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Wild Seed in Wild Times: Ruminations about Octavia E. Butler's Novel amidst the Coronavirus Pandemic

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THROUGHOUT THE GLOBAL CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC, like many people I have sought escape from my fears and anxieties about the spreading virus through literature. A few months ago, I reread one of my favorite novels, Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*, relishing the thought-provoking story that depicts the beginnings of the Pattern, a group of interconnected magical superbeings with powers such as telepathy, extrasensory perception, mind control, and supernatural healing that is featured in Butler's first novel series. Though the plot of *Wild Seed* is fantastical and occurs over four hundred years in the past, the themes and issues Butler explores are still applicable to today's global crises and controversies. Through her depiction of the contentious relationship between the main characters Doro and Anyanwu, Butler gives voice in the novel to questions and thoughts I have been having for over a year of quarantine and restricted movement prompted by the pandemic.

Particularly fascinating to me about *Wild Seed* are the medical and scientific analogies between Butler's characterizations of Doro and Anyanwu and the spread of the coronavirus. Doro is a parasite who does not have his own body. Instead, he is a spirit who must successively inhabit one host body after the other to live. When he jumps to a new body, he kills the existing spirit within it. No one is immune to the possibility of his taking over their body, not even the equally powerful Anyanwu. To survive, Doro has to change bodies whenever the one he currently inhabits is threatened with death. Because of this, Doro is obsessed with obtaining strong, long-lasting bodies, and he creates a eugenics project to interbreed both his children and outsiders with unique supernatural abilities to create more and more powerful descendants. He maintains a strong hold on those in this "Pattern" (the superhuman community he builds in Wheatley, Massachusetts) and will kill, lie, manipulate, and psychologically control his people to achieve his ends. He struggles with Anyanwu throughout the centuries of their relationship because she has a very different ethical viewpoint on how to live, preferring instead to exist freely instead of under his control.

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As I reflected upon Doro's obsessive control over his community deriving from his biological insecurity, strangely enough, I began to see connections with the COVID-19 virus. By nature, viruses too are parasitic, since they must have a host organism to live. Like Doro, they ensure the future of their descendants by moving from body to body, invading bodies close to their host bodies, often mutating in the process. Comparing Doro's project to create the "perfect" superbeing to the coronavirus made me question, what is COVID-19's end game? How does it ensure its future existence and that of its "children" if it so severely affects its human host body that it causes the host's death? Why does the virus not seek out hosts with which it can live in symbiosis instead? When talking about these questions with my colleagues one day, one of them posited that perhaps the virus's true end goal is to mutate so that it becomes similar to a cold virus but it does not know how to do so because the virus should never have been transmitted from animals to humans. After all, though according to news reports some animals have contracted COVID-19, it does not seem to have affected these animals as severely as it has humans.[1]

In addition to sparking these thoughts about the parasitic nature of COVID-19, Butler's depiction of the character Anyanwu, a healer who is the opposite of the killer Doro, captivates my imagination at a time when so many need medical care after becoming infected with the virus. An incident early in *Wild Seed* is illustrative of Butler's creative imagination of what it would be like if we never needed doctors to heal us when we are ill. Anyanwu and Doro travel from Anyanwu's village so that Anyanwu can join Doro's Wheatley community. During their journey, Doro develops an infection on his hand and wonders how he will avoid leaping into Anyanwu's body if his current one dies. Doing so would mean losing Anyanwu's valuable gifts for his breeding project. When Anyanwu learns of the infection, she offers to heal him, but Doro is skeptical because she does not have the herbs that she and her ancestors traditionally used for healing since she has left home. To his surprise, Anyanwu tells him she can heal him without the herbs, which she proceeds to demonstrate:

> She bit his hand. He bore it, holding himself rigid against his own deadly reaction to sudden pain. She had done well to warn him. [. . .] For a time after biting him, she did nothing. Her attention seemed to turn inward, and she did not answer when he spoke to her. Finally, she brought his hand to her mouth again and there was more pain and pressure, but no more biting. She spat three

> times, each time returning to his hand, then she seemed to caress the wound with her tongue. [. . .] Almost at once, the swelling and sickness went away and the wound began to heal.[2]

Lacking knowledge of germ theory since the novel is set in 1690 at this point, Anyanwu conducts her own experiment to discover the source of Doro's infection and heal it. She surmises that his wound has "little small things" in it that she has to learn how to kill and thereby heal him. Anyanwu is Butler's creative embodiment of the global medical and scientific community as they search for effective ways to treat coronavirus patients and devise vaccines to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Through Anyanwu, Butler science fictionalizes the process of vaccination, for Anyanwu uses her body to manufacture antibodies that she then injects into Doro's body to fight his infection. She in effect becomes a walking vaccine. How wonderful would it be if we too had Anyanwu's powers to destroy the coronavirus!

In addition to using her body to heal Doro, Anyanwu is also able to provide food for them during their journey. She uses her body as a makeshift laboratory: "If a plant was unfamiliar to her she tasted it and sensed within herself whether or not it was poison. She ate several things she said were poison, though none of them seemed to harm her. But she never gave him anything other than good food."[3] Because she cannot rely on ancestral knowledge, Anyanwu must test the effects of these unknown plants to discover which are edible and which would be toxic to her and Doro. In science fiction, characters often find themselves in alien environments or critical situations in which they must learn to adjust or even start life anew without the advantage of previous or ancestral knowledge, especially stories where characters move to settle in and colonize other places. During the early stages of the pandemic, many were concerned that the virus would affect the distribution of essential supplies such as food. Though the fears over food shortages fortunately did not come to fruition, *Wild Seed* did make me wonder how I would adjust if food became scarce, since I have limited farming and foraging experience. Thinking of Anyanwu's food trials made me wonder how early humans discovered which plants were edible or toxic and how many tests (and deaths) were needed for us to learn how to feed ourselves as a species. I also contemplated how my own ancestors, who according to my DNA test results from ancestry.com came from Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo, Mali, and other West African countries, modified their culinary heritages upon relocation to the Americas. When I visited Nigeria in 2008, I enjoyed eating jollof rice for the first time and was struck by how much the deli-

cious spicy dish reminded me of the red rice I grew up eating in South Carolina, where my American family originates from. My ancestors were likely brought to the United States because of their knowledge of rice production, which made them especially valuable on the slave market, and thus were part of the process of changing African jollof rice into African-American red rice just as they themselves changed identities.

After witnessing Anyanwu's magical abilities, Doro, "breeder of witches that he was, realized all over again what a treasure she was. Nothing, no one, must prevent his keeping her."[4] The rest of *Wild Seed* details the centuries-long struggles between Doro and Anyanwu over her body, as Anyanwu rebels against the strictures that Doro places around her, barring her complete freedom. Their conflicts are suggestive of debates about civil rights after the U.S. government mandated that Americans must wear masks in public and practice social distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some Americans have rebelled against these orders, viewing them as government overreach. They see it as the government trying to tell them what to do with their bodies, much as Doro does to Anyanwu and his children in *Wild Seed*. Reading the novel during the pandemic made me question, what obligations do we owe to our fellow citizens biologically? If a person is willing to risk catching the virus, does that person have the right to go about maskless and risk transmitting the virus to others in his or her community? After all, viruses do not discriminate. We have no control over who will be infected with coronavirus nor over how much the virus will affect those who catch it. Should people who catch coronavirus from not wearing masks or social distancing be punished if they infect others? Should they also be held accountable for contributing to the virus's mutations, such as the Delta variant, that are faster spreading than previous forms? These are provocative problems to which there are no easy solutions. While we as readers are prompted to identify with Anyanwu and cheer her attempts to free herself from Doro's control, the current pandemic forces us to also consider that sometimes bodies need to be controlled when it is for the betterment of mankind.

Since I first discovered the works of Octavia Butler, she has been one of my favorite novelists and is greatly deserving of being chosen as the first science fiction writer to win the MacArthur "Genius Grant" in 1995. Her works show the power of science fiction to encourage us to examine our world in new or alternative ways. *Wild Seed* offers stimulating thoughts about how we have reacted to the current coronavirus pandemic medically, socially, and politically, making it an interesting and very relevant work to read during these times.

NOTES

1. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that many animals can contract coronaviruses like SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, and there are some that only affect animals. The CDC also relates that "some coronaviruses that infect animals can be spread to people and then spread between people, but this is rare. This is what happened with SARS-CoV-2, which likely originated in bats." See "COVID-19 and Animals." Updated 4 June 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/animals.html. While it seems that some minks on farms around the world may have died from respiratory diseases associated with SARS-CoV-2, the CDC also notes that "a small number of pets worldwide, including cats and dogs, have been reported to be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, mostly after close contact with people with COVID-19 [. . .] Pets infected with this virus may or may not get sick. Of the pets that have gotten sick, most only had mild illness and fully recovered. Serious illness in pets appears to be extremely rare." See "What You Should Know about COVID-19 and Pets." Updated 29 June 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/covid-19/pets.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fdaily-life-coping%2Fpets.html.

2. Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2012), 29.

3. Ibid., 28.

4. Ibid., 29.