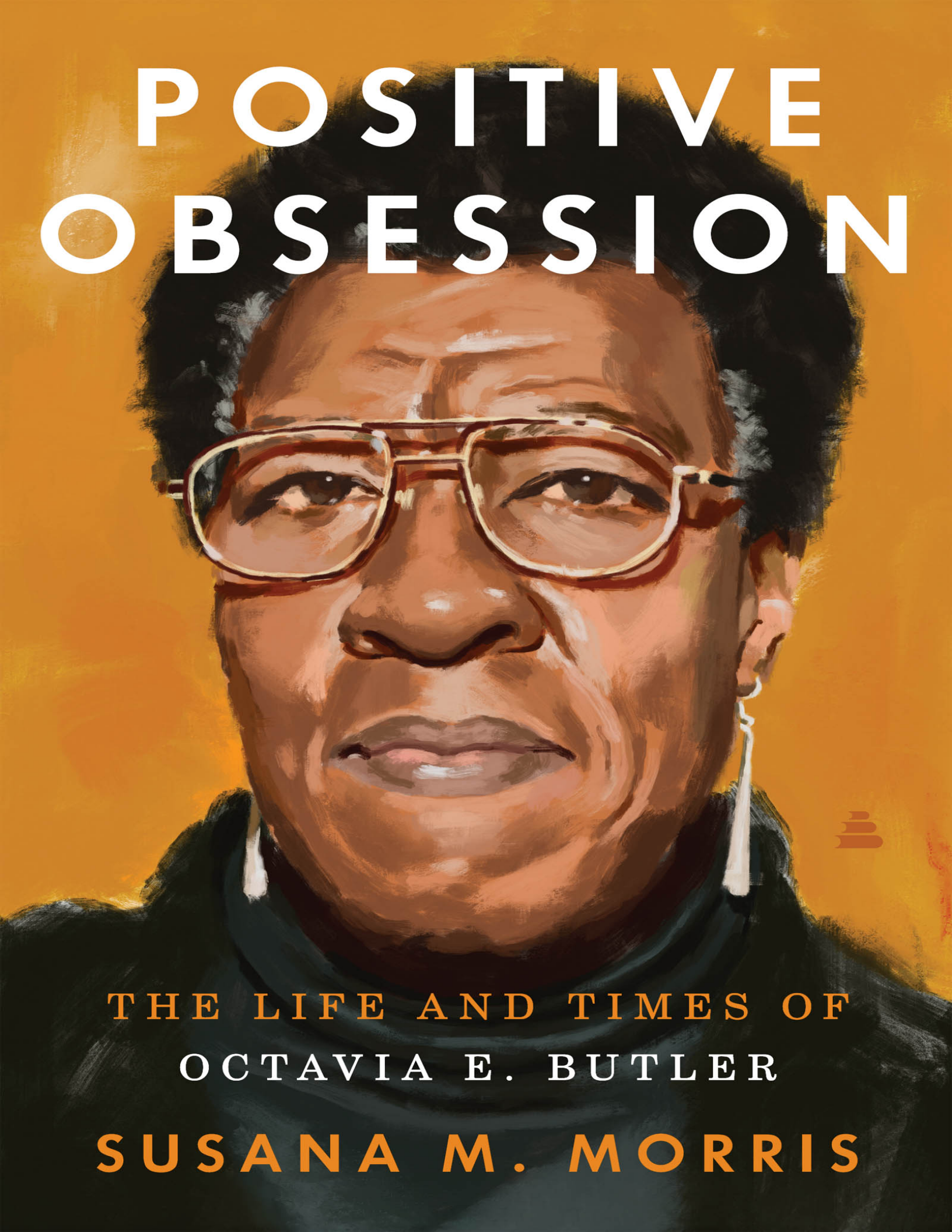
POSITIVE OBSESSION



THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

SUSANA M. MORRIS

POSITIVE OBSESSION

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AMISTAD

An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

To Octavia Estelle Butler for expanding
our horizons to see new suns
and
To librarians everywhere for creating safe havens
for children and adults to dream and create

Epigraph

Prodigy is, at its essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.

Parable of the Sower

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About the Publisher

Octavia E. Butler Chronology

FINDING HER VOICE (1947–1969)

1947

- Octavia Estelle Butler enters the world on June 22 in Pasadena, California, born to Octavia Margaret Guy Butler and Laurice Butler.
- Following her father's early death, young Octavia is raised by her mother and grandmother Stella Guy, surrounded by a loving extended family.

1957

- Her mother gifts her a typewriter for Christmas. She will use this typewriter to write her first several novels, including *Kindred*.

1959

- A chance viewing of a B-movie science fiction film ignites a creative spark in twelve-year-old Octavia. She begins crafting her first science fiction stories, planting seeds that would later blossom into her groundbreaking Patternist series.

1960

- A supportive teacher recognizes Octavia's talent and encourages her to submit her work to science fiction magazines—a crucial vote of confidence for the young writer.
- In an early lesson about the writing world, Octavia encounters an unscrupulous agent who demands a $61.20 "revision fee" (worth about $650 today). Her mother, believing in her daughter's dreams, sacrifices to pay this sum.

1965

- Graduates from John Muir High School and begins her college journey at Pasadena City College.

1966

- Sweet validation comes when her short story "To the Victor," submitted under the pen name Karen Adams, wins a writing competition at Pasadena City College. Her prize is $15.

1967

- Her growing skill earns national attention when her short story “Loss” wins fifth place in the *Writer’s Digest* short story contest.

1968

- In her final year at Pasadena City College, Octavia takes her first Black literature class—a pivotal moment in her developing literary consciousness.
- After earning her associate’s degree in history, she enrolls at California State University, Los Angeles.
- Like many writers before her, Octavia begins juggling various jobs—in offices, factories, and temporary positions—to keep food on the table while nurturing her creative ambitions.

1969

- Octavia leaves Cal State LA to take writing classes at UCLA Extension.
- At the Screenwriters Guild of America’s Open Door Workshop, she meets Harlan Ellison, who recognizes her tremendous potential and becomes a mentor and champion of her work.

FROM STRUGGLE TO FIRST SUCCESS (1970–1979)

1970

- The summer at Clarion Science Fiction Writers’ Workshop proves transformative, as Octavia spends six weeks honing her craft alongside other rising stars in the field and making lifelong friends.
- Here she meets influential writer Samuel R. Delany and strengthens her connection with Harlan Ellison.
- Her perseverance begins to bear fruit when she sells her first two short stories: “Crossover” and “Child Finder.” (The latter was earmarked for Ellison’s anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*, which never makes it to publication.)

1971

- “Crossover” appears in Clarion’s 1971 anthology—her first published work.
- Octavia then enters a challenging five-year publishing drought, a period that tests her resolve but fails to break her determination.

1972

- In a significant step toward independence, Octavia moves into her own Pasadena apartment.

- Though freedom brings its own challenges—financial hardship, loneliness, and self-doubt—these experiences deepen her understanding of human vulnerability, enriching themes she would later explore with empathy in her fiction.

1975

- Studying under Theodore Sturgeon at UCLA further refines her unique voice.
- The years of persistence pay off when Doubleday accepts the manuscript that would become *Patternmaster*, bringing a modest $1,750 advance.

1976

- *Patternmaster* reaches bookstore shelves, introducing readers to her visionary Patternist series, with its exploration of a future where telepathic abilities have restructured human society.
- Octavia begins researching the novel that would become her most beloved work, *Kindred*.

1978

- Publishes *Survivor*, the third Patternist book. (Octavia would later deride the novel as a lesser work, refusing to allow reprints.)
- Begins crafting *Blindsight*, a manuscript that, despite years of development, would never reach publication.

1979

- Publishes *Kindred*, the tale of a modern Black woman who travels back in time to the antebellum South.
- Also publishes the unrelated short story "Near of Kin."
- Despite receiving critical acclaim, Octavia's financial struggles continue.
- Her private journals reveal the weight of poverty, isolation, and frustration that threatened to crush her spirit—yet she continues to write.

BREAKING BARRIERS (1980–1989)

1980

- *Wild Seed*, both prequel and fourth entry in the Patternist series, a centuries-spanning tale exploring immortality, power, and gender through African and American history.

- Her essay “The Lost Races of Science Fiction” boldly challenges the field’s entrenched racism, establishing her as not just a creative force but a crucial voice for change.
- Recognition begins to come her way with the Creative Arts Achievement Award from the Los Angeles YWCA.
- WisCon, the feminist science fiction convention, honors her as guest of honor—one of the first acknowledgments of her groundbreaking work at the intersection of race, gender, and science fiction.

1981

- Though publishers reject both *Blindsight* and *Clay’s Ark*, Octavia perseveres—a stubborn persistence that would serve her throughout her career.
- Is approached to edit *Black Futures*, an anthology showcasing expansive possibilities for Black people in speculative fiction, underscoring her commitment to opening doors for others, though the project never materializes.

1982

- Travels to the Soviet Union and Finland with a delegation of science fiction writers, expanding her international perspective.

1983

- “Speech Sounds,” a story where a pandemic strips humanity of language abilities—a narrative that feels eerily prescient decades later—is published in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*.

1984

- Completes the Patternist series with *Clay’s Ark*.
- “Bloodchild,” her haunting tale of symbiosis, gender, and reproduction, appears in *Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*.
- Her literary star rises as “Speech Sounds” earns her first Hugo Award.

1985

- “Bloodchild” captures the science fiction community’s imagination, sweeping the awards season with Hugo, Locus, Nebula, and Science Fiction Chronicle honors.
- Ever committed to research, Octavia travels to Peru with a UCLA program, gathering experiences that will inform her Xenogenesis series.
- In a full-circle moment, she begins teaching at Clarion West, guiding emerging writers just as she was once guided.

1987

- *Dawn* introduces readers to the Xenogenesis series (later known as *Lilith's Brood*) and to the Oankali—aliens who have rescued humanity from extinction but demand a profound price.
- "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" in *Omni* further showcases her talent for exploring complex ethical questions about nature and nurture.

1988

- Continues the Xenogenesis narrative with *Adulthood Rites*.
- "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" garners the Science Fiction Chronicle Award for Best Novelette, with nominations for the Locus, Nebula, and Sturgeon awards following.
- Fulfilling a lifelong wish, Octavia uses her growing success to pay off her mother's house.

1989

- Completes the Xenogenesis trilogy with *Imago*.
- The deeply personal essay "Positive Obsession" (first published as "Birth of a Writer" in *Essence*) offers readers insight into the mind and heart behind the stories.
- Octavia begins mapping what will become the Parable series—her unflinching examination of societal collapse and spiritual rebirth.

VISIONARY VOICE (1990–2006)

1993

- *Parable of the Sower* stuns readers with its prescient vision of a 2020s America unraveling amid climate change, corporate greed, and societal inequality.
- "Furor Scribendi" offers fellow writers the hard-won wisdom of her journey.
- In "Free Libraries: Are They Becoming Extinct?" she advocates passionately for the institutions that nurtured her own creative development, such as her beloved Los Angeles Central Library.

1994

- The literary establishment takes notice as the *New York Times* names *Parable of the Sower* a Notable Book of the Year.

1995

- In a watershed moment for science fiction, Octavia becomes the first writer in the genre to receive the prestigious MacArthur Foundation

"Genius Grant"—a $295,000 award that acknowledges her extraordinary talent and vision.

1996

- *Bloodchild and Other Stories* gathers her powerful short fiction and essays into a single volume.
- The year brings heartbreaking loss with the death of her mother, Octavia Margaret Butler—her first reader, earliest supporter, and lifelong champion.
- Octavia transmutes her grief into art, channeling her pain into writing *Parable of the Talents*.

1997

- Kenyon College recognizes her contributions to American letters with an honorary doctorate.

1998

- *Parable of the Talents* continues the story begun in *Sower*.
- Her MIT keynote, "Devil Girl From Mars: Why I Write Science Fiction," offers insight into her creative philosophy and unwavering belief in the power of speculative fiction to change minds and hearts.

1999

- *Parable of the Talents* earns the prestigious Nebula Award for Best Novel.
- After a lifetime in Pasadena, Octavia embarks on a new chapter, relocating to Seattle, Washington—a bold move for someone who describes herself as a "hermit."

2000

- The PEN American Center honors her life's work with its Lifetime Achievement Award in Writing.
- Publishes the essay "Brave New Worlds: A Few Rules for Predicting the Future" in *Essence* shares her insights on the speculative fiction craft.
- Her Xenogenesis trilogy is repackaged as *Lilith's Brood*.

2001

- "A World Without Racism," written for National Public Radio, demonstrates her continued engagement with society's most pressing issues.

2002

- Autobiographical essay "Eye Witness" in *O: The Oprah Magazine* offers readers a glimpse into her personal journey.

2003

- The short stories “Amnesty” and “The Book of Martha” appear on scifi.com, exploring themes of connection and choice that echo throughout her body of work while also publishing on an emerging platform, the internet.

2005

- In what would be her final novel, *Fledgling* reimagines vampire mythology through her characteristic lens of genetics, symbiosis, and community.
- An expanded edition of *Bloodchild and Other Stories* brings together more of her short fiction.

2006

- On February 24, the literary world loses one of its most profound and original voices when Octavia E. Butler dies at age fifty-eight after a fall outside her Seattle home.

LIVING LEGACY (2007–PRESENT)

2007

- *Seed to Harvest* gathers the Patternist novels (minus *Survivor*) into a single volume, preserving her early vision for new generations.

2010

- The Science Fiction Hall of Fame inducts Octavia, acknowledging her transformative impact on the genre.

2014

- *Unexpected Stories* brings previously unpublished work to eager readers.

2018

- Graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* published.

2019

- The “Octavia Lab” makerspace opens at the Los Angeles Public Library, honoring her love of libraries and commitment to creativity.

2021

- The National Women’s Hall of Fame recognizes her enduring influence.
- In a tribute that would likely have delighted the space enthusiast, NASA names the Mars landing site of the Perseverance rover the “Octavia E. Butler Landing.”
- Graphic novel adaption of *Parable of the Sower* published.

2022

- *Kindred* reaches new audiences through a television adaptation.
- Her middle school alma mater is renamed Octavia E. Butler Magnet School, inspiring new generations to dream and create.

2025

- Graphic novel adaption of *Parable of the Talents* published.

Author's Note

This is a story of Octavia E. Butler, not *the* story. No biography can claim to capture the complete essence of a life so richly lived, especially one as multifaceted and boundary breaking as Octavia's. As a pioneering Black woman in science fiction, she carved out space where none existed before, creating worlds that continue to resonate with startling relevance decades later. What follows is my interpretation based on available evidence, informed by deep respect for my subject and a commitment to historical honesty.

I first encountered *Parable of the Sower* as a teenager in the 1990s. Octavia's work was prescient then and seems downright prophetic today. But she wasn't a prophet, not in the usual sense of the word, but an ardent surveyor of history and a deeply thoughtful intellectual who believed that her writing could positively change the course of history. This conviction—that imagination coupled with careful observation and steadfast action and collaboration could help shape our collective future—lies at the heart of why her work matters so profoundly.

Positive Obsession represents years of research drawing upon personal correspondence, interviews, unpublished manuscripts, and extensive archival materials. It builds upon the important scholarly and creative foundations laid by Moya Bailey, adrienne maree brown, Gerry Canavan, Lynell George, Ayana Jamieson, and Ibi Zoboi, among many others, while seeking to illuminate previously unexplored connections between Butler's personal experiences and her literary innovations. My goal is that this book will not only join the pantheon of writings about her life and work but that it will also inspire more readers to learn, read, and write about Octavia's work, life, and legacy.

In writing this biography, I sought to illuminate not just the literary achievements but the complex humanity of Octavia E. Butler. My aim has been to present this remarkable writer with all her brilliance, contradictions, vulnerabilities, and enduring impact on our literary landscape. I have tried

to understand the forces that shaped her vision and voice—the personal struggles, historical context, and creative obsessions that fueled such extraordinary work.

My hope is that *Positive Obsession* invites readers to approach Butler's work with fresh eyes, seeing within her texts the imprint of the remarkable person who created them—and perhaps, in doing so, recognize the power of their own positive obsessions to reshape our world.

Introduction

So Be It, See to It

Octavia E. Butler came into my life at the exact moment when I needed her. It was the summer of 1996. I was fifteen—shy, awkward, and nerdy—and trying to figure out who I was. I knew I was the daughter of a single mother, a Jamaican immigrant. I knew I was smart; I was a student in the International Baccalaureate program at my magnet high school. But I felt the weight of all that I was not. I wasn't middle class, or popular, or pretty. I was an accidental loner who spent her Saturdays taking two or three buses to find a well-stocked library.

One Saturday, I was browsing the stacks in the science fiction section at the Lauderdale Lakes Branch Library when something caught my eye. It was the picture of a Black woman. Her eyes were closed, and she had a tiny globe suspended between her upturned hands.[1] I was immediately enthralled and grabbed the book. It was called *Parable of the Sower* by an author I'd never heard of—Octavia E. Butler. The book was about a Black girl, a teenager, who lived in the near future apocalypse of 2024, whose ideas might just change the world. I was floored. I looked around, wondering whether I was being pranked, and then I went to the front desk to check it out. It was exactly what I was looking for and exactly what I needed. That day I checked out *Parable of the Sower* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, completely unaware of how both books would change my life.[2] I packed the two books, plus a bunch of random paperbacks, into my suitcase for my summer trip.

That year I spent part of my summer at my aunt's house in the hamlet of Old Harbour, less than forty miles from Kingston, Jamaica. South Florida isn't that far from Jamaica, but that summer it felt a world away in a few ways. Back home my mom and I lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a

building with a little courtyard. We were flanked by huge apartment buildings and squat duplexes. Ceremonial palm trees dotted my street, and the largest animals I routinely saw were raccoons and the occasional wild ducks that roamed my neighborhood. For me, the most dangerous creatures were the grown men who lurked near bus stops and just outside school who were all too eager to trap a naïve young woman with the street life or a baby. So, I spent my time with my head down, doing my best to get good grades and achieve my biggest dream: to leave Florida behind for a place where ivy grew on the buildings. I was in a tender space, not quite grown but not a kid anymore either.

Even though I had spent summers in Jamaica before, that year I felt particularly out of my element with my family in rural Jamaica. The novelty of my Americanness was only a dim patina for my much cooler teen cousins. After a day or two they ditched me to chill with their friends, while I sat transfixed on my aunt's veranda reading about Lauren Olamina and Earthseed. My aunt had a large farm. Cows greeted me at the gate. Bullfrogs the size of my hand croaked and jumped in gullies that overflowed after the summer rains. Goats nibbled at the guinep tree at the side of the house. Farm dogs and cats prowled at the back door of the kitchen waiting for their scraps. In the distance, the Blue Mountains towered overhead. At night, it got so dark it was easy to believe we were the only people on Earth.

Looking back, it was the perfect time and place to receive the message of Earthseed.

God is Change.

Everything you touch you change.

Like Lauren I was raised in the church, but I was also struggling with its conflicting messages. I felt stymied by all the rules, the hypocrisy, and the lack of grace. Earthseed's message was frankly refreshing. I had begun to question the notion that God was either a jealous, angry man in the clouds prone to fits of smiting or a benevolent deity that somehow still allowed terrible things to happen. The idea that the only constant is change and that we humans—even working-class Black girls with big ideas—have the power to truly shape our world for the better, or worse, was thrilling.

I encountered *Parable of the Sower* at a time when I wasn't sure that my Black girl self mattered much, and here was a story of a Black girl with the power and knowledge to change the world. She was smart and brave and

invited others to be more kind and more empathetic. At the same time, I was clear about the cautionary tale that Octavia Butler was spinning. I'd grown up during the waning years of the Cold War and in the shadow of the Gulf War. I'd also grown up with the daily warning that the days were being shortened for the elect's sake and that Jesus could return at any time. I wondered what life would look like in 2020 or 2040. Would Octavia's warnings about climate change and fascism come to pass? Lauren's musings and experiences set thoughts in motion for me that I grapple with to this day.

I was in college the next time I encountered Octavia's work. It was the year 2000 and I was a sophomore in a course called Slavery and the Literary Imagination. We read *Wild Seed* and my mind just opened up. I found the book so wonderful and unapologetically weird. While *Parable of the Sower* was straightforward apocalyptic fiction, *Wild Seed* had so many different speculative elements—Black immortals! shape-shifting! dolphin sex! It was strange and I loved it. I was also taken with how, like *Parable of the Sower*, *Wild Seed* features an intelligent and resourceful Black woman put in impossible circumstances who makes a way. I so admire Anyanwu's fierce determination to be free, and *Wild Seed* remains my favorite Butler novel to this day.

I'd like to say that I read Octavia early on and took the lessons to heart right away, but that would be only partially true. I went on to pursue a PhD in English and studied Black feminism, focusing on writers such as Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Paule Marshall. I read other Butler novels, waiting with bated breath for her next book, but I kept certain parts of my life compartmentalized. Truthfully, although I spent my free time reading about climate change, fascism, and the apocalypse, I wasn't sure that I had much to say about it. I wasn't a sociologist, a scientist, or a medical doctor. Plus, science fiction was for fun; it wasn't serious, right? Then Octavia died suddenly in 2006. The news of her death was gutting. She was only fifty-eight years old and had just published the novel *Fledgling* after struggling to continue the Parable series. She had so much more to give and to receive. On a purely selfish note, I had always wanted to meet her and tell her how much her work meant to me. Now I would never get the chance. I did feel heartened by the outpouring of love I saw from fellow fans and her peers. Octavia's work changed the world, and it and we are better for it.

Octavia wrote in a genre known for its prescience in science, technology, and social issues; nonetheless, her work stands apart from that of her notable peers. Certainly, as the first Black woman to consistently publish in the genre of science fiction and fantasy, she is a trailblazing pioneer who paved a path for dozens of writers to follow.[3] However, Octavia's life and work are radical in other ways. She wrote with an intersectional lens to convey how multiple systems of power, from patriarchy to white supremacy, have affected and can continue to affect humanity.[4] She routinely envisioned futures with Black women at the center, changing the course of human life and culture, modeling how those who are often dismissed and erased have the knowledge to shift the landscape of our world. She did this not by writing up magical Negro martyrs; instead, she created tough, flawed, intelligent, interesting characters who are well-rounded and complicated. Octavia wrote cautionary tales that warned us about succumbing to fascism, gender-based violence, and climate chaos while offering alternate paradigms—alternative religions, ways of forming family, and understandings of our relationships to ourselves. And she did all of this in prose that is at once incisive, exhilarating, and transformative.

Since Octavia's death, I've transformed my own career with her work as a North Star. From her writings, and the way they have inspired others, to her ephemera, Octavia has shaped my work not only as a queer Black feminist but also as a person with a vested interest in the liberation of Black people and in the fate of humanity. Following Octavia's lead, I decided that I didn't have to be a medical doctor or a scientist or an engineer to be able to speculate about where the world is heading. Octavia had already claimed that space and invites us as readers to step into and take up space as thinkers, writers, and doers. In that way, I'm just one of many readers, writers, and thinkers who are indebted to Octavia's prescient voice and prophetic vision.

Octavia E. Butler was born into a world that failed, and often still fails, to recognize Black women's genius. Despite this and the fact that she didn't have any direct models for the life she wanted to lead, she forged ahead as a writer, teacher, and mentor. When she died suddenly in 2006, the literary world mourned the passing of a creative giant who left the world too soon. Yet despite dying in her prime like so many other Black women writers, such as Audre Lorde (1934–1992), Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995), and

June Jordan (1936–2002), Octavia left the world with a treasure trove of writings and a rich legacy.

Her story is one of determination matched with brilliance. Octavia frequently told aspiring writers to "forget inspiration" and focus on habit. She doggedly pursued her goals despite the obstacles, variously struggling with poverty, self-doubt, writer's block, and depression. She wrote in her journal that she would be a bestselling writer, that she would buy both her mother and herself a home, and that she would sponsor underserved Black writers with scholarships to the Clarion writers' workshop that had helped spur her own career. She encouraged herself and declared "So be it!" and charged herself to "See to it!"—launching herself into uncharted territory and creating the life she dreamed of. She became a bestselling author. She created acclaimed works that reflect her genius. She inspired generations of writers. She took care of her mama. She moved to her dream city of Seattle and bought herself a home there. She did all that she had imagined and more. Yet Octavia's story is still too far in the shadows of literary and cultural history. A fuller story deserves to be told.

Positive Obsession: The Life and Times of Octavia E. Butler tells Octavia's story as one of the foremost intellectuals of the twentieth century. This biography foregrounds Octavia's passions and pursuits and how she used her writing to invite readers to reimagine our own world. Octavia once wrote:

> *To be remembered*
> *Long after your death*
> *Is, inevitably,*
> *To be lied about.*[5]

Rather than bridling my tongue, this warning reminds me to sharpen this project's focus. *Positive Obsession* is but one way to think about Octavia's fascinating life.

To that end, *Positive Obsession* is a cultural biography because as much as it tells Octavia's story, it is also firmly situated within the cultural, social, and historical context that shaped her life. Indeed, there would be no way to tell Octavia Butler's life story without considering the civil rights movement, Black Power, Black feminism, Reaganomics, and a host of other issues because these matters profoundly influenced her personal, creative, and intellectual trajectory. Take for instance Butler's path to writing her

most read work, *Kindred*. The novel was largely inspired by a conversation Octavia had with a friend. They were both attending college at the height of the Black Power movement and were deeply invested in their communities taking control of their political destiny. In a frank moment her friend revealed he hated being related to "weak" people, lamenting the choices he saw his ancestors make in the wake of slavery and segregation. Butler rejected this thinking outright. She wondered how she could make someone like her friend—a person who was well-versed in Black history but lacked empathy for the plight of his Black ancestors—really understand what it meant to be enslaved. In that moment the seeds for what would become *Kindred* were born. The larger cultural context is key to understanding the story of *Kindred* and ultimately of Octavia.

Positive Obsession both charts the life of one of the greatest writers of all time and situates her alongside the key historical and social moments that shaped her work. Octavia's writing imagines counterpasts and counterfutures for Black people while telling the story of the rise and fall of the American project, charting the expansion of global imperialism, and forewarning the end of humanity as we know it because of climate change. *Positive Obsession* thus breaks down significant moments in US politics and history that inform Octavia's life and work. Octavia was a baby boomer who grew up in the shadow of World War II. She came of age during the Kennedy years and experienced her political awakening during the civil rights and Black Power movements. During the Reagan Administration, Octavia was appalled by the steady swing to the right in US politics, critiques that show up in her most popular apocalyptic fiction. In the last years of her life, the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the Iraq War shook her faith and furthered her fears about fascism's rise in the West. *Positive Obsession* pays close attention to Octavia's deep connection to the politics of her day.

This biography also situates Octavia as a midwife of contemporary Black feminism alongside other Black women writers such as Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, who also wrote about patriarchy, white supremacy, and other structures of power in dynamic ways that centered Black women's experiences and intellectual contributions. Like her peers, Octavia is the creative ancestor to contemporary artists, writers, and critics such as adrienne maree brown, N. K. Jemisin, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Nisi Shawl, Toshi Reagon, and Rivers Solomon, among many others. From the

1970s to the 2000s, Octavia wrote about social movements and freedom struggles in works like *Wild Seed*, *Dawn*, and *Parable of the Sower*. Her work anticipated and inspired movements like Black Lives Matter and the fight for climate justice.

I was inspired to call this book *Positive Obsession* because Octavia called her deep, unmitigated desire to write and share her work a "positive obsession." In 1989 she wrote about her early writing aspirations in *Essence* magazine:

> I didn't talk much about my doubts. I wasn't fishing for hasty reassurances. But I did a lot of thinking—the same things over and over. Who was I anyway? Why should anyone pay attention to what I had to say? Did I have anything to say? I was writing science fiction and fantasy, for God's sake. At that time nearly all professional science-fiction writers were white men. As much as I loved science fiction and fantasy, what was I doing? Well, whatever it was, I couldn't stop. Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all.[6]

I am always struck by Octavia describing her life's work as an obsession, albeit a positive one. This was not hyperbole for her. She shaped her life around her need to read, write, and think. She rejected normative pressures to live and work in ways that made her legible to society. She did not become a secretary, as her mother had hoped. She did not get married or have children, as society expects women to do. Instead, she poured her life into her work because it was what fueled her to get up every day. I can relate to Octavia's stubborn rejection of social expectations, especially as I understand all too well the sacrifices such a life often entails, particularly for Black women. In the end, her "dangerous" desire to write manifested itself as the Patternist series, *Kindred*, and many other works. Sparked by afternoons of watching television as a kid and by the offhand remark of a friend, Octavia found that the obsession became a vocation and a higher calling, and an invitation for readers to embrace their own positive obsessions.

Positive Obsession highlights how, with Octavia's deft pen, the devolution of the American empire is an apt metaphor for the best and worst of humanity: the innovation and ingenuity, the naked greed and ambition, the capacious empathy and propensity for violence and hierarchy are all laid bare within the pages of her stories. Those stories trace the trajectory of the American empire—the nation's transformation from a provincial backwater to a capitalist juggernaut (made possible by chattel

slavery) to a bloated imperialist superpower on the verge of implosion. From her first book, *Patternmaster,* to her last, *Fledgling*, Octavia portrays societies hobbled from within by their rigidity, infighting, and myopic vision. The conflicts in her novels and short stories mirror the most salient global events, from the rise of chattel slavery through the chaotic realities of the turn of the twenty-first century—world wars, the hoarding of resources, racial terror, gender-based violence, and climate chaos.

Octavia not only warns of the fall of the West as we know it but also elevates the stories and concerns of Black women while doing so. *Positive Obsession* excavates and celebrates how Octavia told Black women's stories. She crafted Black female heroines who had to live in turbulent environments. Whether it is Anyanwu battling Doro for her independence in the colonial era, Dana negotiating survival among her antebellum ancestors while traveling through time, Lauren navigating a (now contemporary) wasteland with a despotic white supremacist president, or Lilith trying to survive and outwit imperialist aliens and self-destructive humans in the far-off future, Octavia penned cautionary tales of Black women trying to save themselves and the world. These women are neither mammies nor martyrs, however. Instead, these characters' stories both advocate for multiracial coalitions and warn Black women not to sacrifice themselves for the limited vision of a white supremacist patriarchal future. They are interested in living and thriving. So was Octavia. Even in her darkest tales, she almost always ensured that joy was present and by doing so emphasized that Black women deserved pleasure, happiness, and respect. Octavia's Black women–centered narratives tell the story of humanity's hubris and also hint at what could be our salvation: a rejection of hierarchy in favor of mutuality and community, with the most marginalized people centered. She invites us to trust Black women's visions of a better tomorrow.

The chapters that follow trace the trajectory of Octavia's life and work —from her family roots in Louisiana to her childhood in Southern California; her complex inner life; the slow rise of her career; her peers, mentors, inspirations, and students; her career triumphs; and her untimely death. Octavia's story is a unique experience of individual genius, the story of America and the fate of humanity. Octavia once wrote in her journal, "There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns."[7] And she did indeed chart a path that inspired a literary revolution.

Chapter 1

The Pattern Master

The bus rumbled to a stop in front of a small group of people. The neighborhood was still quiet, just waking up really, but people dressed in the uniforms of chambermaids, school lunch ladies, and construction workers had been waiting at the bus stop since before daybreak. Octavia climbed in along with the others, finding a seat not too far from an exit. Once the last passenger scrambled on, the bus lurched forward and the streets of her Pasadena neighborhood began to roll by. Modest houses and apartments made way for humble storefronts and mom-and-pop shops, and then industrial buildings came into view. When Octavia spied the warehouse up ahead, she pulled the cord to alert the driver and the bus came rolling to a stop on a street lined with nondescript factories.

Octavia exited the bus and made her way to her latest job. This week the temp agency had sent her to a mailing house. Usually, she preferred solitary jobs like cleaning office buildings where she could be grumpy all by herself and just get her work done and go home, rather than the grueling monotony of standing for hours with a hundred other people punching holes in cardstock or stuffing envelopes until her shoulders felt like they weren't a part of her body. Her previous shift was a real drag. She had run out of NoDoz so she had to sing to herself for the last couple of hours just to stay awake. Octavia knew she didn't exactly have a melodious singing voice, so she ignored the dirty looks her supervisor threw her way until the woman strode up to her.

"What are you doing? *Talking* to yourself?"

Octavia shrugged. "Just trying to stay awake."

The woman rolled her eyes. "Be quiet and pay attention," she warned before reprimanding another worker.

Octavia sighed. It was a crappy job, but hey, it paid the bills. And it gave her time and space to do what she really wanted to do. Needed to do.

This day she made her way inside, clocked in, and set up at her station. The repetitive motion of stamping envelopes was tiresome, but she occupied herself by glancing longingly at the clock and humming to herself, avoiding eye contact with her hovering supervisor.

Finally, the clock struck twelve. Lunchtime. Octavia had a few minutes to scarf down some grub. But instead of heading to the cafeteria and spending money she didn't have, she grabbed her brown bag lunch, went outside, and found a quiet spot. She pulled out her notebook and a pen, making notes about a story idea that she had. Her brow was furrowed in concentration, not paying attention to her co-workers sharing cigarettes or sitting and laughing together. Octavia didn't really have time for or interest in befriending any of the people at these temp jobs. A half hour spent teasing out the ideas of her latest story was a half hour well spent. But a half hour goes by quickly. Soon she was back on the line, stamping out envelopes, surrounded by a cacophony of voices and the din of loud, whirring machines.

When Octavia got back to the home she shared with her mother, she headed for the shower. She stepped under the steaming hot water and let it wash away the hours she had spent hunched over dull work. Then she stepped out of the bathroom and into her bedroom. The bed was a lover calling Octavia's name, but she drew her eyes away. There would be time for sleep later. She made her way to the kitchen for a snack. She was finishing up the last bits of her bran muffin as she approached the messiest corner of her makeshift office.[1] The wall above her desk was papered with maps, character lists, and inspirational quotes. To the untrained eye, the desk was a disaster, littered with journals, notes, rejection letters, and books, bought and borrowed. A pile of books-on-tape from the library threatened to topple over. A Remington typewriter sat amid all this; another one sat underneath the desk on the floor. That one didn't really work, but when work was scarce, she could pawn it to buy groceries or make up the rent until she got paid.[2]

But the state of neither her typewriter nor her bank account was on Octavia's mind this evening. She was thinking about a woman from work. Something was wrong with her. She stood at her station having loud conversations with someone who was not there, but she wasn't trying to

pass the time or sing herself out of boredom. Rumor around the factory was that she was crazy. She worked all day at the mailing house and when she got home from work, she had to take care of her sick mother. All she did was work and take care of people; she was losing her grip on reality. Octavia felt bad for her; she knew all too well that a life of drudgery could crush the soul.

So, Octavia sat at the typewriter and put in a fresh sheet of paper. She looked at her notes from days before and what she had scribbled down at lunch. She was writing a story about a young woman who worked long hours in a factory. One night her ex shows up and strikes up a conversation with her, but the thing is, *he's not really there*. He's just a figment of her imagination. It's the afternoon, but the only sounds are the steady *click-clack* of her typewriter's keys. Hours pass as Octavia spins the story of a woman brought to the brink of insanity. She doesn't realize how late it is until the sun sets and the sound of her typing is drowned out by the sounds of her neighbors making dinner and settling down for the evening. Octavia eats dinner with her mother and they talk about their days. Later she'll listen to a book-on-tape about telekinesis, take more notes, journal about her day, talk to her cousin on the phone, and maybe do a bit more writing before sinking into bed. Hours before the sun is a bright orange orb in the sky, she'll be up and back at the desk for a few more hours before getting back on the bus to the mailing house factory for her next shift.

"Crossover," the story inspired by Octavia's time working in factories, would be finished in 1970 while she attended the Clarion writers' workshop in Pennsylvania, where she had the opportunity to work with writers such as Robin Scott Wilson and Harlan Ellison. At age twenty-three, she hoped the workshop would be her big break that would start her career in earnest. Instead, she faced more years of precarity and rejection letters, years when she had to pawn her broken typewriter and labor in factories and laundries to pay her bills. But even while Octavia toiled in anonymity, she was fueled by her positive obsession to write probing, harrowing tales of humanity's hubris and hope. Little in her life up till then signaled that she would become a world-renowned writer. She was a working-class Black woman who didn't have a lot of connections or traditional support. She wrote science fiction and fantasy, genres bogarted by white men and belittled by literary critics. Despite these obstacles, Octavia's dedication to her craft persisted amid the financial strain, the personal disappointment, and hard

times. She wrote almost every day—even when she was tired, hungry, or broke. Even when magazines and publishers dismissed her, jerked her around, and underpaid her, she kept at her work. Eventually, the world got to see her gifts and recognize not only her hard work but her talent and brilliance.

Octavia was many things. A devoted daughter, a wry observer of humankind, a feminist with strong politics, a loner. But above all her many identities, she was a writer. She once wrote of herself, "I am a fifty-three-year-old writer who can remember being a ten-year-old writer and who expects someday to be an eighty-year-old-writer."[3] Although she did not live to be an eighty-year-old writer, her early writing shaped the work she would produce for decades to come.

A STAR'S BEGINNING

Octavia Estelle Butler was born June 22, 1947, to Octavia Margaret Guy Butler and Laurice James Butler in Pasadena, California. Her parents had been married for sixteen years when she was born.[4] Throughout her life her family called her "Estelle," but her mother sometimes called her "Junie." Octavia Estelle went by Estelle at home and school until her early adulthood.[5] Octavia Margaret was a domestic worker, and Laurice, a veteran of World War II, shined shoes. The Butler home knew tragedy, and the air in the house was heavy with loss, as four infant brothers died before Estelle's birth. Then her father Laurice died when she was a young girl.[6] As an adult Octavia often wondered what life would have been like if her father had survived or if she had had a slew of older brothers to hang out with.[7] For much of Estelle's life, the widowed Octavia Margaret raised her only child with the help of her mother and extended family.

Some of Estelle's earliest memories were of the home where she and her mother lived after her father's death. It was replete with "big rooms, broad halls, high ceiling[s] and wide stairways" and Baba, the cocker spaniel.[8] But neither the house nor Baba belonged to Octavia Margaret. After becoming a widow, she moved with little Estelle into the home of and worked as a live-in maid for a white family. Two of Octavia Margaret's brothers were the gardener and handyman and her mother was the cook.

Young Estelle was born into a close-knit working-class family. They did not have much money, but they pitched in to support one another. For a

short time in her childhood, Estelle lived on her grandmother Stella Guy's farm in Victorville, built by her two uncles, at the edge of the Mojave Desert. Her grandmother was an indomitable woman whom Octavia Estelle deeply admired.[9] Married at age twelve or thirteen, she had been a young widow with seven children when she made the trek from Louisiana to California in the 1930s.[10] In Victorville Estelle's grandmother raised chickens and sold eggs, kept a cow for milk, and cultivated all the fruits and vegetables the family needed. Her time on her grandmother's farm shaped her in indelible ways. Estelle would look out on the vast expanse of land to the east of her grandmother's farm and imagine she could see the edge of the world.[11] This poetic imagining of her environment was no small indication of the brightness of her future artistic vision. The fire that consumed her grandmother's farm in 1951 would also loom large in her imagination, most pointedly in the description of fires in *Parable of the Sower*.[12]

Imagination and reading were a big part of Estelle's life from the beginning. Her mother and grandmother taught her how to read before she entered school, and though she was a slow reader, she gravitated toward it and was persistent. Later she self-diagnosed herself with dyslexia and decided she was more of an auditory learner, someone with a "radio imagination."[13] She especially loved when her mother read to her at night. After working hard all day, Octavia Margaret always made sure to read to Estelle right before bed. It was like "theater for the mind," Octavia Estelle recalled years later about those cherished memories of being tucked in bed, her mother next to her murmuring tales as she fell asleep.[14]

School was a mixed bag for Estelle. Although she was curious and intelligent, her attention sometimes wandered, and completing assignments was often a challenge. While a few of her early teachers recognized her talent for reading and writing, others classified her as lazy and undisciplined. For example, her third-grade teacher admonished her for being slow to complete her work and charged her with cultivating self-discipline. She was also frequently chastised for daydreaming in class. When she submitted science fiction short stories for writing assignments, the responses ranged from indifference to outright hostility. Estelle internalized these criticisms and throughout her life struggled with what she perceived as her low productivity. She was extremely hard on herself. It wasn't that she was undisciplined, lazy, or unproductive; instead, Estelle

was what today we would call neurodivergent.[15] She processed information and completed tasks in a way that made little sense to some of her teachers. But she was neither uninterested nor disrespectful. She was simply different. Over time she was able to develop hacks that allowed her to function in a world that prizes neurotypical minds, but this was a battle for much of her life.

Fiction was a refuge for Estelle, who was sometimes lonely and lacked the company of other children. Naturally timid, young Estelle often found social interactions baffling and later recalled, "Among my earliest memories is not knowing how to respond. Uncertainty. Fear."[16] She felt like an "out kid" who couldn't relate to her peers, one who learned at four years old to entertain herself.[17] Besides reading, Estelle also made stories up as a game with herself; stories were her earliest companions, her first friends. Once she learned to write, stories were among her first scribbles when she was four years old. Whether Estelle was in school or in the neighborhood, she did not always join in the games that children play. When the sounds of children laughing in the distance caught Estelle's ear, she might feel a sharp pang of longing, but she learned not to rush to join the other children. She knew all too well how vicious kids could be. Estelle had a few friends from church and school but was a frequent target for taunts and bullies. She was shy and awkward and spoke with a lisp. Once she shot up past her peers and towered over them in height, the physical threats dried up, but violence was always a possibility. She did not want to hurt anyone but was ready to defend herself. Besides, the cruel glances and jeers never ceased. So, Estelle learned to entertain herself. Hers was a childhood of many solitary pursuits: daydreaming, reading, watching TV, and scribbling down stories in her notebooks. Her first stories were about horses and dogs, like her 1958 short story "Silver Star."[18] Eventually she moved on to Western tales about cowboys, lawmen, and bandits.

When Estelle asked her mother for a library card, Octavia Margaret's face lit up with pleasure, and she got one for her daughter that day. Estelle was already reading comic books and whatever books her mother brought home from cleaning houses, but a library card gave her more choices. At first, she loved going to the Peter Pan Room, the kids' section of the Pasadena library. Octavia Margaret belonged to a charismatic Baptist church that abhorred "worldly" entertainment like playing cards, listening to secular music, or going to the movies.[19] So Estelle would read the books

that were adapted into film, like Felix Salten's *Bambi, a Life in the Woods*. She also devoured fairy tales and stories about horses, like William Farley's *The Black Stallion*. Eventually though, like Wendy Darling, Estelle wanted to leave Peter Pan and his tales behind. Those stories just could not hold her precocious, wide-ranging interests. Didn't the librarians understand that she was too old for such juvenile books? She did not want to read any more kiddie tales.

Estelle was fourteen when she finally escaped the inanity of the Peter Pan Room. By then she had already started reading science fiction magazines that she snagged at her local grocery store like *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic*, *Galaxy Science Fiction*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Expanded access to the library meant Estelle got the chance to explore her tastes in science fiction and fantasy. She read all the "golden age" science fiction classics, from Robert Heinlein to John Brunner to Theodore Sturgeon, and later fell in love with Frank Herbert's *Dune*, but works by women writers particularly resonated with her. She would read all of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover series. Ursula K. Le Guin's work was another favorite. But young Estelle was a zealot for Zenna Henderson—so much so she would buy cheap copies of *Pilgrimage* from the Salvation Army and pass them out to people because she wanted someone to discuss the book with. Estelle found a kindred spirit in Henderson's writing. *Pilgrimage* is part of a series of novels about a group of telepathic humanoid aliens and featured strong women characters. By the time Estelle read this story she had already been working on proto-versions of the Patternist series, which also centers on telepathic humans and their struggles.

Although Estelle's family encouraged her voracious reading, they generally viewed her writing with bemused skepticism. "Negroes can't be writers," her aunt had told her.[20] It wasn't a malicious statement. It was a gentle but firm admonition to get her niece's head out of the clouds, to save her from further disappointment and inevitable embarrassment. A young Black girl growing up in 1950s America had to have realistic expectations. Estelle's aunt was a nurse and advised her to get a job as a civil servant, something with good benefits and a pension.[21] Wanting to be a secretary, nurse, or even a teacher was one thing—but a writer? No ma'am. What did it matter that writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Ida B. Wells had already gained success and critical acclaim? That was not the

reality of Estelle's world. Black writers were rarely on the curricula of her schools or even most schools in midcentury America. And when she did read the occasional book by a Black author, James Baldwin for instance, she did so on her own, and even then they were always written by men.[22] Although her family cast wary glances at Estelle's scribblings, they let her be. Better to be writing stories than getting into trouble. In fact, her family seemed to think that the incessant reading and writing were less worrying than Estelle's marked timidity and deep introversion. How would a girl seemingly scared of her own shadow be able to make it in the world?

Still, Estelle's mother supported her in various ways. Octavia Margaret bought Estelle her first typewriter when she was just ten years old, the same Remington typewriter she would write her earliest stories and novels on. Though she didn't have much extra, Octavia Margaret gave Estelle money from time to time to buy her own books (her first purchases were a book about outer space and another about horses). Estelle began sending out her stories when she was teenager. And when Estelle in her naïveté got involved with an unscrupulous agent who charged her a reading fee in 1960, Octavia Margaret scrounged up the payment of sixty-one dollars—more than the equivalent of a month's rent.[23] Money was tight. Estelle's mother did not have much to spare, but she nevertheless found the means to support her only child's dreams. Octavia Margaret was clear that she wanted her daughter to have more educational opportunities than she herself had ever had. That was one reason the family had packed up and left Louisiana to move out West in the first place.

Octavia Margaret's experience with education had shaped her in profound ways. She was born in 1914 in northern Louisiana, a world away from Estelle's childhood in integrated Pasadena. Like Estelle, she was tall for her age and when she first arrived at school Octavia Margaret was thrust into third grade instead of kindergarten. Every day she sat in class bewildered, staring at concepts on the blackboard that she had never seen before. Fear and shame were her constant companions.[24] And even though Octavia Margaret carried on and learned how to read and write before leaving school for good after three years of schooling, Estelle perceived that her mother never saw herself as a smart person even though her mother had taught Estelle everything she knew.[25] Octavia Margaret was convinced of her own lack of intelligence because of that confusing and harrowing time in school. And although that early school experience was traumatic for

Octavia Margaret, it didn't have to be for Estelle. No, Estelle would attend integrated schools in California and be encouraged in her studies. Maybe one day, Octavia Margaret dreamed, Estelle would get a good job, maybe even as a secretary.[26] She would be somebody.

But school *was* complicated and even traumatic at times for Estelle, and the last thing she wanted to be was a secretary. Her mama might have thought it was glamorous to wear smart dresses and heels to work instead of a maid's uniform, but Estelle was unimpressed by her mother's pink-collar aspirations. She even hated whenever she saw secretaries on TV shows following orders and running after their bosses. Wasn't being a secretary just a slightly fancier version of being a servant, she wondered?[27] She thought that kind of work was humiliating, sort of like her mama's work cleaning white people's houses. Meanwhile, Octavia Margaret was sure her daughter would one day put away childish things and learn that being a secretary was a fine job. This was just intergenerational miscommunication, she thought. But Estelle would stick to her promise of not having a traditional career. Although they disagreed about Estelle's future career, Octavia Margaret, along with her own mother, was the number one encourager of her daughter's burgeoning life of the mind. Octavia Estelle called her mother and grandmother her heroes and always cited them as the inspiration for the work she did.[28]

THE BIRTH OF A WRITER

It was Octavia Margaret who gave her daughter the spark to even consider a writing career. She saw her quiet, bookish ten-year-old daughter writing, saw the delight on her face as she created, and asked her what she was doing. Estelle replied that she was writing a story. Her mother remarked, almost offhandedly, "Well, maybe you'll be a writer." That small word of encouragement set Estelle on a path that would change her life. Later she recalled, "[at] that point I had not realized that there were such things as writers and it had not occurred to me how books and stories got written somehow. And in that little sentence, I mean, it was like in the cartoons where the light goes on over the guy's head. I suddenly realized that yes, there are such things as writers. People can be writers. I want to be a writer."[29]

Estelle had been scribbling down stories almost as early as she could write, but her destiny to become a science fiction writer was cemented on a seemingly ordinary day in Southern California. As a little girl, Estelle was obsessed with horses and wrote many of her earliest stories about them. On that day she was writing another story about horses in her big pink notebook when she decided to turn on the television as she wrote. Even though the strict Baptist sect Estelle belonged to forbade going to the movies, her mama let her watch movies on TV at home—a loophole that allowed her a window into more secular entertainment. There were only a few channels, so there weren't a whole lot of options. Twelve-year-old Estelle sat down in front of her family's black-and-white television and saw that *Devil Girl from Mars* was on again. She had watched it at least four times already, and honestly, the movie was pretty terrible, more suited to be background noise than anything else. Estelle was a fan of more sophisticated shows like *The Twilight Zone*, not this B movie selection. The costumes were as threadbare as the plot, and the acting was a complete mess. Yet for some reason, this time Estelle could not tear her eyes away from the movie. In the film, Earth's rocky next-door neighbor is in a bit of a crisis: After a literal battle of the sexes, Martian men are dying out, leaving the domineering and oversexed Martian women in a terrible state. They send one particularly bold Martian woman—the titular "devil girl"—down to Earth and beam up some Earthmen to satisfy their carnal and reproductive needs. Although the Martian envoy has superior technology, in the end, the human men outsmart the alien invader and save the Earth from sexual slavery.

Estelle cringed at the maudlin romances—How are they already in love? They just met!—and groaned at the raggedy special effects. The villain had a robot assistant that was clearly just a man in a suit. Plus, it was so obvious that the ray gun the Martian used did not destroy an actual truck, but just a miniature toy truck. Estelle rolled her eyes and thought, "Geez, I can write a better story than that." Then she thought, "Geez, *anybody* can write a better story than that . . . and somebody got *paid* for writing that awful story."[30] This last fact inspired her enough to turn off the television and start writing science fiction in earnest. The story she began when she was twelve years old was the beginning of her critically acclaimed Patternist series. A science fiction writer was born.

Although *Devil Girl from Mars* was typical of the silly, schlocky TV fare that Estelle watched on many afternoons during her childhood, this movie was more than entertainment for a bored, lonely girl-child. Even if the filmmakers hadn't planned it that way, *Devil Girl* was an education for a precocious young woman making sense of the world, identifying the patterns of behavior that reoccurred in society. On Estelle's television screen she saw men—white men—cowering in the face of an all-powerful female alien. Although the woman-alien's powers were trumped up to comedic effect, Estelle could not help but see that beneath its B-movie veneer, *Devil Girl from Mars* tapped into a looming anxiety that was palpable all around. Modern women, embodied as a ridiculous but scary Martian, were challenging the status quo and pushing back against the patriarchy, the poor men who must defeat the alien threat. Estelle may not have had the language to describe that moment, but she got the gist of it. The combination of *Devil Girl*'s ridiculousness and transparent angst provided a necessary spark that lit her imagination.

Things were changing, and people—some people at least—were scared. It was 1959, a time when movements in support of civil rights, women's liberation, and gay rights were slowly gaining mainstream attention, traction, and backlash. While the Korean War was a not-so-distant memory and the Cold War was already afoot, the United States would soon be reeling from the Vietnam War, sending tens of thousands of young men into battle and death. Estelle would grow up seeing a lot of powerful white men on her television screen telling people what to do. Men who invited Americans to ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. Men who proclaimed segregation today, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever. Men who implored the country to unite. Men who turned water hoses and German shepherds onto Black children who could have been her classmates. Like these other men, the white men in *Devil Girl from Mars* reflected the signs of the times.

Devil Girl from Mars was initially released in 1954, seven years after Estelle was born. This was the same year that the Supreme Court overruled the mandate of "separate but equal" through the ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*. Estelle was born into a world swirling with change, a theme that would become so pivotal to her creative work, particularly her Parable series. She learned early on, even before that fateful day in front of the television, that change was not only inevitable but was, in fact, life's only

constant. Estelle also perceived that those in power would stop at nothing to make things stay the same. She recognized this watching her widowed mother work as a domestic for affluent white families. Was segregation outlawed not only in California but also in the whole United States? Yes, but that didn't stop some employers from making her mother enter their homes through the back door. New laws also did not stop them from paying her mother mere pennies or insulting her as she cleaned their homes.

So, by the time Estelle watched *Devil Girl from Mars* on that fateful afternoon, she already knew about a world that was unequal and was afraid of those who lived on the margins. This was the pattern she pieced together from the world around her. It was these early experiences that made her ask questions about who had power and why. She became fascinated with how human beings—especially those who didn't have much power—could empower themselves and others and change the world.

From then on, Estelle earnestly concentrated on writing. She went to school and church like before, but she put even more time into reading and writing. With few friends and no one who shared her niche interests in science fiction and fantasy, Estelle immersed herself in the fantastical world she found in books and in her own writings. Some of her post–*Devil Girl* writings anticipate stories and characters in her Patternist series. Some of the stories featured mature themes like violence and sex. Estelle was test-driving topics that would come to dominate her adult work.[31]

Besides her frequent trips to the library, Estelle read and collected comic books, going into secondhand shops and scooping up cheap back issues. In fact, at one point, Octavia Margaret was worried that Estelle was too obsessed with comics and ripped all her comics in half.[32] But that did not stop her daughter's love of comics and reading or her desire to write. By the time Estelle was thirteen, she began sending her short stories out to magazines. Mr. Pfaff, her eighth-grade science teacher, even typed up one of her stories so she could send it out for publication.[33] Estelle worked with a singular determination that defied the lack of traditional support. When other teachers tried to steer her away from science fiction, she avoided their classes. When family members and friends told her to concentrate on other pursuits, she kept her writing to herself. She forged her own path.

Besides practicing writing, Estelle's teen years started her journey to becoming a polymath. At first, this was not a fully conscious desire. She had always been a curious girl who was interested in fields from history to

biology to psychology, but during this time she initiated her own more formal study of the world. The 1960 election of John F. Kennedy as president helped inspire this shift. Estelle was thirteen, and around this time she became what she called a "news junkie." She sat in front of the television taking in the news coverage of the election and found herself fascinated by Kennedy. Whenever he gave a speech, Estelle watched in awe—and confusion. Kennedy sounded like he was speaking a language she could only partially understand. She just could not keep up—probably because of her youth and neurodivergence. At first, she internalized this, echoing her mother's childhood distress and the negative feedback she herself had already experienced. Quite simply, Estelle felt stupid. Her diaries from this period were peppered with concern. Why couldn't she understand what was going on? She was a voracious reader. She wrote all the time. Why didn't Kennedy make sense to her? It was then she decided that her education was not sufficient. She began watching the news in earnest and paying attention to politics, beginning a lifelong relationship with the news and current events that would show up in her work.[34] And, perhaps most important, she began taking charge of her education. No longer a passive student, she became someone who observed the world incessantly and aggressively pursued knowledge, particularly outside of school and especially in the niche topics that interested her. This didn't mean Estelle always got good grades, but it did mean that she focused on learning even when she wasn't validated by others. This pivot would help fuel her intellectual pursuits and catalyze her life of the mind.

Other circumstances fueled Estelle's introspection. Throughout her adolescence, her life continued to revolve around the same narrow orbit of school, church, and home. Estelle's high school diary from 1963 reveals musings one could find in a typical teenager's diary.[35] She discussed who was and wasn't cute, covered conflicts with her friends, complained about homework, described drama at home, and mentioned the green-and-white patterned Easter dress her aunt Bee had bought for her. Sometimes she wrote in code or in Spanish to keep prying eyes from deciphering her innermost thoughts. Her teenage voice is at once wryly observant, mischievous, and cutting. After falling asleep reading *A Tale of Two Cities* for an English class, she wrote, "Good Grief, I hope no one ever looks at my work with the attitude I look at Charles Dickens's." As a teen, she was already working out the character of Doro, a prominent figure in her

Patternist novels, as well as reading and writing about telekinesis and psychic powers. All throughout her early journals are sprinkles of ideas she would later flesh out in her fiction. She swapped stories with fellow classmates who were also writers. Young Estelle's diary reflects a precocious intellectual mind at work, someone already thinking of herself as a writer. In another entry she wrote after church she declared there was "no message" in the sermon that day and that although the pastor remarked that God did not care about your denomination but only that you are born again, she wrote, "he may say that but half the people I know think their denomination and no other is right." She was able to identify the hypocrisy in what was said versus how church folk felt about their faith. She also mused that the closest thing to a utopia would be a socialist or communist society, although she did not think a utopia was possible because people "will not live together without taking advantage of each other if they possibly can. They will not stop considering themselves better because their skin is light." The roles of religion and hierarchy are some of the most salient themes in Estelle's writing, and they animated her thinking early on.

Her diary also revealed issues she would struggle with for much of her life. In an entry from April 4, 1963, fifteen-year-old Estelle recalled crying in Spanish class after having to give a presentation. She had a phobia of public speaking, one that she would take pains to get over as an adult. Speaking to people outside of her family, especially ones she did not know well, was harrowing for her, and it was sometimes difficult for her to connect with her classmates. Estelle wondered: "I don't know what to do about my personality (a fear of people and worms). I can't talk to people the way I want to. They nearly all sense a difference in me. The[y] talk to each other, then they talk to me. What's wrong?!!"[36] Throughout her life she noted in her diaries and journals how she struggled with decoding social cues and saying the right thing at the right time; high school was a particular minefield.

Estelle grew to be six feet tall when she was about twelve, towering over young men her age. This did not help her social life or her dating prospects. She was occasionally mistaken for her friends' mother, which did little for her self-esteem. Although she had crushes on boys, they were mostly unreciprocated. When guys did approach her, they sometimes mistook her for a boy or made fun of her appearance, which was both hurtful and confusing. Estelle's church outlawed things that most young

people enjoyed: “dancing was a sin, going to the movies was a sin, wearing makeup was a sin, wearing your dresses too short was a sin . . . just about everything that an adolescent would see as fun, especially the social behavior, was a sin.”[37] Still, she and her church friends would do things like roll up their dresses a bit in defiance of the rules. Estelle also noticed that her peers from church and her neighborhood rebelled against social expectations in striking ways. One ran off and got married; another had a baby while she was still in high school.[38] Although she was curious about boys, neither of those options appealed to Estelle. She wanted freedom and independence—not the responsibility of babies or a husband. She made writing her rebellion, the main refuge from the strictness of her upbringing. Besides, her height and androgyny meant that some of the heterosexual coupling that her friends fell into was not quite available to her. And while she would later admit to being curious about queer sexuality, that was not a path she was interested in pursuing as a teenager.[39] Years later she recalled, “My body really got in the way of any social life that I was likely to have had. But, on the other hand, it did push me more into writing because I was in the habit of thinking about things.”[40] In her fiction, such as *Survivor*, *Dawn*, and the Parable series, she would feature tall, androgynous Black women characters who are not only strong and resilient, but desired and desirable.

THINKING BIG

Octavia Estelle graduated from high school in 1965. While she remained “Estelle” to her family and childhood friends, she increasingly called herself “Octavia” in public in the following years.[41] She worked odd jobs while she attended Pasadena City College, graduating with an associate’s degree in history in 1968. Her mother wanted her to take clerical courses, but Octavia took history and writing courses instead. She still had no intention of becoming a secretary after graduation, so she took courses that sparked her curiosity and would help her fiction writing, even winning a college-wide literary contest in 1966.[42] The contest came with a prize of fifteen dollars—the first payment she ever received for her writing.[43] She came in fifth place in a national short story contest sponsored by *Writer’s Digest* the following year.

These early wins buoyed her confidence for a bit. But Octavia was not content to rest on her laurels. Despite this success, she felt like her prose was too influenced by the pulp fiction of her youth. She had spent her teen years reading stories filled with hardscrabble chain-smoking angsty white male protagonists. As a result, these were the sorts of stories she often wrote too.[44] Octavia felt that her writing was derivative, so she sought out mentors who could help her find her voice. The results were mixed. First there were the writing instructors at PCC, a nice enough elderly couple who wrote children's books and knew nothing about science fiction. Octavia's stories might as well have been gobbledygook to them, but they helped her with her grammar and syntax. In another creative writing course her freshman year, the professor, an older white man, advised students to avoid using Black characters unless they were absolutely necessary. She would later reflect that "the presence of blacks, my teacher felt, changed the focus of the story—drew attention from the intended subject."[45] Even as a novice writer Octavia questioned that logic.

Although taking English and creative writing courses makes sense for an emerging writer, she frequently ran into opposition in those very courses. English professors, like the one from her freshman creative writing course, were frequently hostile toward her science fiction pieces. Not only did they find her work strange, but they were not sure of what to make of this young Black woman writer. Sometimes they would accuse her of plagiarizing. She soon learned to mask her interests, performing a kind of literary code-switching. In a class called "Writing for Publication," she "discovered that there is one kind of writing that does not go over well with publishers and that was the kind English teachers seem to like."[46] Over time she recognized that academic writing was one thing and print science fiction was another.

Despite these discouraging circumstances Octavia wrote almost every day, whether she was tired, hungry, overworked, or broke. "Write every day" eventually became her consistent advice to wannabe writers, besides instructing them to read widely and voraciously. She took her own advice seriously. In the beginning of her career, she often woke at 2 or 3 a.m. to write. Octavia would wake up bleary-eyed and plunk herself down at her desk before embarking on hours of writing. Her working area often looked like a tornado had just spun through, leaving notebooks, journals, drafts, and books scattered in its wake. During this time Octavia wrote slowly but

persistently, beginning with short stories before moving on to novels. When she was working on a new project, maps and character lists papered the wall above her desk. Her workstation reflected the energetic tumult within her mind, constantly writing, researching, thinking, and asking questions.

She sent out her work frequently to be considered for publication, and at the beginning of her career, she received frequent rejection slips. She found this constant rejection frustrating, but she never quit writing. Part of this was her strong sense of determination, but even a highly ambitious writer like Octavia needed encouragement. She initially found that help in a curious place: within the pages of self-help books.[47] Books such as *The Magic of Thinking Big* (1959) became a sort of bible for Octavia, who had begun to reject the strictures of her mother's religion as a teen. She filled journals and diaries with goals, affirmations, and intentions about her life and future, a practice she would carry through her life.

Although she was very aware that she was a working-class Black woman entering a field where no one else looked like her, this did not give her pause. She once remarked, "It never occurred to me to ask, If no one else is doing it, do I dare do it? But I realize that a lot of people think if there's no model, then maybe there's some reason not to do something."[48] Young Octavia did not necessarily think of herself as a pioneer or trailblazer. She simply wanted to write the kinds of work she wanted to read.

Even when Octavia's writing improved, she wasn't writing what many teachers, publishers, or agents recognized as traditional literary fiction, yet she also wasn't writing pulp fiction either. In writing workshops, she found that being the only Black person meant she was either ignored or treated like a curiosity, neither of which she found helpful. She wanted to be taken seriously. Her work took science fiction themes and paired them with the lean, clinical, spare prose that would become the hallmark of her writing. When Octavia wrote about aliens or time travelers or telepaths, she didn't write the imperialist fantasies that littered traditional science fiction and fantasy but instead complicated human stories in strange and fantastical landscapes. Thematically, her work had more in common with that of Samuel R. Delany and Ursula K. Le Guin—then fairly new authors themselves—than Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. For many years, editors and publishers found Octavia inscrutable.

In the immediate years after college, Octavia continued to pursue writing education while working odd jobs to support herself. She enrolled in Cal State and later took creating writing workshops at UCLA Extension. She also took classes at the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and then at what is now called the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop. She was part of the WGA's Open Door inaugural classes in 1969. Although the first semester at WGA was terrible—Octavia literally had professors read *TV Guide* to the class—she eventually took classes with science fiction writers she admired such as Harlan Ellison. These courses shifted the trajectory of her career, although it was still a long journey to publication. Ellison had a reputation for being abrasive, combative, and litigious, characterizations that he himself supported. Octavia recalled, "Whatever you wrote he would go over it and talk to you about it and you might go home feeling like you didn't much like him but it was the kind of criticism I needed."[49] In Ellison, Octavia found an interlocutor, mentor, and friend at a crucial time. She admired him immensely, even as their friendship ebbed and flowed over the years. He encouraged her work and, in his singular brash way, pushed her to keep writing and got her interested in attending Clarion.

The Clarion writers' workshop in 1970 was a foundational experience for Octavia. Throughout her life she praised Clarion as her best educational experience. Years later she would go on to become a workshop instructor herself. To attend Clarion she had to take out loans from family and friends and leave California for the first time in her life, traveling across the country to Pennsylvania on a Greyhound bus to attend the six-week workshop. She had a mixed experience at Clarion. On one hand, she sold two stories. "Crossover," inspired by her time working in factories, was more fantasy than science fiction but was published in the Clarion journal. Harlan Ellison bought the other story, "Childfinder," a tale of race and dueling psychic factions, for his anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*, which was never published. And every week she had the opportunity to work with different authors, such as Joanna Russ and Fritz Leiber, and she made lifelong friends with other burgeoning writers, such as Vonda McIntyre.[50] But on the other hand, she was homesick and the fast pace of the workshop had her spinning. Octavia considered herself a slow writer, and being pushed to write and share her work daily was intimidating and exhausting. And although Samuel R. Delany was teaching a workshop

there, they did not strike up a deep connection.[51] She felt lonely and isolated as the only Black woman in her cohort.[52]

But at Clarion, Ellison again helped her improve her writing and shift her experience as a reader. He encouraged her and the other workshop participants to read beyond science fiction. After Clarion, Octavia read across even more genres, consuming anything that would help her build characters and landscapes in her own stories. That might mean reading classic American literature, histories, and books on geology and space travel as research or as part of rabbit holes she would find herself going down after something sparked her interest.

Octavia had hoped that her time at Clarion would jumpstart her career. Instead, she spent the first half of the 1970s languishing in literary obscurity. *The Last Dangerous Visions* seemed to be going nowhere. Ellison was not only erratic as a person but also as an editor. Year after year he promised Octavia and the other writers in the collection that the book was on the verge of being published, but nothing ever materialized. The other stories Octavia sent to magazines were roundly rejected. In fact, she sold nothing between 1971 and 1976—five years of steady rejection letters.

These were dismal years professionally and personally for Octavia. She was broke and her career was at a standstill. She moved out of her mother's house in 1972, and being on her own meant she had to support herself. She was overworked and underpaid; her diary entries from this time reveal a person swinging between optimism for the future and nihilism in the present. At times she even wondered whether taking her own life was the solution.[53] Besides her mental anguish, she was also plagued with expensive and painful dental issues and was often in physical pain from her backbreaking day jobs. She stuck to a grueling writing schedule, often writing from 2 to 5 a.m. and then working a full-time job. Caffeine pills kept her awake as she juggled her writing and the very necessary work she needed to pay her bills. In 1971, she contemplated taking a pause on writing to fully devote herself to some sort of trade (photography was high on her list) that would allow her to accumulate some savings so she could stop working and devote her time entirely to writing.[54] It would take several more years for her to achieve that goal, and it would be decades before she was financially comfortable. Even then, the experience of growing up and spending most of her life without having much money often overshadowed

her shift in class status and eventual financial stability. Octavia worried incessantly about money all of her life.

Despite these discouraging circumstances, Octavia still kept at her craft, penning several short stories that would never see the light of day, as well as beginning what would become the Patternist series and *Kindred*. On November 22, 1973, Thanksgiving, Octavia mused: "I think I have not trusted myself to settle into anything other than the writing. I've fought everything else. I still do. I say again and again, all I care about is the writing. Every other thing, job, social situation, whatever, must give way. Body and mind must remain healthy and intact so that my attention is not drawn from the writing."[55] Sometimes she sent stories out under pen names, often gender-neutral ones, in an effort to circumvent any potential bias. During this time, she started and stopped several stories, including one called "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" set in the Patternist universe that shares little with the story she would eventually publish a decade later. She also worked on drafts on works that would become the early Patternist novels. She started and stopped several stories, a practice she would continue throughout her career.[56] She continued to work odd jobs while taking classes in everything from photography to math to anthropology at Cal State, harboring a desire to become an anthropologist for the next two decades.

Eventually, Octavia decided to switch gears. She found writing short stories to be a lot of work without a lot of reward, so she turned to writing novels in earnest. She "tricked" herself into writing chapters that were interconnected short stories that she linked together to create a longer piece and worked on multiple projects at the same time. This method paid off. In 1975, Octavia sold her first novel, *Patternmaster*, to Doubleday publishers for seventeen hundred and fifty dollars. After years of laboring in the vineyard, she was finally going to be a professional writer.

THE EARLY NOVELS

The Patternist stories had tumbled around in Octavia's head since the afternoon she watched *Devil Girl from Mars*. Even as she wrote other stories, the Patternist world was never fully out of her thoughts. The characters were almost like imaginary friends, they had been with her for so long. She joked once in an interview that Teray, the protagonist of

Patternmaster, was her "first boyfriend."[57] Octavia recalled that the plots of the novels "were in my head for so many years that I didn't need an outline."[58]

The Patternist saga is a five-novel series about a group of telepathic humans who change the course of humanity: Patternmaster (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Clay's Ark* (1984). The novels explore the dualistic nature of humankind: our adaptability and our penchant for hierarchy. The series also reflects Octavia's deep-seated concerns about what America's imperialist designs both on Earth and in space symbolized for the future of humanity and what lessons marginalized groups—such as Black people in the United States—have learned from their oppressors. Octavia's earliest and most prevailing positive obsession was figuring out the patterns of human behavior and using that to imagine possible futures for humanity. Like the telepaths in her novels, she was the ultimate pattern master, except she used her mental ingenuity to write brilliant works that incite reflection and action.

The Patternist series gave Octavia the space to explore longstanding questions: Why do we humans organize ourselves the way we do? Why do some of us adapt for the survival of our species while others adapt in destructive ways by controlling and oppressing others? Why do we insist on creating categories of "inferior" and "superior," especially ones based on arbitrary characteristics? Octavia's Patternist novels imagine humanity impeded by rigid pecking orders and fueled by ableist and settler-colonialist ambitions, transforming human life and society as we know it. In an interview for *Poets and Writers Magazine* in 1997, Octavia observed, "Even when people are the most absolutely homogenous group you could think of, we create divisions and fight each other."[59] Octavia worried that we humans could and perhaps would destroy ourselves because of our stubborn desires to rule over one another rather than collaborate and coexist.

The Patternist series was the beginning of both Octavia's vocation and her career as a writer. She was very prolific during the 1970s, publishing the first three of the Patternist novels before publishing her most well-known novel, *Kindred*, at the end of the decade. She had lived with the Patternist tales in her mind for decades and was teeming with ideas: she came up with the idea for *Patternmaster* when she was twelve, for *Mind of My Mind* when she was fifteen, and for *Survivor* when she was nineteen.[60] She took

inspiration from many sources: everything from that fateful afternoon in her childhood watching a terrible movie, to the comic books she devoured as a young person, to the golden age science fiction tales that she lived on as a teen, to her own vast imagination. Once she finished her first novel, the others came quickly. And once Octavia sold *Patternmaster* to Doubleday, the publisher acquired the prequels *Mind of My Mind* and *Survivor*. She did not yet have a literary agent, sending her manuscripts to publishers herself.[61] But she often struggled with editors who she felt did not respect her vision; they often asked her to curtail some of the depictions of sex or violence that she found far from gratuitous.[62] Sometimes Octavia agreed to make changes, and sometimes she refused. Either way, she was aggrieved by the whole process.

Patternmaster, published in 1976 and first in the series, is last in the chronology of the Patternist world. It is a spare, lithe tale about Teray, a young telepath living in the distant future who battles to rule a far future world of psychic symbionts connected by a mental web called the Pattern. *Mind of My Mind*, published in 1977, takes place in the 1970s and charts the origins of the Patternists and the first Pattern. We follow Mary, a troubled but powerful Black woman, who is the first to unite telepaths. *Survivor*, published in 1978, follows Alanna, a mixed-race Black woman who is part of a group of humans who have fled Earth to escape Patternist control and widespread disease. Once in their new home, Alanna must broker peace with warring alien nations. These first three novels in the Patternist saga feature humans with incredible psychic powers and little moral compass; "mute" humans with no psychic powers who are brainwashed into submission if they cannot escape the clutches of their telepathic overseers; human-alien hybrids at war for the survival of their species; and extraterrestrial humans trying to rebuild humanity in a new world. All these novels are deeply interested in power struggles and hierarchies and how quickly humans can adapt for survival.

Patternmaster, and the whole of the Patternist series, provides curious commentary on the role of technology and the evolution of humankind and further clarity into Octavia's concerns about adaptability and hierarchy. We *Homo sapiens* are known for our aptitude with tools. Human culture is defined by its technology, from the wheel to the printing press to computers. We create tools to augment and better our world, whether via transportation, medicine, or information technology. And while the human

body is incredibly adaptive, we are not apex predators because we possess super strength, indestructible exoskeletons, or any sort of preternatural ability. Instead, we have muscled our way to the top of the food chain largely because of that aptitude with tools, coupled with our ruthless desire to dominate other creatures. In *Patternmaster*, Octavia invites us to consider, What if human brainpower—not ingenuity, but literal brainpower—could solve most, if not all, the problems we have? If psychic healers could clear out arterial plaque and eliminate blood clots or regrow diseased organs and limbs simply with the power of their minds, might what we know of as medicine become obsolete? If telepathic warriors could fight to the death despite their age, size, or physical ability, would conventional armies or war be necessary? If psychic artists could touch a block of wood and imbue it with all the knowledge of a discipline and one could learn all one needs to know by osmosis, what's the use of traditional teachers?—or plays, television, or the internet for that matter? Education, the arts, and entertainment as we know it would change fundamentally. Technological tools of all sorts created to make human life easier would become as obsolete as floppy disks are today. Over time, the need or desire to travel long distances—much less to outer space—might become less captivating or even disappear altogether. Butler scholar and literary biographer Gerry Canavan identifies the Patternists' small world as a type of "world reduction."[63] Rather than the future world being big and complicated, sometimes speculative authors purposely shrink the world-building in a way to reflect the narrowness of the society. This is the world of *Patternmaster* and a possible future for humankind.

Patternist world domination would be complete except for the Clayarks, humanoid hybrids that live on the Earth with them. Centuries before the start of the *Patternmaster* world, astronauts returned from an interstellar trip and brought back a disease that also fundamentally changed the course of humanity. Clayark disease, named after *Clay's Ark*, the only spaceship to ever return to Earth, impels its bearers to spread the contagion by procreating with uninfected people, who end up bearing "deformed" offspring with human heads and hairless, sphinxlike bodies. Clayarks also have two clear advantages over the Patternists: they defy psychic control, and there is no cure for Clayark disease. Although Patternists can physically hurt or kill Clayarks, they cannot control them telepathically. Therefore, Clayarks can infiltrate Patternist strongholds with firepower or through the

sheer power of their disease. Clayarks believe they are the natural evolutionary products of humanity, while Patternists believe they are the true destiny of humans: "Patternists and Clayarks stared at each other across a gulf of disease and physical difference and comfortably told themselves the same lie about each other."[64] Mute humans who have not escaped off-planet are pawns caught in the middle of this existential turf war.

Patternmaster can be understood as an allegory for the outsize influence that hierarchy has in human society and the ways in which human adaptability can be used for nefarious purposes. Patternists can entirely remake society as we know it. However, Octavia depicts them as singularly focused on power and control. She once reflected about *Patternmaster*, "Really they [the Patternists] were pretty awful. You wouldn't want to live in that society."[65] Psychic abilities make Patternists largely selfish, insular, violent, and ruthless. They are essentially humans with preternatural power and little moral code.

One could imagine a utopian society where human beings had immense mental powers that prevented pain, poverty, and strife. Instead, in the Patternists' world, mental power is the only thing that matters, and that power is used to crush and eliminate all opponents. The original Patternist patriarch, Doro, who looms large in *Mind of My Mind* and *Wild Seed*, was the first ruthless demigod to breed psychics, making a path for the Pattern. Butler describes him as a "psychotic individual who is doing the best he can with what he has."[66] The generations he begets do no better. What we get in *Patternmaster* is a futuristic feudal nightmare run by monstrous demigods, living out the worst of humanity's impulses.

Although the world of *Patternmaster* might seem closer to that of medieval Europe than that of late twentieth-century America, both the novel and the series invite readers to meditate on the politics of the American empire and internalized white supremacy. Octavia was a baby boomer, coming of age during the tumultuous postwar era. She was a young person during the Vietnam War, the civil rights movements, and the backlash to all the gains that marginalized people achieved midcentury. With her keen eye for social trends, rigorous historical research, and aptitude for understanding human psychology, Octavia imagined a world grown out of some of the worst excesses of our own.

The other novels in the Patternist series likewise chart the trajectory of humanity's tragic evolution. *Mind of My Mind* is a prequel to *Patternmaster*

that takes place in the late twentieth century and is a primer for how the Pattern and Patternists came to be. Their leader, Mary, is an unlikely heroine—a wild-eyed Black teen, born of the union between a drug-addled latent psychic and the immortal shape-shifter Doro.[67] Mary is brash, ignorant, and untutored, but she has an innate brilliance. Her intelligence lies both in her immense brainpower and in her skills in problem-solving and adaptation, virtues at the heart of all of Octavia's protagonists. In notes Octavia made while she was writing the novel, she writes that Mary "is not becoming part of something. The others are. She is creating something, fitting them into something, possessing them—literally—having an orgasmic or perhaps even religious experience."[68] She is guided by her instinct to gather and control others, but unlike her father she is interested in community, albeit Patternist community. Growing up working class and Black has given her a unique experience as an outsider, and so she is keen to connect others within the Pattern, creating a sort of family she never had. On the other hand, Doro considers himself something like a god, one that accepts only absolute obedience and total submission. The existence of thousands of psychics who are not beholden to him is abhorrent. The fact that one of his children, and only a girl, could accomplish in a few years what had taken him millennia is also revolting. Octavia noted, "The fact that you have Doro, who has kidnapped a bunch of people and bred them and used them, and after a while, when they're strong enough, they do nasty things to him. But they also do nasty things to everybody else, because they've learned that's how you behave if you want to survive."[69]

Mind of My Mind reflects the anxieties that established power structures often have in the face of new systems of power. Emma, Mary's grandmother, another centuries-old immortal demigod, expresses serious and reasonable doubts (fears born out in *Patternmaster*) about a society of powerful telepaths led by Mary, who she calls "ruthless, egotistical, [and] power-hungry." Emma, who we find out in the later prequel *Wild Seed*, has survived chattel slavery, anticipates the burgeoning colonization and enslavement of mute humans, "people forced now to be servants in their own houses. Servants and worse!" She even chafes at the choice to call nontelepathic humans "mutes," likening the term to the epithet "nigger." She warns Doro: "You're not one of them. You're not a telepath. And if you don't think they look down on us non-telepaths, us niggers, the whole rest of humanity, you're not paying attention." Despite the fact that she, Mary,

and even Doro (who inhabits a range of bodies) are people of African descent, Emma recognizes how the hierarchy between Patternist and mute replicates the linguistics and power logics of white supremacy. Doro, on the other hand, is more concerned with his own diminishing authority than the fate of humanity: "Together, the 'Patternists' were growing into something that he could observe, hamper, or destroy but not something he could join. They were his goal, half accomplished. He watched them with carefully concealed emotions of suspicion and envy."[70] In an interview, Octavia revealed, "actually [Emma] and Doro . . . are different versions of what immortality could be. Doro is immortal and destructive. [Emma] is immortal and creative."[71]

Mary is an imperfect mash-up of her grandmother and her father. She is creative; she creates the Pattern and the social system that links her psychic kin together. But she is also destructive. Much to Emma's chagrin, neither Mary nor Doro gives sufficient thought to how those with the least power will fare in their social systems. Their allegiance is to telepaths and immortals, respectively. Doro's notion of eugenics treats all life, telepathic or not, as expendable. They are simply "seeds" that are alternately sown, harvested, or discarded. Mary rescues latents (telepaths who have not transitioned into their full power) who have experienced and perpetrated violence, but nonpsychic humans, early mutes, are simply pawns in her larger plan to unite telepaths. Whereas Doro is fundamentally amoral, both he and Mary operate as social parasites, taking from humanity in order to secure their survival. They perfect the worst rationales of human society to make their own world, another of Octavia's commentary on Black communities internalizing the logic of white supremacist thought. She once admitted, "I don't think that black people have made peace with ourselves, and I don't think white America has made any kind of peace with us. I don't think we really know *how* to make peace at this point."[72]

If *Mind of My Mind* reveals the moral bankruptcy of internalized white supremacy, *Survivor* highlights its enduring legacy. *Survivor* takes place centuries before *Patternmaster* and many years after *Mind of My Mind.* Mute humans seeking asylum from Patternist overlords and infected Clayarks leave Earth and find a planet they can colonize. Once settled in their new home they are quickly embroiled in ethnic warfare with two humanoid clans, the Tekhon and the Garkhon, also known as the Kohn people. Alanna, the novel's heroine, is the titular survivor: She survives her

parents' death as a mixed-race "wild human," living on the edge of society. She survives being shot, captured, and adopted by Missionaries, assimilating as much as she can into their community. She survives space travel and settling on a new planet. She survives being captured by the Tekhon, even marrying Dei, the tribe's leader, and bearing a human-alien hybrid child.

Like Mary in *Mind of My Mind*, Alanna is the prime example of human adaptability. She is clever, is nimble, and has a strong moral code. But unlike Mary, she values integrity and freedom, and because she has lived on the margins of several communities, she is able to understand and respect multiple perspectives. She is also a skilled fighter and tactician who "was left alone and weaponless in a land far more savage" than the planet she migrates to and survived.[73] Alanna is very much in line with several other of Octavia's heroines, such as Lilith in *Dawn* and Lauren Olamina from the Parable series. She is faced with seemingly impossible choices and makes decisions that center not only her survival but the betterment of humanity.

Survivor has the curious distinction of being a novel that Octavia singularly loathed. She derisively referred to it as her "*Star Trek* novel" despite her love for the series as a whole, because it prominently features alien races encountering each other, not unlike the common theme of the original famous science fiction series.[74] When Octavia received a modest advance for *Survivor* in 1976, she had spent years juggling grueling, low-wage jobs with her writing. The advance allowed her to quit her final full-time nonwriting job—working in a hospital laundry with no air-conditioning during the height of summer—and pursue writing full time. This was an important shift in her life, but money troubles continued to plague her during her twenties and thirties. Octavia lamented that her decision to publish *Survivor* when she did was primarily a financial one. She begrudgingly accepted the editor's notes and got her advance, wagering that it was better to take the money and work on what would become *Kindred* than to take the time she ultimately felt was necessary to whip *Survivor* into shape.

Octavia would regret this compromise for the rest of her career. She felt that the novel was rushed and did not substantively add to the Patternist saga: "*Survivor* was the book that I used to get myself to Maryland [to research *Kindred*], which is why *Survivor* is not a very good book. And I tell people not to buy it, which for some reason makes them go out and buy

it."[75] She also admitted: "One of the things I was most embarrassed about in my novel *Survivor* is my human characters going off to another planet and finding other people they could immediately start having children with. Later I thought, oh well, you can't really erase embarrassing early work, but you don't have to repeat it."[76] Octavia remedied what she saw as this oversight in the subsequent Xenogenesis trilogy and in her final novel, *Fledgling*, where humans and nonhumans merge through genetic engineering rather than the physical coming together of probably incompatible anatomies. *Survivor*'s premature publication haunted Octavia: years later she urged publishers not to reprint it, and it eventually fell out of print, where it remains today. When the Patternist series was republished as an omnibus edition in 2007 retitled *Seed to Harvest*, *Survivor* was notably absent. To this day, *Survivor* remains hard to find, with extant editions selling for hundreds of dollars in the rare and used book circuit, although enterprising readers can scrounge up digital copies online.[77]

Octavia's first three novels grapple with how we humans organize society and, in particular, how we relate to those with varying degrees of power. *Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, and *Survivor* are all meditations on hierarchy, especially as it manifests in the form of settler colonialism. Toni Morrison once observed the devastating consequences:

> Violence is understood as an inevitable response to chaos—the untamed, the wild, the savage—as well as a beneficial one. When one conquers a land the execution of the conquest, indeed its point, is to control it by reshaping, moving, cutting it down or through. And that is understood to be the obligation of industrial and/or cultural progress. This latter encounter with chaos, unfortunately, is not limited to land, borders, natural resources.[78]

This is the logic of the white supremacy and settler colonialism that Octavia rails against in these novels. She traces a possible path for settler colonialism to unfurl, from the late twentieth century to the far distanced future.[79] As Mary's grandmother Emma noted, Mary's actions were similar to those of the racist architects of American society. Mary's shaping of the Pattern aligns with the insidious settler colonialism that transformed the world since the seventeenth century. Historian Gerald Horne notes, "In North America the colonialism implanted bloodily involved racialization, which meant the denial of the right to have rights, making millions—Africans particularly—denizens of a society but not of it, that is, permanent aliens, a status that has not entirely dissipated to this very day, indicating its

profundity."[80] Race matters little in the Pattern. Indeed, Mary—the mother of all Patternists—is a working-class Black woman. However, Horne's observation of the "permanent alien" status—one that Emma calls out as well—is akin to the white supremacist logic of settler colonialism. Instead of a race-based caste system, the Pattern is based on psychic ability.

Many years after Mary creates the first Pattern, *Survivor* highlights the pernicious hold that settler colonialism has on humanity. Alanna flees a divided Earth to settle on a new planet with the Missionaries who adopted her. These Missionaries, former mute slaves to Patternists, are not unlike the Puritan immigrants of the seventeenth century. They are fleeing repression, yet their experience as slaves makes them little wiser than their previous captors. When they arrive on a suitable planet that is already populated by intelligent humanoids, the Missionaries immediately misjudge the situation. Viewing the fur-covered, sexually liberated Kohn people as godless savages, the Missionaries believe themselves to be superior and their new planet as a prelapsarian Eden. This belief in their own superiority as humans obscures the Missionaries' ignorance of the Kohns' power. The human settlers flee one form of control only to run into another. Just as the Patternists deemed the mutes to be little better than cattle, the Missionaries regard the Kohn as lower than humans, much to their eventual chagrin. Octavia highlights that humankind's propensity for hierarchy leads to destruction.

Patternmaster takes place centuries after both *Mind of My Mind* and *Survivor* and represents the enduring legacy of settler colonialism and the denouement of humanity as we know it. Culturally and morally bankrupt psychic overlords battle with one another and another evolving humanoid species on what is left of Earth. The weakest humans live in a type of chattel slavery. The devastation wrought by settler colonialism is profound and complete. Humanity has collapsed in on itself.

Regarding the series, Octavia remarked that she was "trying to tell a good story about a strange community of people" in the Patternist saga. She continued, "I might have been making some comment on Black America. Once the thought came to me, I realized that I probably was commenting on Black America. Then I had to ask myself how I felt about that—that I was perhaps making a comment on learning the wrong thing from one's teachers."[81] Just as Audre Lorde suggested that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," so did Octavia illustrate that a society

based on the worst of humanity's teachings would never be free, even if certain ills such as racism no longer technically existed.[82]

LIFE GOES ON

Although Octavia took a Black literature course during her last semester in college, she did not begin seriously reading Black women writers until the 1970s. Because she was writing in a genre in which she knew of no Black women writers, Octavia initially did not see herself as part of a cohort of Black women writers.[83] Although she began her career alongside the likes of Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison, Octavia was in some ways siloed within science fiction and fantasy, stymied by the literary establishment that had not only erected strict demarcations between genres but was only beginning to market and distribute Black women writers widely. Eventually, Octavia did find Morrison's work, crediting her as someone who got her to think more about craft and the art of writing. She befriended other Black women writers, like Toni Cade Bambara, and became a part of the larger circle of Black feminist writers published at the end of the twentieth century.

Octavia was proud of selling her first three novels—and at such a rapid clip. She wrote in her journal: "I have published three small novels. No one can get away with sneering at me or pitying me when I call myself a writer. It's good."[84] But even though she was a published writer, her life didn't change much. She was not suddenly flush with cash. She still rode the bus, never learning to drive for fear that her dyslexia would impede her driving skill.[85] She still lived in the same modest apartment, and until 1977, she still worked the same low-wage temp jobs. Money was a perennial concern well into the 1980s. The publisher advances she received were modest, doing little to mitigate the facts that she was a neurodivergent, working-class Black woman without a safety net. Her books were far from bestsellers, so her royalties were meager. Just after she wrote about her pride in being a published writer, she admonished herself to expand her writing in nonfiction, both to garner more respect and to be more financially stable: "I want to ease my own way so that I make my living from my writing without a break for any other kind of work, and without starving or borrowing."[86] But although these stark realities informed her process and her progress, Octavia persisted despite her worries. Conducting research, writing, asking

and answering difficult questions, and noting the patterns of human behavior was her life's work. And because she was unfortunately used to professional rejection, the lack of immediate support did not necessarily dissuade her. That is not say that the steady flow of rejections was easy. Rather, her artistic impulses existed whether or not she received praise, censure, or silence. She had to create.

Octavia created workarounds to make up for the lack of resources. Although she bought books and materials for her personal collection when she could, she also relied heavily on libraries both in Southern California and during her research trips. The Los Angeles Public Library was a constant refuge until she moved to Seattle in the late 1990s. Even when she wasn't connected to a university or institutional archive, Octavia was able to engage in reading and research that were critical to her work. Until she was able to survive on the proceeds from her writing, Octavia worked more flexible temp jobs, rather than steady clerical work, so she could prioritize writing. If she wanted to stay up all night reading and writing, she could and she did. Work, whether cleaning offices or working in a factory, was just a means to an end, a way to pay the bills until her passion project paid off. Riding the bus and walking everywhere gave her a keen eye for observation. In her travels she focused on interactions between passengers, noted the shapes of neighborhoods and their shifting class dynamics. These observations inevitably made their way into her work. In these ways Octavia shaped her life into a fundamentally writerly one, one that fueled her positive obsession. Despite these obstacles she was incredibly productive during the 1970s.

Imagine if Octavia at this point in her career had not been bogged down by all of these material concerns, if she had had a room of her own with a lock and a key and a stream of income that allowed her to not engage in backbreaking labor.

Imagine.

While Octavia published the first three novels in the Patternist series, another longstanding idea sparked by an unsettling conversation with a friend rattled around her head. It would become her magnum opus and bestselling novel to date, *Kindred*.

Chapter 2

Honoring Ancestors

Kindred is usually a reader's gateway to Octavia's work. It is her bestselling novel, frequently mentioned on "Best Books" listicles and assigned on college syllabi. When I talk to fans of her work, they usually gush about *Kindred*, explaining how the novel changed how they understood slavery and their relationship to it. Writer Damian Duffy, along with John Jennings, who has adapted *Kindred* (and *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*) as a graphic novel, described *Kindred* as a life-changing experience that opened up his understanding of what has been called a "peculiar institution."[1] Considering what inspired Octavia, I imagine this is an answer that would please her. Still, *Kindred* is as much about the time it was conceived and written as it is about the antebellum South.

"What inspired *Kindred*?" was a frequent question asked in the many interviews Octavia gave after the novel's publication. Sometimes the conversation arrived there organically; other times it was clearly an item on an interviewer's checklist. Either way, the conversation usually wound its way to a discussion of the origin of Octavia's time-traveling tale of slavery. As she repeated *Kindred*'s origin story in interviews for more than twenty-five years, she always emphasized a few key details. In a 1988 interview, she recalled:

> *Kindred* grew out of something I heard when I was in college, during the mid-1960s. I was a member of a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable. He was considered quite knowledgeable, but his attitude about slavery was very much like the attitude I had when I was thirteen—that is, he felt that the older generation should have rebelled. He once commented, "I wish I could kill off all these old

people who have been holding us back for so long, but I can't because I would have to start with my own parents."[2]

Her friend's existential crisis stayed with Octavia for years. She knew he wasn't alone in his thinking. His comments revealed a lot about the deeply rooted shame, anger, and mistrust some African Americans coming of age in the 1960s felt about their elders. These young people felt that if only the older peoples had had some backbone, some sense of pride, then maybe, just maybe Black people would be further along. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who were seemingly content to keep their heads down and suffer through white people's mistreatment, these revolutionary Blacks coming of age would stand up and fight back against the proverbial Man.

OUR ANCESTORS' WILDEST DREAMS

Octavia sympathized but fervently disagreed with her friend. Of course, she loathed racism and detested slavery. And she too sometimes wondered how her people, who had endured slavery and Jim Crow in the South only to discover that racism was just as prevalent out West and up North, had gotten up day after day. But she did not place the blame on her Black ancestors or her living elders. She didn't think, *I am not my ancestors, you can catch these hands*. Octavia thought, *I am not my ancestors—they were immeasurably strong. How could I have possibly survived what they had to endure?*

This question nagged at Octavia for years. It persisted after she wrote short stories and dogged her while she wrote the Patternist novels. She kept coming back to her friend's pain, hubris, and ignorance and wondered, What would it take to really survive the crucible of slavery? And how could she get others to empathize with the experiences of the enslaved and those who suffered in the generations after? She wanted younger generations to understand their ancestors as heroes and survivors, not as cowards. She wanted people to reject romantic dreams of revolution for the sober reality of survival.

To be clear, it wasn't that she couldn't relate to her friend's anger and shame. She had simply moved beyond those feelings. Growing up, Octavia's mother, like a third of all Black women in the mid-twentieth century and most women in her family, was a domestic—a fact that young

Octavia wasn't always very proud of. Octavia Margaret was born on a sugar plantation in northern Louisiana, in the same place where her own ancestors had been enslaved years before. In an interview with writer Randall Kenan, Octavia revealed:

> I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she [her mother] did, and I think one of the reasons I wrote *Kindred* was to resolve my feelings, because, after all, I ate because of what she did . . . *Kindred* was kind of a reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery.[3]

Octavia believed that ignorance was a big issue for those who took umbrage with previous generations. Reflecting on her own heritage in a journal entry from 1978, Octavia wrote: "I need not sermonize. I am a sermon. My existence as a good writer-speaker preaches volumes. And the one thing I will not permit anyone to do is say that I am the exception—different from other blacks . . . I am the daughter of a maid and a bootblack, the descendant of slaves. I climb upon the bones of those who survived hell."[4] Octavia was not ashamed of her family. She thought that if people were more educated about slavery, they could be more empathetic not only to history, but regarding their own experiences. Octavia was living proof.

When Octavia Margaret's family moved out to California, she often worked for white people who alternately ignored or insulted her. Young Octavia Estelle saw this treatment firsthand when she accompanied her mother on cleaning jobs. They would leave their mixed-race working-class North Pasadena neighborhood, with its modest yards and humble storefronts, and enter neighborhoods with verdant lawns and pristine sidewalks. The only Black people Estelle would see in such neighborhoods were servants—yardmen tending ornamental grass and women old enough to be her grandmother pushing mewling white babies in strollers. They would pull up to the stately manor where her mother worked, and young Estelle would truck alongside her to the back door. A sour-faced white woman would open the door and give them a once-over, perhaps chiding Octavia Margaret for being early or late. This white woman would give them both a wide berth as they entered her home. Once inside Estelle would notice that this white woman's kitchen was almost as large as their whole place, but she would make pains not to act like she'd never been anywhere.

Her mother would set to work, sweeping and mopping, dusting and vacuuming, while Estelle sat at the kitchen table with a book. She could not ignore the way that the white woman admonished and condescended to her mother or the way that she disparaged Black people when she talked on the phone to a friend.[5]

Estelle would feel the hot rage bubbling up in her. It was all she could do to not throw her book at this woman and storm out. The nerve of this woman! How could she talk to and about her mother that way? Had her mother heard what she said? If Estelle hazarded a glance at Octavia Margaret, she would see that her mother's eyes were cast downward, focused on sweeping, that she never wavered from humming a Gospel Clefs tune as she worked.[6] She had to have heard, and yet she continued cleaning like nothing had happened. Estelle's anger threatened to explode. Was this the same woman who could silence her with a glance? No, *this* woman, whoever she was, who let that fool talk bad about her without a word, this woman was not the mother Estelle knew.

The rest of the afternoon would go on without further incident. Octavia Margaret would finish cleaning under the watchful eye of her employer and collect her payment; then she and Estelle would make their way back to their side of Pasadena. Estelle would fume silently, watching the neighborhoods change back from quiet suburbia to less pristine city streets. On one such occasion, her mother noticed the grim set of her mouth and the dark look in her eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" Octavia Margaret asked with a sigh.

The words spilled out in a terrible rush. "I will never do what *you* do. What *you* do is terrible."[7]

Estelle's mother did not respond with a slap. She did not cuss her out either. Instead, she gave her daughter a long, wounded look and then turned her eyes back to the road without a word. Shame uncoiled in the pit of Estelle's stomach, and they spent the rest of the trip in silence. Having to choose her own switch would have been less painful than sitting with her mother's disappointment and embarrassment. Later she admitted: "I carried that look for a number of years before I understood it, and before I understood what my friend had failed to understand. I didn't have to leave school when I was ten, I never missed a meal, always had a roof over my head, *because* my mother was willing to do demeaning work and accept humiliation."[8] Estelle's mother, and the many women like her, should not

have had to endure mistreatment to take care of their families. Yet Octavia Margaret did endure this with the hope that her daughter would have better opportunities. There is a certain kind of strength and belief in future generations that propelled women like Estelle's mother and grandmother, even if some of their descendants couldn't see it.

Only years later would adult Octavia fully realize that she had lashed out at her mother, a woman who endured low pay and insults to put food on the table, rather than at the true source of her resentment. The white lady had made her feel small, and she was upset with her mother for letting that happen. So yes, Octavia understood her friend's anger because she had already done the work of reconciling her own. The question was how to get her generation, especially middle-class Blacks like her classmate, and the ones that followed to have their own epiphanies.[9] The answer to that question would eventually become *Kindred*.

The tug-of-war between respecting elders and rejecting their complicated history that helped to inspire *Kindred* played out in multiple movements across Black communities during the 1960s and 1970s. Some young people in the civil rights movement, long wary of the centrality of the philosophy of nonviolent direct action, began to break away from traditional movement spaces or to transform spaces they were already in. Take, for instance, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC began in 1960 as an intergenerational coalition that gave voice to youth in the civil rights movement and worked closely with groups such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In SNCC elder leaders such as Ella Baker joined with younger leaders such as Diane Nash to organize direct actions such as sit-ins to challenge segregation and voter suppression in the South.[10] However, as the decade rolled on, SNCC leaders began to move away from what they saw as a more moderate civil rights project and toward more radical politics. SNCC would, in its brief tenure, align itself with the more leftist agenda of the Black Panther Party, mirroring the direction that a significant portion of Black politics would take in the 1960s.[11] Octavia and her college classmates were not much younger than freedom fighters like Stokely Carmichael; like many of them, Carmichael rejected centrist notions of political agitation in favor of more radical politics. For some young people in the 1960s and 1970s, a radical politics often meant a disavowal of the racial politics of previous generations. Black baby boomers like Octavia

were figuring out their place in history. While Octavia did not consider herself militant or particularly radical, being skeptical of political movements in general, she was plugged in to the zeitgeist of her day.[12]

In the 1960s and 1970s the rise of the Black Arts movement represented a similar rejection of the previous comingling of art and politics. Adherents of the movement often rejected what they saw as the frivolity of earlier cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and its attention to glamour, romance, fashion, and other bourgeois trappings. Instead, they extended the line of critique taken up by the midcentury realist and naturalist writers, such as Ann Petry, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, and emphasized the stark reality of Black urban life. Writers such as Amiri Baraka argued for the existence of a distinct Black aesthetic evident across art, drama, poetry, nonfiction, and fiction. This Black aesthetic illumined the contours of Black liberation, resistance, and struggle, speaking directly to the people and not from Ivory Towers or exclusive literary magazines.[13]

As is always the case, multiple movements and conversations were happening at the same time. Just as the civil rights and Black Power movements were expanding and imploding and the Black Arts movement was outlining what was (or was not) proper Black art, Black feminist organizers, writers, and artists, some of whom had been active in these cultural and political movements, were gaining momentum and recognition. Writers, artists, activists, and organizers such as Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, and Michele Wallace straddled multiple political and artistic communities and affiliations. As Octavia transitioned from college student to professional writer, she too would join multiple communities, most obviously the science fiction community. Although she was often suspicious of the masculinist tenor of the Black Power movement, she resonated with its messages about self-determination and pride. Octavia also connected to feminism, and throughout her career she openly identified as a feminist.

By the time Octavia published *Kindred* in 1979, she was also a part of a cadre of Black writers pushing the boundaries of Black artistic expression and cultural production. It was the tail end of the Black Arts movement and the beginning of what some have called the Black women's literary renaissance.[14] Beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the turn of the new century, Black women's writing proliferated. Works such as Maya

Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*, Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*, and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, among many others, helped to inaugurate this movement. As the term "renaissance" implies, this explosion of Black women's literature reflected the fact that Black American women had been producing poetry, fiction, drama, nonfiction, and everything in between at least since Lucy Terry composed the elegiac poem "Bars Fight" in 1746. Standing on the shoulders of pioneering writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Maria Stewart, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells, Pauline Hopkins, and Zora Neale Hurston, these late twentieth-century writers transformed every genre they engaged.[15] And in that way these writers were continuing the tradition of their literary foremothers. While the Black Arts movement proffered a specific mission and ideology, the Black women's literary renaissance did not begin with a manifesto. Instead, like the Harlem Renaissance, this renaissance was named by its descendants. Although some identified as "New Negroes," residents of 1920s Harlem were by and large not walking around telling people they were in a cultural renaissance, and neither were most people in the late twentieth century. But it was clear then, and is now, that more Black women were publishing, at times even with major publishers or to critical acclaim. The works of Black women writers increasingly dotted bookstore shelves and were included on college syllabi. And while not all participants in this renaissance identified as feminists, many of the works grapple with issues of gender and sexuality and how power influences these categories. What connected these authors besides race and gender was often a commitment to telling complicated stories of Black experience, ones that frequently centered Black women's experience, at a pace and a volume never seen before. Octavia's novels were part of that literary revolution.

While Octavia was inspired to write *Kindred* to provide perspective for her friend on their ancestors' endurance, the novel also reflects other concerns. *Kindred* not only reveals slavery's quotidian horrors for Octavia's fellow Black baby boomers coming of age during the civil rights and Black Power movements, but also the Faustian bargain that slavery's descendants are often forced to make in the face of white supremacy. *Kindred*'s protagonist, a modern-day Black woman, must save her white ancestor

(who violates her Black kin) to ensure her own survival. Black readers may also recognize how racism incites similar deals with the devil that forces hard choices. Likewise, the novel invites non-Black readers to grapple with white characters in a way that causes them to reflect on their own relationship to the legacy of slavery and racism. Last, not only does the contemporary action of the novel take place in 1976—during the nation's Bicentennial—it is also the same year Octavia began working on *Kindred* in earnest, and the novel reflects a key moment in the reckoning of American national identity.

THE SPIRIT OF '76

In 1976, the United States was celebrating its Bicentennial—the two-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Still reeling from Vietnam, Watergate, and the previous decade's culture wars, the nation threw itself into the culmination of a series of self-congratulatory festivities to combat the cheerless national mood.[16] Confidence in the nation's political institutions was at an all-time low. President Richard Nixon had resigned amid scandal, after his vice president Spiro Agnew had also resigned in disgrace.[17] Not surprisingly, Georgia Democrat Jimmy Carter handily defeated beleaguered incumbent Republican president Gerald Ford later that year. Vietnam had been a failure, killing a generation of young men and dividing the nation. Conflicts in the Middle East had led to soaring gas prices. Shifting cultural mores were both exciting and unnerving, and conservative backlash to the gains in civil rights for Blacks, women, and gay people was on the rise. Rather than face these issues head-on, the US government engaged in a type of frantic civic propaganda aimed at bolstering nationalism and pride. Nationwide, Bicentennial parks and monuments were erected and dedicated to the "Founding Fathers." Major cities and small towns held celebrations ranging from fireworks to parades to gallery openings to plays. State-sponsored art and memorabilia were produced rapidly and distributed widely. The US Mint produced 975 million dollars-worth of commemorative Bicentennial coins, while postal authorities issued eighty-five Bicentennial-themed stamps—the most for any series stamps in US postal history to date.[18] Museums hosted major exhibitions of relevant art, such as "The Eye of Thomas Jefferson" at the National Gallery of Art.

Instead of reflecting a nation in civic shambles beset by corruption, mismanagement, and political turmoil, the Bicentennial celebrations sought to reshape the national image and legacy. The patriotic stamps, coins, and other memorabilia featuring early presidents and symbols of Americana were attempts to mythologize the past. Celebrations were preternaturally cheerful and represented only the glossiest aspects of US history—references were never made to slavery or the genocide of the country's indigenous peoples. The United States was commemorated as a scrappy upstart nation founded on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, instead of as an imperialist powerhouse built on settler colonialism and chattel slavery. The Bicentennial reflected a cognitive dissonance between the feverish public commemoration of the nation's history and the somber reality of its legacy.

This cognitive dissonance was particularly poignant for Octavia's generation. Bicentennial celebrations did not reflect the reality of young Black people like Octavia who had come of age during an era of great political agitation and social change. Octavia's classmates at Pasadena City College from the decade before would likely tell a different story of the rise of America. Their generation experienced firsthand the eroding of the promise of the movements for racial and gender equality in the face of depoliticization sparked by the fear of "too much change too soon." The public commemoration of America's greatness stood in direct opposition to the calls for change from younger generations that ranged from reform to revolution. Black baby boomers like Octavia often rejected the public displays of patriotism and their artistic and cultural production, remaining skeptical of the American project.

Besides the Bicentennial celebrations, 1976 was also a banner year for literature. Alex Haley released *Roots* and Mildred D. Taylor published *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, two sweeping historical narratives of Black struggle and triumph. It was also an important year for science fiction and fantasy. Frank Herbert released another sequel to *Dune*, Octavia's favorite novel for much of her life. Likewise, Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonsong*, Marge Piercy's *Women on the Edge of Time*, and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (all published that year) highlighted the significance of women in the genre. Fellow Black science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany was nominated for a prestigious Nebula Award for *Triton* (later published as *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*).

The year 1976 was also the year that twenty-nine-year-old Octavia published her first novel, *Patternmaster*. She had already sold *Mind of My Mind* and had sent the manuscript for *Survivor* to Doubleday for review. Itching to clear her head and get out on the road to fill her creative tank, Octavia took a cross-country trip with the advance from *Mind of My Mind*. Travel would become integral to her creative process the rest of her life. In a journal entry from July 2, 1976, she wrote: "So far my research has been very slight, my imagination immense. That may never change in one way. Imagination will probably always play a larger role than research. Else I'd write nonfiction, or at the best I would type fiction which I'm loath even to read. But *Dune* and *Shogun* and *The Godfather* prove what good research—thorough research can bring forth."[19] Observing people and getting firsthand knowledge of a place both catalyzed her writing and provided vital intel that she would use to imbue her speculative fiction with a sense of realism. Octavia's writing might invite readers to suspend their disbelief about time travel or mind control, but she almost always provided a milieu that was familiar enough to draw even the most skeptical reader in. Over the course of her career, Octavia took research and pleasure trips everywhere from Alaska to Peru. And it was during her early travels that she figured out she generally preferred national parks to cities, with the exception of New York City. This realization foreshadowed her eventual move to the Pacific Northwest.[20]

During Octavia's 1976 trip, she traveled through at least a dozen states. As the Greyhound bus made its way around the country, Octavia wrote letters to friends and noted her experiences in a travel journal with her signature wry, unflinching, and often self-deprecating voice, a practice she would continue for the next thirty years.[21] She saw much had changed in a few short years. When she had ridden the bus across the country six years before, she had seen no Black bus drivers. This time around she noted several Black men training to drive buses and reflected on the fact that she could sit in the terminal waiting room and use the bathroom, signs of the changes made in the wake of the civil rights movement. When she got to the Grand Canyon, she overestimated her hiking ability to her chagrin, writing in her journal, "the muscles of my legs began swearing at me and my spare tire suddenly seemed a lot bigger."[22] She explored landmarks in almost every state she stopped in. During the long stretches of time on the bus, she worked out ideas for several projects, especially what would

become *Wild Seed*. Throughout much of her career she would work on several projects at once.

The year 1976 was also when she decided in earnest to write the book that would become *Kindred*, a novel that would offer the historical reckoning the nation was loathe to accept. Octavia had started writing *Kindred* in college after the fateful conversation with her friend but had pushed it aside in favor of other stories that were crowding her brain. She had drafted large portions of the novel when she hit an impasse. She felt she needed time and space to research the novel's setting so it would be historically accurate and authentic. In a journal entry from May 3, 1977, just three days before the start of her research trip, Octavia wondered whether the travel would be a waste of time and money, but ultimately she decided that the trip was necessary. "I want to know the country, feel it, feel the people," she wrote. "I don't have to. I could finish the novel without it. But it would be a poorer novel. Scope—depth, strength would be sacrificed. I have the gift—the talent—of making a little information go a long way. I will go and see and much will come of it." She was correct.

Octavia's formal education up to that point had given her passing knowledge about slavery, the gaps of which she filled because of her own curiosity. Although the first Black studies program began at San Francisco State University in 1969 while Octavia was a college student downstate, formalized study of Black history and culture was, and still is, far from standard curriculum.[23] Before heading to Maryland to do research on the novel in 1977, Octavia scoured her own bookshelves and found a dozen or so books that gave her a good general background on slavery. She also talked to people in her family, probing them for information on life during the early decades of the twentieth century: "I talked to members of my family, and did some personal research that didn't really have anything to do with the time and place I was writing about, but that gave me a *feeling* of the experience of being black in a time and place where it was very difficult to be black."[24] This emphasis on feeling what it was to be enslaved and Black would become the core of *Kindred*.

This preliminary research convinced Octavia she needed to get to Maryland and conduct some onsite exploration. She had chosen Maryland as the setting for *Kindred* because she was inspired by the stories of two of its most famous formerly enslaved residents: Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. She also wanted her characters to have a reasonable

chance of escaping, so a border state like Maryland was a good fit. Otherwise, she knew little of the place. The larger problem was that despite being a published author, Octavia was broke. She still could barely make ends meet through her temp work in factories and offices. Sometimes she had to ask her mother or aunts for a loan to tide her over.[25] All the while she would implore her agent, Felicia Eth, for updates on selling new work, hoping for a windfall. Her cash flow problem brightened momentarily when Octavia sold *Survivor* to Doubleday. Once she received the small advance of $1,750, amounting to something less than $5,000 in today's dollars, she quit her last full-time job at the hospital laundry and headed to Maryland to research *Kindred*.

Even with her advance in hand Octavia couldn't afford a plane ticket with her money earmarked for so many other things, so she again boarded a Greyhound bus bound for the East Coast. She spent hours cramped on smelly buses, hopping off only to stretch her legs and grab cheap food. In her travel journal Octavia noted how she passed the time mostly sleeping and reading. After her adventures from the year before, she was a seasoned traveler and felt less out of her element and homesick, unlike her first cross-country trip to the Clarion workshop years earlier. After days of traveling, the dusty roads of the West and Southwest made way for the wide-open fields of the Midwest, and finally the streets of Baltimore. She found Baltimore shabby and unimpressive. Her first stop was the nearest Travelers Aid; she wanted to stay at the YWCA but it had stopped serving as a hotel for travelers. So she was directed to a seedy motel that allowed her to stretch her meager savings. As a woman traveling alone, she found her surroundings worrisome. She wryly recalled in an interview with her friend the writer Nisi Shawl: "There were a lot of guys standing around out front. I guess the only thing that I was glad about was there were no women pacing up and down out front."[26] When she got to her room, not only did it have a roach problem, it was covered in dust and cigarette butts, prompting her to nickname the place "The Hotel Sleazy." During Octavia's stay she wrote to a friend that, creepiness aside, her height and stature (she described herself at the time as "six feet tall and rather formidable looking") turned out to be sufficient in encouraging shady characters to leave her alone.[27]

In Maryland Octavia hoped to tour former plantations to get a feel for the land so many enslaved Blacks had toiled and died on. But when she got to there, she discovered that there was a house tour season, and that season

was largely over. Nevertheless, she was able to tour George Washington's estate, Mount Vernon, writing about it:

> I went down to Washington, D.C., and took a Grayline bus tour of Mount Vernon and that was as close as I could get to a plantation. Back then they had not rebuilt the slave cabins and the tour guide did not refer to slaves but to "servants" and there was all this very carefully orchestrated dancing around the fact that it had been a slave plantation. But still I could see the layout, I could actually see things, you know, the tools used, the cabins that had been used for working.[28]

Her experience at Mount Vernon was transformative. She wrote to a friend, "No amount of books, pictures or Historical Society dioramas can quite bring the bad old days to life like in a way stepping back into them."[29] She bought Mount Vernon memorabilia and maps of the estate, which helped her in crafting the Weylin plantation of *Kindred*. The irony of touring the slave plantation of one of the "Founding Fathers" just a year after the nation's bombastic commemoration of freedom was not lost on Octavia. Two hundred years of nationhood—and yet the tour guide could not speak the truth about the country's first president: he owned slaves. Her further research into slavery only cemented her conviction that systemic oppression based on hierarchal thinking was intricately woven into the fabric of not only American society but human civilization.

Besides touring Mount Vernon, Octavia also visited the Maryland Historical Society, which was conveniently located across from her hotel. Although the Historical Society was a treasure trove of information, it came with a price. The service fee was low, but so were Octavia's funds. Her budget allowed for only one meal per day, and she did not want to have to choose between eating and researching, so she made the most of her limited time at the Historical Society, particularly to get a feel for antebellum architecture and period-specific furniture: "I had no camera, but I could describe them in one of my notebooks. So in a sense, having no camera was almost a good thing because you remember it better. The way my memory works, I remember it better when I have to look at it and write what I'm seeing."[30] She took notes about the kinds of clothes, tools, and everyday items antebellum Marylanders would have used. She researched the price of land, food, and slaves. She paid attention to how homes were decorated and what was considered fashionable. Her travelogue shows her taking detailed notes to be able to paint an authentic picture of the times. Rigorous research

and attention to detail is a hallmark not only for *Kindred* but for almost all Octavia's works.

Besides the Maryland Historical Society, she found a local library branch to be most helpful. The Hotel Sleazy was also around the corner from the Enoch Pratt Free Library, where she was able to pore over dozens of slave narratives. She found Julius Lester's young adult compilation *To Be a Slave* useful, as well as slave narratives like William Still's *Underground Railroad* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She also read accounts by slave mistresses who wrote diaries from their perches at the big house. Her favorite book though was *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*—a nineteen-volume set of interviews with formerly enslaved people compiled by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s that catalogued their experiences before they died. Octavia found the books useful but sad: "It was depressing reading not only because bad things happened to slaves, but because it could become so pedestrian when you read enough of it, so ordinary."[31] The quotidian horrors of slavery found in slave narratives and first-person accounts would provide much inspiration for *Kindred*.

Octavia also learned a lot just by walking around the streets of Baltimore and the Eastern Shore of Maryland, as well as Washington, D.C., observing the landscape and the buildings. Her "feet never hurt so much."[32] Alex Haley had published his bestseller *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* in the summer of 1976, just before Octavia was tramping around Maryland. She did not read *Roots* before writing *Kindred*, but she was heartened by the book's success: "When I was traveling around in Maryland I kept running across little 'Alex Haley was here' signs; you know, advertising, that he had done research at that particular place. I was writing a completely different kind of book, so it didn't bother me. It at least let me know that I was in the right place to do research."[33]

After her research time in Maryland, she made the cross-country trek back to California and set out to finish the novel that had wracked her brain for years. She placed the maps from Mount Vernon on the wall above the desk in her apartment. She pored over her myriad notes and dove headfirst into the writing process. She worked on the project she was alternately calling *To Keep Thee in All Thy Ways* and *Guardian*—the title *Kindred* would come later—nearly every day and devoted portions of each week to going down rabbit holes of research. And although she did stop to spend

time with her family and the occasional friend, writing—work—was the biggest part of life. Her journal entries from this time reveal that she was happiest when the words flowed from her pen, but she also often felt deeply lonely and longed for more community and romantic partnership, circumstances she largely found elusive. In her diary, she mulls over the brief fling she had with a man she met at the library, an encounter she found clumsy and transactional.[34] During this time her crushes were otherwise unrequited. In another entry she considers getting an office job, not only to better support herself, but also so she could engage with more people: "I write of people. Thus, I require outside contact . . . I must be open, approachable. And gently, carefully, I must approach. I NEED PEOPLE."[35] Money remained tight, and she was again considering resorting to pawning her tape recorder, typewriter, and television—but even that wouldn't cover all of her rent.[36]

The road to publication was not a smooth one. Octavia lamented in November 1977: "I got GUARDIAN back today from [literary agent] Ann Elmo. Five months out and not looked at by ONE SINGLE PUBLISHER. So, yes, I've been treated badly."[37] Chiding herself for sending out "a sloppy uneven, at times poorly written manuscript," she set out to strengthen the novel.[38] This type of negative self-talk is repeated throughout these journals of her life as a young writer, but also throughout the rest of her career. She was exacting and tough on herself to a fault; this manifested often as an unrelenting perfectionism that both pushed her to achieve and chipped away at her confidence. But despite the rejections and low points, Octavia did revise the novel and sold it to Doubleday. As with her other novels, she bristled against what she saw as editorial overreach and she sparred with her editors over the revisions.[39] For example, the publisher wanted to call the novel *Dana*, which Octavia was dead set against.[40] A self-described slow writer, she revised the manuscript until late 1978 and published it the following year, she and the publisher settling on the title *Kindred*.

Besides working on *Kindred*, Octavia also published her only nonspeculative publication, "Near of Kin," in 1979 in the literary magazine *Chrysalis*. There is no science or fantasy at all in it—not even unexplained time travel. But, like *Kindred*, it is a story about troubling family ties. "Near of Kin" was also a story that wouldn't leave Octavia alone until she wrote it

down—another example of positive obsession. Growing up in the Black Baptist church, Octavia was exposed to the Bible as a sort of manual with instructive stories that were to inform her life. She found the Old Testament stories of family strange and intriguing. "The stories got me: stories of conflict, betrayal, torture, murder, exile, and incest," she recalled. "I read them avidly. This was, of course, not exactly what my mother had in mind when she encouraged me to read the Bible. Nevertheless, I found these fascinating, and when I began writing, I explored these themes in my own stories."[41] Inspired by the stories of Lot's daughters and the children of Adam and Eve, she was particularly interested in how modern people make sense of incest. The result is "Near of Kin," a "sympathetic story of incest" that follows a young protagonist confronting the truth of her paternity—that her parents are brother and sister.[42] While Octavia called "Near of Kin" a minor work, it is very much in line with the themes of her other works, despite the lack of speculative content in the tale.

Although Octavia had the idea for *Kindred* for years, when it came down to it, she found the research troubling and the writing depressing. She recalled: "One of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narratives—I think I had gotten to one by a man who was explaining how he had been sold to a doctor who used him for medical experiments—was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it."[43] That the "somewhat cleaned-up version" of slavery that Octavia pens in *Kindred* remains terrifying is a testament to both the enduring horrors of slavery and Octavia's uncanny ability to convey the core truths of slavery's violence for a modern audience.

"A SANITIZED VERSION OF SLAVERY"

Kindred tells the story of Dana, a Black woman writer living in 1976. She's married to Kevin, a white man who is also a writer. They are an unusual couple for their time, but both are pursuing their careers and are deeply in love, despite the censure of their families. Without explanation Dana is thrust back in time to save a young white boy named Rufus from imminent death. Soon after, Dana discovers that Rufus is one of her ancestors—albeit a slaver who rapes Dana's Black foremother—and reasons that she must save him to make her own life possible. Rufus grows up and into his role as

a slave owner and subconsciously calls Dana back in time to save him from death several times. Each time Dana returns and saves him, she endures slavery alongside her ancestors and returns to the present only when her own life is in danger. On her last trip home, Dana returns only with the memories of her time travel; she is also marked by a severed arm, a reminder of how the past has taken a piece of her.

Kindred is fundamentally speculative in that it creates an impossible scenario to invite readers to consider their own assumptions, beliefs, and behavior about slavery and its legacy. That is, what would you do if you were transported back to the antebellum era? Octavia's response is stark and pragmatic. She believed that most contemporary Black people, like their ancestors, would endure for the sake of their own survival and of those they loved. They would commit smaller yet still dangerous acts of rebellion, such as shirking work and destroying tools, as well as larger ones, like committing infanticide and suicide, but few would burn down plantations or murder slave owners outright. They would develop curious, complicated relationships with the people who owned them, and they would hold fast to the community of enslaved people, kith and kin, who comprised their support system. And although they would be worn down by slavery, what Dana calls in the novel "a long slow process of dulling," they would never lose sight of their humanity or the fact that what they were experiencing was terrible and wrong.[44] They would understand themselves to be braving a crucible created by powerful, craven people.

That is not to say that Octavia does not portray slavery's terrible, long-term effects. One especially harrowing scene in *Kindred* depicts a group of enslaved children "playing auction," sizing each other up the way would-be slave buyers would. One child even corrects his peers, telling them that they are not acting like the way he remembers the auction block experience he and his mother endured.[45] Octavia illustrates that slavery had many deleterious effects on Black people, but she never identifies cowardice as one of the results.

Instead, *Kindred* illustrates how slavery entraps the enslaved and their descendants in a complicated entanglement. Their fates remain inextricably linked. Dana learns this when she is forced to save Rufus time and again. In a wicked example of irony, Dana herself seemingly will not exist without the violation of her Black ancestor, Alice. Saving Rufus necessarily leads to Alice's degradation. Yet Dana, relying on her 1976 ethos, initially believes

Rufus may be saved and so makes this deal with the devil somewhat willingly. After all, she is a modern Black woman married to a relatively progressive white man in a loving relationship. Her very life is an example of how far the nation has come in terms of race relations. In her notes on May 26, 1977, Octavia writes: "The struggle to survive and be free underlies every slave novel (and most biog's and short slave narritives [*sic*]). It is so much the common and expected conclusion that it has become a cliche. It is no less true. It is simply a foregone conclusion . . . This is NOT the story of a woman's struggle to be free. This is a story of a black woman who must preserve the life of her white slavemaster ancestor without betraying her own people or herself."[46] Over the course of the novel Dana learns she can't save Rufus, and, by extension, she can't save white people from themselves if they don't want to be saved. This knowledge comes with a hefty price—Alice's life and Dana's arm. Dana's realization of this in 1976 is the genuine story of the Bicentennial, the stark legacy of US history.[47] *Kindred* thus reflects a harsh truth for modern Black Americans who, like Dana, are continually coerced into a tenuous relationship with white America, forced to be the country's moral compass, heart of democracy, and canary in the coal mine for the nation's ills.

Kindred is also about the cost of slavery for white people. Dana's ancestor Rufus is the most obvious example. He begins the novel as a self-destructive, petulant child of an abusive father and a smothering mother. Some readers might see him as doomed from the start, but Dana tries her best to shift the course of his life. She teaches him how to read and shows him kindness, not simply out of deference to his power and privilege but because he is a child deserving of care and affection. But, just as the institution of slavery is too massive for enslaved Blacks to individually shift, Dana finds that she cannot save Rufus from his fate. He is too enmeshed in the infrastructure of white supremacy and patriarchy.[48] Take, for instance, his relationship with Dana's Black ancestor, Alice. Despite Rufus's professed love for Alice, he rapes her. To control her, he pretends to sell her children. Although he is distraught when Alice takes her life, he does not fully grasp his role in her despair. Then his fate is sealed when he attempts to assault Dana. Rufus does not, perhaps cannot, see Black people's humanity. They are objects that provide care for him and fulfill his desires; they have no needs and desires of their own, certainly none that he

is obligated to respect. In *Kindred*, Octavia depicts slavery's ultimate irony, that the institution did more to dehumanize Rufus and other whites than the enslaved property that they sought to oppress. Just as there is a Faustian bargain for Blacks, there is a parallel one for whites. In exchange for the raw social power they receive and can pass down for generations, they give up empathy and a piece of their fundamental humanity. In that way, the novel illustrates what Frederick Douglass observed about whites and how corrupting absolute power is.[49] *Kindred*, then, is not a call to pity Rufus and his ilk, but rather an encouragement for non-Black readers to look inward and to find and extinguish the Rufus within themselves and in society.

Dana's white husband, Kevin, also learns about the costs of slavery firsthand. When Kevin time travels with Dana, he is not unlike Octavia's friend who believed he could and would openly fight against racist practices. But Kevin quickly becomes inured to the vast inequities he sees, passively accepting them. When he first time travels, he marvels at the plantation's self-sufficiency, telling Dana, "this place isn't what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage."[50] But time in the antebellum South quickly disabuses Kevin of his naïveté. He is traumatized after watching an enslaved woman die in childbirth after "the woman's master strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her—dropped on the ground."[51] He cannot indulge in any Wild West fantasies where he travels into the past as a hero in a white hat; he must stand by and watch as white supremacy unleashes its violence in the name of his ancestors. It's no wonder that life in the past rapidly ages Kevin, particularly once he is trapped in the past for five years. He is already prematurely gray; spending years in antebellum America before automated travel and modern medicine wears him down.[52]

Rufus and Kevin exist as foils of each other. Rufus is the unrepentant racist who degenerates over time; he claims to love Alice and Dana, but he really sees them as objects for his own use. On the other hand, Kevin is the well-meaning liberal ally who claims to empathize with Black experience but who still traffics in white privilege until reality forces him to realize how entrenched he is in the system. Before his sojourn in the past Kevin is the stand-in for the reader who is quick to point out how far America has come. He's the liberal/moderate that Martin Luther King Jr. decried in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" who is impressed by incremental progress and unreservedly celebrates it.[53] Kevin's character chastises the complacent

and is a call for true allyship, or what activist Rosa Clemente has called being an "accomplice" to marginalized people.[54] By the end of the novel, Kevin understands the true cost of the nation's "peculiar institution."

At its heart, though, *Kindred* challenges the notion that Black people in the antebellum era and the decades right after slavery were weak or cowardly. Dana's own hubris falls away the more time she spends among her ancestors. She initially holds the naïve belief that she can change Rufus and therefore improve the quality of life for her ancestors, but she eventually realizes that she is simply a cog in the machine of slavery. There is no triumphant battle scene where the enslaved bear arms and cut down their enslavers. Instead, there are small moments of laughter in the kitchen when Dana helps the women cook. There are snatches of storytelling in the slave cabins after dark. Dana sees Black people fall in love and create families and mourn when their people die or are sold away. Just as she does not focus on marronage and large-scale rebellions, Octavia likewise rejects gratuitous displays of violence to show how terrifying chattel slavery was.[55] Octavia was not rejecting the role of revolution or rebellion, but rather emphasizing the strength and courage it took for individuals to survive outside of those kinds of large-scale movements. She creates what she called a "sanitized" version of slavery that tries to get at the psychological horrors of the institution. In *Kindred*, Octavia responds to her friend's implication that his ancestors deserved death not with bombastic storytelling but with a somber neo-slave narrative that emphasizes how their ancestors survived the daily indignities of slavery. Octavia admitted: "What I wanted to teach in writing *Kindred* was that the people who did what my mother did were not frightened or timid or cowards, they were heroes. I wanted to make that clear to people like my friend. I wanted to reach people emotionally in a way that history tends not to."[56]

In fact, in direct response to her friend's angst, Octavia tried to write the protagonist as a Black man in early versions of *Kindred*:

> Actually, I began with a man as [the] main character, but I couldn't go on using the male main character, because I couldn't realistically keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn't even have time to learn the rules—the rules of submission, I guess you could call them—before he was killed for not knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed and that's the way I wrote it. She was beaten and abused, but she was not killed. That sexism, in a sense worked in her favor.[57]

A modern Black man—like her friend from college—one who would be unwilling or unable to readily grasp the level of submission required from a slave would make for a poor protagonist, according to Octavia's logic. On the other hand, she reasoned, the realities of patriarchy—and more particularly the experience of misogynoir, the specific hatred of Black women—would ironically make a Black woman character more viable.[58] It is not that Dana doesn't struggle to adapt to slavery. She makes many missteps that harm herself and others. For example, there are moments when she speaks up when she should in fact be quiet—by the logic of antebellum racism and sexism. And Dana experiences swift violence every time she steps out of line. Though an exacting experience, Dana proved herself to be a quick study. A female protagonist would be used to navigating a world that wanted her submission because of both her race and her gender. The antebellum caste system would be shocking and degrading, yes, but it would be somewhat familiar to her. A male protagonist traveling back in time—even a Black one who had to grapple with white supremacy—would not be reasonably expected to adapt nimbly to the combination of emasculation and racial terror. Octavia imagined that such a character's reaction to his threatened masculine bravado would sabotage the purpose of time travel, and the novel would be over before it started.

She also toyed with the idea of making Kevin a Black man, perhaps a fair-skinned one who could pass for white, which would incite psychological torment for him as he traveled in time.[59] She felt that this would amplify Dana's Blackness. Yet casting Kevin as a white man had its own advantages. His whiteness could protect Dana in the nineteenth century. Dana would also have to battle feelings of being a race traitor among the enslaved when they see her willingly in a relationship with a white man. And Octavia figured that a white partner would be most able to survive the reentry into twentieth-century life. She also worried about how the various configurations would be perceived by her audience: "Should I fear being typed as a 1) black lusting after white men, a 2) a black who turns away from her own."[60] She weighed all these pros and cons and eventually faced her fears, not only deciding against a male protagonist but making the female protagonist's partner white. By considering race and gender in *Kindred*, Octavia responded both to her friend's personal angst and to the masculinist, generational anxiety and agenda of the 1960s and 1970s. By calling into question the era's hypermasculinity that was often

more invested in reclaiming lost masculinity—that is, achieving patriarchal power—Octavia was able to tell the hard nuanced truth of Black experience in slavery through Black feminist storytelling.

Other Black feminists writing in the 1970s rebuked this patriarchy in blackface. Toni Cade Bambara, who would befriend Octavia in the 1980s, published the anthology *The Black Woman* in 1970. The collection includes poetry, short stories, and essays that explore the myriad experiences of Black women, with particular emphasis on the effect that both patriarchy and white supremacy have on the lives of working-class and queer Black women. Likewise, the poetry and essays of self-described lesbian mother warrior poet Audre Lorde outline how Black women were often caught between the machinations of white women in feminist spaces and Black men in Black nationalist spaces. Her work illuminates the spaces Black women build for themselves that allow them to bring out the fullness of their experience.[61] Similarly, Michele Wallace in her strident 1979 polemic *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* called out the toxic masculinity in so-called radical spaces of the 1970s. Like her Black feminist peers, Octavia rejected the notion that a "return" to patriarchy is the solution to the intergenerational conflict. Instead, in *Kindred* Octavia offers a grounded, sober look at both chattel slavery and our contemporary reckoning with it.

Octavia's grim fantasy is as much about the contemporary reader as it is about honoring the suffering and survival of one's enslaved ancestors. She admitted that time travel in the novel was simply a device she used to spark introspection: "I was much more interested in taking a black woman of now and sending her back to then, and having her cope. I wanted to do a novel about feelings as much as about history. Because I recognize that a lot of young people did not really understand on the level of feelings—they could quote facts for you—but they didn't really understand what it might have been like to live then."[62] That's why the book doesn't have a lot of discourse on the mechanics of time travel. There's no time machine or discussion of quantum physics because the speculative aspect of the novel is just a vehicle to get the plot moving. What Octavia offers instead in *Kindred* is a psychological account of slavery and its legacy, one that modern readers are forced to reckon with, not simply as a glimpse into the past but as an experience of the present.

Because of its revolutionary illustration of slavery for modern readers, *Kindred* should be understood along pioneering neo-slave narratives like Margaret Walker's historical novel *Jubilee*.[63] Walker's novel is the first iteration of the modern neo-slave narrative. Published in 1966, just a decade before *Kindred*, *Jubilee* tells the story of Walker's great-grandmother, who was born enslaved, lived through emancipation, and made a life for herself and her family in the wake of Reconstruction. While antebellum and postbellum slave narratives respectively illustrate the moral abjection of slavery and how the formerly enslaved triumphed over enslavement, neo-slave narratives generally have a different trajectory. They are more focused on the interior lives of the enslaved and reveal intimate relationships that were taboo for their antecedents. That is not to say that the antebellum narratives of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs were devoid of violence or sex or descriptions of family life. However, they do not spend as much time discussing the interior lives of the enslaved as their modern heirs do. A famous example in Douglass's narrative is the rather perfunctory inclusion of his first wife, Anna Murray Douglass, at the end of his first autobiography.[64] Similarly, postbellum narratives such as those written by Booker T. Washington and Elizabeth Keckley discuss the contours of slavery as an obstacle they have overcome and rightfully spend a significant amount of time on their postslavery experiences.[65]

Kindred is part of a cadre of 1970s neo-slave narratives, like Alex Haley's *Roots*, that reimagined enslavement for those several generations removed from slavery who came of age during the civil rights era and right before.[66] Neo-slave narratives are examples of art that reckon with the nation's legacy in ways that the Bicentennial's commemorative stamps, coins, and patriotic parades could never do. They tell the ugly, complicated, unvarnished history of the United States, demythologizing the past and giving readers a clearer view of the present. There is poetic justice in the fact that this era, between the civil rights movement and the nation's Bicentennial, also sees the creation and rise of the neo-slave novel, with Octavia's *Kindred* being one of the most groundbreaking examples of the genre.

Kindred nonetheless stands out from its neo-slave narrative peers because it is the first of its kind to truly imagine a modern Black person who is the descendant of the formerly enslaved literally confronting that history. Like her peer Toni Morrison, who wrote *The Bluest Eye* because it

was a book she wanted to read, Octavia saw *Kindred* as the first book that she read that invites a modern reader to really experience the existential threat of slavery. "It's one thing to read about it and cringe that something horrible is happening," she noted. "I sent somebody into it who is a person of now, of today, and that means I kind of take the reader along and expose them in a way that the average historic novel doesn't intend to, can't."[67]

OFF THE NARROW, NARROW FOOTPATH

While many of her contemporaries would later incorporate elements of science fiction and fantasy into their work (Morrison most famously in her masterpiece *Beloved*), it was Octavia who charted that path almost exclusively. For Octavia, the speculative was one way, her preferred way, not only of creating art but also of getting at the heart of the human experience. Indeed, she thought it was particularly helpful in thinking through Black experiences across the diaspora. In her essay "Positive Obsession," Butler asserts the significance of science fiction for 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 reader and writer 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?[68]

These rhetorical questions and subsequent answers reject the notion that science fiction is anathema to Black experience, arguing instead that science fiction can incite the sort of transgressive thinking that is particularly important for Black people. Getting off the beaten path, rejecting narrow, small thinking is key in a stratified world where Black people are often at the bottom of the hierarchy. Octavia's science fiction and fantasy should be understood alongside her sister-writers who began publishing in earnest in the 1970s. They too were answering "What good is any form of literature to Black people?" *Kindred* is one of many answers to that question even if it isn't technically science fiction. Butler called *Kindred* a "grim fantasy" because "there's no science in it."[69]

Although Octavia was indeed a member of the growing group of Black feminist women writers, the fact that she almost exclusively wrote science fiction did set her apart. Besides Samuel R. Delany, Octavia was the only other known Black science fiction writer in circulation when she emerged on the scene. She and Delany were soon joined by Steven Barnes, and they were a trio for a while. But science fiction in those days was largely written by white men for white men.[70] Some in the science fiction establishment, like her mentor Harlan Ellison, embraced her, but these conditions were unfriendly at best and hostile at worst to a working-class Black woman. Such circumstances made for a lonely journey, but not an unfamiliar one. Octavia had been a loner since childhood and was keen on her own company. Just because she did not have any direct models did not mean she allowed her imagination to be stymied by social expectations, even when she wrestled at the beginning of her career with what we now call imposter syndrome. She wrote the kinds of stories she wanted to read and was determined to get her work out. It was her experience as a loner—an only child and a deeply introverted soul content with her own company—that often enabled her to chart this singular path.

Even at this early stage in her career, Octavia was pragmatic about her work and somewhat cynical about the business of publishing and earning an income from it. She did not earn large advances for her novels, and royalty payments were often both meager and sporadic. She frequently pressed her agent and her editors at Doubleday about getting paid. And there were other issues. Once she received a check for $750 (just under $4,000 today), but her bank refused to cash it: “So now I have $750 on deposit and an empty refrigerator and a little red typewriter that’s going to have a new home for a little while. How the hell do all the really dishonest people cash all the bad checks I keep hearing about on the news?”[71] Her journals during this time are alternately filled with admonitions to write more popular works that would pay better and with affirmations to manifest a six-figure savings. She wrote detailed budgets of her actual income and her ideal income. In April 1977 she mused, “What I need for my own well being as a writer is sufficient money for me to live on and still be free to travel and take pictures and notes and inner impressions.”[72] Ideally, Octavia wanted to travel for three months and spend the rest of the year writing and taking classes. She was nowhere near that reality in 1977, but she did her own

modified version that year when she traveled to Maryland to do research for *Kindred*.

Likewise, she did not wait for the muse to strike her but instead maintained a rigorous schedule of writing to keep herself on task. Octavia frequently remarked that habit was more important than inspiration or talent. She told budding writers to "forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice."[73] For the first decades of her career, Octavia lived this advice, writing almost daily and submitting her work as often as she could. She could control and refine her habits as a writer, but she had less power in her dealings as a fledgling author. She wrote striking stories about heroic Black women on fantastical journeys, but being a pioneer did not mean that her work was always well-received. In the early days, her work was rejected often. *Kindred*, for example, was rejected several times before it found a home. Also, Octavia's work was often marketed in ways that she found less than satisfactory. Sometimes publishers replaced Black heroines with white ones on the covers of her novels; other times works that she felt should be advertised to larger audiences were stuck with the niche label of "science fiction," a fact that chafed her. These indignities persisted even after the success of *Kindred*.

Kindred is Octavia's bestselling, most well-known, and most often-cited novel. During her life, the novel frequently was optioned for film and television, and it was the first of her works to be adapted into a graphic novel and as a TV show. When readers say they are familiar with her work, they are usually thinking of *Kindred*. Perhaps this is because Octavia doesn't spend a lot of time discussing any time-travel apparatus or how her multiverse works. Dana simply travels through time when either she or Rufus is near death, and no explanation is offered. Octavia herself noted that *Kindred*, like *Parable of the Sower*, is "accessible to people who normally don't read science fiction."[74] Perhaps *Kindred* is also popular because it is singular and not part of a larger series, making it something of an outlier in her oeuvre. There are versions of *Kindred* that she imagined as part of the Patternist universe in her archive, but Octavia ultimately decided to make it a stand-alone novel.[75]

Although Octavia was not Dana, she wasn't completely different from her. Octavia was also an idiosyncratic outsider who chose to work temp

jobs so she could pursue a writing career that most of her family didn't understand. And, like Dana, she was beginning to see the fruits of her labor. By the time she published *Kindred* in 1979 Octavia was a full-time writer. *Kindred* was her fourth novel, and she was just hitting her stride. Money was certainly still precarious for the next several years, but Octavia devoted the rest of her life to writing full time.

While *Kindred* was not Octavia's first novel, it is perhaps the one that most directly articulates the issues that animate her writing. It is a novel about hierarchy and ethics, about nature versus nurture, and about how futile it is to try to escape one's personal and collective past. The novel's circuitous path is also like her previous works. Octavia, in the throes of her positive obsession, was known for working and reworking ideas until she got them just right—and still fixating on them after publication. She took the germ of the idea from a discussion with a college friend, one that explores how someone today would experience chattel slavery. She spent time immersed in antebellum archives and spent years writing and rewriting snatches that would become her most acclaimed novel, reflecting on not only her own coming to terms with the history of slavery but also its enduring legacy in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Chapter 3

Harvest

On August 3, 1980, former California governor and Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan stood before a sizeable crowd at the Neshoba County Fair near Philadelphia, Mississippi. In what would come to be known as his "States' Rights Speech," Reagan confessed:

> I believe in states' rights; I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level. And I believe that we've distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended in the Constitution to that federal establishment. And if I do get the job I'm looking for, I'm going to devote myself to trying to reorder those priorities and to restore to the states and local communities those functions which properly belong there.[1]

To the uninitiated listener, this declaration might seem like a commonsense perspective on government that uplifts self-reliance and community engagement. But Reagan's speech was a clear signal to those in the know that he intended to return to a version of the country that existed before the sea change of cultural shifts that happened during the 1960s and 1970s. After all, his campaign's slogan was "Let's Make America Great Again," with "again" being the operative word. This speech and the values it lauded would help to shape the scope of the modern conservative movement by deemphasizing the role of the federal government in favor of states exerting more power.[2]

Presidential candidates often try to win votes by going into community spaces and chatting up potential voters. Churches, schools, and county fairs are all places where an enterprising candidate can charm the local electorate into thinking they are as folksy and homegrown as they claim by shaking hands and kissing babies. But Reagan's campaign stop at the Neshoba

County Fair was more than just a typical photo op.[3] Philadelphia, Mississippi, was more than a sleepy hamlet that reflected the rural everyday American Reagan was courting. The county was infamous for being the site where three civil rights activists, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, had been murdered in 1964.[4] So when Reagan arrived in Neshoba County just sixteen years later, championing "states' rights," the subtext was clear to Octavia. She understood the phrase "states' rights" as a euphemism conservatives used for when they wanted to allow individual states to roll back civil liberties based on their state's so-called specific needs.[5] Advocating for states' rights at the site of a lynching was a not-so-subtle declaration of how Reagan sought to govern. She feared for the nation under his rule. Octavia wrote in her journal on November 13, 1979: "Ron Reagan could win. I desparate[ly] [*sic*] want him not to. He is indifferent to just about all the causes important to me."[6]

True enough, there were "Reagan Democrats," or those left of center who crossed party lines to elect the charismatic conservative.[7] They found the B-movie actor turned politician compelling, especially after the tense years of the Carter Administration. Reagan's homespun affect, promises of a booming economy, and tough, no-nonsense sensibilities were refreshing to many. Octavia scoffed at their short-sighted acceptance. In December 1980 she predicted that during a Reagan presidency not only would pollution and environmental calamities increase but "it will become un-American to criticize the destructive activities of big business. The media will minimize such criticism, cowed by governmental assertions that they stand in the way of getting America moving again, putting us back on top."[8] For Octavia, Reagan was not only a scourge, but he and his ilk could precipitate societal collapse. This is borne out in the pages of the works Octavia published in the first half of the 1980s—*Wild Seed*, "Speech Sounds," "Bloodchild," and *Clay's Ark*—and in much of the rest of her career. Where some saw the promise of personal dignity and rugged individualism in Reagan's message, Octavia saw a laissez-faire free-for-all that discounted community and the least among us. After Reagan won the 1980 election, Octavia mused that affirmative action would be slowly eroded, as evidenced by the Supreme Court's 1978 ruling *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, which found affirmative action constitutional but outlawed racial quotas.[9] She rightly worried that

burgeoning corrections to centuries of inequity not only would evaporate in the face of a Reagan presidency but would be declared as forms of "reverse" discrimination against white men. When Reagan remarked in his inauguration speech months later that the only special interest group he identified were "Americans," Octavia's fears were affirmed.[10]

Whereas *Wild Seed* is set in a familiar past, tracing the origins of chattel slavery through the experiences of two demigods, most of the other works Octavia published in the first half of the 1980s were cautionary tales of humanity's nearish future. "Bloodchild" imagines a far-off future where humans exist as pets and hosts for alien offspring. Both "Speech Sounds" and *Clay's Ark* look ahead to the very near future, imagining late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century worlds ravaged by disease, disorder, and chaos. From the vantage point of the early 1980s, that may have seemed like an odd position to take, but Octavia was a student of history, a master at decoding patterns, and she saw the writing on the wall. She identified the "promises" of this new Reagan era—increased prosperity, progression, and liberty after years of recession and inflation—as a smoke screen for a politics that excluded those outside of the mainstream: those who were women or poor or Black or queer or disabled, those from immigrant families, those outside of the so-called American dream. She saw no kindly grandfather in Reagan. Quite the opposite, in fact. After all, she had lived in California much of her life up to that point, and he had been the state's governor from 1967 to 1975. This was the same man who had targeted Angela Davis and other Black activists.[11] He may have spoken softly, but his words also assuaged racists worried about the seemingly rapid post–civil rights social change. Octavia thought of Reagan as a genial monster.[12]

The work that Octavia produced during the first decade of her career reflected the long scope of her understanding. Sure, the 1980s were about conspicuous consumption, but treating the Earth like a dust bin could last only so long. The hole in the ozone layer caused by chlorofluorocarbons found in everyday items like aerosol spray cans was evidence, not to mention the wildfires in her home state. Some found her visions of the 1990s and early 2000s alarmist. Why would a society that is so strong and prosperous descend so swiftly into lawless chaos, as her stories depicted? But Octavia knew all about the fall and failure of empires—look at Rome, the Spanish Armada, the Aztecs. Her works illustrate that the United States

was no different and it was folly to think otherwise. Despite the heady Bicentennial celebrations of 1976 that celebrated American ingenuity, the United States was not simply a scrappy upstart nation that rose to the top out of sheer determination. It was a juggernaut that regularly rolled over other nations, an imperialist leviathan with massive spheres of influence. It was America's time *now*, but it wouldn't be forever. And whatever rose to eclipse the United States might be much worse than the fears about the Soviets—the entire collapse of human society could be brought about by American selfishness (late-stage capitalism), destructive tendencies (nuclear war), or virulent illness (global pandemic). Octavia's words were a stark contrast to the solipsistic optimism of this American age, and her writing during the 1980s highlights this massive hubris.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF THE LIBRARY

Beginning in the 1970s and until her move to Seattle two decades later, the Los Angeles Public Library was in many ways Octavia's unofficial second home.[13] She was a lifelong advocate for public libraries. They were part of the reason that she was a writer at all. In "Free Libraries: Are They Becoming Extinct?" Octavia mused that "public libraries are the open universities of America . . . They offer worlds of possibilities to people who might otherwise be confined by their ignorance and poverty to continued ignorance and worsened poverty."[14] Reading books and attending library programs shifted the trajectory of her life. Octavia never forsook the library even as her star was on the rise. For her, regularly writing and researching in the library was a bit like working a shift at one of her old temp jobs, though she certainly did not miss the days of clocking in. In her journal she admitted, "I write to live; I live to write . . . The writing cannot ever be all, but it must always be first."[15] Many days she got on the bus after putting in some early hours working at home and made her way across the bustling city. Other times she headed to the library straight away to get a change of scenery from her apartment. Researching the backstory for her latest novel, which would become *Wild Seed*, was leading her down all sorts of fun rabbit holes and gave her a break from *Blindsight*, the other frustrating novel she was working on. As the prequel to the Patternist series, *Wild Seed* meant that she spent lots of time developing and fleshing out the origin stories for the main characters Doro and Anyanwu.

Take, for instance, how she knew she wanted Emma Anyanwu, the grandmother figure in *Mind of My Mind* and the protagonist of *Wild Seed*, to be Igbo. At first, she wasn't sure how to make those connections. She sat at a table poring over her cache of treasure: piles of books, some academic or arcane, some old and tattered, about West African histories, cultures, and languages. Out of the pile she picked up Richard N. Henderson's *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture*, an ethnography of an Igbo community in Nigeria. The answer she needed was in a footnote about a woman named Atagbusi. The woman was a shape-shifter and a beloved community leader who was commemorated at the market gate. Her name and memory were invoked as symbols of protection long after her death—this sounded like Emma Anyanwu all the way. Octavia wondered, Who said she *had* to die? Just like that, Emma became Anyanwu Atagbusi, a shape-shifting immortal Igbo woman. Not only was Anyanwu based on this ancient woman found in a footnote, she was also patterned after Octavia's own grandmother, whom she greatly admired.[16]

During this book project, the library was once again Octavia's sanctuary, just as the Peter Pan Room at her childhood library in Pasadena had been her safe space. She wrote much of *Wild Seed* in the library, as she had with her earlier works. Besides *The King in Every Man*, Octavia pored over dictionaries and linguistic guides like *The Ibo Word List*. It was massive and coming apart at the seams, but she was able to study five different Igbo dialects, which helped her add authenticity to *Wild Seed*'s world-building. In a battered Nubian-English dictionary she discovered that "doro" means "the direction from which the sun comes." She had already named her character Doro in *Mind of My Mind*—and even years before in her childhood scribblings—but her newfound knowledge worked perfectly, especially since "Anyanwu" means "sun." She would mourn the library when it went up in flames in 1986 and again during the L.A. riots, but she returned each time the library was renovated.[17]

After the grueling research and writing that went into *Kindred*, this process felt like having dessert after eating all your least favorite vegetables. Years later she recalled:

> I wrote *Wild Seed* as a reward for having written *Kindred*. *Kindred* was *depressing*. I had to go to places that I didn't enjoy going, in my own mind, and in history. Also, my characters in *Kindred* couldn't really win. I couldn't change history and make them win. The closest they could come to winning was to survive. They lived. They didn't live *whole*, but they lived. When

> I finished *Kindred*, I needed to do something that was fun. *Wild Seed* was fun. Which is odd because it was also one of the most difficult novels I've ever written. But I thoroughly enjoyed writing it.[18]

Kindred was a story that wouldn't let her go, and in the end, she felt battered and bruised by writing it. This new story, however, was decidedly more pleasant. Although *Kindred* was a fantasy—and a "grim fantasy" at that—Octavia still had to keep some aspects of that fantastical story realistic.[19] Her heroine Dana was not going to run through an antebellum plantation like John Shaft cleaning up the mean streets of New York. In *Wild Seed*, her heroine had a lot more power. In fact, she had superpowers and could fight her oppressors in much more satisfying ways. The two novels did have something in common, though. Besides the theme of chattel slavery, in both *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* Octavia "decided to approach history as though it were another planet."[20]

Octavia had been fascinated with the idea of people having supernatural powers since she was a kid. Back in high school, she had a group of friends that would sit around and ponder all sorts of existential questions like, "If you could do anything you wanted to do, no holds barred, what would you do?" Her friends often mentioned the usual, like being rich or famous, but young Octavia wasn't interested in any of that:

> "If I could do *anything*, anything at all . . . I would want to live forever and breed folks," she admitted.
>
> Her friends stared at her in confusion. Immortality was one thing, but breeding people? Girl.
>
> "Breed people?"
>
> "Yeah, I'd create a race of superhumans!"[21]

Octavia chuckled to herself whenever she remembered her earnestness. That response did not go over well with her crew. *What sort of weirdo wants to breed people?* Although she kept the wish to herself after that admission, the interest never went away. Although she couldn't live forever and breed people, she could create a character with the same obsession. And so, Doro was born. "At least I made him a bad guy!" she would remark wryly years later.[22]

Yes, working on what would become *Wild Seed* was a lot of fun. But "fun" didn't mean it wasn't challenging. Studying precolonial West Africa, Nubian, and Igbo languages and cultures, not to mention the transatlantic

slave trade, meant years of research. And she was developing a protagonist who had a very particular worldview and lived in a body that was different from those of most other characters she'd written. Most of her previous main characters were tall and formidable—not unlike Octavia herself. Anyanwu was petite and more conventionally feminine. People, particularly men, underestimate her because of her beauty and small size. Part of Anyanwu's struggle and strength is that she is far more powerful than she looks. Besides that, Anyanwu is a West African woman with a strict sense of morality colored by her precolonial Igbo culture. Things that might seem normal in the twentieth-century West, such as drinking cow's milk, is anathema to her understanding.

These characteristics made creating Anyanwu's character a fascinating puzzle for Octavia, but this was a challenge she was up for. Octavia felt like she was on top of her game when she worked on *Wild Seed*. She wrote in her diary in 1978: "I'm a good writer getting better. I just read ahead on Wild Seed. Oh, but it's good. With just a few liners, it's good. With a little more correction, it will be fantastic!"[23] Gone were the days when she had to balance tedious work and time to write. These days she devoted all her professional (and most of her personal) energy to being a full-time writer. That's not to say the money was flowing. Five novels in, and Octavia's money worries were far from over. Though writing was the priority, contacting her agent about an advance or royalty payment was still a prominent item on her to-do list.

BLACK AND FEMINIST

A popular but incorrect narrative is that Black women, fed up with the solipsism of white feminism, created their own lane in the 1970s.[24] However, this convenient narrative decenters decades of Black women's work and cultural production.[25] Since the early nineteenth century, when Maria Stewart became the earliest American woman of any race to address a crowd of men *and* women in public, Black women activists, organizers, artists, and writers had been advocating for racial justice and gender equality in the public sphere. Besides Stewart, there was Julia A. J. Foote, Frances E. W. Harper, Gertrude Bustill Mossell, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and many others, some of which have been lost to history.[26] A century later, into the 1970s, with the explosion of Black feminism in

creative work and criticism, Black women were still carrying the torch of liberation.

The last years of the 1970s were no less frantic and helter-skelter than the early part of the decade. Political upheaval, both national and international, abounded. President Jimmy Carter was sworn in to the White House in 1977 as an antidote to the disastrous Nixon presidency (and subsequent brief term of Gerald Ford).[27] Carter, a farmer and businessman from Georgia, fashioned himself as the anti-Nixon. Soft-spoken and liberal, he focused on environmental issues, improving foreign relations after Vietnam, and ushering the United States into a post–civil rights future.[28] Culture wars drew opponents on issues ranging from abortion, affirmative action, gender equality, and gay rights. It was during Carter's tenure in the White House that the fight for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) climaxed.

The ERA was first proposed in 1923 by activist Alice Paul and aimed to constitutionally cement gender equality. For decades the amendment's popularity grew from unlikely feminist hobby horse to a popular legislation that seemed like a shoo-in for Democrats in the 1970s.[29] However, just as there had been a growing feminist movement on the left, the right boasted its own robust antifeminist movement.[30] Conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly was one of the most prominent voices of the anti-ERA movement.[31] The antifeminist movement spun a convenient narrative about the necessity of patriarchy. It invited Americans wary of the whirlwinds of change to retreat to a so-called simpler era when "men were men, women were women," and those definitions were narrow and clear. Never mind that this America never existed in the first place. Black women like Octavia's mother and grandmother had always worked. Likewise, working-class white women, and women of various other races and ethnicities, had worked everywhere, from factories to farms, for decades. Octavia saw America's political sensibilities as faddish, with people becoming bored and being easily swayed by novelty. She was increasingly frustrated by the media discourse on the ERA. In an interview she admitted: "it seems to me that the media is advertising the death of the women's movement. A vast majority of states have ratified the ERA to the Constitution. I keep hearing . . . the attitude that somehow [the] ERA is not what people want. If it is what the people wanted, then it would have passed. These people often don't realize how many of the states have already ratified it."[32] Her fears

proved correct: the anti-ERA movement had momentum and was able to sway enough lawmakers. By the end of the decade, the ERA was basically dead on arrival. To this day, the ERA has not been ratified by enough states to become law.

Octavia turned thirty years old in 1977 and found herself navigating a shifting landscape, while juggling her own personal issues. What did it mean to be a professional writer if you were always broke? she often wondered. Maybe she should have become a nurse or secretary like folks had suggested. She loved her family and was close to them, but sometimes she found it hard to make new friends and longed for like-minded community.[33] During this time of her life, she was still plagued by shyness and feared public speaking. She listened to tapes that promised to hypnotize the fear away and attended public speaking courses to work on her confidence.[34]

Dating was even more challenging. The combination of her shyness and natural introversion, along with the difficulties of being a six-foot-tall, dark-skinned, somewhat androgynous woman, made heteroromantic relationships hard to navigate. She was at times misidentified as a lesbian, and although she once admitted in her diary to having a crush on a woman, she did not identify as queer.[35] Sometimes this was a misidentification of her gender presentation with her apparent sexuality. Other times, this was hurled as an insult to cut down Black feminists like herself. Throughout her life she bristled against the accusation of lesbianism, believing that this misidentification both stymied her romantic prospects with men and undermined some of her potential friendships with women.

Her journal entries in the late 1970s through the mid-1980s reflect the range of her anxieties. In an entry dated November 23, 1983, she wrote: "I am too alone, too slow, too lazy, too undisciplined, too little in my big body. I talk too much—and too little—saying too often the wrong thing."[36] She wondered whether marriage and motherhood were the right next steps.[37] Conferences and conventions gave her opportunities to meet with like-minded people, and sometimes Octavia also used these events to scope out potential partners, especially in her early days as a novelist.[38] Although she eventually ruled out motherhood as an option for herself, partnership was a perennial desire.[39] She writes in her journal of a short-lived fling with a man during this time, but mostly she worked hard on her craft. Often

Octavia was a happy hermit, researching and writing. At other times isolation, alternately experienced personally, professionally, and socially, weighed heavily on her. From her teens and well into her thirties she intermittently struggled with thoughts of suicide.[40] Social anxiety, economic precarity, health issues stemming from years of working for little or nothing, and just plain old loneliness dotted years that were also marked by the publication of novels and short stories and even increasing recognition from her science fiction peers.

Over time, Octavia formed personal and professional relationships with other Black women writers, such as Toni Cade Bambara, but that didn't happen quickly. While Octavia was isolated in the science fiction community, seemingly alone, writers such as Nan Maynard, Ntozake Shange, Louise Meriwether, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Alice Walker, Audrey Edwards, June Jordan, and Toni Morrison were meeting periodically to share work and sisterhood. As writer Kaitlyn Greenidge notes:

> The Sisterhood insisted on multiplicity. A generation earlier, James Baldwin and Richard Wright had circled each other warily, cognizant of the scrutiny of the larger white literary world. The Sisterhood, at least at its start, rejected the myth of the one and only. This is evident in Morrison's work as an editor at Random House, where she published works by Angela Davis and Henry Dumas, and Walker's promotion of fellow Black female writers to publications and editors. It's there in members' archived syllabi, where we can see them assigning one another's work to their students, long before that work was considered part of any canon.[41]

This particular group drifted apart in the 1980s, but other similar groups existed alongside and in the wake of this crew of Black women writers.[42]

Part of Octavia's isolation was circumstantial. For years she was the only known Black woman to write exclusively in science fiction and fantasy. Certainly, she was connected to fellow science fiction writers like Harlan Ellison, Tetsu Yano, Vonda McIntyre, and others; and she traveled to the Soviet Union in 1982 with a group of other science fiction writers and regularly attended conventions. But she was the singular Black woman in the genre and was very aware of her status. Although during interviews Octavia could downplay her experiences of racism and sexism, her dissemblance was self-protective.[43] She understood that, fairly or not, she was an ambassador who represented both her race and gender. In 1978 she reflected: "I am a dancing bear, a novelty, a black woman who writes

successfully. I must be able to prevail whether blacks in general are in or out of fashion. That means I must always speak well and have something interesting to say. I must become a good storyteller—reach people on a level beyond color."[44] At times, Octavia reminded herself that she must use standard English and avoid any slang, because in her mind, "As SF's solitary black woman writer, I must relax in good English or be misunderstood."[45]

To be clear, her strategy was not a simple capitulation to liberal racism but rather an adroit calculation that she hoped would help her to navigate the choppy waters of her science fiction community alone. And she never watered down her perspective in favor of a more palatable agenda. In 1980, the same year she won a Creative Arts Achievement Award from the Los Angeles YWCA, Octavia participated in a local television show, *LET'S RAP*, where she shared her thoughts on issues from the ERA to affirmative action.[46] She identified the myths and stereotypes that she argued kept Black women on the defensive. She outlined the perils of racism from white women, sexism from Black men, and internalized misogynoir from other Black women. She rejected the notion that "Black women are already liberated" or that "Black women are so strong and matriarchal" that they emasculate Black men.[47] Instead of reifying these stereotypes Octavia argued that more Black women writers were necessary so that Black women could define and depict their own experiences rather than being objects in the stories of others.

Another difference between Octavia and other writers was education and access. Unlike many of her Black feminist peers who had advanced degrees and worked in academia, Octavia had only an associate's degree in history from a junior college and, besides a brief stint as a civil servant, in the early part of her career had worked only odd jobs, often through temp agencies, rather than teaching at universities or working in the arts. For years Octavia worried that she needed credentials like a doctorate to be taken seriously.[48] She also hoped that another degree would boost her confidence. For the first decade of her career, Octavia took several college classes in an effort to gain those credentials before finally abandoning that dream. She also lived on the West Coast while many of her peers worked on the East Coast or at least had ties to New York City. And while she was fervently feminist and progressive in her politics, she did not often participate in activist organizations that would introduce her to other like-

minded peers. Instead, during this time of her life she mostly read, wrote, and watched others from afar. Still, she was very much aware of other Black feminist writers, regularly attending poetry readings and lectures, reading their work, and writing reviews of that work for newspapers.[49] Her journals are filled with musings on writers from Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, to Toni Cade Bambara and Maya Angelou, to Nikki Giovanni and Alexis De Veaux.[50] But it was not until Bambara wrote her a fan letter after the publication of *Wild Seed* that she began commiserating in earnest with other sister-writers.

While thirty-year-old Octavia was balancing life, love, and finances with various degrees of success, she was among other young Black feminists making a mark. In 1977, thirty-one-year-old Barbara Smith published "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" in the lesbian journal *Conditions* and started a movement. In the essay, she argues for a Black feminist criticism that can attend to Black women's cultural production. The year 1977 was also when Barbara Smith, along with her sister Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier, authored the groundbreaking Combahee River Collective Statement. In this feminist manifesto, they outlined the history of Black feminism and its ideology, theory, and practice. They proclaimed, "Black, and other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation." In centering the inherent value of Black women, they were unabashedly anticapitalist, pro-queer, and intersectional in their thinking and activism. They declared that unlike white feminist separatists, they did not reject progressive Black men: "We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism."[51]

Unlike her Black feminist peers who created in community with one another, Octavia also had a somewhat singular experience as a writer of science fiction. As we have seen, the science fiction and fantasy community was (and in many ways remains) a boy's club—a white boys club, in fact. The "Carl Brandon hoax" is probably the most glaring example of the early lack of diversity. In the 1950s, white science fiction writers Terry Carr and Peter Graham created the figure of Carl Joshua Brandon, a supposedly Black science fiction writer.[52] For more than two years, before the ruse was exposed, "Carl" published stories and corresponded with fellow authors

who congratulated themselves on being progressive enough to include a Black man in their literary circles.[53] Two decades later and not much had changed. When Octavia attended conventions during the first decade of her career, she could count on being one of the few women and certainly one of a handful of Black authors.

It should be no surprise that when Butler was approached in 1980 to coedit an anthology of stories about the future of race, to be called *Black Futures*, she jumped at the chance.[54] She wanted captivating stories that did not balkanize, fetishize, or romanticize the conflicts and confluences across racial lines, as she wrote in her 1980 essay "The Lost Races of Science Fiction."[55] She believed that science fiction had the special ability to invite readers to think expansively: "SF looks ahead. But since some of the most forward looking writers do not value characterization—or simply cannot create strong, believable characters, much highly imaginative sf is still run by puppets and stereotypes."[56] *Black Futures* could have combated this issue, but it was stymied from the start. In a letter to Toni Cade Bambara, Octavia described *Black Futures* as an anthology of "science fiction and speculative fiction in general by and/or about Black people."[57] In the letter she lamented, "Fact is, since there are only three active [Black] sf writers in the country (the world?) we have a hell of a lot more 'about' than by." Octavia didn't have a problem with stories about racism, but she didn't want the anthology to be about only racism. She knew there was a depth and breadth of Black experience that could be conveyed in speculative fiction—her work and the writings of Steven Barnes, Samuel R. Delany, and Charles Saunders exemplified this fact. Octavia told her friend that her role as coeditor was both to find Black writers with original science fiction pieces and to have final veto power on all the stories. She would assure that *Black Futures* "doesn't read like too much of the Black past" or like "White ideas of what blacks think and feel, of where blacks are going, of where we've been."

Although Bambara agreed to submit a story, other established Black women writers such as Toni Morrison, who were alternately uninterested or busy with other projects, passed on the project. And some of the writing that Octavia did receive fell into that old derivative trap of stereotypes she desperately wanted to avoid.[58] Her agent was unenthused and did not push the project, and her publisher, Doubleday, balked as well. Despite stereotypes that Blacks simply didn't buy books, Octavia was supported by

Black bookstores that sold out of her books. *Essence* magazine even published the first chapter of *Wild Seed*. Truthfully, Octavia worried that in the current times of post–civil rights backlash Blacks were no longer "in," despite her judgment of the book's potential.[59] By 1982 Octavia decided that it was best to table the project, as not enough Black writers were interested in science fiction.[60]

Octavia's vision would be fulfilled more than a decade later when writer and editor Sheree Renée Thomas published the pioneering anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and soon after the sequel, *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2004), which brought together established writers like Octavia and Delany alongside emerging Black science fiction writers. Thomas sees her anthologies as being possible because of Octavia's early work.[61] When Thomas pitched the idea of *Dark Matter*, she recalled that Octavia was immediately supportive: "She tells me that she and Martin Greenberg had tried to do a book years ago and that basically they were told that nobody's going to read a book about race, because the assumption was that all the stories would be about race"[62] Octavia insisted that *Dark Matter* was more necessary than ever, and she threw her full support behind Thomas's project.[63]

Being a progressive pioneer is hard. Octavia holds the distinction of being the first well-known Black woman to write speculative fiction almost exclusively. That is not to say other Black women never wrote speculative fiction. However, Octavia almost always wrote in the genre, did not use a pseudonym, and sometimes included author photos in interviews and author profiles, so there was no denying that she was a Black woman. While she could not always control the cover art on her novels, some of them accurately depicted the Black characters who populated her work—a stark contrast to most mainstream science fiction and fantasy. But her work was also distinctive in other ways. In May 1977, *Star Wars* was released and soon became a global fan phenomenon. Octavia was bemused by the movie's popularity; she enjoyed the theater-going experience but found *Star Wars* fun if not a bit trite. This was the same year that she released *Mind of My Mind*, a novel about the rise of powerful psychics. Unlike *Star Wars* and other science fiction popular at the time, Octavia's fiction was not particularly interested in swashbuckling heroes. Nor was it a thinly veiled allegory promoting traditional Western values or fantasies of unmitigated

white male domination.[64] Octavia's work stood out in a field of derivative science fiction and fantasy.

Although speculative fiction might imagine possible futures or invite us to reimagine the past, it is fundamentally about the present. As Ursula K. Le Guin reminds us, "science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive."[65] It reflects the anxieties, possibilities, and questions born out of the time in which it was written. The swirling shifts of late twentieth-century US politics around race, class, gender, and sexuality show up in the double jeopardy of racism and misogyny that Anyanwu experiences in *Wild Seed*, and in the twisted interspecies love story of "Bloodchild," and in the atavistic decline of humanity in "Speech Sounds," and in the depravity and violence of *Clay's Ark*.

Before, during, and after working on *Wild Seed*, Octavia was embroiled in another major creative project called *Blindsight*—a supernatural thriller about the rise of a cult with a charismatic leader. This project, however, was frustrating and ultimately unsuccessful. The novel's protagonist is Aaron, born blind and gifted with psychometry, or the ability to discover facts about events or people by touching inanimate objects associated with them. She started working on *Blindsight* in 1978, but just a few months into the project she was stuck.[66] First, she drafted a novel in which Aaron was a Doro-type villain; when that didn't quite work, she decided to draft a version in which the cultists were embroiled in queer and polyamorous relationships that threatened to tear the group apart. That didn't work either. As the narrative threads unspooled, Octavia worried that she was simply reworking Patternist characters under new names in a new novel. She worked on and off on *Blindsight* while finishing *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, *Clay's Ark*, and several short stories. However, *Blindsight* never came together. To add insult to an already tortuous process, when she submitted a draft to her publisher, they rejected the manuscript, calling it one of her "lesser works." In her diary, Octavia cursed the book as boring.[67] By the end of the decade, Octavia shelved *Blindsight* once and for all, devastated that she could not make it work. But despite this disappointment and the failure of the *Black Futures* anthology, the 1980s were largely a time when Octavia began to experience professional triumphs. This started with the publication of *Wild Seed* in 1980.

AN UNFOLDING PATTERN

I first read *Wild Seed* in college for an upper-level course called Slavery and the Literary Imagination. I had to get permission to enroll because I was only a sophomore. We read everything from nineteenth-century slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and poems by Frances E. W. Harper and George Moses Horton to modern-day interpretations of chattel slavery such as Morrison's *Beloved*. If *Parable of the Sower* made me fall in love with Butler's work, it was *Wild Seed* that cemented the lifelong love affair. The origin story of the power struggle between two demigods, Doro and Anyanwu, captured my imagination. Anyanwu's desire to live on her terms, to face death rather than domination, resonated with me down to my core. Here was a Black heroine who was a fighter, who sought to bow to no man. I had never read anything quite like it. The mix of science, fantasy, folklore, and horror was a heady combination and made me want to read more of Octavia's work. Though *Kindred* is her most popular novel, *Wild Seed* is also a perennial reader favorite.

Published in 1980, *Wild Seed* was Octavia's fifth novel and the fourth in the Patternist series. After taking a break from the series to mostly focus on *Kindred* and other stories, Octavia returned to the world of telepathic warriors. *Wild Seed* is a prequel to the series, tracing the origin stories of Doro and Anyanwu. It is also one of the few works in Octavia's oeuvre, besides *Kindred*, that directly tackles chattel slavery. Readers familiar with the trajectory of the Patternists can trace their beginnings and map out possible alternative futures for the society of telepaths. But even readers with no or only a fleeting knowledge of the series can enjoy and understand *Wild Seed* as a stand-alone text.

We meet Doro and Anyanwu in precolonial West Africa at the start of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Anyanwu (whose name means "sun") is an Igbo woman with a strange ability to both shape-shift (changing age, gender, and even species), regenerate her body, and heal others. She is three centuries old and has presided over her descendants in various forms, both animal and human. Doro, our inveterate villainous immortal, is drawn to Anyanwu—calling her "wild seed," or a person with special abilities whom he did not personally cultivate. We learn that Doro was born in ancient Nubia centuries before Jesus and that he discovered his body-snatching ability after a childhood illness. Doro is driven by a desire to alternately connect with Anyanwu—after all, she's the closest thing to a peer he has encountered in millennia—and to conquer her. He gives Anyanwu an

ultimatum: join him or he will destroy her people. Anyanwu reluctantly agrees, not knowing that she is entering into a type of perpetual bondage. The novel charts their decades-long feud and eventual reconciliation.

Wild Seed is certainly plot-driven, but it is also a study of two unusual and compelling characters. Doro has lived for three millennia, yet he is curiously stunted. It is as if the transition he experiences at age thirteen incites a type of arrested development. For thousands of years, Doro has no real challenges, until he meets Anyanwu. With no healthy competition, no reason to check his anger or rage, no intellectual interlocutor—nothing close to a peer or confidante—Doro becomes a spoiled, bored, and lonely god. His seed farms and breeding programs give him some direction, but even those projects are rather aimless and unsuccessful. He breeds powerful people, but he does not want them to be *too* powerful. In his hubris he does not create a system to combat their power, foreshadowing his eventual demise at the hands of his own children. He is profoundly apolitical and simply exists within the power structures he encounters, like chattel slavery, falsely believing that he and his seeds can thrive despite them. Astoundingly, he has no big plan for his special children except to use their power to support his various business ventures.[68]

Doro again foreshadows the limited vision of his descendants—whether it is the early Patternists in *Mind of My Mind*, the colonizing space travelers in *Survivor*, or the feudal inhabitants of the Pattern in *Patternmaster*. Octavia highlights the limitations both of hierarchal human organization and of capitalism and imperialism.[69] When humans (or even demigods) can create anything, she shows them creating narrow, small lives. While we may not have Doro's superpowers, *Wild Seed* nonetheless invites us to consider how we might be playing small in our conceptions of the world.

Anyanwu's centuries-long project of remaining an Igbo matriarch, staying close to and protecting her people, is the foil to Doro's amorality and cruelty. In Octavia's works community is often an antidote to the alienation mischaracterized as rugged individualism in the West. Octavia noted: "My character Anyanwu at one point actually says that she makes communities around herself. All of my characters are in a community like Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*, or they create one; she does that, too. My own feeling is that human beings need to live that way and we too often don't."[70] Although Doro makes farms, his people-stock are no more precious than a cow, pig, or chicken on a commercial farm. He does not

create community; he cultivates sycophants who are genetically built to worship and adore him. When one dies or he is "forced" to kill one, there is little mourning. Similarly, Doro's body-snatching ability is the ultimate in disposability. Just as he does not need to ensure that his seeds live long and prosper, neither does he have the impetus to take care of his body. He can always find another.

Octavia identified Anyanwu and Doro as "different versions of what immortality could be. Doro is immortal and destructive. Anyanwu is immortal and creative."[71] Doro reflects the worst of human avarice. Though he predates the construction of white supremacy, he enables its development. He is a staunch patriarch although he has lived as a woman and given birth. Doro fundamentally lacks empathy, so when he inhabits the body of a woman or a child, or some other marginalized person, he sees the body only as a means to an end, a disposable vessel that is easily replaced. Vulnerability is weakness, and Doro wants and has raw power. He symbolizes the logics of chattel slavery and imperialism, constantly consuming and extracting bodies, people, land, and resources. It is this logic that undergirds the behavior that precipitated Western imperialism, a centuries-long extractive project that has led to our current climate chaos.[72] Doro doesn't have to be sustainable because there is always more to consume.

The novel in some ways is about triumphant possibilities—but it is also fundamentally about compromise. Anyanwu gives up some of her power to forestall Doro, but her compromises are never enough. There is a lot of foreshadowing about how terrible the Patternists will be, but there's also foreshadowing of what they could have been if only Anyanwu had been able to build their community her way. Octavia admitted: "What I hope to wind up with in my work are series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like 'good' and 'evil' enter into the real world—never absolute, always by degrees. In my novels, generally everybody wins and loses something—*Wild Seed* is probably the best illustration of that—because as I see it, that's pretty much the way the world is."[73]

Although Octavia was making a name for herself as a novelist during this time, she still published the occasional short story. The early 1980s saw the publication of two of her most significant short stories, "Speech Sounds," published in 1983, and "Bloodchild," published in 1984. Octavia may have started her career writing short stories, but she later confessed in

the preface to her short story collection: “The truth is, I hate short story writing. Trying to do it has taught me much more information about frustration and despair than I ever wanted to know.”[74] Novels gave her room to fully develop storylines, build intricate worlds, and create complicated characters. Still, when she published short stories, they were brilliant, incisive, and captivating. “Speech Sounds” won a Hugo Award in 1984, and “Bloodchild” swept all the major science fiction and fantasy awards, winning Hugo, Locus, and Nebula awards the following year.

Finally, after the most productive period of her life—publishing six novels and several short stories in less than a decade—Octavia was being recognized by her peers. Before this winning streak, she was beyond frustrated after years of not receiving any science fiction awards. In 1979 she railed in her journal about the unfairness of the writing industry: “I am not ordinary! I am not some damn nothing writer, some shlep who spends her whole life writing and being ignored and shat on and used and made to feel she ought to be grateful for the fucking privilege. I am so incredibly tired of being passed over while writers of less ability telling stories that don’t entertain as well or read as smoothly rake in the gravy.”[75] In 1980, she vowed never to attend another awards event unless she was nominated for something and lamented that she was constantly reminded of her “insignificance” in “both money paid for work and in prizes.”[76] In 1982, she felt increasingly bitter about her lack of recognition.[77] Throughout Octavia’s career she would remain attuned to prizes and awards as markers of success, even if she did not publicly reveal this concern to many.

“Speech Sounds” was inspired by a particularly memorable experience Octavia had on public transit. She never learned to drive and observed a lot about humanity riding buses across Southern California over the years. On one such occasion she witnessed a fight break out between passengers. Disagreements on public transportation are perhaps not unusual, but this particular experience stood out for a few reasons. Her dear friend Phyllis was dying of cancer. Faithfully, Octavia rode the bus every week to visit her. She’d bring the latest draft of what she was working on—the novel that would eventually become *Clay’s Ark*, which is dedicated to Phyllis. Considering the fact that Phyllis was dying of multiple myeloma and *Clay’s Ark* is about an all-consuming disease, this may have been seen as a rather macabre reading selection; but Octavia always shared her drafts with Phyllis, and the cancer had changed enough about their friendship.[78] They

went from meeting in Phyllis's apartment to Octavia visiting her in the hospital, with Phyllis growing frailer by the week—not unlike Keira throughout much of *Clay's Ark*. So Octavia shared the drafts like she always had, despite dreading the weekly meetings where she watched her friend slowly waste away.

The day of the visit that inspired "Speech Sounds," Octavia was not in the mood for foolishness. She was depressed about Phyllis's situation and nursing an ingrown toenail. She did not want to watch Phyllis dying, but she did not want to abandon her either.[79] The crush of passengers on the bus was a medley of competing unpleasant sights and smells. Moments like these made her wish she knew how to drive. Octavia was concentrating on holding on to her bag and not getting stepped on when an argument broke out. One man felt slighted by another. Soon enough, yelling escalated to pushing and shoving. Passengers scrambled out of the center of the melee. It was over almost as quickly as it started, with the instigator scurrying off the bus before the police arrived, leaving the victim bloody and dazed. Octavia was rattled. Society was certainly crumbling all around her. That was when the first line of "Speech Sounds" came to her: "There was trouble aboard the Washington Boulevard bus."

Watching this breakdown in communication made Octavia wonder how far human behavior could devolve. "Speech Sounds" finds humanity unraveling in the wake of a debilitating global pandemic: "the illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and strokelike in some of its effects. But it was highly specific. Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death."[80] Human beings who are afflicted with this illness find it hard to communicate outside of grunts, whimpers, yelps, and shouted gibberish. Spoken language, sign language, written language, song—all gone in an instant. The remaining "speech sounds" do not have a shared lexicon, so one person's innocent whimper is another person's threat, and not surprisingly, violent miscommunications abound.

A global pandemic that changes life as we know it may not seem so far-fetched in the wake of COVID-19; but in 1983 when "Speech Sounds" was published, it was received as a dire warning for the future, although it is as much a commentary on the present as it is about what could happen. For a few grueling minutes, Octavia's afternoon on the bus in 1980s Southern California was not all that different from the main character's perilous

journey on the Washington Boulevard bus in a dystopian America. The story, with its mysterious illness and the resulting breakdown in society, is a cautionary tale about contemporary miscommunication, how easy it can be for human beings to go from being sophisticated communicators to brute animals ready to tear one another apart.

"Bloodchild" is Octavia's most famous short story and one of the most read and anthologized science fiction stories of all time, although it is not without controversy. The story about humans in a tense relationship with insectlike aliens, the Tlic, who use human beings as hosts for their larvae has frequently been understood as a metaphor for slavery, a charge that made Octavia bristle.[81] Instead, she called "Bloodchild" her "pregnant man story," noting, "I've always wanted to explore what it might be like for a man to be put in the most unlikely of all positions . . . I wanted to see whether I could write a dramatic story of a man becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties."[82] Another inspiration was Octavia's fear of the botfly. In preparation for a trip to the Peruvian Amazon to research the Xenogenesis books she would publish in the late 1980s, she learned that the native botfly "lays its eggs in wounds left by the bites of other insects."[83] She became obsessed with this disturbing factoid and was inspired by this fear to create the Tlic. Since childhood, writing helped her to process her emotions. She admitted that "writing 'Bloodchild' didn't make me like botflies, but for a while, it made them seem more interesting than horrifying."[84]

In "Bloodchild," humans, known as Terrans, exist on a far-off planet on a preserve specially built for them. Their rulers are the Tlic, massive insectlike creatures that resemble centipedes or caterpillars. The Tlic and the Terrans are in a wary truce. In exchange for relative freedom, human beings offer up their bodies as hosts for the Tlic's eggs. In the past, the Tlic laid their eggs in animals native to their planet, but an ecological disaster had wiped out their longstanding animal hosts. Male Terrans are now the preferred hosts; female Terran bodies are generally regarded as too precious to use as hosts as they will gestate the next generation of Terran hosts. Gan, the story's protagonist, is a young Terran man living a sheltered and relatively privileged life with his family on the preserve. T'Gatoi is a powerful Tlic politician who runs the Preserve where humans are corralled, and she is a guardian of sorts for Gan's family. Gan experiences a

significant rite of passage where he moves from naïve child to sober adult who has to make difficult decisions not only for himself but for his family.

"Bloodchild" is several things—a love story, a coming-of-age story, a story about the not-so-glamorous consequences of space travel, a story about Stockholm syndrome, and perhaps even a story about slavery, although not in the way that most readers may think. Considering the turn of events in the story, it is perhaps unsurprising that many have read it as an allegory for slavery despite Octavia's insistence that it is instead a love story.[85] Humans confined to a preserve and being forced to share their bodies with their captors sounds a lot like slavery; however, "Bloodchild" does not directly deal with chattel slavery, as *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* do. Nevertheless, there are many forms of bondage, and "Bloodchild" certainly explores the parasitic nature of love and pregnancy and its unequal power dynamics.

Octavia's creative burst continued with the subsequent publication of *Clay's Ark*. Although this 1984 novel can be read as a stand-alone work, it is also another chapter in the millennia-long drama of mutes, Clayarks, and Patternists at the heart of her Patternist series. Though it is the last of the Patternist novels to be published, chronologically *Clay's Ark* takes place a century after *Wild Seed*, decades after *Mind of My Mind*, and decades before *Survivor*. She wrote *Clay's Ark* because she wanted to explore more about the Clayarks that she had introduced in *Patternmaster*. *Wild Seed* gives the backstory of Doro and Anyanwu, and *Mind of My Mind* tells the story of the first Pattern. *Survivor* gives readers a glimpse into the fate of nonpsychic humans who leave Earth. And, of course, *Patternmaster* is the denouement of the series. But what about the Clayarks? Octavia admitted in an interview that at first the Clayarks were "throwaway people" in *Patternmaster*.[86] But she found she didn't want them to stay marginal, so she decided to give them their own novel.

Set in California in the "near future" of 2021, *Clay's Ark* follows Dr. Blake Maslin and his two daughters, Rane and Keira; and Eli, leader of a crew of diseased humans. Eli is the missing and presumed dead geologist-turned-astronaut Asa Elias Doyle from the exploratory spaceship *Clay's Ark*. Unbeknownst to the public, the astronauts have encountered an aggressive alien microorganism whose sole goal is to infiltrate and replicate with a host body's DNA. After encountering this disease while in outer space, the human astronauts morph into Clayarks—animalistic human

hybrids with catlike speed, preternatural strength, and a nearly uncontrollable compulsion to spread their disease.[87] Social taboos, from consuming raw meat to committing incest, are no longer recognized. Instead, human mores erode in the face of this atavistic turn in human evolution.[88] After a series of violent clashes, Clayark disease becomes a global pandemic, with some of the last generation of free humans standing on the precipice of a new world order that sees the course of humanity indelibly changed.

Like the other novels in the Patternist series, *Clay's Ark* invites readers to explore what it means to be human. While *Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, and *Wild Seed* consider humanity's evolution via the figures of the psychic hive mind and erasure of individuality in the mutes' conditions, *Clay's Ark*, like *Survivor* and *Dawn*, addresses this exploration through humans interbreeding with another species. The novel asks: Are we still human if a disease or pandemic fundamentally alters us? Are we still human if our bodies are changed such that we are quadrupeds rather than bipeds? Are we still human if we are mostly guided by biology rather than culture? Are we still human if we transgress human taboos like incest and cannibalism? What does this all mean for humanity?

Clay's Ark is also incredibly brutal, notably so even for a writer who never shied away from violence. Much of this had to do with Octavia's state of mind when she was writing the novel. A series of losses filled her with impotent rage, which spills onto its pages. "When a friend and a relative were both dying of cancer," she wrote, "when another, anorexic and bulimic, was killing herself slowly, when people I loved in general seemed to be doing very badly, I wrote some of the most violent prose I've ever written."[89] Her home was also burglarized twice in the space of a few months, leaving her feeling exposed and scared. Detailing the cruel reality of the world of *Clay's Ark* allowed Octavia to express her disappointment and grief. Still, after pouring out her emotions in this work, she felt adrift after completing the novel. On March 10, 1982, Octavia admitted, "I finished *Clay's Ark* in January, and I still feel 'Between Novels'—that terrible, pointless at-sea feeling."[90] It would take time, but she would eventually turn her sights more fully to what would be her next series, the Xenogenesis novels.

Octavia's prolific time during the first half of the 1980s reveals a preoccupation with arresting and often violent tales that warn audiences

about humanity's potential fate. Still, these works also leave some room for hope. *Wild Seed* shows the alternative path that Patternists could have taken and invites readers to consider how humans can forge healthy communities. "Speech Sounds" ends with the possibility of a new future in which a new generation is guided by the dying embers of the previous society. Likewise, "Bloodchild," despite its complicated interspecies relationships, again shows the importance of family and connection, and the slow march toward justice. And *Clay's Ark* emphasizes the role of family and community in contrast to Western ideas of individualism. To be clear, none of these narratives are sunny or optimistic. They are quite bleak at times. Octavia's stories are not formulaic feel-good tales. But it is clear that even the darkest of her stories almost always have a germ of hope and a lesson for readers. This would be even more apparent in her next series about humanity's evolution in the face of a powerful alien species.

Chapter 4

The Human Contradiction

When interviewers or fans would ask Octavia what inspired the Xenogenesis novels, *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, she would point them to a specific moment in Ronald Reagan's presidency. His description of a potential "winnable" and "limited" nuclear war got Octavia thinking: "I thought there must be something basic, something really genetically wrong with us if we're falling for this stuff. And I came up with these characteristics."[1] She would later call these characteristics the "Human Contradiction": "That's when I began to think about human beings having the two conflicting characteristics of intelligence and a tendency toward hierarchal behavior—and that hierarchal behavior is too much in charge, too self-sustaining."[2]

Ingenuity and persistence allowed humans to survive and thrive over the course of millennia. Humans have created myriad civilizations, languages, tools, and weapons. Human intelligence is a natural resource with seemingly exponential return. Hierarchal thinking, on the other hand, has created some of the largest obstacles for human survival. Often touted as a way to make societies stable and predictable, hierarchal thinking has incited some of the most cruel and self-destructive aspects of human behavior. Pitting groups of humans against one another, often for arbitrary reasons, has been the catalyst of innumerable conflicts. A war waged with world-destroying weapons would be the pinnacle of the Human Contradiction, an example of both our stunning intelligence and our self-destructive hierarchal thinking.

STAR WARS

On March 23, 1983, President Reagan gave his "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security." He was two years into his presidency, coming off the heels of a decisive victory against Jimmy Carter. Part of Reagan's appeal was how he unabashedly talked about returning America to the simpler values of yesteryear. Still, inasmuch as Reagan was committed to rolling back civil rights and appeasing Americans who felt left behind while the country jerkily lurched into a more inclusive future, he was also forward-looking in certain ways. The country he led was at loggerheads with the Soviet Union and other communist nations. The threat of nuclear war was ever present. With Cuba in the nation's backyard, Reagan was hawkish about defending the spread of communism in the neighboring Caribbean and Central and South America. He saw communism as a contagion that easily spread.

For instance, when the tiny Caribbean nation of Grenada ousted its dictatorial ruler in favor of socialist leadership, it wasn't long before the United States, supported by a coterie of Caribbean nations, invaded Grenada in the fall of that same year, 1983.[3] Reagan justified the breach of another nation's sovereignty by suggesting that Grenada was receiving funds from Cuba and the Soviet Union to build military bases. Although the Grenadian government admitted it did indeed receive funds from its communist allies, it claimed those funds were not to manufacture weapons but to build an international airport to support the country's biggest income generator: tourism.[4] Colloquially known as the Spice Island, because of the many spices that grow there, Grenada was and is a premier travel destination for those in search of sandy beaches and tropical climes. Not exactly the makings of a global threat. And yet the possibility of another of the United States's southern neighbors becoming a communist state was abhorrent. Other nations in the Global South could fall to communism like so many dominoes, and then what? Would nuclear war be next? Reagan would spend eight years in the White House doing all that he could to curb the spread of communism, from deposing governments to installing sympathetic leaders—all the time claiming that he was trying to avoid world-annihilating nuclear war. But his vision went further beyond the usual geopolitics. Much further.

On that March evening, the president quietly outlined a program to limit the reach of the nation's possible enemies. He talked about making nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete" by yet-to-be-invented weapons and

space-based missile defense systems. He spun a tale of a majestic battle theater, with space lasers taking on nuclear weapons that would rival scenes from any science fiction novel or movie.[5] War was no longer constrained by the usual boundaries of air, land, and sea; it was now interstellar. The soft, benign expression of the grandfatherly man on the television screen belied the dangerous message he read. Nuclear war had the potential to destroy humankind and make the world uninhabitable, to reshape the entire world, not unlike the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. But the asteroid that hit the Earth was unavoidable; nuclear war was not.[6]

Reagan described his program as "planning for the worst" and included a serious effort at deescalation, but his critics, Octavia among them, rejected his explanations. Chief among their complaints was the juvenile and misleading way he discussed warfare. Octavia was shocked but not surprised. She had despised Reagan ever since he had been elected California's governor in 1967. His turn in the White House only served to increase her ire. Here was the president of the most powerful nation on Earth talking about a "winnable" nuclear war—as if that were possible!

Octavia was born in 1947, just two years after the end of World War II. She came of age during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Her whole adult life had been in the shadow of the Cold War. The idea of a "winnable" nuclear war was simply unfathomable and to suggest otherwise was ludicrous. Yet here was President Reagan talking about space lasers knocking ballistic missiles out of the sky as if he were playing the video game *Space Invaders* or watching the movie *Star Wars*. Indeed, although Reagan called the program the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), it was derisively known in the media as his Star Wars program.

In many ways this name was fitting. Although *Star Wars*, and subsequent movies in the franchise, is an epic story of good versus evil, of empire versus revolutionaries, some viewers watched it merely for the cool lightsabers, special effects, and fight scenes. Likewise, Reagan's description of the Star Wars program was no deeper than the bucket of popcorn a *Star Wars* fan got at the movies. Lasers swatting away nuclear weapons sounded like the fantasies of moviegoers caught up in the desire to be a space swashbuckler. For Octavia, Reagan was a vacuous blowhard, the "ultimate triumph of form over function" who negatively influenced an already susceptible public with impunity.[7] She mused that people, not nuclear war, were the problem, because of our "hierarchical thinking (greed,

xenophobia), anger, short-sightedness, and tendency to romanticize and glamorize war, to perceive war as manly and thus desirable while portraying peace as coward[ly], effeminate, unrealistic[ly] foolish and impossible."[8]

Although she coined the Human Contradiction for the Xenogenesis series, the concept is a running thread throughout many of the works that precede these novels. The Patternist series is in many ways about the ultimate hierarchy. Human intelligence and ingenuity are completely outpaced by the desire to self-destructively rule over one another. Likewise, in *Kindred*, Octavia highlights the destructive logic of white supremacy and chattel slavery. While there was already a perverse economic justification for its existence, the racial hierarchy of chattel slavery created its own twisted sensibility that has proved devastating for generations thereafter. These works highlight internecine human power battles. When Octavia turned to the Human Contradiction in the Xenogenesis series, she did so in a way that invited readers to think about how this tension could instigate the very destruction of humankind when attacked by a powerful outside obstacle.

"WORK IS LOVE MADE VISIBLE"

The mid-1980s found Octavia moving forward in key ways. She had written and published five novels in the Patternist universe, one stand-alone novel, and several short stories. And she had finally begun to receive the recognition she craved from the science fiction establishment. She was also largely ready to move on to a new creative project. The germ of the Xenogenesis novels had sprouted in her mind earlier in the decade, but this was the time to turn her full attention to this new series. Writing was the center of her life. In a 1985 journal entry she declares, "work is love made visible. Work is worship."[9]

Another reason she was keen to complete a new project was that despite having written more than half a dozen novels and short stories, Octavia was still experiencing serious money woes. She supported herself primarily from her writing, and because her advances and royalties were piddling, that meant the lean times were very lean. On New Year's Eve 1984 Octavia had only about $250 to her name. Earlier that day she sent off her latest manuscript to her agent, hoping to snag a lucrative deal. In the meantime, she wanted to write short stories that could keep her financially afloat. She

had been living as a full-time writing professional for nearly a decade, and although she was loathe to get a nine-to-five job, she honestly wondered whether she should swallow her pride and get back in the workforce.[10]

Besides Octavia's persistent financial troubles, her life revolved around the narrow orbit of work and the classes she took at UCLA where she was once again pursuing her bachelor's degree with varying degrees of success. School was frustrating and difficult, although Octavia had no problem studying things she found interesting. She had done extensive research for several novels and short stories. But the reality of juggling school and her writing proved too much to bear. She admonished herself as being a terrible student who just could not balance work and classes that she found overwhelming: "the return to school was such a blow to my ego—and my self-righteousness. There I could see my own intellectual inadequacies magnified and spotlighted . . . I had forgotten what a disastrously bad student I was—even when I did well. I had forgotten all the futility and depression and effort—working so hard to do what others did quickly and easily, inventing tricks to help. Tricks that couldn't help in math and science classes."[11] Based on what we know about Octavia, however, this was clearly not a question of intelligence or interest; rather, her school experience suffered because there was little room to accommodate both her neurodivergence *and* her positive obsession.

By 1985 Octavia was ready to abandon her dream of getting a bachelor's degree altogether. Instead, she vowed to "find another version of school: challenging, maybe painful, mind-expanding."[12] She realized that not only did she not need a degree to be an intellectual, but she had already been living a life of the mind. She also returned to the Clarion writers' workshop as a teacher, helping to cultivate a new generation of speculative writers in the place that initially had fostered her career. And she continued to tutor young people at the Los Angeles Public Library. She also imagined pouring her attention into becoming savvier about the business aspect of writing, whether through garnering better book deals or by increasing the number of her speaking engagements.[13]

Octavia still yearned for community. Despite years of attending college off and on, she had not figured out how to make friends at school. Sure, she had acquaintances, people she could engage in with superficial, friendly chatter, but there was no one she "saw or wanted to see away from school."[14] Octavia wanted something more substantive, a community of

like-minded people whom she could connect with. Outside of the science fiction peers she saw at conventions, corresponded with, and occasionally hung out with, no one in her day-to-day life truly understood how monumental it was, for instance, to win a Hugo Award.[15]

She was also slowly losing the few close friends she had. Phyllis had died, and Donna, another friend, lived far away in San Jose; she had a fraught and complicated relationship with childhood friend, Victoria.[16] Octavia now wanted friends with whom she could share her recent triumphs. She wanted homegirls who on the one hand didn't question her sexuality and shun her for her perceived queerness or who on the other hand expected her to be hip or au courant.[17] She just wanted to be her quirky self, even if at times she felt like she was failing at being properly social. In a September 1984 journal entry, she chided herself against awkwardly oversharing and reminded herself, "don't tell people more than they want to know before they've decided whether they want to know you at all."[18] In other instances new people were intimidated by her profession, which ended things before they started. Likewise, her dating prospects remained less than stellar. Her crushes, such as one on Japanese translator and science fiction writer Tetsu Yano, seemingly remained unrequited.

Sometimes the loneliness was unbearable and Octavia believed that death would be a "sweet relief" from the pain of an alienated existence.[19] She found these realities all the more reason to throw herself headlong into her work: a short story about a destructive disorder that would eventually become "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," and a novel about humanity in the aftermath of a nuclear war. She told herself, "the Most Important Thing I Do Every Day is to WRITE, To Work On My NOVELS and stories. They are my love and my work, my fortune, my life, and if I can be said to have one, my soul. Nothing is more important."[20]

ADVENTURES IN THE AMAZON

Significant parts of Octavia's new series would take place in an Amazon rainforest in Peru. As a consummate researcher, she wondered whether a trip to South America would allow her to gain the verisimilitude she needed in a narrative that was otherwise out of this world, not unlike when she went to Maryland in the 1970s to get a grasp of slavery on the Eastern Shore. In the world of the novel, the rainforest is less affected from nuclear

fallout and is still lush with fruits and vegetables to eat. Octavia wanted to get the feel of the area just right. Whether it was how to accurately describe the experience of paddling in a small boat on the Amazon or the feel of the humidity or flies on one's skin, Octavia wanted to get every detail correct. So in the summer of 1985, she joined a UCLA research group and made her way to the Amazon in Peru.[21]

Octavia kept extensive notes in her travelogue, so much so that she contemplated publishing them upon her return. She advised herself to "be quiet, look—photograph, listen—record, think, question. WRITE."[22] She believed that everything she perceived was "fair game" for her fiction. Traveling to Peru was an adventure for Octavia in many ways. For one, the means of travel were at times harrowing. From the long plane ride from Los Angeles to Cuzco, followed by travel in buses, on canoes, and riding donkeys—not to mention the massive amount of trudging along gravel-lined streets, muddy pathways, and dusty roads, and wading through swampy water. Octavia was no stranger to hiking, and she was in decent shape, but she sometimes found the physicality of the trip vexing, hurting her knee during one of the hikes. She suffered through hotels with hard beds and warnings to not drink the water for fear of illness. She was disturbed by the poverty she witnessed, especially by the ways the locals had to interact with tourists to make a living, and how bedraggled zoo animals were at one stop.

But there were upsides to the trip as well. She got a front row seat to the beauty of the Amazon. She sailed on river boats and noted where she saw acacia trees and other plants she wanted to include in her novel. She found sites where she wanted to stage certain parts of the novel's action, like when she visited a large lake near the Tambopata River that she decided would be the setting for what would become the "Training Floor" section of *Dawn*. She noted where wild vanilla grew and that would be a "nice touch" for the main character she was creating. She admired the architecture in Lima. She observed the rapidly changing weather and how, when the dew fell in the morning, the water drops were as loud as rain.

She sent a dozen postcards to friends and family. She took dozens of photos of the flora and fauna and even a few of herself. In one photo she stands tall with a slight smile and the ruins of Machu Picchu looming behind her; in another, she sits on a stone ledge, her afro a soft halo around her head, her gaze off to the side with towering plants framing her.[23] In

these photos Octavia looks beautiful, serene, and purposeful. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as she was doing what she loved: watching people, learning about the local landscape, and building out the world of what would be her new series.

A NEW BIRTH

Once Octavia returned from Peru, she continued working on her new project and settled back into the rhythms of her life. She set up lofty writing goals, telling herself "a five-page-per day minimum isn't bad but it isn't really enough either" and reminded herself to be disciplined and to practice controlled obsession "because out of control obsession is tedious, limiting, even dangerous."[24] She vowed to stay on a strict diet, fearing that she was gaining too much weight. She had dinner with her old Clarion buddy, Vonda McIntyre, but felt sluggish and out of sorts. She asked Merrilee Heifetz to be her new agent after Felicia Eth left the Writer's House agency, and theirs became a warm working relationship that would continue for the rest of Octavia's career.

On the heels of winning several awards for her short stories, Octavia's new agent was able to negotiate a deal for three books: the Xenogenesis trilogy, consisting of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). Later the trilogy was renamed *Lilith's Brood* and published in an omnibus edition. These novels take place on a postapocalyptic Earth where humans and powerful aliens uneasily coexist. Centuries after the near annihilation of humanity because of a nuclear war, Lilith, an African American woman, awakes to find herself naked and alone in an empty room. Eventually she discovers she is one of a handful of survivors of a great war, that the Earth is in tatters, and that a technologically advanced race of aliens, the Oankali, have rescued her.[25] The catch: the Oankali are gene traders, and they want to mate with humans. This causes an existential crisis greater than nuclear apocalypse. The Oankali are strange creatures, more like giant sea creatures than humanoid, yet they are too powerful to be denied. Most humans recoil from their saviors and refuse to merge their destinies as long as they can.

Dawn introduces the tenuous relationship between the humans and Oankali, with Lilith as a reluctant bridge between the two factions. Like some of Butler's other female protagonists, such as Alanna in *Survivor*, Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*, and Rane and Keira in *Clay's Ark*, Lilith is tasked

with seemingly insurmountable problems.[26] *Adulthood Rites* follows the story of Akin, the first male born of Lilith and Oankali DNA; he is a sort of messiah for humanity, with the idea to terraform Mars. *Imago* follows Jodhas, the first ooloi offspring (ooloi is the third Oankali sex) of Lilith and the Oankali, and one who is able to connect the Oankali with the last of humanity on Earth.

Octavia began working on the series late in 1984, writing about a character who would eventually become the protagonist Lilith. Her first stab at the Xenogenesis series pleased her, and she continued writing with gusto, experiencing the usual fits and starts that come with a writing project but forging ahead because she found it challenging and fascinating.[27] As when she wrote *Wild Seed* after penning *Kindred*, Octavia found the series just plain enjoyable, especially after writing *Clay's Ark* and several short stories that were particularly stark and brutal.[28] She looked at her previous protagonists in order to learn from her past successes and mistakes. Doro and Anyanwu were examples of characters with dramatic, built-in conflict. Aaron, from the ill-fated novel *Blindsight*, didn't quite work because he became so powerful that he outgrew having a compelling conflict. Doro and Mary were two characters with a classic binary conflict, not unlike the pairing of Doro and Anyanwu, but this time it was tension between parent and child.[29] Alanna had been dropped into a conflict between violent factions. Lilith would have to have a compelling conflict that would grab hold of readers and keep them. Octavia decided that Lilith's conflict would be "a struggle for freedom (for personal freedom, her people's freedom, her people's right to continued existence as humanity) while enduring a powerful alien race's captive breeding program."[30] How could Lilith, and by extension humanity, survive in the midst of such utter control? Like *Kindred*, the series asks, How far would one go to survive? What compromises are justified or too much?

The Xenogenesis trilogy is about the evolution of humanity in shockingly alien ways. "Genesis" refers to the birth or origin of something, not unlike the first book of the Bible, which chronicles the origins of humankind in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The prefix "xeno" refers to something "alien" or "strange." In English, we use the prefix most often in the word "xenophobia," or the fear of strangers—or foreigners, really. The portmanteau "xenogenesis" underscores the origin of a new species, the Oankali infused with humanity—and vice versa. This new species will be

fundamentally alien and not resemble humanity as we know it. But Xenogenesis does not necessarily resemble the posthuman, as is often understood.[31] Rather than humans evolving persistently and continually without extraterrestrial interference, they are reengineered by powerful aliens who shift the course of humanity far beyond what humans could imagine. In other words, a xenogenesis is an alien or strange birth, and the novels chart the various responses humans have to this seemingly inevitable merging.

When Octavia created the portmanteau "xenogenesis," she was certainly telling a story of xenophobia, of anti-"alien" sentiment, but she was also telling another story. Generally, the humans who encounter the Oankali are profoundly fearful and distrustful of them. Everything, from the Oankali's frightful appearance, their seemingly ubiquitous power, and their almost unbending desire to merge with humans, incites a profound terror within almost all the humans they initially meet. But fear has been a savior for humans throughout time. For instance, it cautions us to be careful with fire lest it burn us, or with a berry or mushroom lest it poison us. The Oankali are the opposite: their genetic nature actively repels poisons and predators alike, so they can explore the worlds they colonize without fear of danger. As a result, they are what Octavia called "xenophilic." They are intensely interested in the foreign and the strange.

When they arrive on Earth, they use their sensory organs to "taste" the world around them—air, water, earth, plants, and animals. They take in the impressions of this genetic material, learn about the subject and its genetic history, and are able to assimilate and re-create what they encounter. They merge their genes with the other living matter and create new collaborations, new beings. For example, they don't travel through space in a ship, but rather in a living being that shelters, sustains, and transports them across galaxies. This being started out as a sort of sentient creature that the Oankali engineered to have certain characteristics. The Oankali, with their fundamental xenophilic desire to encounter and fuse with others, have spent millennia traveling the universe merging with alien species, some Oankali merging with them and some choosing to remain unchanged.

To the Oankali, humans are as alien as they come, but they find them to be irresistible. This is one of the key conflicts in the novels: the push and pull of repulsion and desire between these two unequal groups. The Oankali's main objective as a species is to trade their genes, to leave traces

of themselves across the universe. They are attracted to difference and compelled to seek out different species to modify their own. The facts that humans are bipedal, hairless, and reasonably intelligent are particularly intriguing to the Oankali. They also believe they have something to offer humans: They see the human propensity for cancer as a useful condition that they can control through genetic engineering. The Oankali take cancerous cells and manipulate them, curtailing the cancer's exponential growth throughout the human body. So something that would overwhelm a human body without intervention would become, under the Oankali's genetic experimentation, a tool to regrow limbs or cure other diseases.

Although the Oankali can offer improved health, it comes at a great cost to humans: having to give up bodily autonomy. The Oankali have a completely different understanding of personal sovereignty. Although their understandings of human psychology evolve over the course of the novels —largely because of the Oankali "constructs," offspring born of human and Oankali breeding—for much of the series, the Oankali treat humans like pets. Would you ask your dog or cat whether it wants to go to the vet? No, you take your pet to the vet regardless of what it might want. The Oankali underestimate the human need for bodily autonomy and personal sovereignty. They cannot fathom why a species that seems so hell-bent on destroying itself through nuclear war would react so unfavorably to another species' intervention. But humans do.

Over the course of the novels humans are revealed to be stubborn and headstrong. The aliens frequently dismiss, misunderstand, and underestimate the human capacity for resistance. Because the Oankali are a fundamentally interdependent, communal species that rules by consensus, they do not understand humanity's desire for independence. And because they see humans as less intelligent, the Oankali do not respect their desire for freedom. The Oankali are particularly dismissive of human notions of consent. For instance, they use their sensory organs to gauge a human's receptivity to sexual activity rather than court them or ask in traditional human-centered ways. Still, Octavia did not think of the Xenogenesis series as stories of cruelty or evil, but rather of narrow self-interest on both sides.[32]

HUMANITY'S FATAL FLAW

As we have seen, the trilogy grapples with the Human Contradiction, the Oankali phrase for what they see as humanity's greatest flaw: "Intelligence at the service of hierarchical behavior."[33] Octavia was fascinated by sociobiology, that is, the study of the biological bases of social behavior. The Human Contradiction was one way to grapple with an axiom of human behavior that seemed to cut across race, religion, creed—even space and time. She believed that "sadly (or not) we are a hierarchal species. We will seek and find or make differences between ourselves and grade those differences worst, worse, bad, fair, good, better, best. Others are less to the degree that they differ and/or are weaker."[34] For Octavia this explained the prevalence of similar destructive behaviors across disparate societies. She pondered whether this was due to a biological imperative or solely a social one. "We are a very young species," she mused, "very newly speciated from our ape ancestors. Our intelligences, our technology, is still at root driven by some very primitive genetic inclinations. Reproduction, territoriality, adult male aggressiveness, and hierarchal drives . . . It seems entirely possible that we possess in our intelligence only short term fitness." To be clear, Octavia was not fully convinced by all sociobiological claims about human behavior.[35] She was no essentialist. At the same time, though, she wondered whether nature did, in some instances, trump nurture. The Xenogenesis books were opportunities for her to explore the limits and possibilities of sociobiology.

The Oankali believe that "life itself [is] a thing of inexpressible value. A thing beyond trade. Life could be changed, changed utterly. But not destroyed."[36] The Oankali are truly "pro-life." Though they have stingers, they rarely kill on purpose and mourn deeply when they happen to kill. They are vegan and forbid humans to consume animal products. They are pacifists and have no culture of war among themselves or with the species they encounter on their interstellar travels. The Oankali rarely speak to one another in anger; instead, they leave a space if they are upset or angry and return when they can converse in milder tones. Human beings' collective penchant for interpersonal and systemic violence marks them in Oankali eyes as fundamentally self-destructive. Because of this, the Oankali contend, humanity should not be able to exist independently. They are to merge with Oankali genes and be transformed. This will at least double their life expectancy. Diseases will not debilitate and kill but will be used to regenerate cells and heal sickness. They will develop keener senses of taste,

hearing, and overall perception. However, they will no longer be fundamentally human or even, in many cases, look human. They will take on a more Oankali appearance, with tentacles and new sensory organs. But, above all, their proclivity for violence will be eliminated.

An ongoing question in Octavia's work is, "What does it mean to be human?" In the Patternist series, the various factions—the psychics of the Pattern, the quadruped Clayarks, and the mutes caught in the middle—all identify as the "true humans." Octavia's final novel, *Fledgling*, features a protagonist who is the result of genetic engineering between humanoid vampires and *Homo sapiens*. The Xenogenesis series has a profoundly interesting angle on this question, however. These novels imagine what it would look and feel like if humans were colonized by a much stronger alien race. Almost no human agrees to join the Oankali without a level of coercion, and even then they usually resist in some way. But ultimately, they cannot resist the Oankali. The humans who are set to colonize Mars are expected to repeat the same mistakes born of the Human Contradiction, while the humans who stay with the Oankali on Earth or travel with the Oankali to the far reaches of space will be the last generation of "purebred" humans. Their offspring will be only part human but will have allegiances to both species or to the Oankali alone.

The Xenogenesis series also gave Octavia the chance to rework an irksome issue. In her 1978 novel *Survivor*, humans and aliens also interbred—though they are entirely different species, perhaps with incompatible sex organs. Alanna and her alien partner have a child, a furry creature that is a clear human-alien hybrid. Octavia saw this as a rookie novelist's mistake, a plot point better suited for *Star Trek* than for serious fiction about what it means to be human. In 1990, she told novelist Randall Kenan, "I thought if I were going to bring people together from other worlds again, I was at least going to give them trouble. So I made sure they didn't have compatible sex organs, not to mention their other serious differences. And of course there are still a lot of biological problems that I ignore."[37] In the Xenogenesis novels, humans and aliens can and do procreate, but not by happenstance. They don't need a lab or pipettes or petri dishes either. The ability to splice genes and remake entire species is embedded in the Oankali and is a compulsion that they do not seek to temper. As for the biological problems that Octavia chose to ignore, those are explained away by the advanced natural technology that the Oankali possess. They are so adept at

manipulating genes—they have had millennia to perfect their craft—that only the most pedantic reader would take issue with their method.

Unlike the Xenogenesis novels, in *Survivor*, Alanna does not spend the majority of the novel pondering the fate of humanity vis-à-vis her furry offspring (a fact that Octavia likely took issue with after publication). She wonders about the child and how it, the first of its kind, will fit into a new society. But Alanna has many other concerns, such as being kidnapped, marrying an alien, and fitting into an alien society as well as even larger issues such as war and religion. Her existential crisis is not necessarily reflective of the annihilation of humankind as we know it. The Xenogenesis books, on the other hand, are all about humanity possibly being engulfed by another, more powerful species. And the idea that the vestiges of humanity might show up in a descendant's errant organ is not a comforting thought for the humans in the series, no matter how the Oankali spin it. They rightfully fear that humanity can no longer be understood in the same way.

INTERSTELLAR IMPERIALISM

After the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, the island for the most part returned to being a spice island and not a potential incubator for socialism. But that is not to say that the Caribbean islands are no longer under the thumb of imperialist overlords. Take, for instance, the circumstances in Martinique. Most people there are descendants of formerly enslaved Africans. Yet in the 2020s, the island, which is still an overseas department (aka colony) of France, is essentially run by the béké, the descendants of French slave masters. They make up less than 1 percent of the population but own 90 percent of the island's wealth. The béké also control food prices, and when Black Martinicans protested the astronomical cost of food, France sent police to quell the protests.[38] The enslaved ancestors of today's Black Martinicans made France rich, and even today France continues using Martinique to fatten its colonial coffers.

Enslaved Africans were essential in building much of the modern West through the violent and extractive actions of colonial powers, and their descendants continue to overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the generational damage of slavery. The example of Martinique, still a French colony, shows that economic exploitation is not something of the past. Imperialism needs to be constantly fed to be kept alive, and it feasts on its colonies and within its spheres of influence.

The Oankali are also imperialists, though interstellar ones, who are only slightly more benevolent than European colonizers were to their subjects. And just as the consequences of the merger of Oankali and human DNA mark the end of the world as humans previously knew it, so too the consequences of imperialism and late-stage capitalism are far-reaching in their own profound way. Octavia recognized this when she critiqued Reagan's dismantling of college support or how he ignored industries that pollute the planet. Such policies, and worse, could lead to the destruction of the planet, not unlike the devastated Earth at the center of the Xenogenesis series. "It seems that unless there's a serious turnaround (political, social, economic)," Octavia worried, "we could pass into the new century with a permanent landed elite . . . AND a permanent poorly educated underclass."[39] In fact in 1985, Octavia predicted that the near future would be dominated by ecological disaster, terrorism, and economic collapse. She saw Reagan's cabinet appointees as "enemies of the departments they head" who sought to dismantle environmental protections from within.[40] She believed that America's xenophobia and overinflated identity as infallible would make the country vulnerable to terrorism, not unlike what was already happening in Europe and the Middle East at the end of the twentieth century. And Octavia surmised that these two circumstances would have a devastating impact on the economy, further widening the gap between rich and poor. These dire warnings would become the central concern of her next series, the prescient and seemingly prophetic Parable novels.

Chapter 5

Prophesies and Parables

Every time I teach the Parable series the world seems to be on fire.

In the beginning of 2016, I taught a senior seminar on Afrofuturism for English majors, and we read both *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. My students were bright, energetic, and intellectually curious about a subject that they didn't initially know much about. At the time I taught at a large land-grant university in a small Southern town. Sometimes I saw bumper stickers that read "A bright blue dot in a deep red state," letting other drivers know that the person driving the car was liberal despite the conservative politics that otherwise abounded.

This was years before the current assault on critical race theory and the book-banning frenzy; even still, teaching African American literature and gender studies in that place was not for the faint of heart. On the one hand, students were often sheltered and naïve, quick to dismiss teachings about racism and sexism as overblown or even offensive. At other times, they openly expressed their hostility to readings outside of their comfort zone. For instance, in a gender studies class on white privilege during the fall of 2008, one student, a veteran of the Iraq War, revealed with a self-satisfied smirk that he "hated Arabs" and that his white privilege meant he could hate anyone with impunity. Standing there in stunned silence, I thought, *I'm not getting paid enough for this shit*. I went home to my little apartment, made myself a large drink, cried, and contemplated changing careers.

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Eight years before teaching the Parable series in that 2016 senior seminar, Barack Obama won the presidency. While the nation gave itself a congratulatory pat on the back for electing the first Black president, my

corner of the world was in utter disbelief. Walking on campus the day after Obama's election was like heading into a funeral for a relative who had died suddenly. People on campus, white people anyway, were confused, distressed, and mournful. They didn't know what to do. That week the campus newspaper interviewed students, and I will never forget one young man who admitted his shock at Obama's win saying he had voted for Senator John McCain because it was "the cool thing to do."[1] My time there was like living in a parallel universe.

But something was different about the spring of 2016. Donald Trump's incredible rise to popularity had my senior seminar students—who ranged in political belief from apolitical to conservative to liberal—genuinely stumped. The old guy with the spray tan and the comb-over from *The Apprentice* was running for president? And seems to be doing *well*? The attitude was that even if you didn't agree with the politics of John McCain, Mitt Romney, Hillary Clinton, or Barack Obama, at least they were all serious politicians with years of experience. On the other hand, Trump seemed kind of ridiculous, like a caricature of a billionaire from an old comic book. What did a crass real estate developer with a penchant for failed businesses and marriages, a man who had previously held no elected office, know about running the most powerful nation in the world? By the time our class was in session, Trump had called Mexicans "rapists and murderers," had openly mocked a disabled reporter, and had said so many racist and sexist things one could almost lose count.[2] Surely this person would not be the nation's next president.

This incredulity was only amplified when we got to the Parable novels. Sure, *Parable of the Sower* had given the students pause. After all, the novel is set in 2024, and in 2016, that was not so far away. The wildfires that raged in the pages of the book were also raging across the country. News media reported on violent crime, poverty, and hunger everywhere. But when we got to *Parable of the Talents*, my students were shaken. Here was a figure running for president who called himself a Christian nationalist, who openly flirted with fascism, and whose slogan was "Make America Great Again!"

Sound familiar?

My students wondered: *How did Octavia know?* She had died in 2006. How could she have predicted a president's slogan, damn near down to the letter, a decade after her death? Was she a prophetess, an oracle, or a seer?[3]

Octavia didn't know that Trump, that gaudy New York real estate magnate and reality TV show host, would eventually become president not just once but twice. But she was a student of history. She understood that someone like Trump would inevitably come to power if Americans continued down the path they were headed during her lifetime. When Ronald Reagan became president, he used the slogan "Let's Make America Great Again" as a dog whistle for his supporters, signaling his intent to "return" the United States to its founding principles and traditions, otherwise known as exclusion and exploitation. While some found Reagan's brand of conservatism mild and palatable, Octavia saw him as a harbinger of future danger. She modeled the Parables' President Andrew Jarret after Reagan, believing that one day another Reaganesque president would rise and that this time, that leader's reign would be even more divisive and devastating. When President Jarret repurposes Reagan's slogan in *Parable of the Talents*, it is not so much a dog whistle as a bullhorn, loudly proclaiming his intent not simply to return the fractured country to its former glory but to lead it as a fascist.[4]

My students were flabbergasted. Sure, they had heard of Ronald Reagan—he remained popular in certain quarters long after his death in 2004—but they were born in the 1990s. His presidency during the 1980s was before their time. They were in elementary school on September 11, 2001. Their childhoods were shaped by the War on Terror and No Child Left Behind. Why, they asked, would Trump repurpose Reagan's slogan? They seemed so different.

On the surface this might have been true. Trump is an opportunist above all. He's been registered as both a Democrat and a Republican. He's been pro-choice and anti-choice. He idolizes hawkish totalitarian leaders but has often been dovish on war. He is certainly interested in power and will wield all sorts of tools to get and keep it, but his megalomania is often small, peevish, and petty.

Reagan, on the other hand, rose from B-list actor to governor of California to two-term president. Reagan's conservative bona fides were impeccable. He was pro–small government, anti–civil rights, anti-choice. Though he was what one today might call a "coastal elite," he aligned himself with conservatives in deeply red states. Reagan was masterful at ushering the Republican Party into a new, powerful era after the disaster of Watergate and President Jimmy Carter's ascendancy.[5] And Reagan's was no

flash-in-the-pan victory. He won two elections in record landslides, with 489 Electoral College votes in 1980 and then a stunning 525 the second time around.[6] After his two presidential terms, George H. W. Bush succeeded him for one term. Twelve consecutive years of Republican rule changed the face of the nation, from the divestment in social programs to the War on Drugs to the US position in the Cold War. The Reagan Administrations profoundly influenced American life in the waning decades of the twentieth century.

Trump was not Reagan, but he knew that didn't matter. Like Octavia's fictional President Jarret, Trump understood what referencing Reagan would mean for his base, even if his positions were inconsistent or his policies veered even further to the right than Reagan's had. Coming off the heels of the Obama presidency, which the right lambasted for being too radical, Trump put himself forward as a corrective for a country being steered off course. Despite being a billionaire who came from money, Trump styled himself as an everyman populist leader. During his 2016 campaign he cut down conservative stalwarts like Jeb Bush and Mitt Romney as well as Tea Party favorites such as Rick Perry and Ted Cruz. Known for his playground taunts and below-the-belt insults, Trump was perhaps most Jarret-like when he openly flirted with fascism and made political friendships with the likes of Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un. His outright encouragement of violence against journalists and detractors at his rallies sounded right out of the pages of *Parable of the Talents*.

Octavia knew.

I taught the Parable series again in the spring of 2020. By then I was teaching a graduate course on Afrofuturism at a largely STEM-serving institution in a big Southern city. The class was a mix of doctoral and master's students from programs like computer science, human-computer interaction, and digital media. This time I "met" with my students via computer because it was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and classes were conducted remotely. There was no vaccine yet, and little was known about COVID and how it was transmitted. Everyone was having a scary and otherworldly experience.

Yet just a few weeks before, we had been on campus discussing various visions of the future. I had shown students a clip from the reality TV show *Doomsday Preppers* as an example of the kinds of things Afrofuturism

explores. The show features people who believe in and prepare for (hence "preppers") various doomsday scenarios—from world-ending super volcanoes to the rise of a global totalitarian government—by stockpiling guns, ammunition, and dry goods, among other things. The clip we watched featured a prepper who spent millions of dollars making his home a fortress that could withstand a biological attack.[7] Unsurprisingly, he owned many guns, but his most curious stockpile was not artillery but toilet paper. He predicted that during the apocalypse, toilet paper would be more precious than paper money. We laughed in class, not knowing that just a few weeks later people would be tussling at supermarkets across the country for toilet paper and hand sanitizer because of a global pandemic, a type of apocalypse. Weeks later, no one was laughing when we discussed *Parable of the Sower*. One student wryly remarked that I could have chosen a better time to ask them to read a novel about the end of the world as we know it.

I've taught the Parable series many times—almost every semester since 2020—both the original novel and its stunning graphic novel adaptation. My students, whether engineering undergrads at a technical institute or humanities majors at an Ivy League school, react similarly.

How did Octavia know?

THE POX

Octavia had been tracing the possible trajectory of America's collapse in her journals for years. In 1992, while completing *Parable of the Sower*, she predicted that the upcoming decade would see a precipitous increase in worldwide tribalism, stock market volatility, and global warming.[8] These worries undergird the action in the two books. The epidemic that began the long steady decline of American civilization is known as "the Pox" in *Parable of the Talents.* Lauren Olamina, the novel's young protagonist, born in the dystopian twenty-first century, knows only a world in free fall. Lauren's husband Taylor Franklin Bankole, who was born in the 1970s, is old enough to have seen the steady crumbling of society firsthand. He recalls:

> We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises . . . I have watched education become more a privilege of the rich than the basic necessity that it must be if civilized society is to survive. I have watched as convenience, profit, and inertia excused greater and more dangerous environmental degradation. I have watched poverty, hunger, and disease become inevitable for more and more people.[9]

The word "pox" refers to a disease; in the Parable series it is also a play on the word "apocalypse."[10] Since at least 2020, the pox seems less like fiction and more like a surreal reality. Perhaps it isn't so much that every time I teach the Parable series the world is on fire; it's that the world is *always* on fire, and Octavia's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* give us language to understand what's happening. Indeed, even as I was completing this book, Octavia's hometown was literally ablaze as wildfires raged across Southern California, not unlike the fires that rage in the 2025 of *Parable of the Sower*.

Interestingly, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic many listicles that lauded Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* or Stephen King's *The Stand* as books we needed to read to help us get a grip on our perilous circumstances neglected to include Octavia's Parable novels. I found that omission curious but not surprising. Despite her critical acclaim and popularity, Octavia did not command the sales figures of an Atwood or a King during her lifetime—although she did posthumously become a *New York Times* bestselling author for *Parable of the Sower* in September 2020. Octavia's work is, however, uniquely situated to speak to the terrors of dystopian America. Using historical examples while also imagining possible future scenarios, Octavia's novels pay close attention to the workings of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism to spin a horrifying near future about America's possible demise and redemption.

GENIUS RECOGNIZED

The 1990s were a banner decade for Octavia. She began the decade thinking about her legacy. In a leather-bound journal she had created with the words "Earthseed: The Book of the Living, Volume 1" inscribed on the spine, Octavia wrote: "I have no children. I shall never have any. American Black children will be mine. My fortune will be spent motivating and educating them while I live and after my death."[11] She was right to consider her impact after more than twenty years of her being a writer because the trajectory of her career would soon pivot.

In 1995 Octavia won a MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as a Genius Grant.[12] Many educators, scientists, writers, artists, and researchers consider this honor the pinnacle of one's career and an indicator of the profound respect one has from one's peers. The MacArthur is understood as

being awarded to the most exemplary minds—geniuses, if you will. And what was Octavia if not a type of genius? She was a barrier-breaking writer whose fiction and essays revealed a sharp mind honed by rigorous introspection and research, one whose arresting prose charged readers to question what they knew about the past, present, and future. Being awarded a MacArthur Fellowship after so many years of feeling looked over and cast aside was not only a profound personal achievement for Octavia but also a significant professional one. She was not simply the first Black science fiction writer, or woman science fiction writer, or Black woman science fiction writer to the win the award; she was the first science fiction writer to win a MacArthur, period.

Besides the prestige, the award came with a no-strings-attached financial gift of $295,000 paid out over the course of five years. Octavia had struggled financially off and on in the nearly two decades since she became a full-time professional writer, and now she had received the biggest windfall of her career. A year before receiving the MacArthur, Octavia had a few modest financial goals. Besides vowing to pay off her credit cards and better manage her monthly budget, she wrote in her journal: "After each novel is finished and off to editor and agent I want to take a trip . . . I want to take mama if in necessary and hire the people I need to help look after her, after yard, after the house."[13] She even made a plan to save twenty thousand dollars and six months of expenses so she could make a down payment on a house, move in, and pay her taxes.[14] (True to form Octavia also had loftier goals—including having a six-figure yearly income and amassing a fortune worth $500 million).[15] Just the next year, many of her goals were much more in reach, as the MacArthur Fellowship offered Octavia a level of financial security and stability that she had never experienced before.[16]

Also in 1995 Octavia published a collection of short stories and essays, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, that the *New York Times* cited that year as one of its notable books. In 1997 she was awarded an honorary degree from Kenyon College. She released *Sower*'s highly anticipated sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, in 1998. That same year she agreed to leave her papers to the prestigious Huntington Library. Like the MacArthur Fellowship, her agreement to house her papers at the Huntington's archive reflects Octavia's status as a major writer, one whose legacy is worth remembering and studying. And in 2000, Octavia was awarded the PEN Center West Lifetime

Achievement Award, bookending a decade of major public accolades and achievements.

But despite the rarefied air of such accolades, Octavia's life remained the same in some important ways. She continued writing, although her relationship to her vocation was becoming increasingly fraught and she had switched from using typewriters to a personal computer. She continued being a self-avowed news junkie who consumed newspapers, radio programs, and television shows daily, paying especially close attention to the news about climate change and culture wars. She continued ruminating on the big questions and ideas that had long animated her work—such as why humans were so committed to hierarchal thinking and behavior. She continued patronizing the Los Angeles Public Library, which remained a sanctuary for her, as it had been since the 1970s. She continued giving talks around the country about her work, in classrooms, at conventions, and in bookstores. The number of television and radio appearances she made began to ratchet up as her fame increased. She continued teaching at the Clarion writers' workshop and mentoring a new generation of speculative writers. She continued corresponding with her writer friends, although she was a notoriously slow responder. She continued being a dutiful daughter and niece as her mother and aunts got older and needed more attention and care. She continued to diet and lament her weight gain as she veered into middle age.[17]

She also continued living what she called a comfortably asocial life in a bustling metropolis. Her inner circle remained tight during the 1990s. She spent time with her family and a few close friends, but otherwise she had mostly settled into life as a solitary writer. She far less frequently lamented her lack of partnership, although her desire to be in a committed relationship did not entirely disappear; she even once let a friend set her up with someone.[18] People continued to speculate on her sexuality. For example, Samuel R. Delany recalls asking Octavia outright if she was gay. According to Delany, in 1997 they were at a gay club in Atlanta because someone had dropped the two speakers off there. Delany assumed they had chosen that venue because he was openly gay. And then he wondered whether it was because Octavia was queer as well. She replied to his query by shrugging and saying, "Probably."[19] Nonetheless, despite the rumors and curiosity, it does not appear that Octavia ever publicly identified as gay.

Another thing that didn't change was that she continued to worry about money although she was far beyond the penny-pinching of her past.[20] But old habits die hard; for the rest of her life, Octavia would almost obsessively ruminate on how she could accumulate more money—not out of greed but as a reaction against her years of poverty and the very real circumstance that she was unmarried and had no children. She had to think about how to support herself in her old age and accomplish her dream of educating Black children.[21] No amount of money she earned was ever quite enough for Octavia to be able to eliminate her fear of scarcity, to truly feel financially secure.

Some important things had changed though. By this time in her life, the nervous, painfully shy Octavia of her early career had given way to a more quietly self-assured, confident woman. Delany recalls noticing this shift when he encountered Octavia in 1991 after several years. They were both speakers at a program at the Schomburg Center in Harlem: "Toward the end of the reading, we got a black heckler, who had just come in off the street, and I was really astonished when Octavia stood up to him quite articulately and told him to keep quiet and not interrupt till, finally, he got up and left. This was not the pathologically shy young woman I remembered from Clarion."[22] This evolution had been slow, steady, and hard-won, beginning when she started taking public speaking classes and listened to self-hypnosis tapes in the 1960s and early 1970s. Now Octavia was in her forties and had been a professional writer for more than two decades. She was well-respected and successful. What did she have to prove to anyone but herself?

To that end, she continued to be hard and exacting on herself about the quality of her writing and the pace of her production. Although her journal entries during the 1990s and into the 2000s are more often than not markedly different in tone from her earlier reflections—more like observations of the world, notes on her writing, and recordings of her travels rather than a cataloguing of her deepest fears and desires—they are still occasionally peppered with bouts of admonition and self-doubt. And despite her carefully cultivated persona, she still suffered at times from social anxiety and worried about embarrassing herself by feeling nervous, irritable—or otherwise human.[23] These issues notwithstanding, Octavia spent a large part of the 1990s traveling and making appearances befitting the stature of a literary star.

Octavia remained plugged in to the politics of the day, whether it was following the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996, the battles around gender and race that roiled within African American communities, or issues on the global stage. Reagan was no longer president, but she saw his unfortunate influence all over US politics, whether it was in the presidency of his successor, George H. W. Bush, or that of Bill Clinton. Octavia viewed Reagan as a sociopath and a pathological liar who could not distinguish between fact and fiction, while she believed Bush was "more likely to know what's true, but no more likely to care."[24] She was rather disillusioned with politics more generally, believing that "whether calling themselves communists, capitalists, socialists, monarchists, or whatever, all rulers are oligarchs. If they aren't rich when they come into power . . . they quickly become rich, and they seek to protect their wealth."[25] In 1992 she predicted that Clinton would be a weak president too busy assuaging working- and middle-class whites whose approval he craved instead of properly attending to the mounting class divide.[26]

She also kept abreast of the culture wars between Black men and Black women that dominated popular discourse. In 1989 Shahrazad Ali published the controversial screed *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman*, which lambasted Black women as being less intelligent than their male counterparts and advised women to submit to men's supposed superiority. Ali was a frequent guest on talk shows during the 1990s as well as a frequent subject of interviews, op-ed pieces, and exposés. Octavia found Ali's popularity unfortunate but unsurprising: "People like S.A. seem either to be complete hypocrites—atheists in pulpits—or extreme examples of Stockholm syndrome and/or simply opportunists who would sell their mother by the slice."[27] After the Million Man March in 1995, Octavia reflected, "to pretend as some black men have (and do) that when black women dare to demand their rights as human beings—their full and equal rights—it is only because they are controlled by white feminists. This is a new twist on the outside agitator theme."[28] Octavia rejected simplistic notions of Black identity that were simply patriarchy repackaged in the language of the late twentieth century. She also observed newly emancipated South African activist Nelson Mandela and his careful dance of remaining friendly to Western governments while maintaining ties to controversial leaders like Fidel Castro.[29] And Octavia lamented what she saw as the Soviet Union's shortsightedness in pulling back from its space

program.[30] Her news-junkie tendencies helped her to see the patterns in everything that was happening.

Despite sometimes being described as a kind of misanthrope who preferred her own company, Octavia had a reputation among her fans, peers, and mentees for being kind, gracious, and generous. She was simply introverted, not unfriendly. Graphic novelist Tim Fielder recalls that Octavia spent two hours on the phone with him in the early 1990s advising him on his career. "We had never even met," Fielder admitted, "and yet here she was mentoring me and encouraging me."[31] Poet Linda Addison, who was also a contributor to Sheree Renée Thomas's anthology *Dark Matter*, recalls bumping into Octavia at a house party: "I went to grab something to drink in the kitchen and when I walked in there, there she was sort of taking a break from the crowd. She was so tall and beautiful. I was star struck, but she was so friendly and gracious. I will never forget it."[32] There is a common refrain from everyone I have talked to who ever met Octavia, whether fan, aspiring writer, or veteran author: they all remark on her kindness, generosity, and regal dignity.

PARABLES FOR A NEW AGE

Much of Octavia's creative output during the 1990s was devoted to the Parable series, although in true Butlerian fashion, she worked on multiple projects at once. Octavia experienced a bout of writer's block after finishing her Xenogenesis series in the latter half of the 1980s. She defined writer's block in a few ways: when you know what you want to say but don't know how to say it, when you say nothing because you don't know what to say, or when you don't know what to say so you produce a type of word vomit.[33] Although she had already been ruminating for years on a project that would eventually become *Parable of the Sower*, the idea was still nebulous when she began working on the novel in earnest in early 1989.[34] For three years she struggled with writer's block, growing increasingly frustrated, so she did what she usually did when her motivation was waning: she devoured books, watched the news, and clipped newspaper articles on interesting topics; she went on walks in her neighborhood; she corresponded with her friends; and she wrote. She wrote about interstellar space travelers who arrive on a hostile planet. They have taken a one-way trip away from Earth. So what do they do next? Rather than answering that question, Octavia

decided to imagine the origin story of these far-flung earthlings.[35] While test-driving methods for improving her writing process, Octavia also began writing snatches of poetry to incite her creative flow. These small poems, affirmations and admonishments, would eventually become the Earthseed scriptures. Poetry became the vehicle through which Octavia could map out the contours of Earthseed philosophy and the world that inspired such a stark religion. In 1992, things clicked into place for her, and she spent the next year writing *Parable of the Sower*. Octavia likewise began working on *Parable of the Talents* in the early 1990s, but like its predecessor, it would take years for the narrative to fully take shape. She even offered to return the advance for the novel because she feared she would be unable to complete it. Nevertheless, Octavia rallied, publishing *Talents* in 1998.

In the Parable series, Octavia saw the opportunity to consider the confluence of several dangerous possible future outcomes. She reflected that "writing fiction forces you to think—to watch people and see how they are manipulated by others . . . to talk about the way a story might be used to illustrate human realities, to learn how words can do great harm."[36] Some inspirations for the world of the series came from news stories, like ones about children of drug-addicted mothers and the misuse of what was being called smart drugs. Octavia watched with increasing dread both the steady decline of educational standards and the country's slippage toward becoming a nation with a stark gap between rich and poor. And for decades, Octavia worried about the consequences of climate change—the irreversible rising of sea levels, the deterioration of the ozone layer, and the pollution of the air, water, and soil.[37] She was also concerned about a troubling consequence of "unregulated capitalism": the increasing privatization of public resources.[38] This concern did not abate when Bill Clinton won the 1992 presidential election.[39] In 1993, she listened to a troubling story on NPR about a "private, for-pay playgrounds (in-door[s]) for parents worried about crime and drugs in public parks."[40] Rather than putting resources toward preventing crime or unequal resources, wealthy residents turned to private companies to secure their children's safety. While such a plan would keep some children safe from danger, the kids who would not have access to the private playground were left to fend for themselves. Octavia believed that the solutions to America's problems included focusing on education, health care, affordable housing, and small

businesses instead of divesting from social programs.[41] She lamented that by the 1990s, Americans "have now voted for 'less' government, higher defense budgets, more death penalties, more guns, harshness to aliens, lower taxes, less welfare, and a balanced budget—from the very people who unbalanced it."[42] This neoliberal turn prioritized individuals over communal well-being, with terrible possibilities for the future.

In 1993 Octavia published her tenth novel, *Parable of the Sower*, with a small independent press, Four Walls Eight Windows. She felt she had hit a plateau with science fiction publishing. Too often publishers had a narrow vision for her work, and Octavia chafed against limited expectations. If she could have things her way, she'd market and shelve her work beyond the three major audiences—science fiction readers, academics, and feminists—that usually resonated with her writing. For one thing, not everything she wrote was science fiction, strictly speaking.[43] *Kindred* is fantasy, albeit a grim one. *Parable of the Sower* is futuristic but also realistic; it is not like her Xenogenesis trilogy, which could be defined as hard science fiction because of its emphasis on science, genetic engineering, space travel, and aliens. As she feared, when she pitched *Parable of the Sower* to publishers, they did not really know where it fit in. Although she had wanted to go with a big commercial press that did not usually publish genre fiction, her agent rightly persuaded her to go small again.[44] She had already done this with *Kindred*, which was now handled by the boutique Beacon Press, known for publishing serious literary works. Going small worked, and from the start, *Parable of the Sower* was a critical hit. It was nominated for a prestigious Nebula Award in 1994. Its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, would go on to win the Nebula Award in 2000.

The critical acclaim of *Parable of the Sower* and her connection to a boutique press devoted to her success meant that Octavia toured extensively to promote the book and her writing more generally, something she never had the opportunity to do before. This was both exciting and wearying. On the one hand, she was keen to promote her books and get them into the hands of readers, and she enjoyed talking about the big ideas that inspired her work. She had never had a proper book tour before, and she relished the chance to promote her work in a big way.[45] On the other hand, Octavia often found the pace of touring and promotion tiresome and draining.

The last decade of her life was filled with media appearances, talks, and the like. Between September and December 1995 alone, Octavia traveled

almost nonstop to Denver, Ann Arbor, New York, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, New Orleans, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, Las Vegas, and Columbus, Ohio, while also making appearances around Southern California.[46] At a stop in New York City in October where she was slated to have a working lunch, an interview, and a book signing, she admitted in her journal that she looked forward to being alone, when she could enjoy "a meal, a trip to the lady's room, and a chance to sleep and wake unhurried."[47]

The travel and appearances continued with similar vigor through the rest of the decade. The longstanding Black newspaper the *Los Angeles Sentinel* identified Octavia as a "self-proclaimed hermit and asocial sister" and billed her lecture and book signing on September 21, 2000, at the Huntington Library as a "must-attend event for aspiring writers, avid readers, and those who simply enjoy reading literature that delves into the depths of the diversity."[48] Octavia was in demand, and not because her latest novel was a feel-good science fiction frolic. It was, in fact, quite the opposite.

The Parable duology presents a near-future apocalypse that charts the fall of the United States as we know it and the concurrent rise of the Earthseed religion. Unlike the Xenogenesis trilogy, the Parable novels are not set in space centuries into the future. They are set a few decades into the twenty-first century in California, albeit a California none of us would want to live in. The Parables' animating themes are the possibilities and pitfalls of religion, how to build an equitable community, and the dangers of unchecked greed and power. Both novels are epistolary and feature Octavia's signature lean yet piercing prose. Journal entries, notes, scripture, and letters propel the plot of these cautionary tales of humanity's impending doom and possible redemption. Octavia's rendering of the characters' private documents and personal thoughts adds an intimate element to novels that are heavy with scenes of suffering and turmoil.

Apocalyptic novels can often be heavy on plot. After all, the world is ending, and readers need to know how and why. But the truth is that, as N. K. Jemisin reminds us, the world has ended many times for many people.[49] Doesn't the world end for people who are taken from their villages, captured, sold, and traded like strings of cowrie shells or goats, then stashed in the hull of a stinking ship and taken to a strange new land, with strange people, speaking a strange tongue? Isn't that a type of apocalypse? Isn't it

the end of *their* world?[50] The Parable novels' personal-style prose brings the apocalyptic fervor of the plots down to earth, inviting readers to remember how commonplace apocalypses have been throughout history.

The Parables' heroine is Lauren Oya Olamina, the daughter of a Baptist preacher who grows from being a sheltered but determined girl to a formidable religious leader with a devoted following. As her middle name Oya suggests, like the orisha of the wind and transformation, Lauren is a masterful agent of change.[51] Indeed, Earthseed's core scripture is "God is Change." Still, Earthseed's "God" is not so much a being to be worshipped or feared as a force to be reckoned with and shaped, lest it shape you. Lauren's reimagining of God is a rejection of her father's faith, a belief she sees as a relic of a bygone era, the "good old days" of progress and plenty. Her God is also heretical to the increasing wave of Christian fanaticism that is sweeping the country. Lauren's God reflects a world where only the most prepared and savvy will survive. Octavia once described *Parable of the Sower* as the "story of a young woman of the near future who sees the world going to hell and who believes she has discovered a new religion that can begin to put things right at least for the people who follow it."[52]

The initial book is a coming-of-age novel that charts the development of Lauren's philosophy as the world around her breaks down. Set in the early 2020s—the opening diary entry of the novel is July 20, 2024—*Parable of the Sower* takes place in a crumbling Southern California. Water is increasingly scarce, wildfires rage, and functioning government is almost nonexistent. Drug abuse, violent crime, and hunger are rampant. After a century of public schools expanding access to education, illiteracy is now the old new normal. The rich live in armored enclaves while the poor eke out an existence on the streets and in rural poverty. All that is old is new again, as indentured servitude and debt peonage, along with company towns, vie for economic supremacy, with people of color at the highest risk of exploitation. Those in the middle class are precarious in their own way; some try to hold on to some measure of safety and control by living in gated communities or in secluded villages. However, these are not the suburbs or hamlets of the twentieth century, but armed groups of the new petit bourgeoisie—professors, doctors, and other professionals—banding together to avoid joining the ranks of the teeming poor. This is the world where Lauren Olamina finds herself coming of age. She is precariously safe

in her gated community, surrounded by her family and community. But the violent world is just outside the walls and barbed wire, waiting to intrude.

Lauren's diary entries build out the crumbling architecture of this dystopian world. In some ways her diary reads like that of any other teen: She complains about her chores, siblings, and parents. She recalls neighborhood gossip and opines about her friends and boyfriend. Lauren also works out her burgeoning religious ideas in her journal, wrestling with her emerging faith and how she can share it with others. Still, Lauren is not an ordinary girl, and she certainly lives in extraordinary times. Her diary notes the lack of water and jobs, even within her relatively privileged community, alongside the creeping terror of the outside just beyond the cul-de-sac: the feral dogs that eat babies if they can get them, the sore-covered beggars who live on the streets, the parents and pimps who sell young girls to the highest bidder, and the drug-addled "pyros" addicted to a substance that makes lighting fires as pleasurable as sex. Eventually, her community's walls are breached and fall like those of Jericho. She and the survivors of the fire make their way north, creating the first Earthseed community along the way.

During their travels, Lauren and her community see the worst of humanity. Her journal evolves from hypothetical musings to stark realities, from the banal sight of people being robbed and beaten for eating out in broad daylight and security forces roughing up vulnerable travelers in overpriced stores, to the horrific sight of pyros burning and pillaging entire communities—often poor and struggling—for their sadistic kicks. One of the most somber sights Lauren encounters is a group of orphaned children "twelve, thirteen, maybe fourteen years old, three boys and a girl. The girl was pregnant, and so huge it was obvious she would be giving birth any day." Lauren and her crew see the children "roasting a severed human leg, maneuvering it where it lay in the middle of their fire atop the burning wood by twisting its foot . . . the girl pulled a sliver of charred flesh from the thigh and stuffed it into her mouth."[53] While Lauren's group escape this fate and make it to Northern California, creating an Earthseed community named Acorn, many others are not so fortunate. Burned-out cities and towns dot the landscape on their journey north.

Parable of the Sower was published in the last decade of the twentieth century and imagines what life could look like a generation later. For those readers at the bottom of the social ladder, those who were students of

history, Octavia's cautionary tale of stark class inequity, environmental collapse, and religious extremism sounded about right. I first encountered the book in 1996, when I was just about Lauren's age. Growing up poor and Black, the daughter of Caribbean immigrants, I found the world that Octavia describes in the pages of the novel to be not all that impossible. It was the era when the news covered the hole in the ozone layer with increasing alarm, before climate change became a wholly partisan issue. I was raised by someone who thought Ronald Reagan was the devil and Jimmy Carter was the best president ever. I saw firsthand the havoc that the crack epidemic and the War on Drugs wreaked in my communities. It wasn't a big leap for me to believe that the United States could be on the brink of collapse just thirty years into the future. But my experience was not necessarily the norm. After all, we were on the cusp of the new millennium, after a decade of record financial profits. The conspicuous consumption of the 1980s and the economic wins of the 1990s would invite us to believe that the United States would remain untouchable, the richest and most powerful nation on Earth, with the freest people.

The cracks in the nation's armor were there if people looked close enough. Though those on the right would later call their brand of evangelicalism "compassionate conservatism," religious extremism was on the rise during the decade.[54] In 1993, the same year of *Parable of the Sower*'s release, the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, went up in flames after a siege by US government agents and Texas law enforcement. David Koresh, a charismatic cult leader with a devoted following, barricaded himself and his congregation in their compound in the face of what they saw as government overreach.[55] Although the headquarters of this particular cult were destroyed, other religious extremists, along with white supremacist militias, simply became savvier at hiding their activities. Two years later, white nationalist Timothy McVeigh, radicalized by the Waco siege, bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, protesting the government. Much of today's domestic terrorism can trace its foundations to its predecessors in the 1990s.

The increasing threat of global warming was also a major concern when the Parable series debuted. Octavia, who was keenly interested in climate change and belonged to several environmental groups, admitted that "global warming is practically one of the characters" in *Parable of the Sower*.[56] Just a year before its publication, Hurricane Andrew laid waste to the Bahamas,

Florida, and Louisiana, resulting in sixty-five deaths and more than $27 billion in damages.[57] Octavia diagnosed the late twentieth-century's manifold dilemmas in her usual clear-eyed way. She identified that our current world order—with its reliance on fossil fuels, for example—was a "dangerous path" that would be hard to deviate from because it would "cost many very wealthy people much money to alter and/or that [it] would cost many jobs and much change to bring about."[58] She observed that when these issues are spotlighted in the media, momentary alarm is followed by pacifying reassurance from politicians and swift denials from profiteering businesses. She also noted how climate activists and organizers resisted this narrative despite fierce opposition from both industry and government. Octavia saw this troubling loop as increasingly problematic and predicted that in our current political climate, "changes may be only cosmetic" until our structures are spurred into action.[59]

Octavia believed that ignoring issues like global warming was a huge mistake, likening it to "ignoring the fire in the kitchen because you're safe in your bedroom."[60] Pretending did not make the problem any less real. When she visited Peru in the 1980s, Octavia was struck by mountains on the coast "because they're so utterly barren, like the moon." This sight catalyzed her thinking, and she wondered, "Is this what Southern California could look like after a few decades of Global Warming?"[61] The characters in the Parable series are dealing with the domino effects of climate disaster —lack of water, increased disease and violence, and the breakdown of social structures. Octavia took the issues of climate change and gamed them out to the near future to invite us to consider their devastating consequences looming not too far away. She mused, "*Parable of the Sower* contains nothing that couldn't actually happen, but I hope we're smart enough—foresighted enough not to let most of it happen."[62]

While *Parable of the Sower* set out to diagnose the problems we might face in the twenty-first century, its sequel sought to outline some possible consequences of the breakdown in society. In her notes about *Parable of the Talents* Octavia wrote, "Talents can show another possibility: fragmentation and the results of retribalization."[63] Set in the 2030s and beyond and narrated by Lauren's daughter, Larkin, the book is punctuated with letters and diary entries that chart the collapse of Acorn and the rise and fall of President Jarret's far-right Christian nationalist fascist state.

Acorn has a few years of relative domestic tranquility. Lauren partners with Bankole, a former doctor who is older than her father, and they have a daughter. Eventually, Lauren and her comrades are discovered and abused, some are murdered, and all are scattered. Larkin is kidnapped and adopted by Christian nationalists. Lauren eventually is able to escape, but she is never able to fully reunite with Larkin (who has renamed herself Asha Vere), who grows up to resent her absent mother. Instead, Lauren becomes Olamina, the mother of Earthseed, which grows from a tiny fringe religion to a powerful unifying cultural force. By the end of the novel, Jarret's administration is short-lived, and the United States moves forward in a slightly less chaotic fashion. It never returns to its former glory as the world's superpower, but it does regain some semblance of law and order.

Part of what makes Lauren a compelling character is how complicated she is. She is determined to the point of obstinacy. She is both savvy and naïve. Perhaps her most interesting characteristic is her hyper-empathy, a psychosomatic delusion that is a result of her birth mother's prenatal drug use. Lauren and other hyper-empaths psychosomatically experience the pain and pleasure of others, but because there is so much pain in her world, hyper-empathy is a dangerous condition to have.[64] For Lauren it means suppressing her pain response when she ventures outside and sees bloody and broken bodies. She eventually learns that more sinister forces—like the wealthy who are ushering in a new era of chattel slavery—prefer to have hyper-empaths as employees or slaves because they are easier to control. But hyper-empathy is not just a tool for domination; it also has the potential to be repurposed for good. Being able to feel another's pain means you are less likely to inflict pain on others, even if only for your own self-interest. Likewise, if you can feel another person's pleasure, you are more likely to want to create a world or at least a community where pleasure is possible, if not frequent. But living in a world where power and domination rule the day more often than not, hyper-empaths are especially vulnerable.

With Lauren, Octavia is able to work out some of the issues that fascinated her in the failed *Blindsight* novel, namely, what it means to be a charismatic leader (of what some would call a cult) and what it means to grow up in the shadow of such a leader.[65] While Lauren is not devious or power-hungry in any traditional sense, she is single-minded and polarizing. Because *Parable of the Talents* is largely framed by her estranged daughter's narrative, readers get another perspective on Lauren. Juxtaposed

to both her mother's adoring acolytes and vicious enemies, Asha has a more ambivalent take on her mother. Raised by her fundamentalist Christian uncle Marc, Asha grows up being taught to fear everything her mother represents: heretic religion and unbridled Black womanhood. However, although Asha does internalize Christian nationalism to a certain degree, her difficulty with her mother is much simpler. Asha resents Lauren for not being there for her and for devoting her life to Earthseed. It's no matter that they are forcibly separated by the very sort of Christian fundamentalists who adopt her and her uncle or that her mother experiences rape and other violence. Fundamentally, Asha feels orphaned. With a dead father and a mother known to offer succor in the stark religion of Earthseed, Asha feels unseen and alone, finding comfort in neither Christianity nor Earthseed, nor in the communities each religion creates.

Octavia wrote *Parable of the Talents* in the wake of her own mother's death after a massive stroke in 1996. Octavia, along with her aunts and cousins, cared for Octavia Margaret as she declined. Her journals from that time reflect her deep worry about her mother's physical pain and the indignity of aging.[66] Octavia was an only child, so much of the planning for the funeral and the business of putting her mother's affairs in order fell to her. She describes her grief as part anger, part disbelief, part despair. Some of what she does in the *Talents* is pour that anger and pain into the narrative, working out some of the angst about her close but sometimes fraught relationship with her mother. She admits, "In January 1997, when I got back into writing the novel, it had become a mother-daughter story."[67] This is not unlike her peer Toni Morrison, who channeled the loss of her father into the pages of *Song of Solomon.*[68] In a 1998 journal entry, Octavia admitted, "my pen and my paper, they comfort me—at least a little. They allow me to scream into utter silence. They focus my thoughts, they permit me to act when no other action is possible."[69]

FROM WILD SEED TO EARTHSEED

Earthseed is a mixture of the wisdom of the Abrahamic faiths along with aspects of Buddhist and Taoist teachings and physics. Eventually, Lauren's teachings are gathered into a book of scripture called *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, verses of which are scattered throughout both *Sower* and *Talents*. While the teachings vary from plainspoken declarations of the

philosophy to advice for devotees, the central understanding is the following: Change is inevitable and inescapable. Lauren arrives at this conclusion as a student of the Bible and history, but also as a young person observing the steady destruction of her already dystopian world. All around her, adults born in the twentieth century reminisce about the "good old days" and claim that those days are coming back. Lauren sees Earthseed's notion of change as the way to take control of the crumbling world—that is, shaping God—rather than simply being subject to it. For Lauren the message is clear: Change is inevitable; humanity can get with it or be relegated to the dust bin of history.

One of the changes Lauren advocates for is humanity leaving Earth and settling on other planets. She writes, "Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths / The universe is Godseed / Only we are Earthseed / And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars."[70] Lauren lives long enough to see the beginning of this evolution. As an old woman she sees the first generation ship launch into space, although she is too elderly to join the trip herself. But she is able to see her dream of humanity leaving its home for another planet, spreading her philosophy of Earthseed beyond our galaxy. Octavia was interested in and a proponent of space travel. She came of age during the Space Race of the late 1950s and early 1960s and was a young person when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon in 1969. She was no champion of imperialism, but she thought that interstellar travel was important and would eventually prove necessary. Although it will be billions of years before our sun becomes a red giant and engulfs the inner planets of the solar system, she felt it was clear that humanity will need a post-Earth plan significantly sooner. The Earth can survive asteroids, meteors, and even nuclear war, but humanity cannot. And since humanity seems unlikely to survive its prolonged adolescence on our home planet, having a plan B seemed wise to her.

Lauren's message about the importance of change is not too far off from Octavia's own sentiments. In fact, before *Parable of the Sower* properly begins, the prologue of sorts breaks down Octavia's life philosophy: "Prodigy is, at its essence, adaptability, and persistent, positive obsession . . . Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all."[71] The idea that one could be unwaveringly devoted to creating and building things rather than tearing them down shaped every aspect of Octavia's life. In the Parable series, she takes the concept of positive obsession to new heights.

Humanity could use the philosophy to reject violence and hierarchal thinking, and positive obsession could be channeled into saving our species from what seems like inevitable destruction. Lauren is not Octavia's doppelgänger, though like many of Octavia's other heroines, she is tall, has dark skin, and is androgynous, brilliant, and opinionated. But Lauren is a spokesperson for many of Octavia's fears about what could happen if human beings do not stop being so self-destructive. As the prologue to *Sower* suggests, Lauren is an archetype of what positive obsession can become. But she's also a warning about unmitigated obsession. Lauren writes in *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, "Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism."[72] Cue the rise of Christian nationalism. But the Parable series also invites readers to cast a wary eye on Lauren and what Earthseed could become. It could very well devolve into the kind of draconian religiosity that it was meant to oppose.

In the short biographies that graced the backs of her books, Octavia often described herself as a "former Baptist." Although she left her mother's church as a teen, she never forgot what she learned there. Octavia was intimately familiar with the Bible, and so it's no surprise that biblical allusions and religious imagery abound in her work, particularly in the Parable series. And she was often working out in her own work the human stories featured in religious texts. Though she was no longer a believer, her religious upbringing shaped her indelibly. She admitted:

> I used to despise religion. I have not become religious, but I think I've become more understanding of religion. And I'm glad I was raised a Baptist, because I got my conscience installed early. I've been around people who don't have one, and they're damn scary. And I think a lot of them are out there running major corporations! How can you do some of the things these people do if you have a conscience? So I think it might be better if there were a little *more* religion, in that sense.[73]

Although she understood how religion could be problematic, she believed in its ability to provide a sort of moral compass for believers.

Octavia was particularly worried about the rise of conservative Christianity, and that's why it has such a prominent place in the Parable series. A year before *Parable of the Sower* was published, fundamentalist Christian Pat Buchanan ran for president. And although he did not receive the Republican nomination, his ascendance on the national stage was

evidence of evangelicalism's rising popularity and power.[74] She considered conservative stalwarts like evangelist Billy Graham, media mogul Rupert Murdoch, and rising political star Newt Gingrich as further evidence of how contemporary politics and the power of religion had become bedfellows within far-right ideology.[75] Her worries about religion, and Christianity in particular, show up throughout her career in novels like *Survivor* and the unpublished *Blindsight*. She saw the potential that religion had to coalesce power and oppress those it deemed sinful. The marriage of Christianity and patriarchy was a union Octavia particularly abhorred. In the Parable series, there are a variety of problematic men, from Lauren's benevolent patriarch of a father to her brothers, who view her as a threat to their authority, to the autocratic Christian nationalist president Jarret. All are buoyed by a Christian tradition that values men's power and emotions above all else.

Despite her ambivalence, Octavia utilized Christian motifs and themes. For instance, the titles of both novels come from parables of Jesus that are told in the Bible. In the parable of the sower, Jesus describes a farmer who sows his seed in various types of land.[76] The seed is alternately blown away, eaten by birds, or lands upon inhospitable land. But some of the seed finds the right soil: "And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold" (Luke 8:8, King James Version). Lauren is the proverbial sower and Earthseed is what she seeks to cultivate. Sometimes her words are dismissed, are devoured, or land in hostile terrain. Sometimes the seeds are carried off and disseminated to far-off places. But, as the series suggests, those who believe are able to take the religion from one person's individual belief to a thriving religion that exists beyond Earth. Octavia herself is also the proverbial sower, her books and short stories the seeds she plants in readers' imaginations, inviting us to new worlds and imploring us to reimagine our relationship to our planet and communities. Some will dismiss her work, others will simply consume it for its beauty or find it entertaining, and still others will take her words in, wrestle with them, and be moved to action.

The message of the Parable series has certainly been embraced during the more than thirty years since their publication. The novels are taught in high schools and colleges around the world. Scholars have written dozens of articles and book chapters on the series. John Jennings and Damian Duffy have adapted *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* as graphic novels. Writer and activist adrienne maree brown, in her book

Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, extrapolated Octavia's teaching into a guide for those interested in making profound social change. Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon reimagined *Parable of the Sower* as an opera. The Parable series is the topic of numerous podcasts and web series. And on July 20, 2024—which some dubbed "*Parable of the Sower* Day"—thousands of people honored Octavia and the seemingly prophetic events of the Parable novels all across social media.[77] We are now living in what was once the near future, and Octavia's warnings and hopes are as relevant as ever.

AN UNFINISHED SERIES

At the end of *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren witnesses part of the destiny of Earthseed, which is "to take root among the stars." The generation starship, ironically named the *Christopher Columbus*, leaves Earth in search of a planet where humanity can start over. Lauren's status as a godlike figure is seemingly cemented among her followers. Though she does not take the journey, she will live on as the founder of Earthseed.

But the Parable series was never supposed to be a duology. Octavia had always intended to write more sequels, the subjects of which are hinted at in the Earthseed scripture. Fragments of the Parable sequels also exist in Octavia's archive, and she would sometimes tease out information about them during interviews in the years after *Parable of the Talents* was released. One of Earthseed's scriptures advises that God is "trickster, teacher, chaos, clay" and that human beings need to attend to all these facets of God in their change-making.[78] Trickster, teacher, chaos, and clay would also become the inspiration for at least four sequels she planned to write—*Parable of the Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of Chaos*, and *Parable of Clay*.

Trickster would take place after the *Christopher Columbus* found a seemingly hospitable planet. But Earthseed immigrants would soon discover that though they could breathe the air, their new home was not welcoming. In various versions of the *Trickster* novel, humans would be inundated with famine, disease, and internal conflict. Would they be able to shape God as their foremother had preached they should? Lauren's twenty-first-century apocalyptic woes were in the spaceship's distant rearview mirror, and Lauren would be as mythological as Jesus is to people today. In the Parable sequels, humanity would have no umbilical cord to their home

planet. The problems they encountered and the ways they would have to shape God or be shaped would have to be discovered on their own. Not unlike the vast expanses covered in Octavia's Patternist series, the Parable sequels were poised to take readers far beyond Lauren's era of the Pox and into a far distant, but equally perilous, future.

We will never know how Lauren's descendants would fare because Octavia was not able to finish those novels before her death. In interviews, she sometimes said that she nixed the Parable sequels altogether. In 1997 she declared she "killed" the subsequent sequels because it had been "too hard to write the first sequel" and she had given up after rewriting the introduction to *Trickster* "at least 150 times."[79] Yet at other times she would suggest that they were just on hiatus while she pursued other creative projects. She told NPR in 2000 she was still working on *Trickster*. In a 2004 interview she said that though she had turned to other projects, she would "probably" return to the Parable series; the setting and plot, however, would not revolve around Lauren or her offspring.[80] And she did indeed publish short stories, essays, and a novel between 1998 and 2005.

Several things contributed to Octavia's ambivalence about her ability to complete the series. The first obstacle was a new multiyear stint of writer's block. She had dealt with writer's block before, like after she published the Xenogenesis novels. At that time, she had started writing poetry that would eventually turn into Earthseed scripture, but this new experience of writer's block was alarming. Octavia continued to read voraciously, and as always, she went down rabbit holes of research and surrounded herself with books on every subject imaginable. But when it came time to put pen to paper, nothing flowed in ways she liked. She wrote and rewrote dozens of versions of novels that she would inevitably be dissatisfied with. The truth is, Octavia was burned out. As a professional writer who had spent decades writing almost nonstop, this was beyond frustrating. It was terrifying.

In her journals she called herself a "worldweaver," "worldmaker," "storyteller," and "bestseller," both as a reflection of what she did and as an aspiration. Octavia did not believe in inspiration. She believed in persistence. She believed in getting up every day, sitting at her desk, and writing. She did not wait for the muse to strike. Time and again, in interviews and lectures, at conferences and conventions, Octavia told writers, "If you want to be a writer, you have to write." But are you still a writer if you can't write? Her usual workarounds proved fruitless. No

amount of reading, researching, outlining, or brainstorming could jog the proper words onto the page. When she was able to write, it was *Blindsight* all over again. The stories did not cohere the way she wanted them to. She explored plotlines that did not materialize or fully make sense. Octavia's block got so bad that she talked to her agent about writing to her publisher, offering to return an advance on a book that was years overdue. After decades of toil, after finally getting the recognition of her peers and financial stability, the words just wouldn't come. Writing, her longtime positive obsession, the purpose that shaped her life, was now seemingly closed off to her.

The end of the twentieth century found Octavia in a curious position. She was a well-respected author, a frequent commentator, a respected mentor and teacher. She had won the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. She was financially stable. But her health was increasingly precarious. Octavia had certainly experienced instances of poor health throughout her life, ranging from dental woes to anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations. In her forties, her mental health had mostly improved, but then high blood pressure plagued her. Octavia alternately felt weak and lightheaded to the point of exhaustion. The medicines she took for hypertension often left her feeling groggy and fatigued, and she wasn't entirely sure they were solving the problem. She had already been struggling with her mother's death as she was wrestling with *Parable of the Talents*. She saw her beloved aunts slowing down and wondered who might pass next, and now her own body was betraying her. Then her aunt Babe died, leaving her aunt Bee as sole living matriarch. Now she and her cousins would need to step up and lead the family, as a whole generation of her family was fading away. On top of all that, she was in a creative slump. Her attempts to return to the Parable series were unsatisfying, and the other stories she tried to write just didn't work. She seemed to be unable to see her way out of the malaise she was in.

While Octavia vacillated between finishing the Parable series and starting other projects, a friend gave her a vampire novel. She found herself immersed in it, and she got an idea. Vampires had long been popular, since Bram Stoker's *Dracula* appeared in 1897. Anne Rice's modern vampires were brooding and sexy and extremely popular. In 1994, Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* was adapted into a big Hollywood movie, just two years after a blockbuster adaptation of Stoker's novel. Octavia would remark that Rice was one of the few speculative authors who could expect long lines of

devoted fans at conventions, while there had been times Octavia had to personally run down readers to pay attention to her books.[81] Vampires were experiencing a sort of renaissance at the turn of the millennium. Why not try her hand at a vampire tale?

In true Octavia fashion, her vampires would not be the traditional sexy male heartthrobs of popular culture. There would be plenty of sex and action, but her vampire novel would be about a daywalker, a young Black woman vampire who was genetically engineered to walk in the sunlight and whose very existence would be the next step in the species' evolution. Octavia put the manuscripts for the Parable sequels aside for the most part and set about writing what would turn out to be her final novel, *Fledgling*.

Chapter 6

Flight

"Two tickets for *Interview with the Vampire*, please."

The movie theater attendant raised an eyebrow at me and my best friend Jamie. "You know you have to be seventeen to see this movie, right?"

I was only thirteen and Jamie was fourteen, but we both nodded enthusiastically. The attendant shrugged and handed us two tickets. We squealed and raced to our seats. I had been looking forward to seeing this movie for months. Vampires were my latest obsession, and I had already been borrowing Anne Rice novels from the library for the past year. But getting to see Louis and Lestat onscreen? I was dying.

When I was growing up, going to the movies was a special treat in my family, something that happened maybe once a year. I loved everything about the movie-going experience: sitting in the darkened theater with the huge screen, taking in a story that I could get lost in, where I could imagine being somebody else. It's still one of my favorite things. So, as I sat in the theater, I felt myself being transported to the past. I imagined myself as a powerful immortal vampire. I was swooning over Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, and Antonio Banderas. I was taken in by the power and glamour of these beautiful monsters. That afternoon at the movies I became a lifelong vampire enthusiast.

THE RISE OF THE UNDEAD

I was far from alone. Before the popularity of *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), vampire tales like *Fright Night* (1985) and *The Lost Boys* (1987) had terrified and titillated audiences. The poster for *The Lost Boys* boasted, "Sleep all day. Party all night. Never grow old, never die. It's fun to be a vampire," giving new meaning to the

Peter Pan syndrome and the public's latest obsession with vampires. And there was television too. Fans devoured shows like *Forever Knight* (1992–1996), a procedural about an eight-hundred-year-old vampire who works the graveyard shift as a homicide detective, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), adapted from the 1992 cult film, which starred the titular Buffy saving the world from supernatural forces, all while balancing life as a high schooler. And vampires were not only pale and undead: Black vampires were also the stars in films like *Vamp* (1986), *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), and *Blade* (1998).

Vampires were once again in vogue, and their reign continued into the 2000s, with the likes of *Angel* (1999–2004), a popular spinoff from the *Buffy* series; and the Twilight series, which for years dominated the bestseller book list (four novels from 2005 through 2008) and blockbuster movie list (*The Twilight Saga* of four films from 2008 to 2012). From 2008 to 2014, HBO's *True Blood* reflected an ongoing fascination with sexy bloodsuckers, and the soapy teen drama *Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017) and its spinoffs also dominated the scene. It seemed like vampires were everywhere.

The year that Stephenie Meyer's glittery *Twilight* vampires were unleashed onto the world, 2005, was the same year Octavia published her final novel, *Fledgling*. Although both *Twilight* and *Fledgling* are vampire tales set in the Pacific Northwest, the two novels could not be farther apart in style and influence. But they do tell us something interesting about the state of the world in the early twenty-first century.

When Octavia began sharing the fact that she was at work on a vampire novel, she was often met with some incredulity. Octavia Butler didn't write vampire novels, right? But after the grueling process of dealing with writer's block and then writing two successful but draining novels, Octavia was in the mood for change. "I wanted to take my mind off the news—Bush, Iraq, the economy, medical care, the environment," she admitted. "I wanted to write about a matriarchy—founded on something other than muscle."[1] She wanted, and would find, something fun, like her previous experience of writing *Wild Seed*.[2] In one interview she said, "I found that I was kind of overwhelmed by what I had done [in the Parable series], what I had had to comb through to do it."[3] Something had clicked when a friend had given her that vampire novel. She recognized that writing one of her own could be a fun project that would be totally different from what she'd

done before. It would be a palate cleanser of sorts, a "reward" for writing the Parable novels.[4] And that's how *Fledgling*, Octavia's final novel, was born.

Fledgling isn't a "save the world" novel like the Parable series, but the novel did arrive in a world in dire need of saving. Published in 2005 four years after 9/11 and amid the War on Terror, *Fledgling* reimagines family and community during a time when the battle lines of "us versus them" were being redrawn in newly devastating ways. The novel also appeared during a rise in demographic anxiety as the nation's shifting racial landscape meant that for the first time in modern US history whites were poised to become a racial minority. *Fledgling* reflects some of the heaviness of its times. In other words, despite the novel being billed as lighter literary fare than some of her other works, *Fledgling* is at its heart an Octavia E. Butler novel—sober, intense, and serious—even if it has a lot of sex and vampires.

A WRITER'S LIFE

The last six years of Octavia's life were a whirlwind of speaking tours, awards, and accolades. Though she lamented her output, she continued to be a sought-after speaker and author. Her declining health meant that these years also included a miasma of insomnia, mysterious symptoms, and, at times, despair. But it started out with a life-affirming move.

Octavia had long loved Seattle. She first visited the city in the 1970s when she was a young writer and was utterly captivated by its lakes and mountains. Though Octavia had not lived anywhere for any length of time besides Southern California, after her mother's death, she decided to bite the bullet and leave California. In 1999, she and her three hundred boxes of books made their way to Seattle for a new adventure. Octavia described this move as her "midlife crisis."[5] But it was no reckless move aimed at capturing a misbegotten youth. Instead, it was the fulfillment of a promise she had made to herself to live where and how she wanted to live. That same year Octavia admitted, "I'm fifty-two years old and have never moved to a place just because I wanted to."[6] So she did just that.

Moving to Seattle gave Octavia an opportunity to live in an area that she found breathtaking, where she could explore state parks, hike, and commune with nature. There was also a vibrant science fiction community

in the Pacific Northwest. She still kept copious journals and filled them with musings about politics, pop culture, her natural surroundings, and, of course, her writing. But gone were the days when she filled pages of her diary with yearnings for a different kind of life. These days Octavia was mostly settled, if not at peace, with the direction her personal life had taken. She was not incessantly mourning that she was missing out on something. Now in her fifties, hers was a quiet life centered on her work and dotted with conversations with a wide range of acquaintances, colleagues, students, mentees, fans, and family; activities with her small, tight-knit circle of friends; and restorative sojourns into the beautiful terrain of the Pacific Northwest.

Besides living in her dream city, Octavia, during the last years of her life, primarily attended to her demanding career and dealt with her increasingly precarious health. The latter had Octavia seriously concerned. More and more it seemed that her hypertension symptoms were getting worse and her medications had alarming side effects. She noted in her journal that the medicines made her cough until she was nauseous. At other times, she was so drowsy that she fell asleep at her desk. She was frequently out of breath and in pain after even mild exertions, a disconcerting fact for someone who enjoyed spending time outdoors and in nature. She wondered whether she had an undiagnosed allergy or severe asthma and contemplated changing doctors to get a second opinion. Eventually, Octavia was taking a daily cocktail of prescription medicines and over-the-counter drugs to treat high blood pressure, high cholesterol, shortness of breath, the incessant cough, and pain.[7]

Despite these medical concerns, Octavia remained dedicated to the demands of her career. *Kindred* turned twenty-five in 2004. That year she embarked on a grueling international tour, traveling to eighteen cities, including Paris and London, to celebrate this quarter-century legacy. Although Octavia was a seasoned traveler—she averaged about a dozen trips per year in the last years of her life—this was a lot even for her, especially since she sometimes had trouble getting from the jet bridge to the gate without becoming winded. But even with her declining health, Octavia hopped on planes in Seattle and flew down the West Coast, over to the Midwest and the East Coast, and down South, crisscrossing the country several times a year. Being a meticulous chronicler of her life, she often remarked on things such as the size and spaciousness of planes in the spiral-

bound notebooks she used to take notes on her travel experiences, draft talks, make diary entries, and comment on workshop writing projects. Given her height, she was hyperaware of comfort on increasingly small planes; she preferred aisle seats to the dreaded middle or even window seat. Because she lived in Seattle, long flights, and often connecting flights, were inevitable, even if she was just traveling home to California to see family for Christmas. Octavia spent many hours in airports observing her fellow travelers and preparing for interactions with others who were clamoring for her attention. After the post-9/11 travel changes, she noted in her 2002 travel journal: "New 'security' rule at Seatac (or is it at airports in general?). One must now have a bording [*sic*] pass to get through security. This means I must wait in long lines behind people who appear to be moving house via the airline baggage service. Does anyone—anyone at all! —believe this will make us safer rather than just slower and more pissed off!"[8]

Although her paralyzing shyness had largely dissipated over years of concerted effort, the schmoozing that was required of an internationally acclaimed writer did not always come naturally to Octavia. She prepped herself in her notes, reminding herself that "people are ridiculous, outrageous, and fun" and to enjoy others and to invite them to enjoy her as well.[9] If she did not get sufficient time to herself, or if her travel plans required rushing around, she felt put out and irritable.[10] But despite her penchant for solitude, she did enjoy going out and meeting fans and fellow writers. She reflected in a travel diary from 2000 that she enjoyed both "attention and anonymity" in equal turns.[11]

During the early 2000s, you could find Octavia on the road just about anywhere. She spoke about her work at small, independent bookstores, in college classrooms, at academic conferences, at local libraries, and at science fiction conventions. She was interviewed by local radio, NPR, and other national news outlets. Although she rarely read from her work, she gave a few tried-and-true talks. Sometimes, she broke down for eager creative writing students what it meant to be a Black woman science fiction writer, sometimes she riffed off "The Monophobic Response," an essay she reprinted in Sheree Renée Thomas's *Dark Matter* anthology.[12] In one talk, she walked listeners through the many paths of her life, calling the speech "Woe to Wonder" because that phrase accurately described her experience as a writer. She explained how watching a terrible movie motivated her to

write what would become the Patternist series, or how a bus ride gave her the idea for "Speech Sounds," or how her fear of botflies inspired "Bloodchild" and informed the Xenogenesis series. She revealed how her beloved mother and grandmother were inspirations for her work and how hard it was for her to sell her first novel. Other times she talked about a singular text, whatever was her latest work, or about *Kindred* or the Parable novels. In almost all her craft talks she advised listeners that "writers use everything" and to "notice, mine, and record" one's life.[13] And she absolutely practiced what she preached.

The seven years between the 1998 publication of *Parable of the Talents* and the 2005 appearance of *Fledgling* and the second, expanded edition of the *Bloodchild* collection are often considered a fallow period for Octavia. She published a dozen novels, a collection of short stories, and several essays over the course of her career, but as science fiction authors of her generation went, this was a relatively small number of works. For example, Samuel R. Delany has published more than thirty-five books. Ursula K. Le Guin published twenty-three novels, thirteen children's books, twelve volumes of short stories, eleven volumes of poetry, and five essay collections. Still, it is a bit unfair to compare Octavia's output with that of another writer. Delany, for instance, was a critical darling almost from the beginning of his career, whereas it took Octavia years to be published, much less get the recognition she deserved. Le Guin published for decades and lived to be eighty-eight years old, and Delany is still active in his eighties. Octavia died at only age fifty-eight after protracted illness. She spent much of her twenties doing odd jobs to support her writing career and remained single throughout her life, while many of her peers, like Delany and Le Guin, were partnered for much of their careers and experienced a type of domestic support that Octavia simply did not have. None of her science fiction peers lived with her circumstances, and none produced writing quite like hers.

In some ways Octavia's life was more akin to that of her friend Toni Cade Bambara or her peers Audre Lorde or June Jordan. They all made major marks in fiction, essays, and poetry. They also spent a good chunk of their early careers trying to make ends meet teaching, working as librarians, writing for magazines, and publishing major works. Like Octavia, these Black women writers came from working-class roots. As we have seen, their work was part of a Black women's literary renaissance that started in

the 1970s and continues today. But their literary bona fides and critical acclaim did not always come with the financial prestige and social support that benefited their white and male colleagues. And although some of these writers lived and are still living long, prosperous lives, it is not insignificant that many of them died relatively young.

Nonetheless, Octavia worried incessantly over her output, and her journals are filled with page after page of admonitions to work harder and produce more. She characterized herself as a slow reader and a slow writer. During interviews from this time, she often mentioned having writer's block and feeling stuck. Yet her notebooks are also filled with thousands of pages of novel notes, annotations, research findings, and diary entries devoted to revising old work (such as the Parable sequels) and test-driving new work, such as a manuscript she was calling *Paraclete*, another she was calling *Spiritus*, and a nonfiction guide about names she was calling *Fire, Laughter, Emeralds, Rain: A Thesaurus of First Names*.[14]

In the early 2000s, Octavia also obsessively reworked the *Trickster* novel. In one version of the sequel she worked on in 2001, she imagined the new planet that the followers of Earthseed would inhabit, called Olamina, which would be "a world of long seasons but short days" and have strong winds averaging fifteen to twenty miles per hour.[15] The colonists would be able to harness this great wind power to fuel their lives, but living among raging winds would be a serious force to contend with. They would possibly have to live underground to avoid being caught up in daily tornadoes. Planet Olamina would be a sort of antagonistic force in their lives, a silent but significant character in the novel, not unlike the "evil Earth" of N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth series. Octavia also imagined Lauren Olamina's spiritual descendants wrestling with the nature of their religion. She envisioned a powerful schism between an "[Earthseed] of anthropomorphic gods and prayer and correct ritual" and "an Earthseed of an indifferent changing universe, tradition and the certain knowledge that the only hope for one of us is the rest of us."[16] The world-building was specific and intricate, but Octavia struggled with how to create the mystery she felt should be the driving force at the novel's heart. In other places she considered how the people on Olamina might terraform their new home with their own compost.[17] She pondered the meaning of the title, with the titular trickster being a reference to the book of Job or an allusion to "the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Issac [*sic*]."[18]

In 2002 she was still contemplating the center of *Trickster*'s plot, debating whether to make the novel a murder mystery or a "rather quiet story of say family interaction—say Romeo + Juliet, or even Hamlet. Richard III? Basics—Daisies in a garden of exotics, mutants, and the distorted."[19] *Paraclete* was still on her mind too. In 2001 she reflected, "It began as a piece of candy. What is it now—less of the fun of candy, but still not serious."[20] A year later she remarked that it was the only work in progress that had any "staying power" in her mind.[21] She continued to work on the name of the book. She pondered writing an accidental utopia story, which would eventually become "The Book of Martha," which was published at the same time as "Amnesty," a story about a woman who serves as a mediator between powerful alien overlords and wary humans.[22] And she was still batting around the idea of a nonfiction book, a collection of essays, as well as a piece on how the writer Theodore Sturgeon influenced her writing. During all of this she was still figuring out the mythology and plot of what she was calling *Memory Flesh, Bone, Blood*, the novel that would eventually become *Fledgling*.

Still, despite the thousands of pages of notes and annotations and musings and drafts, Octavia wondered whether the whole business of writing was futile. The spark eluded her. She described her frustration: "you're writing really well. You're getting nowhere. Hundreds of pages go by. Nothing much happens. To me, that's writer's block."[23] On a flight returning from a writers' conference in Charlotte, she mused: "I'm in more trouble than I know how to handle here, and the worst of it is not feeling much of anything. Hell, the whole problem <u>is</u> not feeling much of anything. No novel so far holds me and I fear none of them will hold others."[24]

There is a particular irony to Octavia's angst. She had just spoken as a distinguished author at a writers' conference, and yet she was questioning her very purpose. What she is describing is deeper than writer's block; she was experiencing a sort of existential crisis. She had spent her whole adult life pursing a vocation as a writer. It was her positive obsession. She had traveled the country, and the world, advising others on writing, but her own intellectual well wasn't necessarily dry—she just wasn't interested in drinking from it. She wondered, "Why do I keep doing this. It should be relatively easy now (aop [as opposed to] 25 years ago when I didn't know how). Now I've done it—several times. Now I know I can. But it's like now

I have to learn to do it with part of me gone."[25] In another entry she admits she feels "empty," except for her feelings of frustration.[26] She wondered whether her diminished libido was connected to this lack of creative energy.[27] Octavia would continue to periodically agonize over this numbness for the rest of her life. Was it age, illness, menopause, depression, alienation, outside pressure, or some wretched combination of all those things that brought on this despair? *Fledgling* was written when she was in this existential miasma, and ultimately she was ambivalent about the novel's quality.[28]

Writers, or any sort of creative, probably recognize this dilemma. Despite years of expertise or even in the face of critical acclaim, sometimes you cannot produce anything that feels meaningful to you. You sit at the computer or at the easel or in front of a potter's wheel . . . and nothing. Nothing happens. Or maybe you can't bear to open your laptop or gather your paintbrushes. At other times in your life the muse might have struck you in the middle of the night and you jumped up out of your sleep to pursue your ideas. Or you faithfully showed up at your desk or computer and made something happen, even when you didn't feel like it. This is what Octavia preached: habit over inspiration.[29] Sometimes, though, no matter what you do, the work just doesn't flow.

Yet Octavia persisted. During the early 2000s, like before, and even when she felt burned out or bereft of new ideas, she kept on populating notebooks filled with research findings, general musings, snatches of dialogue, and descriptions that would wind up in her final novel and her numerous works in progress. In 2002 she wrote, "I fear that the less fiction I write, the less fiction I will write. Not a good prospect," and vowed to put herself on a stricter daily schedule for writing.[30] That same year she gave a talk where she discussed "block breakers" that can disrupt the monotony of life and get one's creative mojo going. She advised writers to "run away from home" or travel to a new locale, whether to another state or country or just to their local library. She told them to get a pet so they could experience some unconditional love in their lives. She suggested they keep a journal because writing in it counted as writing and could maybe incite a good idea. And she cheekily counseled them to fall in love, because, "Why not? You're already miserable."[31]

During these years she made hundreds of notes about the flora and sometimes fauna of Southern California and Alaska, notes that would eventually make their way into the drafts for *Trickster*. Before she moved to the Pacific Northwest, she took trips there and meticulously noted the geography and weather, details that would round out the atmosphere in *Fledgling*, the same way her trip to the Amazon rainforest in the 1980s had helped her flesh out the world of her Xenogenesis novels or how her walks in Los Angeles helped her develop the landscapes of *Parable of the Sower*. Octavia kept on reading about, researching, and engaging with the world around her. This did not cure her existential angst, to be sure, but it prevented her from completely drowning in it.

Octavia's extensive field notes not only informed her craft talks and her fiction, but they also read like scraps of the memoir she had been contemplating and working on for more than a decade. On February 28, 2001, she was traveling back home from a talk at Smith College when a 6.8 earthquake struck near Seattle. Her plane was rerouted to Portland, Oregon, where she and a slew of other passengers were stranded. Journal in hand, she attended to the sights, sounds, and smells of the marooned passengers with interest, humor, and sympathy, writing at 3 a.m.:

> I'm on the ticketing floor. Alaska, Frontier, Northwest, TWA, Southwest, American, United, etc. All vacant. Sleeping people or just weary slumped people are scattered about . . . I'm one of them and we all smell. Someone is playing with an energetic, shouting child who will, later today, be tired and cranky—or asleep. Only the "no smoking" and the "Don't leave your luggage unattended" messages play periodically, not often. Cleaners run vacuums over vast expanses of rug. A few people talk quietly among themselves here and there.[32]

She also continued to be a keen observer of human personality and social order. Though she never did get the degree in anthropology that she had pondered back in the early 1980s, Octavia did her own sort of anthropological and sociological studies on everyone around her, from those she traveled with to public figures. On a trip to Denali National Park in 2001, she seemed to spend as much time observing the dynamics between individuals as she did the breathtaking landscape. While cataloguing the lichen, black spruce, rivers, waterfalls, dry alpine tundra, and cracked permafrost—all potential inspiration for the *Trickster* novel—she noted who was gregarious and who was sullen, who competed, and who got along to get along. Of one woman she noted, "So much intelligence and

so much nervous energy—and a firocous [*sic*] conscience," and that if this woman were Black instead of white, "she'd have an almost impossible time finding someone to marry. She's too good in too many ways, and without undue hubris she knows it."[33] She looked at the men in the group with an equally keen eye, noting who sought to dominate conversation or lead group dynamics by being an "Alpha."

In a notebook she labeled "People—Impressions, Sensations, Observations," Octavia made note of compelling character traits.[34] These observations reflect her sociological interest in how humans relate to one other, especially in terms of power dynamics. She noted general character types, such as the "bigoted universal individual" who is "his own standard of perfection." This type has an object of disaffection that he severely judges others based on their distance from him in terms of some arbitrary characteristic, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and so on. She delineated the "opportunist" or "wandering-bully" who was a sniveling brownnoser with his superiors but vicious with his subordinates, like "Igor tormenting Frankenstein's monster." She noted how individuals gained power and made certain groups inferior by bargaining and manipulating others, using language to control others, especially the underinformed. She observed how these power players would call what they opposed something negative, like "forced bussing" or "special interests" when discussing integration or affirmative action, respectively. On the other hand, these manipulators would define their own perspective with an innocuous term, for instance using "pro-life" instead of rightfully announcing themselves as anti-choice. She understood the cynical genius of this rhetoric, observing that "only your most passionate opposition will continue to point out the cynical lie that is your name, and they will quickly begin to sound like whiners unless they are wise enough, quick and rich enough to turn your vileness into a laughing stock." She understood that unless the political left was particularly nimble in its counteroffensive, it would constantly be on the defensive with this sort of rhetoric.

Octavia also made notes on how people are conquered, how unscrupulous leaders ruled, cajoled, and dominated others. She observed the role of birth order in families and took note of what sorts of marriages reflected society's various mores. She listed characteristics and speculated that when a person seems fearful, shy, and quiet, they might in fact be afraid and ashamed of everything. Or if they are gruff, distant, and kind, they

might be slow to warm up to strangers. She was interested in how people displayed belief, noting types, from the contrarian devil's advocate to the mindless fanatical to the wise, strong, intelligent believer. As she told her writing students and audiences during her numerous craft talks, writers use everything, and they mine the world for material. Octavia's research and observations reflect her taking her own advice seriously.

Not surprisingly, her views on politicians are equally insightful and cutting, and she spent a lot of time in her notes exploring the significance of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century politics. With the popular rebranding of the Republican Party in the 1990s and 2000s, Octavia homed in on figures such as politician Newt Gingrich, Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, California governor Pete Wilson, and George W. Bush. Although she was not dogmatic in her thinking, Octavia was progressive in her politics and abhorred conservative ideology. For her, politics were not simply pragmatic or the means to an end. A person's political stance reflected their morals and represented that person's character, so not unsurprisingly, her critiques of these figures are scathing. For instance, Octavia characterized Gingrich as a type of "intelligent monster," who thrived on his meanness, ambition, and psychological projections. She took special note of the Georgia politician's penchant for hypocrisy. He decried unwed single mothers, yet he was a son of an unwed single mother. He was virulently homophobic but had a lesbian half-sister.[35] He touted "traditional" family values but had been divorced multiple times. Gingrich was the definition of "do as I say, not as I do." For Octavia, he was the archetypal conservative huckster, who sold hapless Republicans a pipe dream for an ideology he barely believed, much less lived.

Pete Wilson and Clarence Thomas received a similar amount of ire in Octavia's observations. She described Wilson, the Republican governor of California from 1991 to 1999, as a man of middling intelligence and naked ambition who was a "plotter," "always scheming, calculating, [and] manipulating people." She saw his touting of anti-immigrant Proposition 187 as a thinly veiled attempt to divide and to capitalize on those divisions. He used his skills of bargaining and manipulation to amass power. Octavia identified Thomas as a "semi-intelligent monster"—an even more craven version of Gingrich's intelligent monster. Surely, the revelations of Thomas's ethics violations in the 2020s would be no surprise to her. While she identified Gingrich as a type of bigoted universal individual, Octavia

understood Thomas to be a more pitiful facsimile of this type. He was a self-hating, *literal* Uncle Tom. Unlike the Gingriches of the world, who play a zero-sum game that makes wins for their race, gender, and class, Octavia likened Thomas to the eighteenth-century Africans who sold their compatriots to Europeans as chattel. However, she makes a key caveat:

> Eighteenth century Africans who sold their fellows did not see themselves as <u>like</u> those they sold. They sold prisoners of war, criminals, and they sold "the lower orders." They sold "Others." Clarence Thomas "sells" his own—even his own sister, telling half the story, lying about her by omission.[36] He has chose[n] to spit [on], to shit on, his own, first for pay, then from habit and for pay, then because he was so out of his element, so intellectually inadequate that, he simply, reflexively, savages his own at every opportunity.

The eighteenth-century African slave traders were not selling their fellow Blacks, because "Blackness" as we know it did not exist for them. They were Igbo, Yoruba, Fulani, Dahomey—not "Black." For them, Octavia contends, selling someone who was from a neighboring nation or a prisoner of war was not unlike the Saxons fighting the Franks, who did not understand themselves to be "white" either. But Thomas was not an Igbo slave trader in the 1700s. He was a Black man from Pin Point, Georgia, who grew up speaking Gullah. He was born in 1948, almost a year to the day after Octavia's birth. Yet while Octavia devoted her life to creating art that moved people to action against bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and violence, Thomas spent his life buoying the very structures of white supremacy that continue to oppress marginalized people. Thomas's betrayal garners him great power—a lifetime appointment on the Supreme Court and what Octavia called the "worst type of honorary whiteness."

In her notes, Octavia reserves some of her most serious contempt for the then occupant of the White House, George W. Bush. Naming him "Shrub," she identifies him, as the name suggests, as a lesser version of his already mediocre father. The younger Bush is "ambitious but lazy," expecting a leg up because of his inherited power and privilege. She likens him to a trigger-happy cop "who shoots someone and/or beats him to a pulp, then charges him with resisting arrest, and feels nothing, smiles, and moves on and does it again when he wishes." Octavia rejects Bush's rebranding as a "compassionate conservative" as a cheap patina. He is simply a more privileged version of so many other career politicians, all of whom she saw

as fundamentally corrupt. He was an extension of Reagan's dastardly brand of Christian nationalism masked as family values.

She saw politician-adjacent figures like political fixer Roy Cohn and Manhattan Project scientist Edward Teller as sellouts who bartered away part of their humanity for prestige and power. She identified Cohn as an opportunist turned intelligent monster, a "powerful sociopath—the Newt Gingrich of his time." He too was a hypocrite—a Jew who supported anti-Semites, a closeted gay man who was virulently homophobic. He supported Senator Joseph McCarthy's communist witch hunt in the 1950s and was an early mentor of eventual president Donald Trump. He was in the business of brokering power with the most abject and immoral. Of Teller she noted, he was "Arrogant. Amoral. Brilliant. Contrary." His hubris and insolence often outshone his intelligence. His desire to dominate and crush others made his brilliance brittle. He was a scientist who was more concerned with what was possible than with what was ethical. Octavia marks Cohn and Teller as archetypes of intelligence gone awry—individuals who exemplified the Human Contradiction at the heart of her Xenogenesis novels. If you are smart but unprincipled, you could, like these men, be quite dangerous. Interested as she was in charismatic but troubled leaders, like Lauren Olamina in the Parable series and Aaron in the shelved work *Blindsight*, it is no surprise that Octavia devoted serious study to what made leaders tick.

Octavia's observations on her fellow science fiction writers were similarly incisive. Also in the "People" notebook she described Isaac Asimov as a "successful, self-limited perfectionist," who "tended to dislike and avoid those things he couldn't do well." She likened him to a big fish in a small pond, content to stick to lakes and the rivers he was used to. Octavia observed that for Asimov these limitations did not necessarily hinder his success, at least as the public perceived him. Samuel R. Delany she respected but also saw as proud and at times pompous. She pegged Steven Barnes as ambitious and strategic. Interestingly, the writers she considered here were all men. In the same notebook she admitted that she never competed with women, but she saw men as her rivals, though they rarely understood her as a real peer, save for Delany and Barnes. This is not because Octavia was some sort of secret chauvinist. She was no Phyllis Schlafly. But she admitted that she was not in the business of competing with women over men, which is often the most common sort of gendered

rivalry we see in heteronormative society. And although she admired fellow female science fiction writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Joanna Russ, and more recent writers like Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson, it was their male peers whose careers were filled with the most accolades and opportunities. And that was the kind of career Octavia wanted.

Octavia kept dozens of notebooks filled with wry and cutting observations about people and personalities because she was fascinated with human behavior, and writing was her way of making sense of the world. These observations helped her create complex characters that were neither wholly good nor completely evil. She mined these character types in her writing. The observations also were crucial in her world-building.

Octavia spent a lot of time working during the last six years of her life, but she also had downtime. She always went home every Christmas to visit her cousins in Southern California. Sometimes friends would visit her in Seattle. In the summer of 2002, she hosted friends Donna and Frances. Donna came to town for Octavia's birthday in June and they spent time in Rainier. Later in the summer, Octavia and Frances went to Rainer and then to Vancouver. Octavia noted they had a great time touring the "Garden + whale-watching and eating and shopping." She went to the movies, watching popular films like *Pay It Forward* (which she found good but with a maudlin ending) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (whose ending she detested). She spent a lot of time outdoors with her dear friend Leslie, enjoying the striking Pacific Northwest landscape that she had fallen in love with decades before. At that time, she was following a vegetarian diet and frequently included "phony chicken" on her shopping lists, alongside her usual fresh fruits and vegetables. She continued a lively phone correspondence with a wide range of people, from her editor and agent to her fellow writers, old friends, former students, and more. Sharon Ball, a former editor at NPR who first interviewed Octavia in the 1990s, recalled that the two of them would have long chats, often two hours or more, discussing everything from writing to Octavia's battle with high blood pressure.[37] Several friends with whom she connected in this way recall her as being funny, kind, and down-to-earth.

VAMPIRES REMIXED

What made the vampire popular again more than a century after *Dracula*?[38] American audiences were working out something fun, dangerous, and taboo

in the various depictions of vampires in literature and pop culture that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly around queerness. During the time of AIDS, when casual sex was tinged with stigma, the vampire became a proxy for longing and desire.[39] As the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to a somewhat more cautious public projection of sex in the 1980s and 1990s, cultural desires for the dangerous and taboo nevertheless remained. Vampires in film and books and television became an avenue to safely explore darker desires. Vampires are also usually frozen in time; they are eternally young and beautiful. American society is obsessed with youth and beauty, so vampires become another way to feed that cultural desire. Because vampires are more often than not depicted as powerful white men, the vampire is also a way to recuperate the white masculine object of desire without seeming to be passé. In a post–civil rights, post–women's rights era, longing for the white patriarch seemed old-fashioned, parochial at best and dangerous at worst. But longing for a glittery, perpetually young vampire? No problem. And because vampires are more often villains rather than heroes, one could indulge in rooting for the antihero too.

Fledgling reflects some of these concerns, but because it is an Octavia E. Butler novel, it goes beyond the usual cultural anxieties and familiar undead tropes. Like Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, which also has a Black woman vampire protagonist, *Fledgling* reimagines the vampire genre, adding curious and disturbing twists. *Fledgling* is a solo novel, as was *Kindred*, though it ends in a way that suggests tantalizing possibilities for a sequel, fragments of which exist in Octavia's archive. And like Octavia's other novels, *Fledgling* too is interested in hierarchies, human behavior, and the state of the world.

Fledgling is the coming-of-age story of Shori Matthews, who wakes up in a cave alone in the Pacific Northwest, naked, covered in blood, and desperately hungry with no memory of who she is. She kills an animal to feed herself and eventually wanders out to a road where a young man takes her in. She looks to be about twelve years old, with the flat chest and narrow hips of a prepubescent child, but Shori is in fact fifty-three years old and is an adolescent Ina woman. The Ina are a long-lived humanoid species who need blood to survive; in other words, they are vampires.

Octavia remarked that she wrote stories that could be categorized as the chase, the game, the quest, or the test, and *Fledgling* is primarily a quest

story. Shori is on a quest to remember who she is and to find out who killed her family and tried to kill her. During this quest, both Shori and the reader learn much about Ina society. Many vampire stories could be placed alongside horror stories of werewolves, witches, and ghosts, but *Fledgling* is markedly different. For one thing, the Ina are not supernatural creatures. Octavia remarked that *Fledgling*, which she called "science fantasy," is a "vampire story—but my vampires are biological. They didn't become vampires because someone bit them; they were born that way."[40] In her notes, Octavia calls vampires "intelligent disease organisms."[41] Although the Ina aren't supernatural, they do possess preternatural senses, including super strength and agility and the ability to perceive when someone is lying or misleading them. Octavia creates vampires who are another type of human and imagines a world where multiple human species coexist, like the era when *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals) lived side by side.

Not only do the two species coexist, the Ina need humans to survive. Shori learns this when she meets Wright, the young white man who takes her in and nurses her back to health. There is sexual tension between them, and Shori instinctively wants to bite him. Wright, more intrigued than disturbed, assents: "I bit hard into the side of his neck. He convulsed and I held on to him. He writhed under me, not struggling, but holding me as I took more of his blood."[42] This reads less like an attack and more like a consensual sexual encounter. Soon after this they have intercourse, and Shori bites Wright again, inciting a powerful orgasm and prompting her to realize she'll have to bite other humans, or she'll kill Wright.

The Ina need blood from multiple humans—their symbionts—to live, and so they create interconnected symbiotic, albeit problematic at times, communities with their human cousins. These interspecies enclaves include compounds with same-gender Ina and humans of multiple genders. Whereas the Ina mate with others of their species, they create longstanding relationships with multiple humans, practicing a type of queer kitchen table polyamory.[43] It's not all free love and hot sex in these communities though; seriously uneasy power dynamics are also at play. Though the Ina are not immortal, they can live several centuries, and any human in their care will live far longer than the average mortal. But in exchange for this health and strength, their human symbionts must largely forgo normative human society, and their loyalty is not simply a vow. The Ina have an addictive

substance in their saliva, and their symbionts become infected with this venom. In her draft notes, Octavia writes that Ina saliva is a hypnotic anticoagulant that produces an orgasmic feeling. After a period of being exposed to Ina venom, the humans can't leave; they are tethered to the Ina permanently, not unlike the human–ooloi bond in the Xenogenesis novels. This codependency can be troubling. What does it mean for a previously independent adult person to be physically dependent on another much stronger individual for their entire life? For some humans, this incites an existential crisis; for others, they feel beholden to a capricious powerful creature who views them as little more than a toy. The Ina may be sexy, but they are very dangerous.[44]

When I first read *Fledgling* I was immediately taken in by Shori's story. But I was also profoundly disturbed. Though she was a young adult, Shori looked like a child. She was experiencing violence and chaos, but she was also engaging in a variety of sexual relationships that left me baffled and uncomfortable. But this seemed to be the point. I don't believe Octavia was making excuses for the sexualization of children, but the novel troubles the notions of predator and prey and invites us to reconsider who really is a monster. Shori admittedly devours a man she left for dead, and Wright happily takes in, hides, and has sex with a young person who looks like a minor. Are they both types of monsters? Furthermore, the fact that the prepubescent-looking Shori is adultified by Wright and others mirrors the adultification of Black girls that is rampant in our society, a circumstance that too often leaves them vulnerable to violence and exploitation.[45] Vampires are traditionally understood as monsters, but in our seemingly unmagical world, those who target children are very real predators. That is not to say that the novel's role reversal is easy to stomach.

In the fall of 2022, I taught *Fledgling* to college undergrads. Adaptations were particularly on my students' minds, and one of them mused, "I don't see how this can be made into a film or TV show." I agreed. Of course, adaptation for film or television is not necessarily the litmus test for a successful novel, but the student's observation does speak to the tensions in this novel. How do you portray the age disparities at the heart of the novel without veering into lecherous voyeurism? Ultimately, although Octavia expressed interest in her works being adapted for TV and film and worked on adaptations of *Kindred* during the 1980s, she was above all a

novelist, not a screenwriter. And one of her duties was to create thought-provoking works that invite readers to reconsider what we think we know.

Fledgling was published in a world teeming with vampire stories, but it stands apart in key ways, particularly regarding the novel's protagonist. Shori is not a white man with centuries of amassed wealth and power, as most previous vampires had been. Octavia noticed that most vampire stories centered men, and women characters were often weak and feckless.[46] Shori is a relatively young Black woman fighting for her life and community. Though she does come from wealth and resources, those resources were almost all stripped away from her when other Ina sought to kill her and her family. Shori's amnesia also separates her from the usual vampire story. On the one hand, she's not a newly turned vampire who is struggling to adapt to her new life and trying to reconcile that with her past as a human. Shori has no memory of her past. She is a blank slate relearning the ins and outs of both human and Ina society. Shori's amnesia is not simply a clever plot device that leads the reader into the novel's world-building; it also means that Shori isn't saddled with any sort of baggage. She's a perfect conduit to guide readers into a world that is at once familiar and quite different. But Shori's amnesia also underscores that she experienced a trauma so severe that she had to forget it in order to survive.

Although the Ina are rich, powerful, and strong, they are not wholly invulnerable. They are tall, gaunt, and ghostly pale—not exactly able to blend into a human crowd. And, like traditional European vampires, they are allergic to the sun and move through the world primarily at night. When they sleep during the day, they do not simply rest; they enter a comatose state during which they are almost dead to the world. Although they have developed workarounds over the millennia, fearful humans have successfully attacked them during the day with fire. Looking for a way to circumvent this vulnerability, the Ina use science to genetically engineer a daywalker—a vampire that can move about in the sun—so they can better survive as a species. Octavia wondered, What would a vampire need to be nearly invulnerable? Her answer: melanin. This is how Shori comes to be. She is a genetic experiment made with a combination of human and Ina DNA. The Ina used a Black human so that Shori would be born with melanin. Shori's father, Iosif, admits, "Some of us have tried for centuries to find ways to be less vulnerable during the day. Shori is our latest and most successful effort in that direction."[47] Shori's darker complexion gives

her some protection from the sun, although she must still take precautions, even in rainy Seattle. Her very existence could incite a sea change in Ina society. Banished for centuries to the darkness, the Ina could finally emerge into the day.

Shori's existence puts the Ina at a crossroads. Her family and their allies are ready to pivot into a new type of existence with a generation of Black vampires. Could vampires come out of the proverbial closet and into society? At the very least, could they be able to better protect their kin from the likes of xenophobes who have been the scourge of their communities for centuries? On the other hand, Ina purists, such as the Silk family, see Shori as the bastardization of their species. Not only is she part human, she is also Black. They refer to her as a "dirty little nigger bitch" and a "goddamn mongrel cub."[48] This is textbook white supremacist language. Lest we forget, the term *mulatto* is Portuguese for "little mule" and reflected the misguided belief that mixing races was like mixing species. It took only one generation to do away with that untruth, but the idea that biological race is fact and not fiction has taken centuries to disprove. And scientific racism, from eugenics to the bell curve, remains an ongoing social dilemma.[49] In the case of the Ina and humans, they are in fact two different species. Yet through genetic engineering these humanoid groups have become even more intertwined.

Curiously, even as the Silks avow their superiority to humans, they are all too eager to latch on to the human categories of race—whiteness in particular. This is not surprising when you consider the novel's social logic. At the start of the novel, which takes place in the early twenty-first century of the internet and modern technology, Shori is fifty-three years old—about the same age Octavia was when she started writing the novel. Though Shori is essentially an Ina teenager and not a middle-aged baby boomer like Octavia, they both would have been born in the middle of the twentieth century, so Shori, like Octavia, would have been a small child during the early years of the civil rights movement. Likewise, because Ina can live upward of half a millennia, the Silks and other elder Ina would have been alive during the time of chattel slavery around the Civil War—even during the American Revolution. They therefore had plenty of time to develop racist notions over the centuries. Just because they aren't human doesn't mean they aren't racist.[50] And being racist is also quite convenient, as it helps them remain on top in the old Ina hierarchy.

Fledgling may be what Octavia calls science fantasy, but it is also a horror novel—though the horror comes from what may seem like an unexpected source. Horror as a genre tends to illuminate our deepest cultural fears and individual anxieties. Whether it's the specter of unabashed queerness, or womanhood run amok, or family secrets that won't stay dead, horror is often the place where we can work out these issues in the safe space of a novel or in a darkened movie theater. Take, for instance, the plethora of slasher films during the 1980s, movies like *Friday the 13th* (1980) or *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). These films usually featured horny young people who meet their untimely ends after engaging in some sort clandestine coupling. Part of this movie trope was the cheap thrill—think the expendable white co-ed who dies after sneaking out for some illicit fun. But part of this trope also highlights the social anxiety around (white) women's sexual freedom.[51]

Race in the horror genre mimics our own racial anxieties as a society. For instance, there is the long running joke in horror movies that the Black character—usually singular and a minor character—dies first. This trope is so infamous it has been lampooned in films from the Scary Movie franchise to the more recent film *The Blackening* (2023). Blackness figures into portrayals of the abject and the grotesque in works from Edgar Allan Poe to H. P. Lovecraft. Racial animus is part of the very foundation of American horror. But in Black horror, that is, work where either most of the characters are Black or Blackness is a significant part of the narrative and the author or director is Black, more complicated themes are often at play.[52] Films like *Blacula* (1972) or *Ganja and Hess* (1973) or novels like Tananarive Due's 1997 novel *My Soul to Keep* or *Fledgling* don't treat Black characters as throwaways. Artists Stanford Carpenter and John Jennings call the particular way that Black creatives, like Octavia, utilize horror to be part of the "ethnogothic" imagination, which they define as the proliferation of ghosts, vampires, hauntings, and the supernatural in Black diasporic works.[53]

Jennings, the illustrator for the graphic novel adaptations of *Kindred* and the Parable series, takes this definition even further, identifying the ethnogothic as speculative cultural narratives that wrestle with the psychological traumas of white supremacy, patriarchy, and other social ills through gothic tropes like the "the grotesque other, body horror, haunted spaces, the hungry ghost, the uncanny, the doppelgänger, fictional historical

artifacts, and multivalent disruptive tensions between the constructions of memory, history, the present, and the self."[54] Ethnogothic works use familiar terrifying tropes as tools for illuminating the myriad horrors of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. *Fledgling*, like other ethnogothic works (e.g., Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, P. Djèlí Clark's *Ring Shout*, Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out*, Misha Green's TV series *Lovecraft Country* [adapting Matt Ruff's 2016 novel]), or Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* is horror where race is far from incidental.[55] Shori's Blackness is horrifying to the Silks and other conservative Ina who see her birth as denigrating their species. They commit fratricide rather than willingly admit a Black member to their community. White supremacy invites a type of cannibalization rather than an evolution of their species.

The Silks' insistence on endogamy also mirrors the consistent demographic anxiety particularly salient at the turn of the twenty-first century. Studies show that by the middle of the twenty-first century non-Hispanic White Americans will no longer be the racial majority in the United States.[56] The rise of Latinx communities and interracial relationships means that those who identify as solely European American are dwindling in number, creating a racial anxiety that can be seen in the meteoric rise of neo-Nazi and white nationalist groups during the past decade.[57] It can also be seen in the likes of right-wing pundit Tucker Carlson expounding on the so-called great replacement theory, which claims that immigrants from developing nations are being brought in to replace American whites.[58] And when khaki-clad, tiki torch–bearing marchers chanted "You will not replace us!" in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 to awaken other white supremacists across the country.[59] Like the white nationalists in Charlottesville, in *Fledgling* the Silks "will not be replaced" by the likes of Shori and her descendants. Though the Silks aren't human, they are white. And their whiteness and Ina-ness are inextricably intertwined. This white supremacist logic mirrors the contemporary anti-Blackness that is on the rise in the United States in the early aughts and that manifested in the proliferation of the global alt-right. Through her characterization of the Silks, Octavia made white supremacy's perverse logic abundantly clear: It is better to die than to live as a Black Ina. However irrational and self-defeating this logic, Octavia presented it as their truth.

Octavia frequently discussed how the human insistence on having hierarchies would be humanity's downfall. In *Fledgling*, she also invites readers to consider that hierarchical thinking could be the downfall of our imagined humanoid cousins. Rather than embracing the evolution in their midst, some vampires would rather die as a species. Put another way, white supremacy is a hell of a drug.

Octavia wrote *Fledgling* as a way to try out a different sort of storytelling and as a departure from the creative roadblocks she had been encountering. But it also exists in a pantheon of Black vampire tales that includes *The Gilda Stories* by Jewell Gomez; Tananarive Due's African Immortal series; and the Vampire Huntress Legend series by L. A. Banks. These days, Black vampires are much less of an anomaly; dozens of traditionally and self-published vampire tales are on the market, and *Fledgling* was a part of this wave in popular culture and literature.[60] At the same time, *Fledgling* fits right in with the rest of Octavia's work. Like the Parable series and the Patternist novels and her other work, *Fledgling* is about the divisions that humans (and humanoids) insist on making and maintaining—even if it will be the death of us.

With *Fledgling* Octavia had caught a second wind, but her untimely death would prevent her comeback.

Epilogue

New Suns

Octavia was only fifty-eight years old when she died suddenly. On February 24, 2006, she fell and hit her head on the cobblestone path outside her home in Seattle, after what was seemingly a stroke.

I remember exactly where I was when I heard about Octavia's death. I was in grad school and had stopped by the English department to check my mail. When I walked into the mail room, someone asked whether I had heard the news. "What news?" I asked, absent-mindedly thumbing through book catalogues and notices for conferences. They said, "Oh my God. Octavia Butler died." Everybody in the mail room stopped. We were shocked. Octavia Butler?! Are you sure? But she was so young! And she just published a novel! I stood there, my mind swirling in disbelief. A thousand thoughts rattled in my head, finally settling on one selfish truth: I would never get to meet her. I would never get to tell her how much her work meant to me, how she inspired me, and how she changed the trajectory of my life. I was bereft for a mentor who would never know my name.

Obituaries far and wide reflected the shocking loss of a literary giant. *The Times* called her a "science fiction writer who refused to be pigeonholed by her race or gender."[1] NPR noted that she "was a rare science fiction author, black and a woman. She also won every major award in her field, and in 1995 a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as a Genius Grant."[2] The *New York Times* wrote, "Throughout Ms. Butler's career, the news media made much of the fact that she was an African-American woman writing science fiction, traditionally a white male bastion. But in interviews and in her work itself she left no doubt that her background equipped her spectacularly well to portray life in hostile

dystopias where the odds of survival could be almost insurmountable."[3] *The Washington Post* titled its obituary "Octavia Butler, A Lonely, Bright Star of the Sci-Fi Universe," and author Marcia Davis wondered "if in all that aloneness, in all her solitude, she knew just how beautiful she was and that she was loved."[4] Friends and colleagues likewise gave tributes. Tananarive Due remembered speaking with Octavia in the summer of 2005 and recalled her strict dedication to her work. Fellow science fiction pioneer Samuel R. Delany fondly recalled meeting and teaching a young Octavia at Clarion writers' workshop in 1970 and watching as she transformed from being a strikingly shy student to a self-assured and confident author.[5]

Although Octavia had alluded to some health problems in a few interviews over the years, she was extremely private, so very few knew the depth of the health concerns that plagued her during the last years of her life. She began taking medications for high blood pressure in the 1990s, but sometimes Octavia felt that they were doing more harm than good. She alternately suffered from brain fog, insomnia, sinus congestion, and extreme fatigue. This disease extended to her creative life and although she wrote frequently, very little of it met her high standards. On May 26, 2005, while home alone, Octavia fainted, tried to hold on to a tower of books in her grasp, and then seemingly hit her head on a fire extinguisher. When she woke up, she was "on the floor, intensely confused, scarily confused, lying down, mind writhing with confusion."[6] This experience shook her. A few weeks before her passing, Octavia revealed in an interview that she wasn't sure what was next on her agenda because of her precarious health. She was cautiously optimistic and admitted, "I'm getting through some heart problems right now. And the meds that I take kind of leave me so totally washed out that I barely write anything. So, I don't know what I'll be doing next, but if it isn't [a sequel to] *Fledgling* I definitely have other ideas. I have ideas for at least four other novels, so things will definitely be coming eventually."[7] Three weeks later, she was gone, leaving the world profoundly changed by her all too short time on Earth.

Just a few months after Octavia's passing the New York Public Library hosted a tribute to her life. Those who worked with her, like her longtime agent and her editor, in addition to literary luminaries, academics, singers, famous actors, and Octavia's family joined together to pay homage to her life and work. Octavia's editor Dan Simon captured how rare and special she was in his eulogy:

> 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? . . . Octavia comes to 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 humans can create and the choices that she made in her books and in her life always gave us new ways of seeing.[8]

Poet Sonia Sanchez read an excerpt from Octavia's essay "Positive Obsession." Professor Sandra Govan traced the influence of Octavia's works in the academy. Her agent Merrilee Heifetz fondly remembered Octavia's wry humor, dedication to her work, and rightly earned success. Applause and laughter rang out in the great auditorium as person after person recalled the wonder that she was.

GENIUS RECOGNIZED

Black women's genius is so rarely recognized, much less understood. And when it is recognized and celebrated, it is often too late. Our Black women artists, poets, novelists, and intellectuals live in a world where they are faced with the multiple jeopardy of misogynoir, classism, ableism, and other daunting systems of power.[9] The controlling images that Black women labor under often reduce them to being, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, the mules of the world.[10] Black women are symbols of both desire and disgust. Black women are both emulated and erased. Black women are the face of moral strength and the archetype of libidinal weakness. It is only until fairly recently, and only in fits and starts, that Black women have begun to be identified as intellectuals in larger public discourse.

It is perhaps no wonder that Octavia was woefully misunderstood for much of her life. Maybe if she had been born in 1997 or 1967 instead of 1947, perhaps then she would have had different options and different opportunities. Perhaps her early genius would have been treasured and cultivated beyond the narrow orbit of her family and nurtured in every classroom and workplace she encountered. Perhaps her neurodivergence would have been properly recognized and attended to. But this was not Octavia's experience; not for any fault of her own but because of structural inequities, limited resources, and language that are only now beginning to have to understand the wide range of human experience. Perhaps if Octavia had been born in a different time, being a shy, six-foot tall, dark-skinned, full-figured woman would have given her more robust options for

partnership and more expansive options for understanding her sexuality and gender expression. But, again, this was not Octavia's experience.

And yet, despite the strictures, despite the lack of resources, despite it all Octavia took her positive obsession and created profound stories. I often tell my students that Octavia had the equivalent of ten PhDs because of the level of research she did and the type of thinker she was. She was a profoundly curious, thoughtful, and rigorous artist and theorist. She was a brilliant intellectual, an autodidact who exemplified a life of the mind. Her story is not a Horatio Alger tale of pulling herself up by her bootstraps. Her life and works are a defiant example of courage and tenacity, a stunning triumph in the face of looming obstacles. She was building readers a bridge to the future while trying to cross it herself. And we are all the better for it. But it was not easy being an architect, an astronaut, an engineer, and an innovator. Octavia did not grow up in the world we have now, flawed though it may be. But she did help positively shape the world that we are now inheriting—by centering Black women as heroines, not as sidekicks or vehicles for others' growth; by crafting cautionary tales that charge us all with creating the future we want to see; and by being an example of what persistence matched with brilliance can do. Octavia's writing implores us that it is up to us to reimagine the world we want to live in and do the work to create it. And in that way Octavia's genius changed the world.

REBIRTH

In *A Few Rules for Predicting the Future*, Octavia reminds us that even though predicting the future is an imprecise science, it is important that we use our imaginations to envision more expansive ideas for humanity. Octavia drops several gems in the essay, which was originally published in the May 2000 issue of *Essence*. She writes that we need to "learn from the past," in order to recognize the patterns in history and human behavior. She likens trying to predict the future without studying the past to "trying to learn to read without bothering to learn the alphabet." A fool's errand. She invites us to "respect the laws of consequences" because everything we do has an effect, even if we think we are unimportant or lack power. She cautions us to "be aware of your perspective," reminding us that there is no universal, default position, that "where we stand determines what we're able to see." Everyone has a perspective that informs how we understand things. When talking to college students at the turn of the twenty-first

century, she was surprised to learn that these young millennials did not fear nuclear war the way her generation did. She advises readers to "count on the surprises" because "no matter how hard we try to foresee the future, there are always these surprises. The only safe prediction is that there always will be."[11] These rules reflect a large part of Octavia's intellectual process: studying history, making sense of patterns and behavior, and offering some solutions for her readers to grapple with. Her essay suggests that the future is worth living and striving for, and even though there are so many problems—from climate change, to war, to greed—there is still hope for humanity. Don't count us out just yet.

Octavia did not like being called a prophet, although one could understand why she gets that designation. Her oraclelike accuracy on realities in the twenty-first century—from white nationalism to climate chaos—is almost scary. Luckily for us, Octavia's works are not simply doomsday tales bent on scaring us into submission. They are critical examples of cultural production that invite curious readers to reflect more on their present than on any bogeyman in the future. Using incisive prose that ranges from clinical to bombastic, with characters that are an uneasy mix of good and evil, in worlds and eras, whether close by and familiar or unique and far-flung, Octavia's novels and short stories etch an artistic movement that partners the best of what speculative fiction can do with questions that demand rigor and introspection from readers. *Wild Seed* and the Parable series ask us to consider how we make community, especially in the face of pervasive violence. "Bloodchild" and *Fledgling* ask us uncomfortable questions about love, agency, and power. The Patternist saga, the Xenogenesis series, and "Speech Sounds" ask us what it really means to be human. *Kindred* asks us to think about what makes us family and what is America's true legacy. Again and again, Octavia's writing asks us to wrestle with major existential questions and invites us to be transformed by her work. Who can read *Kindred* and remain unchanged? Who reads *Clay's Ark* and is not haunted by its vision of the future? Who reads about the diseases in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," "Speech Sounds," and the Parable series without rethinking what we know about disability? Who reads about the T'lic, the Oankali, or the Ina—or even the Patternists—without seriously thinking about who is predator and who is prey? These stories make an indelible impression.

Since her death, interest in Octavia's work has never waned. If anything, it has steadily increased. Two short stories originally written in the 1970s, "Childfinder" and "A Necessary Being," were published together in *Unexpected Stories* in 2014. Writers from Tananarive Due to Nisi Shawl to N. K. Jemisin and others have reflected on Octavia's profound influence on their writing. No longer is Octavia the singular Black woman writing primarily in speculative fiction; her literary descendants are manifold. Octavia is an Afrofuturist icon. Her stories have been translated into dozens of languages. Books like *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, by adrienne maree brown, and *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, edited by Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, reflect how Octavia's work has not only influenced literature but also shaped activism and social justice movements. Countless books and articles have been written about her life and works by scholars, creative writers, and journalists. She is a notable figure in many children's books, and a biography about Octavia Estelle's early years is aimed at middle grades. Octavia's fiction is a mainstay on college syllabi and in university courses. Organizations like the Octavia E. Butler Literary Society, the nonprofit Octavia Project, and the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network celebrate and consider her work as a cultural touchstone. Octavia has an asteroid, a landing space on Mars, and a mountain on Pluto's moon Charon named after her. Her beloved Los Angeles Public Library dedicated the Octavia Lab, a makerspace for patrons, in her memory. Sixty years after she graduated, Octavia's alma mater George Washington Junior High was renamed Octavia E. Butler Magnet School in 2022. Fittingly, its library is also named after her. In her hometown of Pasadena, Octavia's Bookshelf, an independent Black-owned bookstore, was named in her honor. In 2022, *Kindred* was adapted for television. To date, *Kindred* and the Parable novels have also been adapted as graphic novels. *Parable of the Sower* has been made into an opera. Podcasts such as *Octavia's Parables* have been created to discuss and explore Octavia's works. And, as Octavia predicted, she did in fact become a *New York Times* bestseller. In 2020, *Parable of the Sower* landed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list just as the pandemic was starting, when we needed Octavia's vision and prescience more than ever. In 2022, Lynell George, author of an artist's companion of Octavia's work, wrote in the *New York Times* that Octavia was experiencing a type of renaissance almost twenty years after her death. These are just a few

examples of Octavia's lasting place in our society. Indeed, there is no way to fully enumerate the significance of her influence; that would be like trying to count all the sand at the seashore. Her legacy is as vast as the stars that are her namesake.

Octavia understood that one's legacy is a curious thing that one may not be able to fully predict. Still, she held out hope. In 1993 she mused:

> Thinking about my legacy—about the things I hope to leave behind when I die. Ideas. I generate ideas for a living. Some of them are quite good. As it happens, my way of presenting my ideas is by way of writing science fiction novels and stories, articles, and giving talks. My books are most likely to last. They're like messages in bottles that I cast into a sea of humanity. There's no guarantee that they will ever be found and read by people able to make use of them. They are, if anything, beginning places. They might foster study in areas new to the finders. They might give the finders directions for behavior modification. They might give the finders something to react against, and thus find new paths for thought and/or action.[12]

Octavia published *Parable of Sower* in that year, 1993, the title taken from a biblical story that is also about legacy in a way. Like the proverbial sower, Octavia wondered whether her ideas would be cast on receptive, fertile ground, or whether they would find hard, inhospitable places; or maybe her words would travel far beyond her in time and space to be planted elsewhere. In the decades after her death, it is clear that her words and ideas and hopes for the future continue to grow.

Octavia's hope that we would read her work and then be incited to study our world and our (mis)shaping of it and be spurred into action is a noble hope. Noble and necessary. Though her works often depict a future marred by violence and injustice, these stories were not nihilistic predictions but a sort of love offering for readers to receive and be changed by. And, to that end, what a gift they are. Octavia's messages presuppose that we are smart enough and justice-oriented enough to be introspective and to make life better for generations to come. This is the ultimate gesture of hope for humanity.

Consider the hope that many formerly enslaved Blacks had for the future. They imagined and agitated for the abolition of chattel slavery, and many of them never saw that accomplished. They did not live to see the promised land, as it were. But they fought to create a world that would be better for their descendants, understanding that, as Martin Luther King Jr. put it, "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice," and that we can indeed bend it, shape it toward justice. Octavia had a

similar hope for and belief in us, despite her clear-eyed understanding of humanity's shortcomings. She reminds us that everything we touch, we change, and that with a positive obsession for seeking truth, making community, and rejecting the allure of despotism and destructive power, we can create a world that our descendants deserve. She reminds us that "our tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great deal of influence over this child, even though we can't control it absolutely. Best to think about it, though. Best to try to shape it into something good. Best to do that for any child."[13]

It is up to us to decide whether we shape the world in the image of our better angels or succumb to our tendency to privilege power over empathy. Octavia's life and work have left us with a magnificent blueprint to follow.

Acknowledgments

This book was conceived in February 2020. I was working with colleagues from the Atlanta University Center to host Planet Deep South, a conference devoted to Afrofuturism and Black future visioning in the South. I stepped into a study carrel at the Woodruff Library and whispered to my agent, Tanya, “I think I can do this.” A week or so later, the whole world shut down, and I set about beginning this project.

None of this would have been possible without the folks at McKinnon Literary. I am forever grateful to Tanya McKinnon and Carol Taylor for championing this project and fiercely supporting me along the way.

Boundless gratitude to my team at Amistad, especially my editors Abby West and Makayla Tabron. Your attention, patience, and support have strengthened this book in countless ways.

Jennifer Baker, thank you for believing in this book from the very beginning. I am so very grateful. Thank you Katy O’Donnell for getting me on the right path early on.

Special thanks to the Huntington Library and to the estate of Octavia E. Butler for their generosity. Thank you to the Rubenstein Library at Duke University and to the wonderful folks at Charis Books & More for your kindness. I offer my undying thanks to Holly Smith, archivist extraordinaire at the Spelman College archives, for her help and much appreciated pep talks.

One of the best parts about working on this book was that not only did I have the opportunity to dive deeply into Octavia’s archive, I also got the spend my time engaging other writers (on the page or in the world) who fiercely love Octavia too. The groundbreaking work of Steven Barnes, Gerry Canavan, Samuel R. Delany, Tananarive Due, Lynell George, Jewell Gomez, Ayanna Jamieson, John Jennings, Nisi Shawl, Sheree Renée Thomas, Ibi Zoboi, and too many others to name, helped to illuminate my path, and I remain forever grateful.

This book was made possible by the generous support of the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Thank you to dean emerita Jacqueline Jones Royster for seeing something in my work. Special thanks to my current and former department chairs, Kelly Ritter and Richard Utz, for your stalwart support. Many thanks to my friends and colleagues at GT, especially André Brock, Kenya Devalia, Nihad Farooq, Narin Hassan, Jillann Hertel, Tiffany Johnson, Sherie Randolph, Anne Sullivan, John Thornton, Joycelyn Wilson, Lisa Yaszek, and Ida Yoshinaga. My endless gratitude goes to Blaire Bosley and Emma Sweigart for their invaluable support as research assistants. And shout-out to my Spring 2024 Butler class for our enriching conversations as I rounded the bend on this project.

My work was also supported by two generous fellowships that gave me time to focus and offered me new perspectives on the work. I spent a catalyzing semester as the Anschutz Distinguished Fellow at Princeton University. Having the opportunity to work in Morrison Hall was a dream come true. I also had the honor of teaching awesome students in the Fall of 2022 in a seminar on Butler. I can't wait to see what you all do. I spent a very generative and productive semester at the University of Michigan as the Freehling Visiting Professor. My time in the Humanities Center, especially attending our weekly seminars, has sharpened my work in untold ways.

There are so many people in my village that offered a listening ear, an encouraging word, a new perspective, and/or valuable advice. And in the inevitable case that I have left anybody out, please charge it to my head and not to my heart. Many thanks to Linda Addison, Reynaldo Anderson, Lanice Avery, Tiffany Barber, Yaba Blay, adrienne maree brown, Leslie Callahan, Julia Charles, Kleaver Cruz, Damian Duffy, Rishi Guné, Ashley Farmer, Tim Fielder, Tanisha C. Ford, Frances Smith Foster, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Silk-Jasmyne Hindus, Aida Hussen-Levy, John Jennings, Nicholas Jones, Tiffany Lethabo King, Kiese Laymon, Diana Martha Louis, José Alfredo Menjivar, Candice Merritt, Darnell Moore, Vernelle Noel, Melanye Price, Theresa Thames, Sheree Renée Thomas, Julia Tigner, Sangodare Julia Wallace, and Pambanisha Whaley. My Atlanta fam—Khalilah Ali, E. R. Anderson, Regina Bradley, Zanetta Byers-Harris, Christopher Colvin, Qiana Cutts-Givens, Sky Davis, Jillian Carter Ford, Eileen Fannon, Christina Harrington, Cazembe Murphy

Jackson, Maria Jackson, Beth Levine, Brandi Pettijohn, Ellen Coleman Rapier, Amanda Rivera, D'Juan Rollins, Dartricia Rollins, Nyesha Samuel, Holiday Simmons, Sean Saifa Wall, and everybody at Charis Books & More—thank you for being a part of my beloved community.

Shout-out to my Fort Lauderdale crew: Jamie Anderson, Tameka Johnson, and David Scinto. You have blessed me with a lifetime of love and laughter. I'm so grateful for our thirty-plus years of friendship.

My sisters, Belissa Alvarez and Alexa Encarnacion, your friendship has saved my life more than once. Thank you for loving me in all my ways and for being my family. Kinitra Brooks, you are my partner in crime. Thank you for the gut-busting laughter on FaceTime and in real life, for dreaming with me, and for reminding me that I'm always better than I remember. My Wonder Twin, Brittney Cooper—thank you for being a fierce interlocutor, a friend to my mind, my Sagittarian sounding board, and a mirror of the best parts of me. Where would I be without your sisterhood? I hope to never find out. Thank you to Katia deSouza and Selena James for being the best big sisters a girl could ask for. When I grow up, I want to be like you. Christina Henderson, thank you for being an adventurous, steadfast, and loyal friend—and, of course, for the fire memes. One day I will actually watch the shows I promise to watch. You can quote me. Kimm Lett, thank you for being one of the sweetest and most caring people I know. You are a sister-friend in need and in deed. My BFF Eesha Pandit—to know you is to love you. Thank you for the marathon catch-ups, the "I love you so much" texts and voice notes, and decades of talking about everything from philosophy to perfume. You are irreplaceable. And thank you for sharing the Pandit family with me. You are all a blessing. Robert Patterson, you are my brother from another mother. Thank you for the encouragement, laughter, advice, and for always reminding me that I'm my own best thing. My Crunk Feminist Collective family—Robin Boylorn, Brittney Cooper, Sheri Davis, Eesha Pandit, Rachel Raimist, and Chanel Craft Tanner. Thank you for exemplifying feminist friendship. I adore you all. Big ups to all my nieces, nephews, and nibblings: Alessandra, Cori, Cairo, Harris, Joaquín, Julia, Kylar, Naima, and Naim. Thanks for the reminder that the kids are indeed alright.

My dear Ignacio G. Hutía Xeiti Rivera—you gather the pieces I am and give them back to me in all the right order. God broke the mold when they

made you. Your love, care, and support are a revelation. Thank you for being you.

To my mother, Ethlyn Morris, my first and best teacher. Thank you for always taking me to the library and getting me books whenever I asked for them when I was a kid. You inspired my own positive obsession. I would not be here without you.

Lola Maye, you are the love of my life. You crossed the rainbow bridge just as I was finishing up this book. For eighteen years you were with me on every writing project, every move, and every triumph. Your unconditional, albeit curmudgeonly, feline love continues to sustain me. Thanks for the years of snuggles and side-eyes.

Thank you to everyone I encountered who urged me on, whispered words of encouragement, and excitedly declared that they couldn't wait to read the book. You were the wind at my back as I wrote. This book is my love offering to all of you.

And to Octavia Estelle Butler, thank you for inspiring me and so many others to think big and reject the narrow, narrow footpath the world expects us to take. Your example is a gift and a North Star.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: SO BE IT, SEE TO IT

1. This cover image was illustrated by artist John Jude Palencar. He also did striking covers for several other of Octavia's novels, including *Parable of the Talents*, *Wild Seed*, and the Xenogenesis series. See John Jude Palencar, *Origins: The Art of John Jude Palencar* (Underwood Books, 2007) for more examples.
2. *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents* was the first novel I ever read by and about Caribbean people. It helped to catalyze my desire to study literature.
3. See Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, eds., *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020).
4. "Intersectionality" is a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how systems of power such as racism, sexism, and classism inform and impact our lived experience.
5. OEB 3246. Citations in the notes from Octavia E. Butler's papers use the Huntington Library's catalogue system, codes beginning with "OEB" followed by numbers. These sources can be found in Butler (Octavia E.) Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
6. Octavia E. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (Seven Stories Press, 2005), 133.
7. OEB 2068.

CHAPTER 1: THE PATTERN MASTER

1. For most of her adulthood Octavia, who was often self-conscious about her weight, sometimes gravitated toward what was billed as "health foods," such as bran muffins. Not only was she likely influenced by pervasive fatphobia, she was also worried about dying early like her father. OEB 3222. She told Terry Gross in 1993 that her father died because of "overdoing just about everything . . . ate too much, drank too much, died young," Octavia E. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Melville House, 2023), 89.
2. Octavia sometimes had to pawn items when her money was low. This was true for her well into the 1980s.
3. For example, the following brief autobiography appears just below the "About the Author" at the end *Parable of the Talents*: I'm a fifty-three-year old writer who can remember being a ten-year-old writer and who expects someday to be an eighty-year-old writer. I'm also comfortably asocial—a hermit in the middle of Seattle—a pessimist if I'm not careful, a feminist, a black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive." Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Warner Books, 2000), 423.
4. The couple were married on May 17, 1931, in Los Angeles.
5. Estelle means "star." Her grandmother was named Stella, so Octavia Estelle was named after two of the most important people in her life. In this book I refer to Octavia Estelle as "Estelle" when referring to her in her youth (reflecting what she called herself) and "Octavia" for the adult woman as she began to publicly call herself Octavia. See also Ibi Zoboi's middle-grade biography of Estelle, *Star Child: A Biographical Constellation of Octavia Estelle Butler* (Dutton's Children's Books, 2022), for more on her childhood.
6. Laurice Butler died in 1951 when Estelle was just shy of her fourth birthday.
7. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 139.
8. Eye Witness, "Octavia Butler's Aha! Moment," from *O, The Oprah Magazine*, May 2002, Oprah.com, https://www.oprah.com/spirit/octavia-butlers-aha-moment/all.
9. Octavia patterned the protagonist of *Wild Seed* after her grandmothers. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 69–70.
10. OEB 3083.
11. OEB 3222.
12. OEB 3146. Octavia told Jelani Cobb in 1994 that one of her earliest memories is being woken up in the middle of the night to a house on fire, likely the result of an overturned candle or kerosene lamp. Her grandmother's house did not have electricity. She recalled that her "biggest memory was being snatched up . . . and awakened . . . and standing outside watching the house burn down," Octavia E. Butler, *Conversations with Octavia E. Butler*, ed. Consuela Francis (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 59. In a rush to escape the flames and save themselves, her family nonetheless tried to salvage as much of their property as they could, but many precious family heirlooms were lost.
13. Butler, *Conversations*, 101–2.
14. Butler, *Conversations*, 86.
15. Throughout her life Octavia was very open about having dyslexia. See, for example, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," "PW Interviews: Octavia E. Butler," and "Congratulations! You've Just Won $295,000: An Interview with Octavia Butler," in Butler, *Conversations*.
16. OEB 3211.
17. Butler, *Conversations*, 80.
18. OEB 2472.
19. Butler, *Conversations*, 131.
20. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 127.

21. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 6.
22. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 84.
23. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories,* 131; Butler, *Conversations*, 50.
24. Butler, *Conversations*, 28, 78.
25. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 70.
26. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 7.
27. Butler, *Conversations*, 78.
28. OEB 3083.
29. Butler, *Conversations*, 50.
30. Octavia told this story many times over the years but to particularly poignant and humorous effect in a 1993 keynote address at MIT.
31. OEB 3210.
32. Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl, eds., *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* (Aqueduct Press, 2013), 131.
33. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 130.
34. Butler, *Conversations*, 36.
35. Information in this paragraph from OEB 3111.
36. OEB 3111.
37. Butler, *Conversations*, 131.
38. Butler, *Conversations*, 119–120.
39. In a 1988 interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin, Octavia disclosed that after considering whether or not she was queer, she attended a meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Service Center. Butler, *Conversations*, 14.
40. Butler, *Conversations*, 120.
41. Her longtime friend Vonda McIntyre recalled that she was still referring to herself as Estelle in 1970 during their time at the Clarion workshop. Alexandra Pierce and Mimi Mondal, eds., *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler* (Twelfth Planet Press, 2017), 316.
42. The story “To the Victor” was published under the penname Karen Adams.
43. OEB 70.
44. Butler, *Conversations*, 14.
45. Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 181.
46. Butler, *Conversations*, 3.
47. She discussed this in many interviews and in her essay “Self Construction..
48. Butler, *Conversations*, 17.
49. Butler, *Conversations*, 53.
50. Robin Scott Wilson was the workshop director, and the other instructors were Samuel R. Delany, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Fritz Leiber, Joanna Russ, and Kate Wilhelm.
51. “Introduction,” in Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview.*
52. OEB 208.
53. OEB 3215.
54. OEB 3174.
55. OEB 3211.
56. Octavia’s papers at the Huntington are peppered with unfinished manuscripts, scraps of stories, and notebooks filled with musings, research, and corrections.
57. Butler, *Conversations*, 104.
58. Butler, *Conversations*, 20.
59. Butler, *Conversations*, 129–130.
60. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 113.
61. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 66.
62. OEB 3218, OEB 3219.

63. See Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, citing Fredric Jameson's notion of world reduction.
64. Octavia E. Butler, *Patternmaster* (Headline, 2020), 709.
65. Butler, *Conversations*, 95.
66. Butler, *Conversations*, 15.
67. Mary's father Doro is a millennia-old parasite born in ancient Nubia whose power includes snatching and inhabiting the bodies of others. Doro's mission (the origins of which are explored in Octavia's fifth novel, *Wild Seed*) is to create a race of superhumans with mutant powers. For centuries Doro mates with these superhumans and forces them to procreate with him and one another. With Mary, it seems as if Doro's eugenics plans come to fruition. She comes of age and shows herself as a rival to her father after she inadvertently creates the first Pattern. After gathering thousands of psychics to California and planting the seeds of Patternist society (Mary is the first head of house, and the other members of the "first family" represent other important roles in Patternist society, such as healers and teachers), Doro wants to curtail her plans.
68. OEB 3174.
69. Butler, *Conversations*, 129.
70. Octavia E. Butler, *Mind of My Mind* (Headline, 2020), 394, 395, 392.
71. Butler, *Conversations*, 8.
72. Butler, *Conversations*, 129. Emphasis in original.
73. Octavia E. Butler, *Survivor* (Doubleday, 1978), 90.
74. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 113.
75. Holden and Shawl, *Strange Matings*, 49.
76. Butler, *Conversations*, 32–33.
77. Despite Octavia's critiques of the work, *Survivor* nonetheless adds an interesting layer to the Patternist series. None of the other Patternist novels spends as much time unpacking the fate of humans who are neither psychic nor Clayarks. In *Survivor*, we learn that not all humans are mute slaves to powerful telepaths. There are wild humans who subsist outside of Patternist communities and human enclaves that exist just outside of Patternist control. We learn that even mutes programmed to obey Patternists tried to resist and fought to form their own communities. We also learn how mutes and Patternists formed coalitions to fight Clayarks, their common enemy. Some escape off-planet to create new Patternist worlds in other solar systems. Nontelepathic humans, like the Missionaries in *Survivor*, reject Patternist protection and leave Earth behind. We also learn that racism persists when Alanna, born of an Asian American mother and a Black father, is shunned by certain Missionaries because of her dark brown skin. *Survivor* represents another potential path for humanity, one that mirrors many of the concerns that Octavia had for humanity's many foibles.
78. Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 205.
79. In the 1970s, in *Mind of My Mind*, Mary and the rest of the First Family use mind control to take nonpsychic people's homes, businesses, and schools—they infiltrate the infrastructure of whole towns and make them their own. They enter nonpsychic people's homes and make them servant-prisoners, slaves, on their own property. While Mary is bringing together latent psychics who have lived in squalor and destitution, she uses nonpsychics as objects, pawns in her master plan to unite her people within the Pattern.
80. Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (Monthly Review Press, 2018), 17.
81. Butler, *Conversations*, 93, 94.
82. See Audre Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).
83. Butler, *Conversations*, 117.

84. OEB 3212.
85. Although dyslexia has no bearing on one's ability to drive, Octavia frequently cited it as the reason she did not learn to drive. Today, we would use the language of neurodivergence to describe Octavia's understanding of how her mind worked and how she processed information.
86. OEB 3212.

CHAPTER 2: HONORING ANCESTORS

1. Author interview with Damian Duffy, August 2, 2024.
2. Butler, *Conversations*, 21.
3. Butler, *Conversations*, 28.
4. OEB 3218.
5. In an interview with Charles Brown for *Locus Magazine*, Octavia recalled watching her mother experience racism and disrespect just to earn a living. She admitted that her mother "used to take me to work with her when she couldn't get a babysitter and I was too young to be left alone, and I saw her going in the back door, and I saw people saying things to her that she didn't like but she couldn't respond to. I heard people say in her hearing, 'Well, I don't really like colored people.' And she kept working, and she put me through school, she bought her house—all the stuff she did" (Butler, *Conversations,* 182).
6. While Octavia Margaret did not listen to secular music, she did enjoy gospel music, like the group the Gospel Clefs, who were popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Octavia Estelle fondly remembered the group as part of the soundtrack of her childhood. OEB 3185.
7. Octavia recounted this story to Daniel Burton-Rose in a 2003 interview for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (Butler, *Conversations*, 197).
8. Butler, *Conversations*, 197. Italics in the original.
9. Butler, *Conversations*, 21.
10. For a historical overview of the dynamics of the evolving movement see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
11. For more context on Black women's connection to the Black Power movement see Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
12. OEB 3211.
13. Larry Neal's 1968 essay "The Black Arts Movement" outlines the movement's goals and ideals. "The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics."
14. In her article "Tending the Tradition: Gayl Jones and the Beacon Black Women Writers Series," Deborah E. McDowell cites herself and other Black feminists in the 1970s and 1980s who were instrumental in fostering this literary movement. See also Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of Empire* (New York University Press, 2021).
15. See Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New Press, 1995) and Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Harcourt, 2004).
16. For more on the Bicentennial, American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: A Final Report to the People* (US Government Printing Office, June 30, 1977).
17. See Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's exposé of the Watergate scandal, *All the President's Men* (Simon & Schuster, 1987).

18. Ivan Greenberg, "Postage and Power: U.S. Nationalism and the 1970s 'Bicentennial' and 'Americana' Stamp Series," *Journal of Social History* 49, no. 1 (2015): 60, doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shv045.
19. OEB 3213, emphasis in original. Octavia frequently cited *Dune*, *Shogun*, and *The Godfather* as examples of popular literature with excellent world-building, the type she wanted to have in her own works.
20. It was love at first sight when she visited Washington state in the 1970s. From Seattle to Mount Rainier, there was much for her to explore. She didn't want to leave and returned to Seattle just a few weeks later.
21. Quotations and reflections that follow are from OEB 3213.
22. OEB 3215.
23. Political scientist John H. Bunzel wrote the following in 1968 about the emerging Black Studies program at San Francisco State:

> On college campuses across the country today, black nationalism, still only in its earliest stages but emerging with considerable force and purpose, comes in many different sizes, shapes, and even colors. (It is no accident that in many quarters Negro is "out" and Black is "in," or that the NAACP is sometimes referred to as the National Association for the Advancement of Certain People.) Yet one thing is clear: just as one finds black artists in the existing theater calling on one another to stop assimilating and imitating white standards, and instead to begin building cultural centers "where we can enjoy being free, open and black, where," as actress and director Barbara Ann Teer put it, "we can literally 'blow our minds' with blackness," so one also finds black students in our existing academic institutions demanding a program of Black Studies—one that will not only lead to the affirmation of their own identity and self-esteem, but will recognize the new needs of the black community and thereby help to define the concept of "black consciousness." Black Power, black nationalism, a black society—whatever meaning these terms will come to have for the whole of American society in the years ahead, the curricular idea of Black Studies will become the principal vehicle by which black students will press their claim for a black "educational renaissance" in colleges and universities throughout the nation. (John H. Bunzel, "Black Studies at San Francisco State," *The Public Interest* 13 [1968]: 22.)

24. Butler, *Conversations*, 214; emphasis in original.
25. OEB 3213.
26. Holden and Shawl, *Strange Matings*, 49.
27. Butler, *Conversations*, 135.
28. Butler, *Conversations*, 29.
29. OEB 3215.
30. Holden and Shawl, *Strange Matings*, 50.
31. Butler, *Conversations*, 198.
32. Butler, *Conversations*, 135.
33. Butler, *Conversations*, 214.
34. OEB 3217.
35. OEB 3215.
36. OEB 3217; Octavia estimated that she could get about forty-five dollars from this sale, which was half of her rent.
37. OEB 3216.
38. OEB 3216.
39. OEB 3218.
40. OEB 3218.

41. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 85.
42. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 85.
43. Butler, *Conversations*, 29.
44. Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Beacon Press, 1988), 183.
45. Butler, *Kindred*, 99.
46. OEB 3215.
47. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 144.
48. See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Vintage Books, 1976) and Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, rev. ed. (W. W. Norton, 1999).
49. See Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely, eds. (W. W. Norton, 1997).
50. Butler, *Kindred,* 100.
51. Butler, *Kindred,* 191.
52. Butler, *Kindred,* 194–97.
53. To that end, in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King addresses white moderates: "I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."
54. Rosa Clemente (@rosaclemente), "Accomplices not Allies, how White people can and must end racism," X (formerly Twitter), August 25, 2016, twitter.com/rosaclemente/status/[tweetID].
55. The term "maroons" describes enslaved people who successfully escaped bondage and established autonomous communities beyond the boundaries of slave-holding societies. Marronage itself represents the complex process of liberation from slavery, a profound act of resistance and self-determination. *Petit marronage* characterizes short-term escapes, where individuals or small groups temporarily fled their plantations—sometimes for days or weeks—driven by a range of motivations, from seeking respite to staging localized acts of resistance. In contrast, *grand marronage* represents a more radical form of escape, wherein enslaved people permanently removed themselves from the plantation system. This more comprehensive mode of liberation could manifest through individual or collective actions, ranging from small group departures to large-scale plantation breakouts and even larger scale rebellions that fundamentally challenged the infrastructures of slavery. See Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), for more on marronage.
56. Butler, *Conversations*, 197.
57. Butler, *Conversations*, 79.
58. See Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York University Press, 2021).
59. OEB 3217.
60. OEB 3215.
61. See Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (W. W. Norton, 2006) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Survival Is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde* (Farrar, Straus

and Giroux, 2024).

62. Butler, *Conversations*, 134–35.
63. In *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), Angelyn Mitchell identifies narratives like *Kindred* that invite us to reimagine slavery as "emancipatory," underscoring the freedom work these texts do. Of *Kindred*, Mitchell observes that "Butler engages and revises the dominant themes of the nineteenth-century female emancipatory narrative—specifically, female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, and community—in order to interrogate the concept of freedom. In my reading, Butler's project in *Kindred* is to free her readers from a history that has been, as Dana concludes, 'unusable'" (43).
64. Douglass, *Narrative, 70.*
65. In *Jubilee* (1966), Margaret Walker broke the mold that its predecessors made by employing fiction, and not just novelistic techniques, to tell her ancestor's story. Although Walker was a painstaking researcher who pored over archives and included realistic details, *Jubilee* is ultimately a novel and benefits from the latitude to create and reimagine that fiction provides. It is this freedom that helps engender later works such as *Kindred*. In many ways, Walker's novel is the blueprint for much of the neo-slave narratives that follow, such as Ernest J. Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971); Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976); Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987); Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003); and Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (2016). *Jubilee* is a sweeping historical family saga of mixed-race identity in the Deep South. It stands in stark opposition to the tradition of mainstream American historical novels that feature slavery but center white characters and include grotesque depictions of the enslaved, such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).
66. Likewise, the neo-slave narratives that follow *Jubilee* are various reclamations of forgotten, obscured, or previously discarded history. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, by Ernest J. Gaines (Dial Press, 1971), traces a century in the life of a formerly enslaved woman who comes of age during Reconstruction and lives into the late twentieth century. *Roots*, by Alex Haley (Doubleday, 1976), which has been adapted multiple times as a television miniseries, recuperates West African history alongside the place of Haley's family in the most poignant chapters of African American history.
67. Butler, *Conversations*, 207.
68. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 135.
69. Butler, *Conversations*, 218.
70. Charles Saunders also emerged as a Black fantasy writer during this time. His novels, such as *Imaro*, which foreground African myths and legends, exemplify the sword and sorcery (or what Milton Davis and Balogun Ojetade have called "sword and soul") genre. See Milton J. Davis and Charles R. Saunders, eds., *Griots: A Sword and Soul Anthology* (MV Media, 2011).
71. OEB 3217.
72. OEB 3212.
73. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 141.
74. Butler, *Conversations*, 126.
75. In an interview, Octavia admitted, "*Kindred* was supposed to be part of the [Patternist] series but it didn't seem to fit, probably because I wanted to be more realistic than I had been in the earlier books," *Conversations*, 21.

CHAPTER 3: HARVEST

1. "Ronald Reagan's 1980 Neshoba County Fair Speech," *Neshoba Democrat*, April 8, 2021, neshobademocrat.com/stories/ronald-reagans-1980-neshoba-county-fair-speech,49123.
2. See Lee Edwards, *A Brief History of the Modern American Conservative Movement* (Heritage Foundation, 2004); Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (Grove Press, 2008); and John C. Skipper, *The 1964 Republican Convention: Barry Goldwater and the Beginning of the Conservative Movement* (McFarland, 2016).
3. See Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric History and Memory in 1980s America* (Cornell University Press, 2011) and Jeffrey D. Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Election: Ronald Reagan and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement* (Routledge, 2014).
4. See Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (Bantam, 1991); Jacqueline Johnson, *Finding Freedom: Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer* (Miami University Press, 2013); and Florence Mars and Lynn Eden, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989).
5. See Sotirios A. Barber, *The Fallacies of States' Rights* (Harvard University Press, 2013); Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *States' Rights and American Federalism: A Documentary History* (Greenwood Press, 1999); and Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2010).
6. OEB 3219.
7. See Jonathan Bartho, "Reagan's Southern Comfort: The 'Boll Weevil' Democrats in the 'Reagan Revolution' of 1981," *Journal of Policy History* 32, no. 2 (2020): 214–38, doi.org/10.1017/S0898030620000044; and Robert L. Fleeger, *Brutal Campaign: How the 1988 Election Set the Stage for Twenty-First-Century American Politics* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023).
8. OEB 3222.
9. OEB 3222.
10. OEB 3177.
11. See Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (PublicAffairs, 2003); and Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (Random House, 1974).
12. OEB 3178.
13. Vi Thục Hà, "On Persistence: Octavia E. Butler & Central Library," LAPL Blog, Los Angeles Public Library, June 11, 2019, lapl.org/collections-resources/blogs/lapl/persistence-octavia-e-butler-central-library.
14. Octavia E. Butler, "Free Libraries: Are They Becoming Extinct?" *Omni* 15, no. 10 (August 1993): 4.
15. OEB 3175.
16. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 70.
17. OEB 37; Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 126–27.
18. Butler, *Conversations*, 202. Emphasis in original.
19. See Lisa Yaszek, "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 4 (June 2003): 1053–66.
20. OEB 3087.
21. Butler, *Conversations*, 18.
22. Butler, *Conversations*, 18.
23. OEB 3218.
24. See Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*; and Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, *All the Women Are White*.

25. See bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020).
26. See Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*.
27. See Kai Bird, *The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter* (Crown, 2021); and Herbert D. Rosenbaum, and Alexej Ugrinsky, *The Presidency and Domestic Policies of Jimmy Carter* (Greenwood Press, 1994).
28. Carter, for example, installed solar panels on the White House in an attempt to get the American public interested in renewable energy. During his presidential campaign, Carter often courted feminist, LGBT, and racial justice groups with the promise of continued support in exchange for support of his candidacy. For some people on the left, Carter's presidency sparked hope for a progressive future; but for conservative Americans, the Carter years were a frightening time of too much change too quickly.
29. See Doreen J. Mattingly, "The Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in California," *California History* 96, no. 3 (2019): 2–24, doi.org/10.1525/ch.2019.96.3.2; and Jocelyn Elise Crowley, "Moving Beyond Tokenism: Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and the Election of Women to State Legislatures," *Social Science Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2006): 519–39, doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2006.00394.x.
30. See Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Eric C. Miller, "Phyllis Schlafly's 'Positive' Freedom: Liberty, Liberation, and the Equal Rights Amendment," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 18, no. 2 (2015): 277–300, doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.18.2.0277; and Anna Von der Goltz and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson, eds., *Inventing the Silent Majority in Western Europe and the United States: Conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).
31. Schlafly mobilized a significant group of mostly white, suburban and rural women for her STOP ERA campaign. She and her followers claimed that instead of liberating women the ERA would do just the opposite. Despite the fact that Schlafly herself was an attorney who traveled across the nation, leaving her children in the care of others, she claimed that most American women preferred a more cloistered, domestic life. She maintained that the ERA's promise of equality between the sexes would be an erosion of traditional American family values. Schlafly and other antifeminists insisted that men and women were too fundamentally different and that equality would mean that women would be forced to leave the home and hustle for dollars among men in the crude workforce.
32. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 29–30.
33. OEB 3225.
34. OEB 3221.
35. OEB 3218. Octavia was curious about queer sexuality and so she attended a meeting at the Gay and Lesbian Service Center to get more information. After listening to participants share their experiences of being part of the LBGTQIA+ community, she decided in that moment that identifying as queer was not for her: "I realized, Nope, this ain't it. I also realized, once I thought it over, that I'm a hermit. I enjoy my own company more than I enjoy most other people's—and going to parties or trying to meet Mr. or Ms. Right or whatever simply doesn't appeal to me" (Butler, *Conversations*, 14). Nevertheless, Octavia remained intrigued by queerness as a concept and would continue to explore queer themes in her fiction.
36. OEB 3226.
37. OEB 3218.
38. OEB 3178.
39. OEB 3218.
40. OEB 3226.
41. Kaitlyn Greenidge, "The Power of Sisterhood," *Harper's Bazaar*, February 28, 2023, harpersbazaar.com/culture/art-books-music/a43094454/toni-morrison-power-of-sisterhood/.

42. See Courtney Thorsson, *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2023).
43. Historian Darlene Clark Hine makes a case for the role of dissemblance for Black women's tactic to subvert the misogynoir they face, See Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20, doi.org/10.1086/494552.
44. OEB 3218.
45. OEB 3218.
46. OEB 3221
47. OEB 3221.
48. OEB 3178.
49. Not only did she review Alica Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* in the October 17, 1983, edition of *The Washington Post*, she also reviewed Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, Amiri and Amina Baraka's *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women* for the *Post.*
50. See, for example, OEB 3179, 3182, 3183, 3184, and 3219.
51. Combahee River Collective, Combahee River Collective Statement, *Words of Fire*.
52. See André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 30–67.
53. Conceived of in 1999, the Carl Brandon Society is an organization created to increase recognition of race and ethnicity in speculative literature. Its website reveals the following about its name: "We named ourselves after Carl Brandon in much the same way that the Tiptree Award named itself after the fictional male writer James Tiptree Jr., a pseudonym for the feminist SF writer Alice Sheldon. Just as women can now write under their own names, so can people of color now write (and publish) our own stories. We've got much further to go yet. This is why we're working to make fandom a more rewarding place for people of color, to build a readership for the speculative writing of people of color, and to help the world understand that we can't create a just future if people of color aren't including in its imagining" ("About the Carl Brandon Society," Carl Brandon Society, https://carlbrandon.org/about/).
54. Her co-editors were Martin Greenberg and Charles Waugh.
55. The essay can be found as an appendix in Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler.*
56. OEB 3226.
57. Butler, To Toni Cade Bambara, OEB 3782 and OEB 3783.
58. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 28.
59. OEB 3183.
60. Black artists and writers continue to contemplate what Black futures could be. In 2020, Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham published *Black Futures* (One World, 2020), their edited collection of mixed media—essays, manifestos, memes, poetry, recipes, and more. In the introduction they write, "In developing *Black Futures*, we sought to answer the question, 'What does it mean to be Black and alive right now,'" xiii.
61. Thomas continues to lead the vanguard in editing anthologies of science fiction, such as *Africa Risen: A New Era of Speculative Fiction* (Macmillan, 2022), a collection of original fantasy and science fiction stories from Africa and the African Diaspora, which she co-edited with Oghenechovwe Donald Ekpeki and Zelda Knight.
62. Author interview with "Sheree Renée Thomas," September 19, 2023.
63. Thomas would also go on to study under Octavia at the Clarion West writers' workshop.
64. Octavia discusses this in "Lost Races of Science Fiction," Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, appendix.
65. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Ace, 2010), xiv.
66. OEB 3218.
67. OEB 3221.

68. For example, Doro uses the preternatural ability of his son Isaac to control weather to ensure safe travel of a slave ship. On the one hand, being able to maneuver tons of wood, steel, and people is no small feat; it is, in fact, an amazing power. On the other hand, all Doro envisions is within the limited purview of the society. Why not create some sort of super society where slavery doesn't exist? Where his mutant children can live free? Where even he can rule as a god, unencumbered? Doro has no such vision.
69. See Sidney Lens, *The Forging of the American Empire* (Haymarket Books, 2016).
70. Butler, *Conversations*, 111.
71. Butler, *Conversations*, 11.
72. See Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
73. Butler, *Conversations*, 20.
74. Butler, *Bloodchild*, vii.
75. OEB 3219.
76. OEB 3175.
77. OEB 3180.
78. OEB 3178.
79. OEB 3178.
80. Butler, "Speech Sounds," *Bloodchild*, 96.
81. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 79.
82. Butler, "Bloodchild," in *Bloodchild*, 30.
83. Butler, "Bloodchild," 30.
84. Butler, "Bloodchild," 31.
85. OEB 3182.
86. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 147.
87. Octavia was inspired by rabies, not by HIV/AIDS.
88. Besides *Clay's Ark*, Clayarks feature most prominently in Octavia's first novel, *Patternmaster*, as the archnemeses to the psionic power of the Patternists, Doro and Anyanwu's descendants; they are the descendants of Eli's family. In *Patternmaster*, Clayarks resemble sphinxes, with their uncanny combination of human faces and hairless, quadruped bodies. They have remnants of human speech and move with feline grace when vaulting on all fours but are clumsy and awkward when attempting to walk upright like their biped ancestors.
89. OEB 3179.
90. OEB 3178.

CHAPTER 4: THE HUMAN CONTRADICTION

1. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 143.
2. Butler, *Conversations*, 23.
3. See Wendell Bell, "The American Invasion of Grenada: A Note on False Prophecy," *Foresight* 10, no. 3 (2008): 27–42, doi.org/10.1108/14636680810883107; Peter Clegg, and Gary Williams, "Editorial: The Invasion of Grenada 30 Years On—A Retrospective," *Round Table* 102, no. 2 (2013): 121–26, doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2013.764094; and Patsy Lewis. "Introduction: Grenada: Revolution, Invasion and Beyond," *Social and Economic Studies* 62, no. 3/4 (2013): 1–8.
4. See Roberto Márquez, *A World Among These Islands: Essays on Literature, Race, and National Identity in Antillean America* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); Beverley A. Steele, *Grenada: A History of Its People* (Macmillan Caribbean, 2003); and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).
5. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, March 23, 1983, reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-defense-and-national-security.
6. Octavia makes a case for a measured response to nuclear proliferation in a 1981 op-ed for the *Los Angeles Times*, "Civil Defense in the Nuclear Age."
7. OEB 3229. See Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 110–11.
8. OEB 3185.
9. OEB 3231.
10. OEB 3227.
11. OEB 3229.
12. OEB 3229.
13. OEB 3227.
14. OEB 3227.
15. OEB 3227.
16. There are letters and diary entries that reflect the ups and downs of their friendship. See, for example, OEB 2608, 4256-4262.
17. OEB 3231.
18. OEB 3227; emphasis in the original.
19. OEB 3231.
20. OEB 3185.
21. OEB 3185.
22. The following quotations and observations are from OEB 3186.
23. OEB 7859.
24. OEB 3232; emphasis in the original.
25. Butler began thinking through the Oankali in the 1970s. She wrote various versions before settling on what would be the Xenogenesis series.
26. OEB 3227.
27. OEB 3229.
28. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 101.
29. OEB 3182.
30. OEB 3229; emphasis in the original.
31. See Elana Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Theodora Goss, and John Paul Riquelme, "From Superhuman to Posthuman: The Gothic Technological Imaginary in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' and Octavia Butler's 'Xenogenesis,'" *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 3

(2007): 434–59, doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2007.0068; Melvin G. Hill, ed., *Black Bodies and Transhuman Realities: Scientifically Modifying the Black Body in Posthuman Literature and Culture* (Lexington Books, 2019); and Kristen Lillvis. *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* (University of Georgia Press, 2017).

32. OEB 3227.
33. Octavia E. Butler, *Adulthood Rites* (Grand Central, 2021), 467.
34. This and the following quotation are from OEB 3228.
35. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 81.
36. Butler, *Adulthood Rites*, 470.
37. Butler, *Conversations*, 33.
38. For more on Martinique, see Céline Théodose, "'Martinique Is Ours, Not Theirs!': Framing Conflicting Identities During the 2009 Protests," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 168–87, doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2019.1608797; Alyssa James, "Martinique's Vie Chère Protests and the Fight for Caribbean Justice," *Stabroek News*, December 16, 2024, stabroeknews.com/2024/12/16/features/in-the-diaspora/martiniques-vie-chere-protests-and-the-fight-for-caribbean-justice/; and David A. Vivian, "The Colonial Legacy Lurking Beneath Economic Unrest in the French Caribbean," *The Conversation*, November 1, 2024, theconversation.com/the-colonial-legacy-lurking-beneath-economic-unrest-in-the-french-caribbean-242460.
39. OEB 3229.
40. OEB 3231.

CHAPTER 5: PROPHESIES AND PARABLES

1. Griffin Limerick, "Obama Makes History: Lee County Results Closely Mirror State Choice, Differ from Overall National Outcome," *Auburn Plainsman*, November 6, 2008.
2. Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Donald Trump's False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2015, washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/; and "Donald Trump Under Fire for Mocking Disabled Reporter," *BBC News*, November 26, 2015, bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34930042.
3. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholar Monica A. Coleman and writer Tananarive Due hosted two dozen webinar discussions titled "Octavia Tried to Tell Us: Parable for Today's Pandemic."
4. See Ian Haney-López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
5. For the early days and rise of the conservative movement, see John C. Skipper, *The 1964 Republican Convention: Barry Goldwater and the Beginning of the Conservative Movement* (McFarland, 2016).
6. In contrast, incumbent president Jimmy Carter won forty-nine electoral votes in 1980, and challenger Walter Mondale won thirteen four years later.
7. *Doomsday Preppers*, Season 4, episode 6, "There Will Be Chaos," aired on August 28, 2014, on the National Geographic Network.
8. OEB 3246. Octavia didn't always get everything right. For example, along with these predictions she believed that China would break up into smaller nations, not unlike what happened to the Soviet Union.
9. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 8.
10. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 117.
11. OEB 3246.
12. Though in a 2000 interview with Charlie Rose, Octavia, with her characteristic modesty, gently chided the interviewer for calling it that. "Octavia Butler," *Charlie Rose Show*. June 1, 2020, https://charlierose.com/videos/28978.
13. OEB 3129.
14. OEB 3129.
15. OEB 3132 and 3246.
16. OEB 3133.
17. OEB 3126.
18. OEB 3237.
19. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, x.
20. OEB 3139.
21. OEB 3139.
22. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* viii.
23. OEB 3127.
24. OEB 3242; emphasis in original.
25. OEB 3242; emphasis in original.
26. OEB 3242.
27. OEB 3129.
28. OEB 3133.
29. OEB 3246.
30. OEB 3246.
31. Author interview with Tim Fielder, February 29, 2024.

32. Author interview with Linda Addison, September 22, 2023.
33. OEB 3126.
34. OEB 3126.
35. OEB 3151.
36. OEB 3133.
37. OEB 3127; OEB 3246.
38. OEB 3246.
39. OEB 3246.
40. OEB 3126.
41. OEB 3246.
42. OEB 3131.
43. Although science fiction is a term that is popularly used to refer to wide range of works, writers and scholars of science fiction generally agree with something akin to the Oxford English Dictionary's definition, that science fiction is "Fiction in which the setting and story feature hypothetical scientific or technological advances, the existence of alien life, space or time travel, etc., *esp.* such fiction set in the future, or an imagined alternative universe." Fantasy, on the other hand, does not feature scientific or technological advances even if there is time travel or an alternate universe. Instead, fantasy often centers magic or metaphysical or, in the case of *Kindred*, gives no explanation of the mechanics of time travel or any such speculative phenomena. There are other terms such as science fantasy, which describes a melding of science fiction and fantasy as seen in *Wild Seed*, for example. Hard science fiction often explores real-world topics like space travel, computer advancements, and artificial intelligence and emphasizes technical detail and accuracy.
44. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 89–90.
45. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 98.
46. OEB 3133.
47. OEB 3133.
48. Kaia Shivers, "An Evening with Award-Winning Novelist Octavia Butler," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 27, 2000, B5, ProQuest, proquest.com/newspapers/evening-with-award-winning-novelist-octavia/docview/369364825/se-2.
49. Jessica Hurley and N. K. Jemisin, "An Apocalypse Is a Relative Thing: An Interview with N. K. Jemisin," *ASAP/Journal* 3 no. 3 (2018): 467–77, dx.doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0035.
50. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993).
51. Orishas are indigenous Yoruba deities; however, the term orisha is also prevalent across the African Diaspora. *The Encyclopedia of African Religion* defines Oya as "one of the seven primary orisha in the Yoruba religion, which originated in the Old Oyo Empire of Ancient Yorubaland, present-day Nigeria. The name Oya is defined by the action "she tore," "O-ya" in Yoruba. The River Niger, the thunderbolt, fire, tornadoes, buffalo, and the wind represent this female orisha. Guardian of the gates of death, she stands at the gates of the cemetery, yet she does not represent death. She is only the keeper and guardian of the gates, allowing souls to enter. Because of her post, she has a special relationship with the ancestor world (egun and egungun). Oya is actually the opposite of death; she is symbolic of the air that humans breathe, and she can perpetuate life or death with her wrath (i.e., hurricanes, tornadoes)." Octavia was very deliberate in naming her characters, and so Lauren's middle name, Oya, reflects her similarities to the deity.
52. OEB 3127.
53. Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central, 2007), 271–72.
54. "President George W. Bush on Compassionate Conservatism," *Catalyst* 12 (Fall 2018), George W. Bush Institute, bushcenter.org/catalyst/opportunity-road/george-w-bush-on-compassionate-

conservatism.

55. See Michael Decourcy Hinds, “Death in Waco: The Lost Cause; Texas Cult Membership: Many Lives, Shared Fate,” *New York Times*, April 20, 1993, nytimes.com/1993/04/20/us/death-in-waco-the-lost-cause-texas-cult-membership-many-lives-shared-fate.html.
56. Butler, *Conversations*, 117
57. “Hurricane Andrew’s 30th Anniversary,” National Weather Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, https://www.weather.gov/news/220822-hurricane-andrews. Accessed July 12, 2024.
58. OEB 3246; emphasis in the original.
59. OEB 3139.
60. OEB 3139.
61. Butler, *Conversations*, 184.
62. OEB 3127.
63. OEB 3129.
64. See Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Duke University Press, 2018) and Therí Pickens, *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* for more on understanding the role of disability in Octavia’s work.
65. See Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Robert J. Patterson, *Exodus Politics: Civil Rights and Leadership in African American Literature and Culture* (University of Virginia Press, 2013).
66. OEB 3136, 3139.
67. Butler, *Conversations,* 122.
68. “Toni Morrison Talks with Hilson Als About Her Father,” YouTube, posted by *The New Yorker*, October 6, 2015, youtu.be/ejKe-AE-1fo?si=ZgzM0g234AXE2sSB.
69. OEB 3139.
70. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 77.
71. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 1.
72. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 1.
73. Butler, *Conversations*, 187.
74. See “Pat Buchanan in 1992: ‘Make America First Again,’” YouTube, posted by *Face the Nation*, February 4, 2016, youtu.be/qBm7SZ_WjYY?si=4okE5cQTePrP3h-e.
75. OEB 3133.
76. These parables occur several times in the Bible. For example, the parable of the sower appears in the books of Luke, Mark, and Matthew. The parable of the talents occurs in the book of Matthew and a similar parable, the Parable of the Minas, appears in the book of Luke.
77. See Lynell George, “The Parable Is Now.” *Alta*, July 19, 2014, https://www.altaonline.com/dispatches/a61625840/the-parable-is-now/; and Errin Haines, “The Amendment: Octavia Butler’s Vision of 2024 with Dr. Ayana Jamieson,” *The 19th News*, May 15, 2024, https://19thnews.org/2024/05/errin-haines-the-amendment-podcast-ayana-jamieson/.
78. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, 25.
79. Butler, *Conversations*, 122.
80. Butler, *Conversations*, 212.
81. Holden and Shawl, *Strange Matings,* 12.

CHAPTER 6: FLIGHT

1. OEB 3155.
2. Butler, *Conversations*, 148.
3. Butler, *Conversations*, 223.
4. OEB 3155.
5. OEB 3146.
6. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 101.
7. OEB 7998.
8. OEB 3170; emphasis in original.
9. OEB 3170.
10. OEB 3149.
11. OEB 3208.
12. In the essay "The Monophobic Response," Octavia calls out humanity's adolescent behavior (exhibited in wars over land and resources and the like) and connects it to our desire to create aliens out of other people. Humanity will have matured, Octavia suggests, once we can be interdependent and not dominate one another.
13. OEB 3146
14. OEB 566-582; Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 114.
15. OEB 3147.
16. OEB 3147.
17. OEB 3148.
18. OEB 3148.
19. OEB 3149.
20. OEB 3147.
21. OEB 3149.
22. OEB 3149.
23. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview,* 110.
24. OEB 3147.
25. OEB 3147.
26. OEB 3149.
27. OEB 3149.
28. Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler*, 167.
29. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 140.
30. OEB 3149.
31. OEB 3149.
32. OEB 3147.
33. OEB 3150.
34. OEB 3150; except as noted, the observations in the remainder of this section are from this notebook.
35. As Speaker of the House, Gingrich supported the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996, which federally defined marriage as between one man and one woman," Congressional Record, 104th Congress, House of Representatives, July 12, 1996. He has called being gay a "choice," Montopoli, "Newt Gingrich: Being gay is a choice for some." Gingrich has described same-sex marriage as a "temporary aberration," Sink, "Gingrich: Same-sex marriage a 'temporary aberration.'" Likewise, his half-sister Candice Gingrich-Jones, an outspoken LGBT activist, has discussed her distant relationship with her sibling and their differing views on homosexuality in a 2011 interview, Julie Bolcer, "Candace Gingrich-Jones: Newt Hasn't Changed," *The Advocate*,

December 16, 2011, https://www.advocate.com/news/news-features/2011/12/16/candace-gingrich-jones-goes-back-future-newt.

36. Here Octavia is referring to how Clarence Thomas used the example of his older sister, Emma Mae Martin, to draw contrast between those who are self-reliant and those who rely on so-called government handouts. A 1991 *Los Angeles Times* article notes that "When Martin was on public assistance in the early 1980s, Thomas publicly aired his disgust. To him, she and her four children symbolized all that was wrong with liberal handout programs. 'She gets mad when the mailman is late with her welfare check,' he declared at a conference of Black conservatives. 'That's how dependent she is. What's worse is that now her kids feel entitled to the check, too. They have no motivation for doing better or getting out of that situation,'" Tumulty, "Sister of High Court Nominee Traveled Different Road: Family: Although Clarence Thomas held her up as a horrible example, Emma Mae Martin defends her life and the choices she made." While Martin was indeed on public assistance, she was also a fulltime caregiver for their elderly aunt during this time, a fact that was conveniently left out of Thomas's diatribe.
37. Sharon Ball, "Octavia Butler: Eye on the Stars, Feet on the Ground," NPR, "All Things Considered," March 4, 2006, npr.org/2006/03/04/5245686/octavia-butler-eye-on-the-stars-feet-on-the-ground.
38. In the West, Dracula is the archetypal vampire. Most often attributed to the fifteenth-century historical Vlad the Impaler, he is a ghostly pale, devilishly handsome, and utterly ruthless undead creature who lures innocent virgins into a living death with his seductive ways. Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* helped cement the vampire as a staple in popular culture. Vampires are not particular to European folklore, however. Take, for instance, the *soucouyant* of the Caribbean. These flying hags, like Jamaica's white witch of Rose Hall, shed their skin and suck their victim's blood. Or the *adze* of West Africa, shape-shifting bloodsuckers often disguised as fireflies. Or the *Krasue* of Southeast Asia, a mere head of a beautiful woman, with entrails floating from her neck.
39. See Marty Fink, "AIDS Vampires: Reimagining Illness in Octavia Butler's 'Fledgling,'" *Science Fiction Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 416–32.
40. Butler, *Conversations*, 218.
41. OEB 3149.
42. Octavia E. Butler, *Fledgling* (Warner Books, 2007), 12.
43. See Janet W. Hardy and Dossie Easton, *The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love*, 3rd ed. (Ten Speed, 2017).
44. See Susana M. Morris, "Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, nos. 3/4 (2012): 146–66, doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2013.0034.
45. See Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (University of Illinois Press, 2013); and Monique W. Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New Press, 2016).
46. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 169.
47. Butler, *Fledgling*, 66.
48. Butler, *Fledgling*, 173.
49. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (Free Press, 1994) by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray argues that intelligence is largely hereditary and linked to socioeconomic outcomes, controversially suggesting racial differences in IQ. It is widely criticized for its flawed methodology, misinterpretation of data, and use of racist pseudoscience to justify inequality.
50. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 160–61.
51. See John Kenneth Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s* (McFarland, 2007); and Sarah Trencansky, "Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror," *Journal of Popular*

Film and Television 29, no. 2 (2001); 63–73, doi.org/10.1080/01956050109601010.

52. See Kinitra D. Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* (Rutgers University Press, 2017); and Maisha L. Wester, *African American Gothic: Screams from Shadowed Places* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
53. Author interview with John Jennings, August 6, 2024.
54. John Jennings, "Scratching at the Dark: A Visual Essay on EthnoGothic," *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora* 42, no. 1-2 (Spring-Winter 2016): 249.
55. See Susana M. Morris, "Ethno-Gothic Cinema," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Jay Telotte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
56. William H. Frey, "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects," Brookings, March 14, 2018, brookings.edu/articles/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/.
57. Audra D. S. Burch, "White Supremacist Incidents Are Rising Across the U.S," *New York Times*, November 21, 2024, nytimes.com/2024/11/21/us/trump-neo-nazi-anti-government-groups.html.
58. See Michael Feola, *The Rage of Replacement: Far Right Politics and Demographic Fear* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024).
59. Hatewatch, "White Nationalist Chant in Charlottesville Again: 'You Will Not Replace Us,'" YouTube, October 10, 2017, youtu.be/0M9tbtjRktc?si=53guuyizfWhkU_Al; and Sophia Siddiqui, "Racing the Nation: Towards a Theory of Reproductive Racism," *Race & Class* 63, no. 2 (2021): 3–20, doi.org/10.1177/03063968211037219.
60. See Jerry Rafiki Jenkins, *The Paradox of Blackness in African American Vampire Fiction* (The Ohio State University Press, 2019); and Kendra R. Parker, *She Bites Back: Black Female Vampires in African American Women's Novels, 1977–2011* (Lexington Books, 2018).

EPILOGUE: NEW SUNS

1. "Octavia E. Butler," *The Times,* March 14, 2006, https://www.thetimes.com/article/octavia-e-butler-6jl8jxcxr8f.
2. Neda Ulaby, "Sci-Fi Author Octavia Butler Dies," February 27, 2006, npr.org/2006/02/27/5235453/sci-fi-author-octavia-butler-dies.
3. Margalit Fox, "Octavia E. Butler, Science Fiction Writer, Dies at 58," *New York Times*, March 1, 2006, nytimes.com/2006/03/01/books/octavia-e-butler-science-fiction-writer-dies-at-58.html.
4. Marcia Davis, "Octavia Butler, A Lonely, Bright Star of the Sci-Fi Universe," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2006, washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2006/02/28/octavia-butler-a-lonely-bright-star-of-the-sci-fi-universe/e4ce72bf-7265-4041-bf05-20e7ffbce8e1/.
5. Davis, "Octavia Butler."
6. OEB 3155.
7. Butler, *Octavia E. Butler: Last Interview*, 170.
8. "A Tribute to Octavia E. Butler," New York Public Library, June 5, 2006, https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/tribute-octavia-e-butler.
9. Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology" (1988), Dartmouth Scholarship, digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa/2073.
10. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins coined the term "controlling images" to delineate the cultural imagery that often reduces Black women to flat stereotypes such as the mammy or the Jezebel.
11. Octavia E. Butler, *A Few Rules for Predicting the Future: An Essay* (Chronicle Books, 2024), 18, 19, 27, 41, 49, 53.
12. OEB 3246.
13. Butler, *A Few Rules*, 55.

Photo Section

A PRESCIENT CREATOR OF NEW WORLDS

Baby Octavia Estelle and her mother Octavia, 1951.

"I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she [my mother] did, and I think one of the reasons I wrote Kindred *was to resolve my feelings, because, after all, I ate because of what she did."*

Octavia Estelle in 1962, when she was a student at John Muir High School in Pasadena.

"I am the daughter of a maid and a bootblack, the descendant of slaves. I climb upon the bones of those who survived hell . . ."

Octavia with Clarion workshop classmates and teacher Harlan Ellison in Pittsburgh, 1970. *Front and center*: Harlan Ellison; *first row, left to right*: Vonda N. McIntyre, Lucy Seaman, Lynn Marron, Debbie Goldstein, Jeanie Sullivan, Mel Gilden, Steve Herbst; *back row, left to right*: Alan Edward Rubin, David Skal, Tom Slattery, Ralph Benko, Gerry Conway, Jean Mark Gawron, Russell Bates, Joe Manfredini, unidentified person, Octavia Butler.

Octavia (*right*) with fellow awardees (*left to right*) Betty Myles, Artie Bates, and Lady Tyger Trimiar at West L.A. Community College's "A Salute to Black Role Models of the Greater Los Angeles Community," 1981. Octavia was honored to be recognized by her community.

"No one can get away with sneering at me or pitying me when I call myself a writer. It's good."

After years of feeling overlooked, Octavia triumphantly stands with her first Hugo Award, 1984.

Octavia with fellow Black speculative fiction writers Tananarive Due, Jewelle Gomez, Samuel R. Delany, and Steven Barnes at a conference at Clark Atlanta University, 1997.

Octavia on a panel with fellow writers Vonda N. McIntyre and Larry Niven at the Loscon science fiction convention, 1988. She frequented such conventions throughout her career.

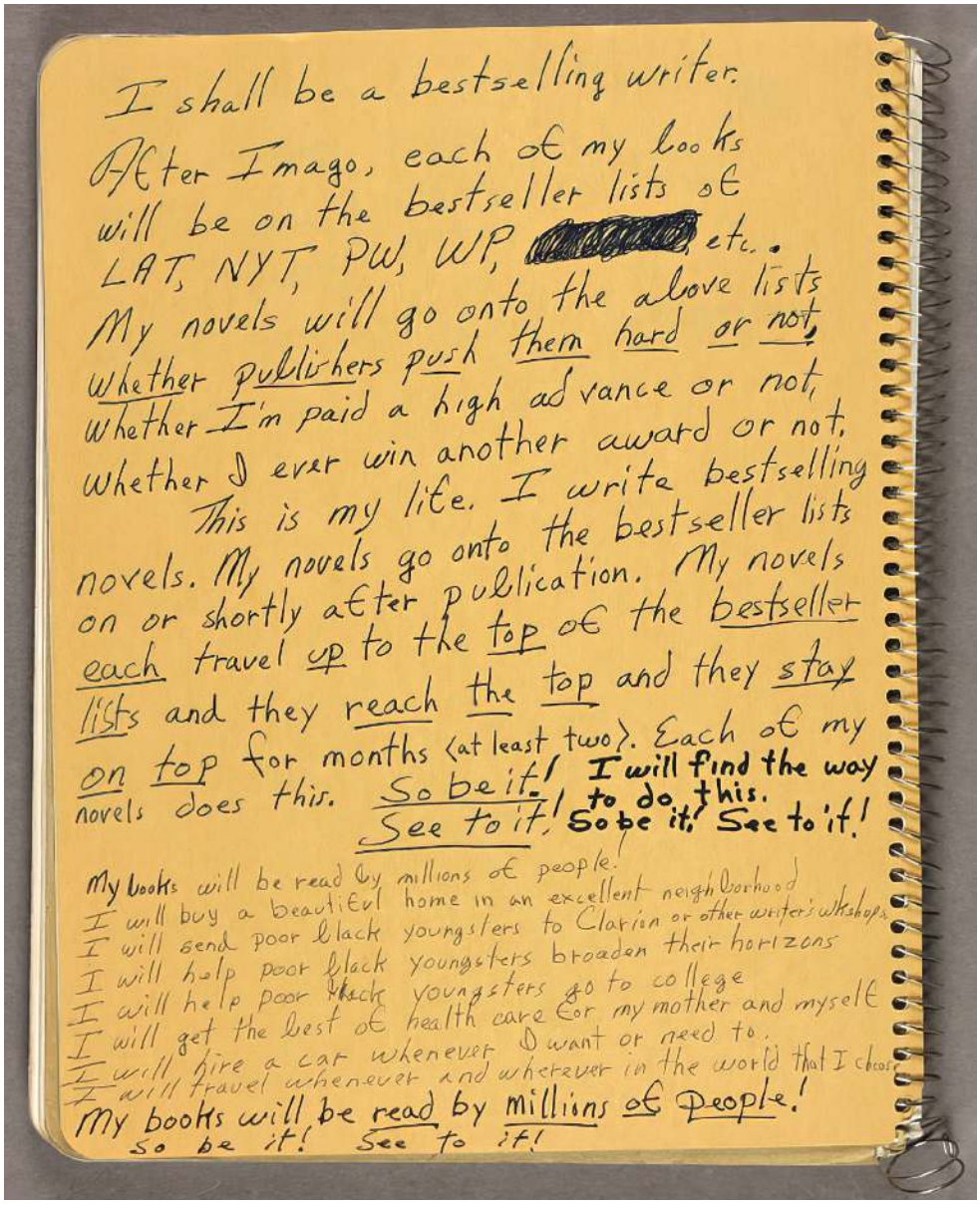
In 1988, Octavia (*back row, second from right*) joined other Black women writers at the Essence Writers' Retreat in Nassau, Bahamas. *Seated, from left*: Dr. Julianne Malveaux, Betty Winston Baye, Stephanie Stokes Oliver, Sonia Sanchez, Thulani Davis, Ntozake Shange, Valerie Wilson Wesley, Bebe Moore Campbell. *Second row, from left*: Toni Cade Bambara, Elsie Washington, Barbara Smith, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Bonnie Allen, Sherley Anne Williams, Cheryll Y. Greene, Ayesha Grice, Phyl Garland, Ivy Young, Elaine Brown. *Last row, from left*: Susan L. Taylor, Lena G. Sherrod, Renita Weems, Jean Wiley, Audrey Edwards, Jill Nelson, Vertamae Grosvenor, Octavia Butler, Lucille Clifton.

In 1985, Octavia traveled to Peru with a UCLA study group to research a writing project. Here she sits outside her hotel. She'd been fascinated by Peru's coastal mountains "because they're so utterly barren, like the moon," and that contributed to her thinking about *Parable of the Sower*.

Some of Octavia's earliest stories were about horses. Her love of animals, and horses in particular, remained throughout her life. Photograph from 1999.

Octavia was proud of Sheree Renée Thomas's anthology *Dark Matter*. Here, she signs a copy for a fan in 2001. Years before, she had been unable to get writers to sign on to her *Black Futures* anthology, and now there was a vibrant scene of Black speculative fiction writers.

Octavia at Mount Rainier in 2001. She fell in love with Seattle when she first visited in the 1970s and lived there during the last years of her life.



A 1988 note inside the cover of one of Octavia's many commonplace books. Octavia believed in the power of positive thinking, and her notebooks are filled with affirmations.

"I say again and again, all I care about is the writing."

Octavia at Charis Books & More in Decatur for the celebration of *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, 1995. She had more opportunities to go on book tours and talk with readers after she started publishing with smaller independent publishers.

CHARIS ARCHIVE

About the Author

SUSANA M. MORRIS is a Black feminist scholar and a cultural critic who has dedicated her career to studying the interior lives of Black women. She is an associate professor of literature, media, and communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology. A former Anschutz Distinguished Fellow at Princeton University and Norman Freehling Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan, she is the author of *Close Kin and Distant Relatives: The Paradox of Respectability in Black Women's Literature* and a cofounder of the Crunk Feminist Collective. Her other works include the coedited collection *The Crunk Feminist Collection* and the coauthored young adult handbook *Feminist AF: The Guide to Crushing Girlhood*. Her writing has appeared in *Gawker, Long Reads*, Cosmopolitan.com, and Ebony.com, and she has been featured on NPR, on the BBC, and in *Essence* magazine.

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Cover art: Sam Kerr
Cover design: Stephen Brayda Reference photograph: © Malcolm Ali/Getty Images

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Morris, Susana M., 1980- author.
Title: Positive obsession : the life and times of Octavia E. Butler / Susana Morris.
Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Amistad, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024058303 (print) | LCCN 2024058304 (ebook) | ISBN 9780063212077 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780063211834 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780063211841 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Butler, Octavia E. | African American women authors—Biography. | Science fiction, American—Women authors—Biography. | Speculative fiction, American—Women authors—Biography. | LCGFT: Biographies.
Classification: LCC PS3552.U827 Z79 2025 (print) | LCC PS3552.U827 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54 [B]—dc23/eng/20250210
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024058303
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024058304

Digital Edition AUGUST 2025 ISBN: 978-0-06-321184-1
Version 07112025
Print ISBN: 978-0-06-321207-7

About the Publisher

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