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“My Books Will Be Read By Millions of People!”: The LaGuardia Community College Octavia E. Butler Project on Wikipedia.”

Ximena Gallardo C.

CUNY LaGuardia Community College

Ann Matsuuchi

CUNY LaGuardia Community College

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Ximena Gallardo C., Professor of English
Ann Matsuuchi, Professor and Instructional Technology Librarian
LaGuardia Community College, CUNY
31-10 Thomson Avenue
Long Island City, NY 11101
xgallardo@lagcc.cuny.edu
amatsuuchi@lagcc.cuny.edu

"My Books Will Be Read By Millions of People!": The LaGuardia Community College Octavia

E. Butler Project on *Wikipedia*

You got to make your own worlds. You got to write yourself in. Whether you were a part of the greater society or not, you got to write yourself in. So I got to write myself in.

--Octavia E. Butler explaining the centrality of writing to her identity on *Charlie Rose*

On March 3, 2014, we announced to a class of twenty-eight second-year community college students that they had twelve weeks to become experts on Octavia E. Butler's best-selling novel *Kindred* so that they could compose a research essay on it as well as redraft its Wikipedia entry. Not surprisingly, the students reacted with bewilderment mixed with a slight panic. "Wikipedia?," a brave soul finally blurted out. "But our teachers have told us not to use Wikipedia!"

As it turns out, in recent years academic suspicion of "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit"¹ has metamorphosed into enthusiastic and transformative scholarly engagement.²

Wikipedia projects can be found in a range of traditional, established locations: in college classrooms at Harvard, Barnard, and the University of Chicago, at the Museum of Modern Art, which for the past three years has hosted the globally-recognized Art+Feminism Wikipedia editathon for Women's History Month, and even at the National Archives and Records Administration, which plans to install a "Wikipedia Discovery Center" within its walls. At LaGuardia Community College, this year the La Guardia and Wagner Archives began a student project with the goal of constructing a localized history of AIDS in New York City.

In our specific case, that single-class trial working on Wikipedia's article for *Kindred* was so successful that it encouraged us to create the LaGuardia WikiProject Octavia E. Butler: a collaborative effort of undergraduates, Butler specialists, and volunteer Wikipedia editors to craft thorough, rigorously researched, well-written encyclopedic entries for Butler's fiction. Since then, two more teams of LaGuardia Community College students have collaborated in revising the Wikipedia articles for the novels *Fledgling* and *Wild Seed* as well as composing an authoritative biographical entry for their author. In February 2016, a meeting of Butler scholars and Spelman College honor students contributed to the project by creating and revising the articles for the novels comprising the Patternist series—*Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, *Survivor*, *Wild Seed*, and *Clay's Ark*—during a three-hour Wikipedia edit-a-thon hosted by the Octavia E. Butler Society and Spelman College. Efforts continue up to the time that this chapter is being written, with a new group of LaGuardia undergraduates expanding the entry for the short-story and essay collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories*.

What follows, then, is a discussion of the goals, methods, and outcomes of the LaGuardia WikiProject Octavia E. Butler as it stands now: at the beginning of what we hope becomes a series of Wikipedia featured articles³ on Butler. Specifically, we aim to explain why we chose to

make Wikipedia, an environment much contested by college professors and so generally extraneous to the college classroom, the center of Butler pedagogy, as well as share what we learned from aligning the specific academic objectives of a research class on Butler to the goals of the Wikipedia community.

Project Goals, or Why Wikipedia?

There may be no more thorough way to understand an Octavia E. Butler work than becoming an expert on it. That was the overall goal we set for our students, and that is why we fixed our sights on working in the English-language Wikipedia. Contributing to this online encyclopedia would simultaneously require students to gain both a broad and an in-depth understanding of Butler and her work, as it befits the encyclopedic writing in which they would be engaging.

Editing Wikipedia is an outstanding instance of experiential learning, as the process requires students to shift from, as one of the editathon student participants at Spelman observed, being knowledge consumers to being knowledge creators on the Internet, all the while being supported by a community of smart, caring, helpful, and sophisticated people. Specifically, editing Wikipedia equals to implementing and practicing what, for lack of a better phrase, we have come to refer to as “21st Century writing,” that is, writing that is web-based, social and collaborative, a work in perpetual progress, immediately visible and thus prompting instant feedback, and easily available and accessible. Overall, it is an incomparable environment for students to experience the pleasure and pain of real-world publication.

Wikipedia also supplies us with a key “Butler teaching moment” at the beginning of the semester. As we introduce the encyclopedia’s notability guidelines, we discuss the reasons and consequences of its clear, if incidental systemic bias so that certain topics, groups, and even

cultures are not yet adequately represented in its English-language version.⁴ We then explain the need for WikiProjects such as ours: while a substantial number of scholars, critics, and fans would agree that Butler's work is central not just to the speculative, feminist, and African-American communities, but to the whole of American culture and perhaps the world, a quick browsing of archived Wikipedia pages reveals that before the LaGuardia WikiProject began in 2014, entries for Butler's work were woefully underdeveloped, incorrect, and, in some cases (for instance, before the Spelman College edit-a-thon created the articles for *Mind of My Mind* and *Clay's Ark*), nonexistent.

Unsurprisingly, Butler's marginal coverage in the world's most popular encyclopedia strikes a familiar chord with our students, many of whom strongly identify with her life experiences as a black, female, working-class individual who attended public school and community college. Most importantly, it compels them to *want to rectify* that deficiency, especially after they learn about her unwavering resolve to live under her own terms against enormous odds—and to make herself visible through her work. As Butler explained in a PBS interview when journalist Charlie Rose asked her what it was about writing that was so important to her growing sense of self: “You got to make your own worlds. You got to write yourself in. Whether you were a part of the greater society or not, you got to write yourself in. So I got to write myself in.”⁵ Butler's clear-eyed understanding of the determination it takes for those in the margins to claim a place in the human story best describes why we advocate for our students to become active participants in Wikipedia's knowledge-sharing project: to write Butler, as well as themselves, into the greater society represented in “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” One of the reasons for the lack of diversity amongst Wikipedia contributors and topics is the message constantly being sent and that we sometimes repeat to ourselves as women and as

people of color: *You're not an expert. You don't know enough. You are an impostor.* Clearly, we tell our students, much of the information up on Wikipedia is quite appropriate and useful. But there remains much undone, much that needs to be improved. And if we understand who Butler was and what she was all about, we must get in there and improve it. Thus students learn that the solitary act of writing can involve a larger responsibility of collective participation.

Methods⁶

ENG103 at LaGuardia Community College is a composition and research class whose objective is to teach students to collect, analyze, and use sources as well as to develop ideas by drafting, revising, citing and documenting sources, critiquing, and editing final drafts. For the LaGuardia WikiProject, we retained those goals as well as the end product, a thesis-based research paper, while turning some of the individual drafting into collective editing that results in discreet sections of a Wikipedia entry on a specific Butler work. Students, then, become “experts” in one of Butler’s works by approaching her fiction critically for the individual research essay, and inventorially for the collaborative encyclopedic entry.

In practice, these two approaches generate very different observations and discussions about the texts at hand. A class conversation focused on finding provocative arguments about “The Book of Martha” for the research essay, for example, may dwell on how the writing of this story adds to the Biblical canon or on the possible symbolism behind God’s metamorphoses during the story; when working on the Wikipedia entry for the same story an hour later, a small group will engage in a long debate as to which specific events should or should not be included in the “Plot” section of “The Book of Martha” or what quotes “best represent” the key ideas in the story, while a second group will be busy encapsulating the public reaction to the story by aggregating and organizing the reviews of multiple critics for the article’s “Reception” section.

These intense negotiations on material that is normally glossed over as background information in the traditional research classroom serve to bring the students' attention to aspects of the story they had not previously considered.

Editing Wikipedia also means that students analyze a variety of contextual information normally deemed inconsequential in the research classroom. As mentioned above, they pore over book reviews, reflecting on the importance, for instance, of novelist Junot Diaz declaring *Fledgling* his "book of the year"; puzzle over types of literary awards (what is a Nebula Award and who have been other recipients of it?); they discuss the implications of publishing data, such as the fact that half a million copies of *Kindred* have been sold since it was first published in 1979; they consider how the work is further disseminated through community events such as the 2003 "If All of Rochester Read the Same Book" three-day program centered on *Kindred* or the adaptation of *Parable of the Sower* into an opera by American folk/blues musician Toshi Reagon.

We should mention that most current educational projects on Wikipedia reproduce the format of traditional research classes: each student chooses an individual article whose topic she then investigates and expands. In contrast, our classroom dynamics emulates the type of community that Wikipedia is and wants to be: a collection of editors creating a product through collaboration and negotiation. Instructors serve as coordinators and guides (Ximena serves as editor-in-chief while Ann provides integrated and ongoing information and digital literacy instruction) while students propose revisions, vote on the content of the entry, and contribute to it depending on their academic strengths: some are at their best when paraphrasing from scholarly work, some when copyediting, some when using wiki markup to code special features of the article, such as framed quotations. As students move through groups and editing tasks, they learn

about different aspects and critical viewpoints on Butler's fiction and begin developing their own arguments, which they then use to craft the research essay.

Issues

Our students have little trouble comprehending and enjoying Butler's fiction. Their struggle begins when they are required to grasp and rephrase scholarly articles both for their essays and the "Themes" section of the Wikipedia article. The difficulty lies partly on the students' language level (for a large percentage of the LaGuardia student body English comes as a second language) and partly on the fact that undergraduates are not the target audience of most scholarly articles. In addition, many scholars plunge into their arguments with little preamble, again assuming that their readership has a clear grasp of the theory behind their analysis or of the socio-historical circumstances surrounding Butler's authorial choices. Thus, when the protagonist of *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu, was pronounced by several academics as a fictional representation of Donna Haraway's "cyborg" identity, a substantial portion of class time had to be spent explaining Haraway's ideas in "The Cyborg Manifesto." The interests of Butler scholars, then, tend to determine the direction of class work, as our job is to understand their arguments and render them as accurately as possible for the encyclopedia.

Thus it is not strange that certain thematic sections of an article end up echoing the specialized language of the original texts, making the piece hard to understand for Wikipedia's general readership. A typical example of this issue can be found in the current version of the article for *Wild Seed*. Unable to adequately paraphrase Stacy Alaimo's argument explaining Anyanwu as a representation of cyborg identity, the group in charge of the section opted for quoting heavily:

Stacy Alaimo further argues that Butler uses the "utterly embodied" Anyanwu not just to counteract Doro's "horrific Cartesian subjectivity" but to actually transgress the

dichotomy between mind and body, as Anyanwu is capable of “reading” other bodies with her own. As such, she illustrates Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge,” wherein the subject (knower) does not distance itself from the object (known) and thus offers an alternative way of experiencing the world. Anyanwu’s body, then, is a “liminal space” that blurs traditional divisions of the world into “nature” and “culture.”

Awkward if useful passages such as this one are what make the LaGuardia WikiProject Octavia

E. Butler a work in progress which we hope will continue to be perfected by future editors.

Outcomes

For us, perhaps the most important outcome is that our students demonstrate both a broad and a deep understanding and appreciation of Butler’s fiction. Rather than approaching her work from a single and narrow point of view (the one they have decided or been told to argue with the support of scholarly sources), students experience all manner of perspectives on Butler’s work and must weigh the importance of each based on their experience and understanding of her work. Their mastery and awareness of the material is evidenced by their Wikipedia entries, of which two outstanding examples are the article for *Kindred* and the article on Butler’s life, career, and achievements.

In addition, the multiple practical conversations as to “what is key,” “what should be included,” how long a plot needs to be and what information to cover (sometimes students are strongly against including “spoilers”), or what Butler scholars see as the text’s legacy or place in culture, history, and literature obviously serve to enrich the students’ separate explorations in their research essays. However, an interesting recurring outcome of the project is that students declare themselves more invested in their team work than in their research paper, which they consider a “throwaway” assignment—a means to a grade rather than a valuable artifact in itself. This high level of student engagement with the work completed for the encyclopedic entry seems to be true of most Wikipedia projects,⁷ and probably stems from the students’ knowledge that

their collective work will be read and referenced by many others for a long time. Most importantly, this understanding of the significance of their work on Wikipedia has motivated specific students to continue to invest in the project outside the classroom by, for example, volunteering to present on their experiences at the 2014 and 2015 meetings of Wikimedia Conference USA.⁸

One other noteworthy benefit of the project is the increased visibility of and access to Butler's universe in the world's most consulted encyclopedia, which necessarily impacts global awareness and understanding of her work, especially since critical studies of her fiction are contained in the paywalled databases of academia and thus only accessible to a minute, privileged part of the population. One good example of how the project has increased access to reliable information on Butler's fiction is the Wikipedia article on her best-selling novel *Kindred*. Before we began our work, the article was glaringly incomplete and had only three short online interviews as its references:



Article [Talk](#)

[Read](#) [Edit](#) [View history](#)

Kindred (novel)

Kindred is a 1979 novel by Octavia Butler. While most of Butler's work is classified as science fiction, *Kindred* is often shelved in literature or African-American literature and Butler categorized the work as "a kind of grim fantasy".^[1]

The novel tells the story of Edana (Dana) Franklin, an African-American woman living in 1976 Altadena, California who, on her twenty-sixth birthday, begins the first of six involuntary journeys back in time to Maryland's Eastern Shore in the antebellum South. She soon finds out that she has been unconsciously summoned (through means that are never fully explained) by Rufus Weylin, a young white boy who is the son of a slave owner, Tom Weylin, and her distant ancestor. Rufus calls for Dana whenever he feels his life is in danger, from the time he is a child through to adulthood, forcing Dana to rescue him from the perceived immediate threat. But the cost is dear: Dana must also guarantee her own future survival by learning to exist on the plantation as a slave, including taking steps to ensure that one of her black ancestors on the plantation, Alice, the daughter of a free woman, has a child with Rufus, who will become Dana's direct ancestor.

Contents [hide]

- 1 Plot summary
- 2 Time travel
- 3 Author's quotes
- 4 References
- 5 External links

Image 1: Wikipedia article on *Kindred* as of 9 May 2014. Note the Table of Contents.



Article [Talk](#)

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Kindred (novel)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Kindred is the bestselling novel by American science-fiction author Octavia E. Butler. Part time-travel tale and part slave narrative, it was first published in 1979 and is still widely popular; it is regularly chosen as a text for community-wide reading programs and book organizations, as well as being a common choice for high school and college courses.

The book is the first-person account of a young African-American woman writer, Dana, who finds herself shuttled between her California home in 1976 and a pre-Civil War Maryland plantation. There she meets her ancestors: a spoiled, self-destructive white slave owner and the proud black freewoman he has forced into slavery and concubinage. As her stays in the past become longer, Dana becomes intimately entangled with the plantation community, making hard compromises to survive slavery and to ensure her existence in her own time.

Written to underscore the courageous endurance of people perceived as chattel, *Kindred* examines the dynamics and dilemmas of antebellum slavery as well as its legacy in present American society. Through the two interracial couples that form the emotional core of the story, the novel also explores the intersection of power, gender, and race issues and speculates on the prospects of future egalitarianism.

While most of Butler's work is classified as science-fiction, *Kindred* crosses disciplinary boundaries and so is often shelved under literature or African-American literature. Butler has categorized the work as "a kind of grim fantasy."^[1]

Contents [hide]

- 1 Plot
- 2 Characters
- 3 Main themes
 - 3.1 Realistic depiction of slavery and slave communities
 - 3.2 Master-slave power dynamics
 - 3.3 Critique of American history
 - 3.4 Trauma and its connection to historical memory (or historical amnesia)
 - 3.5 Race as social construct
 - 3.6 Strong female protagonist

Image 2: Wikipedia article on *Kindred* as of 28 April 2016. Note the article's comprehensive lead and Table of Contents. The References section has forty-seven separate secondary sources, most of them linked to an online version of their content.

- 8 Adaptations
- 9 Important Quotations from *Kindred*
- 10 References

While the article as our students left it may still be built upon, visitors to Wikipedia from all over the world now have a reasonably accurate and reliable starting point to learn about or begin their research on *Kindred*. As of the time of this writing, the *Kindred* article is viewed 241 times a day.

LaGuardia undergraduates are keenly aware that by creating well-researched and accurate encyclopedic material on Butler's fiction and posting it to the free web they not only give Butler the greater exposure she deserves but provide an important channel of access to her scholarship (every semester someone jokes that their work will make it easier for others to plagiarize their essays). We would like to suggest that it is this awareness of their responsibility in disseminating knowledge properly that motivates them to do the best work possible for the entry while maybe putting less effort in their college papers. When all is said and done, students feel the fate of Butler's work is intimately related to their own competency in presenting it to the world.

The Future...?

The parameters of the Wikipedia Project Octavia E. Butler strike some of our colleagues as ambitious, especially considering that this enterprise is currently centered on a single research class for community college undergraduates. We hope our quick overview of the project has demonstrated that knowledge comes and is built from all quarters. And so, in closing, we would like to invite other Butler teacher-scholars and their classes to join us in the worthy effort of creating accurate and useful content about Butler's work on the free web.

Our students have been daunted by the challenges of this work, and the collaborative nature of the process allows for a realization of the importance of all their contributions. Knowledge sharing spaces online remain too closely tied to the traditional print models that they imitate, and if we do not take an active role in shaping future development, underlying hierarchical and patriarchal values will remain, leaving Butler's

¹ From Wikipedia's welcome message on its main page.

² To give an idea of the extent of educational work on Wikipedia, only in Spring 2016 4135 students in 215 courses added 3.53 million words to the encyclopedia, created 480 articles and edited 4,000 more. For more information on educational WikiProjects, please visit the WikiEd dashboard at <https://dashboard.wikiedu.org/>

³ A Wikipedia featured article must fulfill Wikipedia's criteria for accuracy, neutrality, completeness, and style (including the use of media) and is distinguished by professional standards in writing, presentation, and sourcing. For particulars as well as examples of featured articles, please see "Wikipedia:Featured Article Criteria"

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_article_criteria> and "Wikipedia:Featured Articles" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_articles>.

⁴ For more details on Wikipedia's systemic bias, please see "Wikipedia:Systemic Bias" <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Systemic_bias> and "Wikipedia:WikiProject Countering Systemic Bias"

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Countering_systemic_bias>

⁵ "Octavia Butler on Charlie Rose- Part 1/2." *YouTube*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016. Interview aired 1 June 2000. Episode 9409, *Charlie Rose*. PBS.

⁶ For details on specific goals, methods, tools used for collaborative work, and assignments for each of the texts we have worked on, please visit the LaGuardia WikiProject Octavia E. Butler blog at <http://butler103.blogspot.com>

⁷ Roth, Amy, Rochelle Davis, and Brian Carver. "Assigning Wikipedia Editing: Triangulation Toward Understanding University Student Engagement."

First Monday 18.6 (2013). <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4340/3687>
doi:10.5210/fm.v18i6.4340

⁸ Wiki Education Foundation. "Wikifying Science Fiction's 'Grand Dame.'" News from WikiEd. Wiki Education Foundation. 22 Oct. 2015. Web. 25 May 2016.

<<https://wikiedu.org/blog/2015/10/22/wikipedia-students-octavia-butler/>>