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AN INTERVIEW WITH OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

By Randall Kenan

Octavia E. Butler is something of a phenomenon. Since 1976 she has published nine novels, more than any other black woman in North America, and even more amazing: She writes science fiction. Having won all the major SF awards, (a Nebula and two Hugos), she has gained a substantial cult following, as well as critical acclaim, particularly for her 1979 novel, *Kindred*, reissued in 1988 in the prestigious *Beacon Black Women Writers Series*. *Kindred* is the tale of Dana Franklin, a black woman from an interracial marriage in LA in 1976, who is mysteriously plucked back in time on a number of occasions to 1824 Maryland and to a moral dilemma involving her white ancestor. A book often compared to *Metamorphosis* for its uncannily successful blend of fact and fantasy, it is considered by many to be a modern classic. Butler manages to use the conventions of science fiction to subvert many long held assumptions about race, gender and power; in her hands these devices become adept metaphors for reinterpreting and reconsidering our world. Strong women, multiracial societies and aliens who challenge humanity's penchant for destruction inform her work and lift it beyond genre.

Her works include: *Patternmaster* (1976); *Mind of My Mind* (1977); *Survivor*, (1978); *Wild Seed* (1980); *Clay's Ark* (1984); and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy: *Dawn* (1987); *Adulthood Rites* (1988); and *Imago* (1989). Butler has also published a number of short stories and novellas, including the award-winning, "Bloodchild" in 1984. She is working on the first book in a new series.

Octavia Butler lives in Los Angeles. This phone interview took place on November 3, 1990.

KENAN: Do you prefer to call your work speculative fiction, as opposed to science fiction or fantasy?

BUTLER: No, actually I don't. Most of what I do is science fiction. Some of the things I do are fantasy. I don't like the labels, they're marketing tools, and I certainly don't worry about them when I'm writing. They are also inhibiting factors; you wind up not getting read by certain people, or not getting sold to certain people because they think they know what you write. You say science fiction and everybody thinks *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*.

KENAN: But the kind of constructs you use, like time travel for example in *Kindred*, or . . .

BUTLER: *Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There's no science in *Kindred*. I mean, if I was told that something was science fiction I would expect to find something dealing with science in it. For instance, *Wild Seed* is more science fiction than

most people realize. The main character is dealing with medical science, but she just doesn't know how to talk about it. With *Kindred* there's absolutely no science involved. Not even the time travel. I don't use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from.

KENAN: In earlier interviews you mentioned that there's an interesting parallel between your perception of your mother's life and some of the themes you explore in your work. You spoke of how in your growing-up you saw her in an invisible role in her relationship with the larger society. How have certain ideas about your mother's life consciously or unconsciously affected your work?

BUTLER: My mother did domestic work and I was around sometimes when people talked about her as if she were not there, and I got to watch her going in back doors and generally being treated in a way that made me . . . I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she 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 a kind of 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. My mother was born in 1914 and spent her early childhood on a sugar plantation in Louisiana. From what she's told me of it, it wasn't that far removed from slavery, the only difference was they could leave, which eventually they did.

KENAN: I was also curious about the amount of research that you do when you're working on a book.

BUTLER: It varies greatly. With *Kindred*, I did go to Maryland and spend some time. Well, I mostly spent my time at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore and at the Maryland Historical Society. I also went to the Eastern Shore to Talbot County, to Easton actually, and just walked around, wandered the streets and probably looked fairly disreputable. I didn't have any money at the time, so I did all my traveling by Greyhound and Trailways and I stayed at a horrible dirty little hotel . . . it was kind of frightening really . . . I didn't know what I was doing . . . I had missed the tours of the old houses for that year, I didn't realize that they were not ongoing but seasonal. Anyway, 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 get the layout, I could actually see things, you know, the tools used, the cabins that had been used for working. That, I guess, was the extent of my away from home research on *Kindred*. I did a lot more at the libraries.

KENAN: I'm assuming that entailed slave narratives and . . .

BUTLER: Yes, yes. Very much so. It was not fun . . . It's not pleasure reading. As a matter of fact, one of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative—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 presenting slavery 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. I think that's what most fiction writers do. They almost have to.

KENAN: But at the same time, I think you address the problem of accuracy and distance with amazing intelligence and depth. In place of visceral immediacy you give us a new understanding of how far removed we are from manumission. For example, the scene where Dana in *Kindred* witnesses the patrollers catching the runaway, you address this issue straight on; how she was unprepared to bear witness to such horror. So at the same time, you are making the reader aware of how brutal it all is, was, and doubly, how much we're separated from that past reality and how television and movies have prejudiced us or in some cases blinded us to that fact.

BUTLER: The strange thing is with television and movies, I mean, they've made violence so cartoonishly acceptable . . . I was talking to a friend of mine the other day about the fact that some kids around the L.A. area, on Halloween, kids around fourteen and fifteen, found a younger child with Halloween candy and they shot him and took it away from him . . . Now when I was a kid, I knew bullies who beat up little kids and took away their candy, but it would not have occurred to them to go out with a knife or gun to do that, you know. This is a totally different subject, but it's one that interests me right now. Just what in the world is to be done, to bring back a sense of proportion of respect for life?

KENAN: But another thing that makes *Kindred* so painful and artful is the way that you translate the moral complexity and the choices that have to be made between Dana and her white husband and not only in the past but in the present.

BUTLER: I gave her that husband to complicate her life.

KENAN: And even though the roles in many ways are more affixed by society in the past, she has to make similar choices in the present; so it's almost as though time were an illusion.

BUTLER: Well, as I said, I was really dealing with some 1960s feelings when I wrote this book. So I'm not surprised that it strikes you that way, as a matter of fact I'm glad. I meant it to be complicated.

KENAN: Violence also seems to be a part of the fabric of your *oeuvre*, in a sense. The fact that Dana loses her arm, in *Kindred*, which is inexplicable on one level . . .

BUTLER: I couldn't really let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole.

KENAN: But also, for instance, in "Bloodchild." [Note: *In this story human beings on another planet have entered in a pact with an indigenous species who implant eggs in the humans for incubation. When the eggs hatch, the humans are cut open. Not everyone survives.*] I mean, the idea that sacrifice has to be . . .

BUTLER: Not sacrifice. No, no . . .

KENAN: You wouldn't call it sacrifice? Cutting people open?

BUTLER: No, no . . . "Bloodchild" is very interesting in that men tend to see a horrible case of slavery, and women tend to see that, oh well, they had caesarians, big deal. [Laughter].

KENAN: So really, you wouldn't characterize that as being violent?

BUTLER: Not anymore than . . . well, remember during the Middle Ages in Europe, I don't know what it was like in Africa, if a woman died giving birth, they would try to save the baby.

KENAN: Over the woman?

BUTLER: In this case, they were trying to save both of them and, I mean, it's not some horrible thing that I made up in that sense. In earlier science fiction there tended to be a lot of conquest: you land on another planet and you set up a colony and the natives have their quarters some place and they come in and work for you. There was a lot of that, and it was, you know, let's do Europe and Africa and South America all over again. And I thought no, no, if we do get to another world inhabited by intelligent beings, in the first place we're going to be at the end of a very, very, very, long transport line. It isn't likely that people are going to be coming and going, you know, not even the way they did between England and this country, for instance. It would be a matter of a lifetime or more, the coming and going. So you couldn't depend on help from home. Even if you had help coming, it wouldn't help you. It might help your kids, if you survived to have any, but on the other hand it might not. So you are going to have to make some kind of deal with the locals: in effect, you're going to have to pay the rent. And that's pretty much what those people have done in "Bloodchild." They have made a deal. Yes, they can stay there but they are going to have to pay for it. And I don't see the slavery, and I don't see this as particularly barbaric. I mean if human beings were able to make that good a deal with another species, I think it would be miraculous. [Laughs] Actually, I think it would be immensely more difficult than that.

KENAN: Fascinating and faultlessly logical. But at the same time—again with the idea of violence—the relationship between Doro and Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*. [Note: *Set in seventeenth-century Africa, eighteenth-century New York, and nineteenth-century Louisiana, this book is the struggle between Doro, a mindforce, and Anyanwu, a shape shifter, in their attempts, each, to create a new race. A novel of fantasy and science.*] That takes on a different paradigm. They are extremely violent to one another.

BUTLER: That's just men and women!

KENAN: [*Laughs*] But particularly in their various metamorphoses, when she becomes a leopard, or the sheer number of people Doro kills. It's a sort of natural violence. Or a violence of survival, I should say . . .

BUTLER: It's not something I put there to titillate people, if that's what you mean. [*Laughs*] I don't do that. As a matter of fact, I guess the worse violence is not between the two of them, but it's around them, it's what's happening to the people around them who are not nearly so powerful.

KENAN: In your work it does seem to be a given that this is a violent universe and you don't romanticize it in any respect.

BUTLER: I hope not, I haven't tried to. I think probably the most violent of my books were the early ones. A friend brought this to my attention the other day because she was just reading some of my stuff. She said that she was surprised at the amount of violence in *Patternmaster* and casual violence at that. [Note: *The first in her "Patternist" novels, this book initiates the battle between the Patternists (humans with psionic powers) and the Clayarks (disease-mutated human quadrupeds).*] I said it probably comes from how young I was when I wrote it. I think that it is a lot easier to not necessarily romanticize it, but to accept it without comment when you're younger. I think that men and women are more likely to be violent when they are younger.

KENAN: You have mentioned the African myths and lore that you used in *Wild Seed*. Can you talk more about that? I didn't realize that you had gone to such pains.

BUTLER: I used in particular, the myth of Atagbusi, who was an Onitsha Ibo woman. She was a shape-shifter who benefited her people while she was alive and when she died a market-gate was named after her, a gate at the Onitsha market. It was believed that whoever used this market-gate was under her protection . . .

Doro comes from an adolescent fantasy of mine to live forever and breed people. And when I began to get a little more sense, I guess you could say, and started to work with Doro, I decided that he was going to be a Nubian, because I wanted him to be somehow associated with ancient Egypt. And by then his name was already Doro, and it would have been very difficult to change it. So I went to the library and got this poor, dog-eared, ragged Nubian-English dictionary. I looked up the word Doro, and the word existed and it meant: *the direction from which the sun comes; the east.*

That was perfect, especially since I had pretty much gotten Emma Daniels, who came before the name Anyanwu, but I had been looking through names for her, Igbo names, and I found a myth having to do with the sun and the moon. Anyway the problem with that is: I lost it. I didn't write it down and I never found it again and all I had was one of the names: Anyanwu, meaning the sun. That worked out perfectly with Doro, the East. So I wound up putting them together.

KENAN: Such rich etymological and cultural resonance. It's almost as if the African lore itself is using you as a medium.

Which leads me to a slightly different, but related topic. You seem to be exploring the idea of miscegenation on many different levels throughout your work. In *Xenogenesis* it seems to reach a new peak. [Note: *In the trilogy the alien Oankali join with human nuclear war survivors to create through genetic engineering a new species, better able to survive than both its progenitors.*] Over the years you've been dealing with sex, race, gender; but here you're able to raise it yet another complicated step.

BUTLER: [Laughter]

KENAN: Seriously. In *Kindred* miscegenation is quite literal. But in *Dawn*, *Adult Rites*, and *Imago*, genetics put an odd twist on an old idea.

BUTLER: One of the things that 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. So 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.

KENAN: How many other black science fiction writers do you know personally?

BUTLER: I know two others personally. [Steve Barnes and Samuel R. Delaney]

KENAN: Any other black women?

BUTLER: I don't know any black women who write science fiction. Lots of white women, but I don't know any black women—which is not to say there aren't any. But I don't know any.

KENAN: I couldn't compare you to other winners of the Nebula and the Hugo Awards. [Note: *The Nebula Award is given by science fiction writers and the Hugo Award by the fans.*] When you interact with your fans, how do they react to your being black and a woman? Is there a great deal of interest in the novelty of your being practically *the only black women sci-fi writer*?

BUTLER: No. If they're curious about that, they tend not to tell me and I'm just as happy to have it that way. No, I've been in SF for a long time and I know people. I go to SF conventions and no matter where I go in the country, I generally see someone I know. SF is kind of a small town and there is no problem with enjoying yourself. Obviously in some places you will meet with some nastiness, but it isn't general. The only place I was ever called "nigger," had someone scream nigger at me in public, was in *Boston*, for goodness sakes. It wasn't a person going to a conference, it was just a stranger who happened to see me standing, waiting for a traffic light with other SF people who were headed toward the convention.

KENAN: In light of that question, how do your readers react to the fact that most of your main protagonists are women and more often black? Does that ever come up?

BUTLER: Yes, as a matter of fact it came up more before I was visible. I wrote three books before anybody knew who I was, aside from a few people here in L.A. And I got a few letters asking why? The kind of letters that hedge around wondering why I write about black people; but there were few such letters. People who are bigots probably don't want to talk to me. I hear signs of bigotry every now and then when someone slips up, someone's manners fail, or something slips out. But there isn't a lot of that kind of thing.

KENAN: Speaking of women in science fiction, a lot of black women writers whom I've been in contact with lately speak of the ongoing debate between black women and feminism. I'm sure the feminist debate is ongoing within science fiction. Do you find yourself at all caught up within that debate?

BUTLER: Actually it isn't very much. That flared up big during the seventies and now it's a foregone conclusion. Not that somebody is particularly a feminist, but if somebody is it's their business . . . I was on a little early Sunday morning TV show a while back, and the hostess was a black woman and there were two other black women writers, a poet and a playwright and me. And the hostess asked as a near final question how we felt about feminism and the other two women said they didn't think much of it, they assumed it was for white people. I said that I thought it was just as important to have equal rights for women as it was to have equal rights for black people and so I felt myself to be very much a feminist.

KENAN: And you feel your works then actively reflect feminist ideals?

BUTLER: Well, they do in a sense that women do pretty much what they want to do. One of the things that I wanted to deal with in the *Xenogenesis* books, especially the first one, was some of the old SF myths that kind of winked out during the seventies but were really prevalent before the seventies. Myths where, for instance, people crash land on some other planet and all of a sudden they go back to "Me Tarzan, you Jane," and the women seem to accept this perfectly as all right, you know. We get

given away like chattel and we get treated like . . . well, you get the picture. I thought I'd do something different.

KENAN: There seems to be a movement in your work from a view of continuance to a view of apocalypse. For instance in *Clay's Ark* the civilization has been attacked by a microorganism. But in *Xenogenesis* there is a postapocalyptic scenario. Has your thinking about that changed? I understand there is a huge debate in science fiction now about writers who tend to wipe the population clean and start over again, as opposed to writers like William Gibson and the other cyberpunk writers, who take as a given that we are going to survive somehow, someway and then extrapolate from that assumption.

BUTLER: I don't think we are more likely to survive than any other species especially considering that we have overspecialized ourselves into an interesting corner. But on the other hand, my new book isn't a postapocalyptic type of book. I'm not really talking about an earth that has been wiped clean of most people. As a matter of fact earth is as populated as ever and in fact more so because it takes place in the future. The greenhouse effect has intensified and there has been a certain amount of starvation and agricultural displacement. There are real problems. Some of our prime agricultural land won't be able to produce the crops that it's been producing and Canada will have the climate, but on the other hand Canada caught the brunt of the last few ice ages and has lost a lot of top soil, which wound up down here. These are big problems and they are not sexy as problems so they are not the prime problems in the series that I am working on, but they're in the background. It's not a postapocalyptic book, it's a book in which society has undergone severe changes, but continues.

KENAN: I am really impressed by the way your characters often speak, almost epigrammatically, not to say that it is stiff dialogue, but you achieve a sort of majesty, particularly when you're talking about the human species; how we interact with one another. There is a lot of wisdom in what you have your characters say, without sounding didactic. What are your literary influences to that effect, both science fiction and non-science fiction, what writers?

BUTLER: All sorts of things influence me. I let things influence me. If they catch my interests I let them take hold. When I was growing up I read mostly science fiction. I remember getting into Harlan Ellison's class and at one point having him say, science fiction fans read too much science fiction; and he was no doubt right, but as an adolescent that was all I read except for school work. I guess the people that I learned the most from were not necessarily the best writers (although Theodore Sturgeon was one of them and I think he was definitely one of the best writers). They were people who impressed me with their ideas. I didn't know what good writing was frankly, and I didn't have any particular talent for writing so I copied a lot of the old pulp writers in the way I told a story. Gradually I learned that that wasn't the way I wanted to write.

But as for what influences me now, well, for instance I was reading a book about Antarctica . . . It was a kind of a difficult book to read because it involved so much

suffering. Antarctica is probably as close to another planet as we've got on this earth . . . I thought what if I had a bunch of outcasts who had to go live in a very uncertain area and I made it a parched, devastated part of future southern California because there are areas here where the hills fall into the canyons and cliffs crumble off into the sea even without earthquakes to help them along. My characters go to this ruined place as though it were another world and the people they meet there are adapted to their new environment. They won't be savages crawling through the hills. I wanted them to have found some other way to cope because obviously some people would have to. Not everybody would go ape or become members of gangs and go around killing people. There would be some people who would try to put together a decent life, whatever their problems were . . .

Really, I think that's what I mean about something influencing me. The book I read didn't influence me to write about Antarctica but it influenced me to take a piece of the earth as we know it and see what it could become without playing a lot of special effects games.

KENAN: Are there other literary or nonliterary sources that you see consciously or unconsciously affected your work?

BUTLER: Every place I've lived is a nonliterary influence, every place and every person who has impressed me enough to keep my attention for a while. If something attracts my attention I am perfectly willing to follow that interest. I can remember when I was writing *Clay's Ark*, I would be listening to the news and I would hear something and it would be immediately woven into the novel. As a matter of fact some of the things that I found out after I finished *Clay's Ark* were even more interesting. Down in El Salvador I guess about a year after I finished *Clay's Ark* I read that it was the habit of many of the rich people to armor-plate Jeep Wagoneers and use them as family cars and that's exactly the vehicle that my character was using and I was glad I had chosen well.

KENAN: Science fiction writers—with a few notable exceptions like Samuel Delaney—are often slapped about the wrists because people feel that their writing styles are wooden and are merely there to get the plot across. Your writing has almost biblical overtones at times. Have you consciously striven for such a style?

BUTLER: I've developed my love for words late in life really. I guess it was when I realized that I was writing pulp early on. I realized I didn't want to. I read some of my own writing, which is a very painful thing to do and I could see what was the matter with it, having gotten some distance in time from it. And I realized that there were things that I would have to learn even before that. Back during the 1960 election and the Kennedy Administration, that was when I began to develop into a news junkie. I was very interested in Kennedy and I would listen to his speeches and I guess I was about thirteen when he was elected, and I realized that half the time I couldn't figure out what he was saying and I felt really, really bad about that. I felt stupid. Although I didn't know it at the time, I'm a bit dyslexic. I realized that there was so

much more to learn. You're always realizing there is so much out there that you don't know. That's when I began to teach myself as opposed to just showing up at school. I think that there comes a time when you just have to do that, when things have to start to come together for you or you don't really become an educated person. I suspect that has been the case for a lot of people, they just never start to put it all together.

KENAN: Obviously, you write beautifully. So is it all organic in the sense that all these disparate ideas and themes fit together, that your interests coincided?

BUTLER: No, it's work. [*Laughs*] But you mean style. Yes, and it's something I can't talk about. It's very, very intimate. I make signs. The wall next to my desk is covered in signs and maps. The signs are to remind myself sometimes of things. For instance, a sign from a book called *The Art of Dramatic Writing* by Lagos Egri, it's a kind of a paraphrasing really; tension and conflict can be achieved through uncompromising characters in a death struggle. And just having signs on my wall to remind me of certain things that I need to remember to do in the writing; signs in black indelible ink. That sort of thing, it's kind of juvenile but it really helps me. But there are some things about the writing that are just so personal that you can't even talk about them.

KENAN: I should ask in closing: Do you have any advice for young writers?

BUTLER: I have advice in just a few words. The first, of course, is to read. It's surprising how many people think they want to be writers but they don't really like to read books.

KENAN: AMEN!!!!

BUTLER: And the second is to write, every day, whether you like it or not. Screw inspiration. The third is to forget about talent, whether or not you have any. Because it doesn't really matter. I mean, I have a relative who is extremely gifted musically, but chooses not to play music for a living. It is her pleasure, but it is not her living. And it could have been. She's gifted; she's been doing it ever since she was a small child and everyone has always been impressed with her. On the other hand, I don't feel that I have any particular literary talent at all. It was what I wanted to do, and I followed what I wanted to do, as opposed to getting a job doing something that would make more money, but it would make me miserable. This is the advice that I generally give to people who are thinking about becoming writers.

KENAN: [*Laughing*] I don't know if I would agree that you have no literary talent. But that's your personal feeling.

BUTLER: It's certainly not a matter of sitting there and having things fall from the sky.