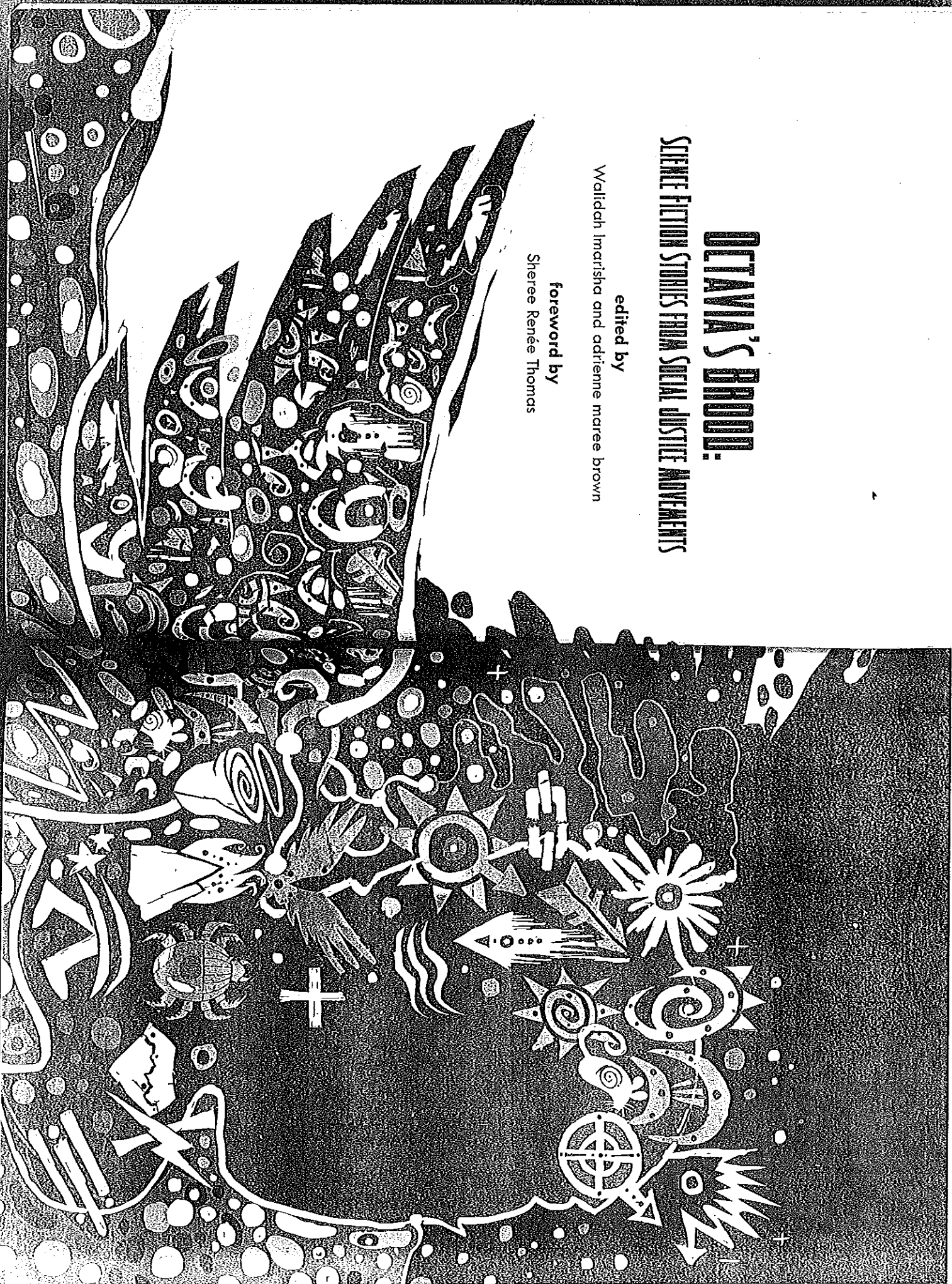
SCIENCE FICTION STORIES FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

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Oscar Wilde's Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements
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To Octavia E. Butler, who serves as a north star for so many of us. She told us what would happen—"all that you touch you change"—and then she touched us, fearlessly, brave enough to change us. We dedicate this collection to her, coming out with our own fierce longing to have our writing change everyone and everything we touch.

startling, fantastic ways, while widening the gulf between those who have and those who don't. In America and in the big beautiful world beyond, the gulf widens perversely, making a mockery of freedom, justice, democracy, and even mercy. James Baldwin said that we are not born knowing what these concepts mean, that they are neither common nor well defined. If we "individuals must make an enormous effort to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply," as he wrote, then our communities must make a sustained and concentrated effort to create societies that reflect that same sense of respect and meaning.³

The stories in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* represent a global quest for social transformation, for justice. They are about people from different backgrounds and worlds, expanding the notions of solidarity and community, redefining service, and exploring and rediscovering the human spirit in baffling times, under challenging circumstances. The writers collected here offer stories that explore a broad range of social justice issues, from urban gentrification, bioterrorism, racism, and militarism to motherhood, environmentalism, spiritual journeys, and psychological quests. Culled from artists who in their other lives work tirelessly as community activists, educators, and organizers, these stories invite, inspire, engage. If the purpose of a writer, as Toni Cade Bambara said, "is to make revolution irresistible," these writers, these stories represent.⁴ With incisive imagination and a spirited sense of wonder, the contributors bridge the gap between speculative fiction and social justice, boldly writing new voices and communities into the future.

A trickster, teacher, chaos, and clay, God, as described by Octavia E. Butler in her Parable novels, is change, and *Octavia's Brood* is an important resource in our journey toward positive cultural and institutional change. May it spawn new conversations in classrooms, inspire vigorous discussion in coffeehouses and book clubs, and create new organizing tools and "case studies" for strategizing in our community organizations.⁵

³ James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 156.

⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, interview with Kare Bonetti (Columbia, MO: American Audio Prose Library, 1982).

⁵ For more information, see *Octavia's Brood*, <http://www.octaviasbrood.com/>.

INTRODUCTION

WALIDAH IMARISHA

WHENEVER WE TRY TO ENVISION A WORLD WITHOUT WAR, WITHOUT violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds—so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories? That is the premise behind the book you hold in your hands.

In the years we have been working on this book, many folks have asked us what science fiction could possibly have to do with social justice organizing. And every time, we have responded, "Everything. Everything." We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories. Using their everyday realities and experiences of changing the world, they can form the foundation for the fantastic and, we hope, build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.

We titled this collection in honor of Black science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler. Butler explored the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and—most important—hope. Her work has taught us so much about the principles of visionary fiction, inspiring us. The title plays on Butler's three novel collection, *Lilith's Brood*, which is about adaptation as a necessary for survival. Changes will occur that we cannot even begin to imagine, and the next generation will be both utterly familiar and wholly alien to their parents. We believe this is what it means to carry on Butler's legacy of writing visionary fiction.

"Visionary fiction" is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.

This anthology of visionary fiction contains short stories from people who have dedicated their lives to making change. It also includes pieces from well-known science fiction writers Tananarive Due, Terry Bisson, LeVar Burton, and Kalamu ya Salaam, and from award-winning journalist and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal (who writes here about *Star Wars* and imperialism).

The process for creating this anthology was unlike any either of us editors had been involved with before, one that was both very intensive and highly collaborative. We worked with contributors over the course of many rounds of edits to pull out the visionary aspects of their incredible stories, as well as to ensure that the writing and storytelling captivated and inspired. We appreciate immensely the countless hours each writer poured into this creation of love. And we both feel lucky beyond words that we had the support and advice of the incredible Sherree Renée Thomas, who edited the groundbreaking anthology *Dark Matter: 100 Years of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora*.

Many of the contributors to *Octavia's Brood* had never written fiction before, let alone science fiction. When we approached folks, most were hesitant to commit, feeling like they weren't qualified. But overwhelmingly, they all came back a few weeks later, enthusiastically, with incredible ideas and some with dozens of pages already written. Because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world. The writers in this collection just needed a little space, and perhaps permission to immerse themselves fully in their visionary selves.

We especially wanted to make space for people whose identities are marginalized and oppressed within mainstream society. Art and

culture themselves are time-traveling, planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out. And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us. For Adrienne and myself, as two Black women, we think of our ancestors in chains dreaming about a day when their children's children would be free. They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being. We are responsible for interpreting their regrets and realizing their imaginings. We wish to continue the work of moving forward with their visionary legacy.

At a retreat for women writers in 1988, Octavia E. Butler said that she never wanted the title of being the solitary Black female sci-fi writer. She wanted to be one of *many* Black female sci-fi writers. She wanted to be one of thousands of folks writing themselves into the present and into the future. We believe in that right Butler claimed for each of us—the right to dream as ourselves, individually and collectively. But we also think it is a responsibility she handed down: are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of "the real" and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?



ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN

WE HOLD SO MANY WORLDS INSIDE US. SO MANY FUTURES. IT IS OUR radical responsibility to share these worlds, to plant them in the soil of our society as seeds for the type of justice we want and need. It has been beautiful to gather these stories, collaboratively edit them, and begin to understand not just the challenges we face or the enemies we need to transform, but the abundance of imagination we in the social justice realm hold, and must cultivate.

We see ourselves as part of a growing wave of folks connecting science fiction (or what we're calling *visionary fiction*) with social justice. Science fiction is the perfect "exploring ground," as it gives us the opportunity to play with different outcomes and strategies before we have to deal with the real-world costs.

In the process of hearing and working these stories, we developed tools, frameworks, and principles that would help us to bring the work off of the page and into our lives. We wanted to end this anthology with an offering of three of these tools. The first is visionary fiction, which Walidah spoke about in the introduction. The elements of visionary fiction are that it: explores current social issues through the lens of sci-fi; is conscious of identity and intersecting identities; centers those who have been marginalized; is aware of power inequalities; is realistic and hard but hopeful; shows change from the bottom up rather than the top down; highlights that change is collective; and is not neutral—its purpose is social change and societal transformation. The stories we tell can either reflect the society we are a part of or transform it. If we want to bring new worlds into existence, then we need to challenge the narratives that uphold current power dynamics and patterns.

We call upon science fiction, fantasy, horror, magical realism, myth, and everything in between as we create and teach visionary fiction.

The second tool is emergent strategy. A strategy is a set of plans toward an action. Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns emerge from a series of relatively simple interactions. Instead of linear, hierarchical, outcome-oriented strategies and strategic plans that can't adapt to changing conditions, we need ways of strategizing together based on understanding and respecting change. So far, the elements of emergent strategy are that it is intentional, interdependent and relational, adaptive, resilient because it is decentralized, fractal, uses transformative justice, and creates more possibilities. One of the ways we've been reading Octavia Butler's work is as case studies of emergent strategy. In sessions with local communities, we're introducing people to the framework and asking them to assess which elements of emergent strategy might be most necessary to their local work and supporting them in generating strategies together.

One aspect of emergent strategy is that there is no waste—we are encouraged to see everything around us as a resource. Butler's book *Parable of the Sower* follows the main character Olamina, a young Black woman who lives in a slightly dystopic future in a gated community. She carries a radically different vision for the purpose of humanity than her Christian family. She believes our "destiny is to take root among the stars," to see Earth as a womb rather than a permanent home. She calls her beliefs Earthseed, and she cultivates Earthseed as she matures in the tiny and dangerous container of her home. The essence of emergent strategy can be found in the central tenet of Olamina's Earthseed: "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change." Olamina begins studying the skills needed to survive outside of the walls and packs a survival bag. When the community is attacked and the walls fall, she finds herself on the outside with her bag, her knowledge, and her dreams. She finds people along the way, other survivors willing to dream with her new forms of community, adapting constantly to ever-changing conditions. Exploring these and other examples from Butler's work—in addition to studying other aspects of emergence—creates a solid foundation for changing the way we strategize on our path to justice.

Finally, we have our collective science-fiction/visionary fiction writing workshops. Our premise is that if we want worlds that work for more of us, we have to have more of us involved in the visioning process. One of the ways we perpetuate individualism is by ideating alone, literally coming up with ideas in solitude and then competing to bring them to life. Our workshops are designed to encourage collaborative ideation. Together we identify issues that are relevant to the local community and build a world in which to explore the issue and possible solutions.

In each workshop, we start out by asking ourselves what in our community needs vision, with the idea that we can apply our collective ideation to it like a healing salve.

We identify lead characters—often pairs or groups of lead characters to disrupt the solitary hero narrative—and we intentionally move those voices that are often marginalized in our society to the center of the world-building.

We then build the setting, identifying where we are in time, creating a geography and conditions, naming any shared assumptions we have, and determining what the major conflict will be in that world. What is the change our characters seek? Who else is seeking change?

Once these elements are laid out, we send people off to spend time writing their stories in this shared world. So far, no matter how much time we give people, they are still writing when the timer goes off. The imagination just needs a little nudge to run wild.

The writers come back together to read their work and affirm each other for being part of such a collective act of genius. Each time, participants are surprised and inspired by the ways others interpret and experiment in the world. We believe that this experience helps grow the capacity to truly vision and implement together.

We are touring the country, sharing these tools for communities to use in their own local work. What we continue to experience are the kinds of groundbreaking conversations that transform how people view their present lives and work.