



A TRIBUTE TO OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

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(applause)

DAN SIMON: Thank you, everyone, for coming. Octavia was beloved of so many people across the country, and so the people who made it here tonight and who are presenting tonight—you all are representing tens of thousands of people around the country, and it is being taped, and so I hope some of them will be able to get to hear the proceedings, and to think of Octavia and honor her as we're honoring her tonight. Cell phones off, please. **(laughter)** Always last.

The—I want to mention that some of Octavia's family has come here from L.A. County to be with us tonight, and I'd like to ask them to stand, just so that we can thank you for coming. **(applause)**

I'm just going to say a few brief words and then the presenters will come up without introduction and introduce themselves, and there will be a lot of reading from Octavia's work and some other things. My name's Dan Simon, and I was Octavia's originating editor for her last three novels and for her one short story collection. And just as we were gathering tonight, I was remembering a party that we had when we published *Parable of The Talents*, and it was—in a way reminds me of tonight and a lot of the people

who are here tonight were here then, and, gosh, it seems like a lifetime ago—it was in 1998, and Octavia was so happy, and she was here among us and so much has changed since then.

And then the other thing I was remembering is the call I got from Merrilee Heifetz, Octavia’s agent, and that was about sixteen years ago, and Merrilee was calling me about an author of hers that I was not familiar with at the time named Octavia Butler and there was this kind of passionate intensity in Merrilee’s asking and—whether we’d be interested and telling me a bit about Octavia and I couldn’t say “no,” because it was, there was just something behind what she was—something obviously there that was going to be new and exciting to me and that was for *Parable of the Sower* and it was the first book of Octavia’s that I worked on, and I have to say, because—something that I need to say is that I probably did less as Octavia’s editor on the page than with any other writer that I’ve ever edited, and it wasn’t for lack of trying—I would send Octavia long memos, **(laughter)** and I was full of suggestions. And it wasn’t that Octavia wasn’t interested in what I had to say—she was.

But what was particular—one of the things about Octavia is that, before she would send anything to me or to Merrilee, she put herself through *such* a process. She wrote *so* many drafts, she was so hard on herself as a writer, that by the time I saw the manuscript, she really had nothing left to give to that particular book, and with each of the three novels that we published at Seven Stories and before that at Four Walls, she would call me at some point and say she was done, hurrah, and that all she had to do now was just a little bit of fine-tuning, a few sentences, polishing here and there, and then she’d be done within a week to ten days, definitely. And then I would get a call, about ten days or two weeks later—this happened in all three of the novels—saying that she had to start over **(laughter)** and that I would see the book in one to two years **(laughter)** and I realized now why Merrilee had called me, and Merrilee was not looking for a great editor, she was looking for a very patient person. **(laughter)** And that’s all that she really needed from me, and in a way, it was a—you know, mine was an easy job.

Among Octavia’s many qualities, she was simply a naturally kind human being. She always made me feel that I was very funny, very smart, and very good. **(laughter)** I think that she made a lot of people feel that way. She made her readers feel that way. She asked me to call her, when I had to call her, early in the morning. And there was so much that we could be talking about, but I knew that she didn’t like to talk about the work, and that there was nothing that I could remind her of in the way of her

responsibilities to me or to the press that she wasn't already very cognizant of, and that there was nothing that I could say to make her more responsible than she already was, and so what would end up happening, is we would laugh a lot on the phone and we would talk about NPR, we would talk about books we'd read, we would talk about the weather, and there was always this kind of, I think, mutual gratefulness in those conversations because we *didn't* talk about anything big. And it was always a lot of fun, and I always got her laughing, and I have very fond memories of those conversations.

I think that most people would rather be kind than unkind, but I also think that most people aren't exactly sure *why* that is important, and I want to say tonight that of all the people that I have ever known, Octavia Estelle Parsons was very clear and forceful and knew why it was important not to hate, why it was important to be kind, she was very clear in her mind that without kindness and without the kind of love that her characters were always striving for, and that she was always striving for, that we were in danger as a species and that the planet was in danger. I think this was partly to do with her own family history and partly to do with the fact that much of her work involved imagining the near future. I believe she knew better than pretty much anyone I've ever met, the dangers of hierarchical thinking, the dangers of racism, the dangers of the kinds of abuses of the human spirit which, you know, are becoming again habit with us as a race, and she was very troubled in the last five years by what was happening politically and what was happening in the world.

Does it ever seem to you that there are people among us who hold up the sky and make the rivers flow? People who are just like other people, just like the rest of us, only different? They're the structural beams in the house we all share, the house that has a sky for a roof, and usually they don't want to call attention to themselves, they just want to be who they are, *do* what they do with as little interference as possible. Octavia comes to my mind as first among that group of people. She did what she *could* do. In her books she showed us the horrors and the great good that humans *can* create and the choices that she made in her books and in her life always gave us new ways of seeing. She *was* a beacon of hope, sometimes even when she wasn't trying, and in mourning her, and in honoring her, I just really want to keep her close and feel her close. Thank you.

(applause)

SONIA SANCHEZ: Hello. How are you? My name is Sonia Sanchez and I want to read a section from *Bloodchild* called “Positive Obsession.”

“My mother read me bedtime stories until I was six years old. It was a sneak attack on her part. As soon as I really got to like the stories, she said, ‘Here’s the book, now you read.’ **(laughter)** She didn’t know what she was setting us both up for. I think my mother said to me one day when I was ten that everyone has *something* that they can do better than they can do anything else. It’s up to them to find out what that something is. We were in the kitchen by the stove. She was pressing my hair while I sat bent over someone’s cast-off notebook, writing. I had decided to write down some of the stories I’d been telling myself over the years. When I didn’t have stories to read, I learned to make them up. Now, I was learning to write them down. I was shy, afraid of most people, most situations. I didn’t stop to ask myself how things could hurt me or even whether they could hurt me, I was just afraid.

“I crept into my first bookstore full of vague fears. I had managed to save about five dollars, mostly in change. It was 1957. Five dollars was a lot of money for a ten-year-old. The public library had been my second home since I was six, and I owned a number of hand-me-down books, but now I wanted a new book, one I had chosen, one I could keep. ‘Can kids come in here?’ I asked the woman at the cash register once I was inside. I meant ‘Could black kids come in?’ My mother, born in rural Louisiana and raised amid strict racial segregation had warned me that I might not be welcome everywhere, even in California. The cashier glanced at me, ‘Of course you can come in,’ she said. Then, as though it were an afterthought, she smiled. I relaxed. The first book I bought described the characteristics of different breeds of horses. The second described stars and planets, asteroids, moons, and comets.

“My aunt and I were in her kitchen talking. She was cooking something that smelled good and I was sitting at her table watching—luxury. At home my mother would have had me helping. ‘I want to be a writer when I grow up,’ I said. ‘Do you?’ my aunt asked. ‘Well, that’s nice, but you’ll have to get a job, too.’ ‘Writing will be my job,’ I said. ‘You can write anytime. It’s a nice hobby, but you have to earn a living.’ ‘As a writer.’ ‘Don’t be silly, I mean it, honey, Negroes can’t be writers.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘They just can’t.’ ‘Yes, they can, too.’ I was most adamant when I didn’t know what I was talking out. In all my thirteen years, I had never read a printed word that I knew to have been written by a black person. My aunt was a grown woman. She knew more than I did. What if she were right?

“Shyness is shit. It isn’t cute or feminine or appealing, it’s torment, and it’s shit. I spent a lot of my childhood and adolescence staring at the ground. It’s a wonder I didn’t become a geologist. **(laughter)** I whispered. People were always saying, ‘Speak up! We can’t hear you!’ I’d memorize required reports and poems for school, then cried my way out of having to recite. Some teachers condemned me for not studying. Some forgave me for not being very bright. Only a few saw my shyness. ‘She’s so backwards,’ some of my relatives said. ‘She’s so nice and quiet,’ tactful friends of my mother said. I believed I was ugly and stupid, clumsy and socially hopeless. I also thought that everyone would notice these faults if I drew attention to myself. I wanted to disappear. Instead I grew to be six feet tall. **(laughter)** Boys in particular seemed to assume that I had done this growing deliberately, **(laughter)** and that I should be ridiculed for it as often as possible.

“I hid out in a big pink notebook, one that would hold a whole ream of paper. I made myself a universe in it. There I could be a magic horse, a Martian, a telepath, there I could be anywhere but here, anytime but now, with any people but these. An ‘obsession,’ according to my old Random House dictionary, is ‘the domination of one’s thoughts or feelings by a persistent idea, image, desire,’ etcetera. Obsession can be a useful tool, if it’s positive obsession. Using it is like aiming carefully in archery. I took archery in high school because it wasn’t a team sport. I liked some of the team sports, but in archery you did well or badly according to your own efforts, no one else to blame. I wanted to see what *I* could do. I learned to aim high, aim above the target, aim just there, relax, let go. If you aim right, you hit the bulls-eye. I saw *positive* obsession as a way of aiming yourself, your life, at your chosen target. Decide what you want, aim high, go for it. I wanted to tell a story. I wanted to sell a story. Before I knew how to type, I wanted to *sell* a story. I pecked my stories out two-fingered on the Remington portable typewriter my mother had bought me. I had begged for it when I was ten and she had bought it.”

And then I wanted to end up with the last thing that she says. “So then, I write science fiction and fantasy for a living. As far as I know, I’m still the only black woman who does this. When I began to do a little public speaking, one of the questions I heard most often was, ‘What good is science fiction to black people?’ I was usually asked this by a black person. I gave bits and pieces of answers that didn’t satisfy me, and that probably didn’t satisfy my questioners. I resented the question. Why should I have to justify my profession to anyone? But the answer to that was obvious. There was exactly one other

black science fiction writer working successfully when I sold my first novel, Samuel R. Delany, Jr. Now there are four of us, Delany, Steven Barnes, Charles R. Saunders, and me. So few, why? Lack of interest? Lack of confidence? A young black woman once said to me, ‘I always wanted to write science fiction, but I didn’t think there were any black women doing it.’

“Doubts show themselves in all sorts of ways, but still I’m asked, ‘What good is science fiction to black people?’ What good is any form of literature to black people? What good is science fiction’s thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets readers and writers off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what everyone is saying, doing, thinking, whoever everyone happens to be this year. And what good is all this to black people?”

What we do know, indeed, what is good, what has been good for all of us is to listen and to read and to see this child of the stars help us to reach the stars. Thank you.

(applause)

SANDRA GOVAN: Good evening. I’m Sandra Govan from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I’ve known Octavia for a long time, I’ve written about her for a long time. I’ve called my remarks, “Keeping It Real: The Impact of Story in Octavia Butler’s Fiction.” Despite the circumstances that have brought us here tonight to pay homage to the highly regarded and much-beloved Octavia E. Butler, it is my distinct pleasure to be here at the New York Public Library to *represent*, as we say in my community. I wanted to address this legion of faithful Butler fans in my capacity as both Butler scholar and public academician. Translation: I will talk tonight not as one of the arch young deconstructionists deconstructing her work in coded academic tongue nor even as a crafty older professor seeking to augment a tenure file by publishing some incomprehensible treatise **(laughter/applause)** on such concepts as “Butler and the Postmodern” or “Butler and The Chiastic Cannibalism,” whatever that means.

No, I am flattered to have been invited here tonight to discuss the impact of Butler's fiction with intelligent readers and writers who *care* about her fiction, those readers who understand that Octavia E. Butler was not driven to write about **(inaudible)** in philosophy or rhetoric, but was instead concerned about telling a good story and telling it well. I know that as a working writer, Butler worked *hard*, persisting in drafting, crafting, and revising her tales, as we just heard her editor say, in order to reach us all with a well-honed story, striving to maintain the worlds within her stories as unique, yet credible and dramatic, thus holding readers at the peak of excitement, while keeping it real for the several discrete audiences she recognized as her fans. The relationship I had with Octavia was both personal and professional. Since 1984, I've interviewed her, introduced her, reviewed her work, written articles about her, and an afterword to *Wild Seed* at her request. Visited her home, entertained her in mine. She became a friend with whom I shared common bonds, common dreams, common roots in the Louisiana soil.

Each time we met a conference or casually, she remained the same kind, patient, and generous woman, though she did not suffer fools willingly. **(laughter)** Witty, yet reserved, considerate of others, yet a forthright, astute, observant, politically incorrect, honest and humorous person. A woman of tremendous insight and integrity whose incisive integrity saturated everything she wrote, be it her essays, as we just heard, her stories in *Bloodchild*, or her novels, *Kindred*, and the Patternist books, the Xenogenesis Trilogy, the two *Parable* novels, or *Fledgling*, her last novel, published just last year. With each work, Butler recognized her audiences, what would attract, what would hold our attention. She was determined to engage us and *not* to bore us. She understood her audience to be, largely, three distinct groups: the science fiction fans, the feminists, and black Americans. Yet I believe she underestimated her reach, underestimated the profound impact her works had on other readership groups as well.

For instance, hundreds of college professors brought her novels into the classroom and seduced students into willingly reading her works. And that's a feat, getting students to read these days. Some later tried to appropriate her, using critic-speak, trying to make her work "more valuable" to the anointed insiders of literary canon formation. Such an undertaking remains entirely unnecessary, for the intrinsic merit of her work speaks to each reader quite clearly. But understand: her novels and stories reach much further than tortured inquiry takes us, and they are taught in more than just Black Studies classes. Her stories and novels appear regularly all across the college curriculum—in English composition classes, American literature and history classes, science fiction classes, popular culture classes, women's studies

classes. Her admission into the academy and her progression from outsider to mainstay was an immense and resounding change of status. No doubt it helped that she was also a MacArthur Award winner, apart from winning both the Nebula and the Hugo Awards.

Butler's work appealed to yet another audience group, the professionals among us. Not just the writers and the teachers, but the social workers, the psychologists, the scientists, the doctors, the chemists, the biologists, in America and abroad, all drawn to her work by the force of her ability to ignite our imaginations, by their respect for her creation of dramatic story, by their appreciation of the way she envisioned, then constructed and sustained characters and worlds. Such readers respond to the precision of her insight and detail, for the accuracy by which she analyzed human behavior, and gave us, in her alternate realities, a sense of transcendence through her very powerful imagination. Last October, during our final interview, Butler recounted how a doctor had confided that one of his patients believed his disease was just like the one she had invented in *The Evening and the Morning and the Night*.

(laughter)

Subsequently, a friend among those regular readers who are neither particularly feminist nor academician nor professional recounted how once a young black man stood up in Chicago's McCormick Place and proclaimed to Butler a heartfelt "Thank you for *Wild Seed*, thank you!" That young man experienced a spiritual vibe. He expressed what we might describe as a passionate engagement with Butler's fiction. He was drawn to *Wild Seed* because the story of Anyanwu and Doro reached his heart, his mind and his soul as he saw himself for perhaps the first time reflected in the speculative realm of science fiction. At another Chicago venue, a social worker rose to announce during the Q & A that she was thoroughly engaged by *Fledgling* and though "its sexual underpinnings" disturbed her, **(laughter)** she remained mesmerized by this novel that gave Octavia, following a numbing writer's block, such pleasure to write.

In many ways, the mesmerizing impact of Butler's fiction is akin to that of a snake. We want to turn and run, but we cannot. We remain, captured by the story, fascinated by the snake's hypnotic power, a recurrent Butler theme, as our oracle, our griot of past, near-present, or alternate possible futures, Butler connects us precisely through the power of her lyrical prose. She offers us knowledge, wisdom, heroines, and hope, informing us without becoming preachy or didactic. Hers are books we pass on to

one another. As a friend noted, “Her characters jump off the page to become a play before my eyes. Her stories are complex and speak to my soul.” Extrapolating from the past and the present, Octavia E. Butler never tired of revealing the human condition, never ceased asking us to look around, to think, and to act responsibly before that option is removed from us. We will miss her resonant, prescient voice terribly, but we will continue to read and to teach her. Thank you.

(applause)

HARLAN ELLISON: My name is Harlan Ellison. I’m speaking to you from Los Angeles. **(audio cuts out)**

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON: In *Parable of the Sower* the leader is a wounded leader in that she is born a child impacted by substance abuse of her mother and it caused a quality that really struck me very strongly because she could feel what other people were feeling and I guess if they were feeling good and she was feeling good it was pretty good, but if you were bleeding or if somebody hit you, she would feel what you felt, and I was really struck by this thing where her siblings would sometimes do things because they knew she had the condition, and then if she had to fight for herself, she had to deal with the fact that she would actually hurt her own self hitting somebody, and then she would feel how much she had hurt them, and so sometimes she really pulled herself together and just got triple hell because she had to fight for herself, and when I read *Parable of the Sower*, I said, “I can sing this book,” and one of the first things I did was this song and it just explored what happens if—

(song performed by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon not transcribed)

(applause)

MERRILEE HEIFETZ: A tough act to follow. **(laughter)** I’m Merrilee Heifetz, senior vice president of Writers House and Octavia Butler’s literary agent. Our relationship began over twenty years ago when her previous agent, Felicia Eth, left the agency. We met when I sat next to Octavia at the Hugo Awards when *Bloodchild* won for best short story. As Octavia wrote to me then, “You’re the logical person for me to ask. Besides, you’re good luck.”

For someone who led a solitary, writerly life, Octavia was emotional, passionate, and romantic. For someone so steeped in science and in the starkly honest, gritty, and often dark side of humanity, Octavia was a great believer in luck, and *really* a terrific optimist. She had to be, because success did not come quickly. The first book I sold for Octavia was actually one that had gone out of print. *Kindred* was originally published by Doubleday...(audio cuts out)...woman who travels through time to a slave plantation. However, Beacon Press bought trade paperback rights and put it in a new line they were doing of women's science fiction. It has since sold close to half a million copies, has been optioned numerous times for film, and is taught in colleges throughout the country. Also at that time, the set of novels known as the Xenogenesis series, which are now collected in the single title *Lilith's Brood* were under contract but were not yet published. They came out over the next few years but sold even fewer copies than *Kindred* had. So far, I was failing to bring Octavia the luck she had hired me for.

But Octavia was a writer, and while she believed in luck, she also believed in hard work, fueled by passion. I'm going to read to you from a letter she wrote me in 1990, when she was working on a novel called *Gods of Clay*, which later became *Parable of the Sower*. "Dear Merrilee, The novel, as I started to tell you on the phone, is the story of Lauren Olamina, her obsession, the religion she creates, her struggles with enemies, followers, and Gage, the foster son who may become her Joshua, her Judas, or her Paul. The novel takes place on a twenty-first-century Earth made somewhat grimmer by the greenhouse effect and altered by social change and technological advancement. The religion she creates and uses, she also believes in. It is her tool for pushing human beings to fulfill what she sees as their destiny...(audio cuts out)...freedom and among the world's ruling businesses, increased concern for profit and power, could motivate people to reach for the stars. Thus religion is the ancient tool that Olamina must use to push some small fraction of humanity into the future. It is a dangerous tool, easily perverted, and heavily dependent on Olamina's survival. It does not depend on logic. It does not depend on Olamina's being good or right. It depends on her survival. That's the story. The form has been shifting about on me, but that's the story. Wish me luck. (laughter) Sincerely, Octavia E. Butler."

She finished the novel about a year and a half later, and I began to send it out. Her sales on the previous three books had been so bad that no one offered. This was before Oprah, before Terry McMillan. One publisher actually told me that black people don't buy books. (dismay from audience) The only luck I

was bringing Octavia at this point was decidedly bad. But finally, her editor at Warner said that if I could find someone else to publish the hardcover, he could buy the paperback rights. Thus we found Dan Simon, who was then at Four Walls Eight Windows and the publishing team that would Octavia through the next sixteen years went to work. *Parable of the Sower* was published in 1993, and in 1995 Octavia was awarded her MacArthur. I am happy to say that her book sales increased, **(laughter)** and finally, ten years after she hired me, success found Octavia.

A perfectionist, Octavia was capable of seeing the negative side when the writing was not going well. Here is a letter she wrote me in 1997. “Dear Merrilee, This is going to be something of a bare-bones letter because nothing I can think of to say will make it any more pleasant to write or to read. I won’t be finishing *Parable of the Talents*. I believed I could finish it but I was wrong. I am sorry to let you, Dan, and myself down, but I see no alternative. Please let me know the procedure for returning Dan’s money. **(laughter)** Apologies and best wishes, Octavia E. Butler.” I don’t think I ever actually told you about this letter. **(laughter)** As most of you know, that book went on to win the Nebula Award in 1999 for best novel of the year.

But even when things were dark, her passion for her art was greater than any romance. I would like to close by reading you a letter which describes a series of books that didn’t quite work out the way she planned, but this is the Octavia I will always remember and always miss. “Dear Merrilee, Enclosed is the May 89 *L.A. Style* you couldn’t find. I’m on page 89. Sci-fi femme, for God’s sake. **(laughter)** But what the hell, they spelled my name right. About the *Essence* picture, it may be my natural contrariness showing through, but I *hate* that picture. It’s me under about an eighth of an inch of makeup, which kept trying to melt off under those bloody lights and weirdly bleached out—me with most of the *me* removed. I wouldn’t want to see it anywhere else. Finally, to the most important matter this letter covers, please take the outline and chapters of *Justice* that I sent you and TOSS THEM OUT. **(laughter)** I’m keeping the characters’ names and the concept of contagious empathy but probably nothing else. The story was beginning to feel the way an earlier novel called *Blindsight* used to. Always just a little out of reach, and never very interesting. Ask Felicia how many times I rewrote *Blindsight*. No, don’t ask her. Even she doesn’t really know. Thoroughly bad business. Anyhow, I feel so much better about what I’m working on now that I can’t even describe it. It’s based on the Gaia Hypothesis, the notion that the Earth itself is a living organism. Unhappily, Dave Brin has just had a book published or will have it published soon,

on *his* notions of Gaia. We met at LAX on our way to the same convention and he told me about it. I managed not to kill him. **(laughter)** I've been fascinated by Gaia for years, and scared to tackle it because it's so massive, but Dave and others who worked with Gaia have stayed close to home with it—Earth only. My idea has much in common with the problems of transplant surgery and blindly responsive immune systems. The transplants are people who go to settle on living worlds of other solar systems. Five shiploads of people, five other solar systems. These people can expect no help from Earth in their lifetimes. No new colonies, and no useful communication. They have all the material goods they need, all the technological help they need, to deal with problems they expect. What they don't expect is to be treated as organs, transplanted to blindly and persistently rejecting planetary organisms. I'm talking about nasty little things. Microorganisms that find the human body intolerable and that damage human eyes when they're blown or otherwise transferred into those eyes. The organisms die. The eyes are eventually blinded. People who go to sleep in apparently convenient places might awake to find themselves encapsulated in a kind of plant gall, rather like the way oysters encapsulate offending material in pearls. I plan to play with every immune response I can find a use for. I feel so good now that I'm digging around in biology again. I should have known better than to try to ignore it. By the way, that huge paragraph above is talking not about one book, but probably five. At least three. They will deal with worlds with and without their own intelligent species, and, under the circumstances intelligent species, with their own particular biologies, sociologies, and psychologies, are likely to be the worst possible complications. A world doing all it can to be rid of humanity is bad enough. Fun fun fun!" Exclamation point. **(laughter)** "I'm researching now and playing with ideas but I know by the way this feels that I've got something good. It will probably have to be offered book by book because it will have no onstage characters in common. Oh, but speaking of characters, have I got some juicy ones demanding to be heard. Like I said, fun, fun, fun. I have a convention and a week of Clarion coming up, so I can't quite hide out with thirty or forty books and my typewriter. *That's* what I feel like doing. You see, this is what I'm like when I'm in love. Best, Octavia."

(applause)

MAX RODRIGUEZ: Good evening. My name is Max Rodriguez. I'm editor of *QBR: The Black Book Review* and founder of the Harlem Book Fair, and I had the pleasure of interviewing Octavia about a month before she passed, at the CUNY Graduate Center, the advent of her book *Fledgling*. But I had

interviewed her, actually, maybe four months before that, and *that* didn't go so well. It was Octavia in true form, in rare form, as we say. I shared with her that sometimes I had, you know, trouble, you know, finding that writer's space, sometimes I had to look at the paper and just wait for the inspiration to come, and she said to me, in her very Octavia way, "Well, clearly you're not a writer." **(laughter)** And—yeah, *crushed* by Octavia. Yeah, but true to my profession, I smiled as I wrote, "not a writer." **(laughter)**

So you can understand the trepidation I had when I received a call from CUNY asking me to interview her again. I said to myself, "Hmm, public humiliation. Where does that fall on my list of my favorite things?" Okay. But we interviewed at CUNY, and we had a wonderful time. If you've had the opportunity to read *Fledgling*, it was a great book. I was particularly taken with how she infused vampire—or vampirism with sexuality, and we jostled onstage around that back and forth and there was a lot of humor around that. So, from *Fledgling*:

"I bit him. Just a quick bite and release on the meaty part of his hand where his thumb was. 'Goddamnit,' he shouted, jerking his hand away. Then he made another grab for me before I could get to the open door. There were several buttons on the door, and I didn't know which one of them would make it open. None of them seemed to work. That gave him a chance to get his hand on me a third time. 'Be still,' he ordered, and gave me a hard shake. 'You'll kill yourself. If you're crazy enough to try to jump out of a moving car, you should be in a mental hospital.' I stared down at the bleeding marks I had made on his hand and suddenly I was unable to think of anything else. I ducked my head and licked away the blood, licked the wound I had made. He tensed, *almost* pulling his hand away, then he stopped, seemed to relax. He let me take his hand between my own. I looked at him, saw him glancing at me, felt the car zigzag a little on the road. He frowned and pulled away from me, all the while looking uncertain. Unhappy. I caught his hand again between mine and held it. I felt him try to pull away. He shook me, actually lifting me into the air a little, trying to get away from me, but I didn't let go. I licked at the blood welling up where my teeth had cut him.

"He made a noise, a kind of gasp. Abruptly, he drove completely across the road to a spot where there was room to stop the car without blocking other cars. 'What are you doing?' he demanded, watching me. Not pulling away at all, now, but looking as though he wanted to, or as though he *thought* he should want to. I didn't answer. I wasn't getting enough blood from his hand. I wanted to bite him again, but I

didn't want him afraid or angry. I didn't know why I cared about that, but it seemed important. Also, I knew hands weren't as good for getting blood as wrists and throats were.

"I looked at him and saw that he was looking at me intently. 'It doesn't hurt anymore,' he said, 'it feels good, which is weird. How do you do that?' 'I don't know,' I told him. 'You taste good.' 'Do I?' He lifted me, squeezed past the division between the seats to my side of the car and put me on his lap. 'Let me bite you again,' I whispered. He smiled. 'If I do, what will you let me do?' I heard his consent in his voice, and I hauled myself up and kissed the side of his neck, searching with my tongue and my nose for the largest blood source there. A moment later I bit hard into the side of his neck. He convulsed and I held onto him. He writhed under me, not struggling, but holding me as I took more of his blood. I took enough blood to satisfy a hunger I hadn't realized I had until a few moments before. I could have taken more but I didn't want to hurt him. He tasted *wonderful*, and he had fed me without trying to escape or to hurt me. I licked the bite until it stopped bleeding. I wished I could make it heal, wished I could repay him by healing him. He sighed and held me, leaning back in his seat and letting me lean against him.

"So what was that?" he asked after a while. "How did you do that? And why the hell did it feel so fantastic?" He had enjoyed it, maybe as much as I had. I felt pleased, felt myself smile."

One more. "I sat on the bed. He started to pull the t-shirt over my head. 'No,' I said, and he stopped and stood looking at me, waiting. 'Let me see you.' I pulled at his shirt and unbuttoned one of his buttons. 'You've seen me.' He nodded, finished unbuttoning his shirt, and pulled his undershirt over his head. His broad chest was covered with a mat of brown hair so thick that it was almost like fur, and I stroked it and felt him shiver. He kicked off his shoes and stripped off his pants and underwear. There was a great deal more fur on him everywhere, and he was already eager and erect.

I had seen a man this way before. I could not remember who he had been, could not recall the specific face or body, but all of this was familiar and good to me. And I felt my own eagerness and growing excitement. I pulled the t-shirt over my head and let him push me back onto the bed, let him touch me while I petted and played with his fur and explored his body until, gasping, he caught my hands and held them. He covered me with his huge furry blanket of a body. He was so tall that he took care to hold himself up on his elbows so that my face was not crushed into his chest. He was very careful at first,

afraid of hurting me, still afraid that I might be too young for this, too small. Then, when it was clear that I was not being hurt at all, when I had wrapped my arms and legs around him, he forgot his fears, forgot everything. I forgot myself, too. I bit him again, just beneath his left nipple, and took a little more blood. He shouted and squeezed the breath from me. Then he collapsed on me. Empty, spent.”

So, after the conversation **(laughter)**—shift—so, after the conversation in the green room, she congratulated me on the interview, we had fun, she laughed about the jousting we did on the stage about the sexuality, she said, “I think you enjoyed reading those passages as much as I enjoyed writing them.” **(laughter)** And I said, “Yeah, I did, Octavia,” and I looked at her slyly, and I said, “You wouldn’t happen to be a vampire, would you?” **(laughter)** And she laughed that throaty laugh of hers and I laughed, too, I laughed to myself, “Look at me, hitting on Octavia Butler.” **(laughter)** Thank you, Octavia, for writing us into alternative futures, and thank you for this moment.

(applause)

MARLENE BARR: Hello, I’m Marlene Barr, I’m a pioneering scholar of feminist science fiction criticism. My purpose is to tell the story of how the first article about Octavia Butler to be published in a scholarly book came to be written in 1984. Italo Calvino’s “All at One Point” bears upon the story and the story is the afterword to my forthcoming *Afro Future Females*, the first anthology about black women science fiction writers. It’s called “A Blast From the Past, or the Big Bang.”

I explain how Calvino’s vision of his protagonist, Mrs. Phinko, unleashed the expansion of the universe when she says, “I’d like to make some noodles for you boys,” applies to black science fiction’s present burgeoning. According to Calvino’s story, an Italian mother’s words serve as the catalyst for the inception of the universe. I know that the beginnings of scholarship about black women science fiction writers emanated in part from a woman of Italian ancestry’s words. I know, because I witnessed it, and I was responsible for it. I offer an anecdote of historical importance in relationship to black science fiction criticism’s development. The story of how Ruth Salvaggio, who hails from New Orleans and teaches at the University of North Carolina, witnessed a Big Bang, agreed to write about Octavia Butler, said that she’d like to cook some gumbo, and participated in the start of scholarly writing about black women who author science fiction.

Time: 1984. Place: Black Hole State University. You shouldn't know about it, but I wrote a book about it, but that's another story. **(laughter)** Dramatis Personae: Young Marlene and Dr. Ph.D. Salvaggio, also known as Ruth. Once upon a time young Marlene and Dr. Ph.D. Salvaggio were quoting from Calvino, packed in there like sardines, in the patriarchal academy, where hardly anyone knew then that there could be feminist space. In their attempt to create new feminist literary criticism spaces, Dr. Ph.D. Salvaggio was turning from Dryden to women writers and young Marlene defiantly focused upon feminist science fiction. She decided to enlist her friend in her cause.

"I'm editing a Starmont House Press readers' guide on three women science fiction writers. All the other guides in the series are about an individual male author. No one realizes that women science fiction writers are important enough to warrant their own individual guides, so three women have to be packed in like sardines into one volume. Will you contribute something on a woman science fiction writer?" Marlene asked Ruth. "Science fiction? I don't know anything about science fiction." "Ruth, science fiction is literature. You're a literature scholar. You can write about literature." I really said that. "I'm not sure about this." "Please do it! Tell you what. I have a whole shelf filled with science fiction by women. To make you more comfortable with the thought of writing about science fiction, why don't I take all my women's science fiction books and throw them in the air? You can write about the text that falls closest to you." "Okay, it's 1984 and Big University Patriarch is watching us. We young feminists have to stick together. Yes, Marlene, as always, I will stand with you in solidarity, even if it does mean that I have to write about—gasp!—science fiction."

Marlene took her books in her hands and hurled them upward. They crashed with a resounding Big Bang. One book, after nearly decapitating Ruth, landed on her foot. "Fate has decreed that I write about this book, about *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. Who is Octavia Butler? Is *Kindred* good?" "Ruth, she's awesome. **(laughter)** Even though *Kindred* has a white woman on its cover, Butler is a black writer who writes about black women." Still reluctant to touch an actual science fiction novel, **(laughter)** mainstream literary critic Ruth gingerly took *Kindred* in hand. "Time travel, plantations, slavery: *Kindred* is an American epic and Butler is a descendent of Mark Twain. I can bring my experience as a Southerner and a daughter of Italian immigrants to bear upon Butler. I'd like to make some gumbo for

tonight's department feminist reading group. As soon as I finish cooking, I'll start reading *Kindred* immediately."

And, lo, it came to pass that at the same time Dr. Ph.D. Salvaggio uttered the word gumbo and consummate New Yorker Marlene wondered if gumbo contained sardines, quoting from Calvino, "The point that contained her in all of us was expanding in a halo of distance and light years and light centuries and billions of light millennia." Two young women friends who were together facing the slings and arrows of outrageous sexism (**laughter**) in the patriarchal academy directed against women in 1984—and, oy, you shouldn't know from it! (**laughter**)—united in Big Sisterhood participated in the birth of the feminist criticism that would elucidate the new space called science fiction created by black women whose time and expanding space had come. They wanted to make one point in 1984: The literary universe is certainly big enough to prelude women writers and women scholars from being treated like fruitless sardines confined within the good old boys' fishing pond.

This is a true story. Ruth Salvaggio really did agree to write about Butler after I threw my science fiction books in the air and *Kindred* landed at her feet. She contributed the chapter on Butler to the first Starmont House readers' guide devoted to female science fiction writers. That volume marked the first time that Butler's work was discussed between hard book covers. The part I played in generating the Big Bang which brought Salvaggio to Butler is pertinent to my anthology *Afro Future Females*. When I asked Butler if I could include one of her stories, she said that she fondly remembered the chapter devoted to her work in the Starmont House readers' guide. With that memory in mind, she graciously granted me permission to include her story "The Book of Martha," sans monetary remuneration. "Just send me a copy of your anthology and that will be payment enough," she said. I can never fulfill her request. Instead, I want to share this story about how feminist solidarity and gumbo cooking at once led to the creation of scholarship which played a role in the history of literary criticism about black women science fiction writers, and, most importantly, made Octavia E. Butler happy. Thank you.

(applause)

EVERY BROOKS: (laughter/applause) I thought you might know from somewhere. Octavia Butler was a gift, to me, to all of us. I have often, after having discovered this gift, shared it with children, young and old, even to this day. *Parable of the Talents*.

“Darkness gives shape to light as light shapes the darkness. Death gives shape to life as life shapes death. The universe and God share this wholeness, each defining the other. God gives shape to the universe as the universe shapes God. Chaos is God’s most dangerous face. Amorphous, roiling, hungry, shape chaos, shape God, act. Alter the speed or the direction of change. Vary the scope of change. Recombine the seeds of change. Transmute the impact of change. Seize change, use it, adapt, and grow. God is change, and, in the end, God prevails, but meanwhile kindness eases change, love quiets fear, and a sweet and powerful positive obsession blunts pain, diverts rage, and engages each of us in the greatest, the most intense of our chosen struggles. To shape God, with wisdom and forethought, to benefit your world, your people, your life, consider consequences, minimize harm, ask questions, seek answers, learn, teach, read.

“Your people welcome you. We are Earth seed. You are Earth seed. One of many, one unique, one small seed, one great promise, tenacious of life, shaper of God, water, fire, sculptor, clay, you are Earth seed, and your destiny, the destiny of Earth seed, is to take root among the stars. Beware. At war or at peace, more people die of unenlightened self-interest than of any other disease.

“Chaos is God’s most dangerous face, amorphous, roiling, hungry. Shape chaos, shape God, act. Alter the speed or the direction of change, vary the scope of change, recombine the seeds of change, transmute the impact of change, seize change, use it, adapt, and grow. To make peace with others, make peace with yourself. Shape God with generosity and compassion. Minimize harm. Shield the weak, treasure the innocent, be true to the destiny. Forgive your enemies, forgive yourself.

“Beware. Ignorance protects itself. Ignorance promotes suspicion. Suspicion engenders fear. Fear quails, irrational and blind, or fear looms, defiant and closed. Blind, closed, suspicious, afraid, ignorance protects itself, and protected, ignorance grows.

“Self is body and bodily perception. Self is thought, memory, belief. Self creates. Self destroys. Self learns, discovers, becomes. Self shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. To shape God, shape self. Take comfort. Each move toward the destiny, each achievement of the destiny must mean new beginnings, new worlds. A rebirth of Earth seed, alone. Each of us is Earth seed. Through the destiny we join, we are purposeful, immortal. Life. Are you Earth seed? Do you believe? Belief will not save you. Only actions guided and shaped by belief and knowledge will save you. Belief initiates and guides actions or does nothing.

“To survive, let the past teach you, past customs, struggles, leaders and thinkers. Let these help you. Let them inspire you, warn you, give you strength, but beware. God is change. Past is past. What was cannot come again. To survive, know the past, let it touch you, then let the past go. So much has happened. No. That’s wrong. Things haven’t just *happened*. I *caused* them to happen. We’re not slaves anymore.

“I know what I’ve done. I will go with the first ship to leave after my death. If I thought I could survive as something other than a burden, I would go on this one, alive. No matter. Let them someday use my ashes to fertilize their crops. Let them do that. It’s arranged. I’ll go and they’ll give me to their orchards and their groves. Now, as I watch, one by one the ships lift their cargoes from the Earth, I feel alone with my thoughts, until I reach out and hug each of my friends and look into their loved faces, this one solemn, this one joyous, all of them wet with tears, except for Harry. They’ll all go soon in these same shuttles. Perhaps Harry’s ashes and mine will keep company someday. The destiny of Earth seed is to take root among the stars, after all, and not to be filled with preservative poisons, boxed up at great expense, as is the revived fashion now, and buried uselessly in some cemetery.

“I know what I’ve done. Darkness gives shape to light as light shapes the darkness. Death gives shape to life as life shapes death. God and the universe share this wholeness, each defining the other. God shapes the universe as the universe shapes God. We have lived before, we will live again. We will be silk, stone, mind, star. We will be scattered, gathered, molded, probed. We will live and we will serve life. We will shape God and God will shape us again. Always. Again. Forevermore. God is Change and in the end God prevails.”

(applause)

SAMUEL R. DELANY: Friends, good evening. I'm Samuel Delany. **(applause)** This has been such a rich evening with Avery Brooks and Matt Rodriguez and Sonia Sanchez giving us Octavia's actual words and Harlan and Marlene and Merrilee Heitftetz giving us their words about Octavia. It's quite an evening.

I first heard of Octavia Estelle Butler shortly after I arrived to teach at the Clarion Workshop and Harlan Ellison, whom you heard earlier this evening, who had taught the week before me, got me aside to tell me there was a student he had urged strongly to come to Clarion because of her extraordinary talent, and whom he was particularly concerned about because he did not want her to get overlooked in the crush. Next morning, in the first workshop session, in the circle I noted a tall young woman of twenty-three, who, it soon became clear as the week went on, was extremely sharp. When she had something to say, she said it clearly, articulately, and it was always to the point and very clarifying, but she didn't say a lot.

During our personal conference I remember feeling great warmth toward her and support for her. I remember liking her immensely. We shared a lot. We were both black, we were both dyslexic, and we were both science fiction writers. But I lived on the East Coast, Octavia lived on the West. We didn't see each other again for fifteen or so years. Eventually, however, we were both invited to speak together at the Schomburg Library of African American literature in New York City's Harlem.

I should tell you just a little bit about my exposure to the Schomburg. My mom, for many years before the wonderful building that is now there on the corner of Lenox Avenue, was the library clerk in charge of the Schomburg Collection when the Schomburg Collection was about eighty boxes of books in a room about twice the size of my bathroom on the second floor of the Countee Cullen Branch on East 125th Street, so I had played all over the Schomburg Collection when I was about ten or eleven.

(laughter) And so there I was being called back to the Schomburg and I hadn't realized that this thing had been created on the corner of Lenox Avenue and 135th Street, and there it was, and there, when I went in, was Octavia, whom I hadn't seen for fifteen years.

By this time Octavia had published several novels. It was an afternoon program, and I remembered how astonished and, yes, delighted I was at the way over the intervening years she had gained such self-confidence. This was a wonderful public speaker with a presence easy to call “majestic.” As I told her afterwards, it was a pleasure and an honor to appear with her. When, in ’95, she won a MacArthur Fellowship, the coveted genius award, I think Octavia was both pleased and a bit flustered. More than once she has said in interviews, with modesty, “I’m no genius,” but if we accept Lessing’s description of genius from his 1756 study *Laokoon*, “genius is the ability to put talent wholly into the service of an idea,” then, yes, Butler wrote stories and novels of genius.

There were lots more appearances together, and all of them made me proud. In Atlanta, in Philadelphia, in New York, in Atlanta again, in Miami. The last program we did was in November of 2004, in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian. It was also the last time that I saw her in person. In the green room, before we went on, Octavia was drinking orange juice and we laughed together about the rainy weather outside, which did not keep a standing-room-only crowd away from the auditorium that night. And, in the Q and A period, after Octavia had eloquently discussed the writing process of *Parable of the Talents* and when the questioners had lined up at the microphone in the aisles, early on, one young man explained that he had a question for Miss Butler. And, after telling her how much her work meant to him, he whipped out a sheaf of paper and asked, “My question, Miss Butler, is, will you read my film script?” **(laughter)** After a moment of silence from the stage, Octavia said, firmly, “No.” **(laughter)** People laughed. Though still smiling, the young man looked a bit crestfallen, as if to say, “Well, at least I tried.” A moment later, more gently, Octavia said, “Even if I read it, there’s nothing I could do for you.”

Firm, kind, committed, and wonderfully astute and articulate, Octavia made the concerns of science fiction real for many, many black Americans. As well, she used the various situations of black Americans to give resonance and richness to many science-fictional ideas. Short fiction such as “Bloodchild,” “Speech Sounds,” and “Amnesty” will hold their place in the canon of American thought and writing for a long time as will the novels *Kindred*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *Parable of the Talents* among novels of ideas. Octavia Butler is a writer and a person who is loved, who is missed. I taught her works, and her stories always produced the *most* provocative of discussions in my classes. I miss and I mourn the woman and the writer. Thank you.

(applause)

(song performed by Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon not transcribed)

DAN SIMON: Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Octavia.