Although labels distort what is unique about an author's work, to say that Octavia Butler is a "black feminist science fiction writer from Southern California" serves to open up a discussion of her work, rather than to narrowly pigeonhole it. As Butler herself puts it, "I really have three fairly distinct audiences: feminists, SF fans, and black readers." The way her work weaves these three strands into a provocative whole is what makes her fiction so unusual and compelling.

Butler made these observations to Jim McMenamin and me at her home, a modest duplex in a middle-class, primarily black neighborhood located near the absolute center (if such a point exists) of Los Angeles. It was a glorious July afternoon in 1988, and although we conducted most of the interview on a park bench overlooking the La Brea Tar Pits, our brief interlude at her home provided numerous clues about the seemingly paradoxical elements of her intellectual and literary sensibility. While Butler was signing some of her books for us, we busied ourselves examining her bookcases, which contained (in addition to the expected rows of SF novels) a revealing selection of scientific texts, anthropology books, volumes devoted to black history, albums (jazz, rock, blues), and an impressive number of cassette tapes, which turned out to be mostly National Public Radio selections that she listens to on her Walkman, mainly while riding the bus or walking. (Like Ray Bradbury, Butler does not drive a car.)

Octavia Butler has been publishing SF novels since the mid-1970s. Her early work received excellent critical notices and reviews, but only during the past several years has she begun to attract significant attention from outside SF's insular community. Her fiction has its roots in her experiences as a black woman growing up in a society dominated by white people, particularly white men. With the publication of her Patternist novels, she immediately signaled her interest in anthropological, racial, and political themes.

Given her background, we might naturally expect Butler to focus specifically on racial and sexual issues—and to use science fiction to suggest alternatives to our own society's sexual and racial structures. On one level her works do exactly that. For example, two of her most expansive and provocative novels, Kindred (1979) and Wild Seed (1980), employ time-travel premises that permit strong black heroines to roam through prior historical periods; Butler uses these confrontations with actual historical circumstances to create fresh, revealing perspectives about past and present racial and sexual biases. In Kindred, a strong, adaptable black woman is cast back to the early days of slavery in pre-Civil War America—a wonderfully simple but suggestive vehicle for developing juxtapositions between our own age's assumptions and those of earlier eras. Such interactions are further developed in Wild Seed, which moves across two continents and spans over two hundred years. Wild Seed traces the evolution of an unlikely love affair between Anyanwu (an African sorceress and shape-shifter) and Doro, a vampirish figure who is intent on establishing a superhuman race by selectively breeding individuals who possess "special" traits. Part of the success of Wild Seed is due to Butler's meticulously detailed and vivid renderings of the various environments through which Anyanwu passes. Each of these cultures—a neolithic African village, a slave ship, eighteenth-century New England, and antebellum Louisiana—provides her with an opportunity to examine societal and personal attitudes that not only gave rise to slavery and gender stereotyping but also contribute to contemporary prejudices.

What gradually becomes clear in both Kindred and Wild Seed, however, is that the dilemmas facing the heroines arise not only from specific, locatable sources of racial and sexual oppression but also from larger political, economic, and psychological forces. The struggle for power, control, and individual dominance/mastery over other creatures and the natural environment is a primal struggle common to all creatures—and it is in this sense that Butler's best work, for all its vivid particularities and subtle treatment of psychological issues, transcends narrow categorization as "black" or "feminist." Anyanwu is probably Butler's most complex and fully realized character to date, possessing the inner strength and nurturing tendencies we associate with many recent feminist authors; she is also a fierce and violent woman who is not reducible to
familiar stereotypes. Butler uses race and gender to explore the universal issues of human isolation and our mutual desire for power and transcendence—and the longing for means to bridge this isolation via community, family, and sexual union.

These issues are developed throughout Butler's Patternist novels, including *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and *Survivor* (1978), which move backward and forward through past and future histories on Earth and in outer space. The unifying motif in all these works is the linking of minds through telepathy; but unlike most of the notable previous treatments of mental telepathy (for instance, Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* or Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*), Butler's communities are racked by internal conflicts and are portrayed in distinctly ambivalent terms.

Most recently, Butler has been expanding similar themes in her Xenogenesis trilogy: *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and the recently completed *Imago* (1989) examine a postholocaust humanity that has been sterilized and genetically altered by the alien Oankali. Rescued from an ecologically devastated Earth and forced to accept alien intervention in order to procreate, Butler's humans face the ultimate confrontation with the Other. The impetus of these novels is the human's xenophobic fear of the Oankali, who provide the only hope for survival—through mutation and an acceptance of a broader interpretation of the designation "human."

**Larry McCaffery:** In one way or another, all your books seem to explore different forms of slavery or domination.

**Octavia Butler:** I know some people think that, but I don't agree, although this may depend on what we mean by "slavery." In the story "Bloodchild," for example, some people assume I'm talking about slavery when what I'm really talking about is *symbiosis*. That's not to say that I haven't dealt with slavery or that I don't think about it—*Kindred* and *Wild Seed* deal very directly with slavery. Let me tell you an anecdote about slavery. When I was about thirteen I found out on a visceral level what slavery was; before that I hadn't understood why the slaves had not simply run away, because that's what I assumed I would have done. But when I was around thirteen we moved into a house with another house in the back, and in that other house lived people who beat their children. Not only could you hear the kids screaming, you could actually hear the blows landing. This was naturally terrifying to me, and I used to ask my mother if there wasn't something she could do or somebody we could call, like the police. My mother's attitude was that those children belonged to their parents and they had the right to do what they wanted to do with their own children. I realized that those kids really had nowhere to go—they were about my age and younger, and if they had tried to run away they would have been sent right back to their parents, who would probably treat them a lot worse for having tried to run away. *That*, I realized, was slavery—humans being treated as if they were possessions. I stored that away in the back of my mind, without realizing I was doing it, until at a certain point in my work I needed to call it up. The nice thing about being a writer is that anything that doesn't kill or disable you is typewriter fodder. Whatever it is, no matter how terrible, can be used later.

**Jim McMenamin:** Even books like *Wild Seed* and *Kindred*, in which you investigate aspects of black experience, seem to suggest something that transcends specific racial or cultural situations.

**OEB:** I hope so. When I put together my characters, it doesn't occur to me to make them all black or all white or whatever. I never went to a segregated school or lived in a segregated neighborhood, so I never had the notion that black people, or any other ethnic or cultural type, made up the world. When I write, I'm very comfortable not seeing things in terms of black or white. If I feel self-conscious about something, I don't write about it; I write it out—that is, I write about it and think about it until it is so familiar that it becomes second nature—not like some of the early SF writers who include a black character to make a point about racism, or the absence of racism. I want to get to the point where these things can be in the story but are incidental to it.

**LM:** What has drawn you to writing SF?

**OEB:** SF is what I like to read, and I think you should write about what you enjoy reading or you'll bore yourself and everyone else. I started writing SF when I was twelve. I was already reading SF, but I hadn't thought of writing it—I was writing fantasy and romance, both of which you know a lot about at ten or eleven, right? What happened to me sounds like a cliche but it's true: I was watching a movie on television, *Devil Girl From Mars*, and I thought, I can write a better story than that. So I turned off the TV and started writing what was actually an early version of one of my Patternist stories. The short stories I submitted for publication when I was thirteen had nothing to do with anything I cared about. I wrote the kind of thing I saw being published—stories about thirty-year-old white men who drank and smoked too much. They were pretty awful.

**LM:** Joanna Russ told me the same thing—that when she was in high school she thought if she didn't write about men going off to war or hunting big game then she didn't have anything significant to say.

**OEB:** Right. And a slightly different problem was that everything I read that was intended for women seemed boring as hell—basically,
“Finding Mr. Right”: marriage, family, and that’s the end of that. I didn’t know how to write about women doing anything because while they were waiting for Mr. Right they weren’t doing anything, they were just waiting to be done unto. Since I didn’t know what else to do, in those early Patternist stories I more or less copied the boys’ books. I eventually got very comfortable with that approach, but there are stories that were written in the mid-1970s where the strain really shows.

JM: In Patternmaster Amber says, “When I meet a woman who attracts me, I prefer women . . . and when I meet a man who attracts me, I prefer men.” Talk a bit about the sources of this openness.

OEB: Because of the way I looked, when I was growing up I was called various and sundry unsavory names by people who thought I was gay (though at the time nobody used that word). I eventually wondered if they might not be right, so I called the Gay and Lesbian Services Center and asked if they had meetings where people could talk about such things. I wound up going down there twice, at which point I realized, No, 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. At any rate, I was intrigued by gay sexuality, enough so that I wanted to play around with it in my imagination and in my work. That’s one of the things I do in my writing: either I find out certain things about myself or I write to create some context in which I can explore what I want to be. You can see how this works in the way I created Mary, in Mind of My Mind. I wanted to become a bit more forward, not so much to take charge (although sometimes it comes to that) but to take responsibility for what happens to me. I made Mary an extremely feisty, not very pleasant woman and then inhabited her life so I could see how it felt. I even had her live in my old Pasadena neighborhood, in the house my best friend lived in.

JM: Do you transpose these specific biographical elements into your work on a regular basis?

OEB: I use actual details only when I feel they’ll work. For example, all the street names in Mind of My Mind parallel Pasadena street names, some in English and some in Spanish, though reversed. I really enjoy doing this sort of thing—along with going back and winning some of the battles I actually lost.

LM: Your father died when you were a baby and you were raised by your mother and grandmother. Did that experience affect your work in any direct way? In Patternmaster, for example, the kids are raised elsewhere, protected from their parents.

OEB: Growing up without a father influenced my life and, undoubt-edly, my work because I didn’t have that one male person around to show me what it means to be male; instead, I would watch my uncles and wonder why they did things the way they did, which may be why I later became interested in anthropology. Certainly, though, my childhood had something to do with the way I sometimes present parents as not being able to raise their own children. In Mind of My Mind, the parents can’t stand being close to their children and hearing all that undisciplined mental shrieking. And in Patternmaster you have a society formed by a psychotic individual who is doing the best he can with what he has. He’s not a good person—among other things, he sees the rest of humanity as food—and the daughter he raises is not a good person. But how can she be? She wouldn’t survive if she were “good.”

JM: Throughout the Patternist series you have different hierarchies yet the same kinds of control mechanisms we see around us.

OEB: No, they’re worse, because the mutes don’t know what’s happening to them. If you know that you’ve been completely taken over, if you’re aware of this happening, you might be able to fight it. But if you don’t know about it, you don’t have a chance.

LM: The idea of control being exercised through mind operations that the victims are unaware of has its parallel in our own society—you go out to buy a Bud Light or a Toyota without being aware that you’ve programmed to do it.

OEB: Exactly. And even if you are aware of these forces, they can still possess or control you because you’re not necessarily aware of exactly what they’re doing when they’re doing it. I remember going through a period in my teens when I was very depressed about my writing. I had no siblings—I was basically a solitary person anyway—so I would spend hours watching old movies and whatever series was on TV. After a while, it seemed that everything I’d ever wanted to write about had already been condensed and trivialized on television. I couldn’t articulate this at the time, of course; nor could I write much of anything, at least not that I’d show to anyone.

LM: What sorts of SF did you read while you were growing up?

OEB: Until I was fourteen I was restricted to a section of the library called the “Peter Pan Room.” That had the effect of stopping me from going to the library much, because after a while I felt insulted by the juvenile books. Before I got into SF I read a lot of horse stories, and before that fairy tales. For some reason I didn’t read Asimov until later, but I did read Heinlein and the Winston juveniles (with those fantastic inside pictures of all sorts of wonderful things that never happened in the book). My first experience with adult SF came through the magazines at the grocery store. Whenever I could afford them I’d buy copies of Amazing and Fantastic; later I discovered Fantasy and Science Fiction
and eventually *Galaxy*. After I got out of the Peter Pan Room, the first writer I latched onto was Zenna Henderson, who wrote about telepathy and other things I was interested in, from the point of view of young women. I'd go down to the Salvation Army bookstore and buy copies of *Pilgrimage* for a nickel and hand them out to people because I wanted someone to talk to about the book. Later I discovered John Brunner and Theodore Sturgeon. I can remember depending on people like Eric Frank Russell and J. T. MacIntosh to give me a good, comfortable read, to tell me a story. Whether they told me anything I didn't know or hadn't thought about or read somewhere else was another matter. Later I read all of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover books. I especially liked Ursula Le Guin's *Dispossessed*, and the original *Dune* by Frank Herbert was another favorite of mine. I read Harlan Ellison's stories and also John Wyndham, Arthur C. Clarke, A. E. Van Vogt, Isaac Asimov—all the SF classics, whatever I got my hands on.

**LM:** I remember being drawn to a certain kind of SF that seemed very different from what I was used to—works by people like Robert Sheckley and Alfred Bester, for example.

**OEB:** I think they were writing a sort of humorous, satirical SF that I felt totally alienated from, probably because I had little sense of humor as a kid. The stuff I was writing was incredibly grim—so grim that teachers would accuse me of having copied it from somewhere.

**JM:** What about the books that Samuel Delany was writing back in the '60s?

**OEB:** No. I didn't even know he was black until I was at Clarion. I got *Nova* when I was a member of the Science Fiction Book Club in my early teens, but I couldn't get into it. I did read some of his stories but none of his recent work, except his autobiography, *The Motion of Light in Water*.

**JM:** Were you into other types of reading when you were growing up—comic books or *Mad* magazine, that sort of thing?

**OEB:** I didn't discover *Mad* until 1962 or 1963, when my mother brought home a couple of issues that someone at work had given to her. She didn't have any idea what they were, even after she leafed through them, but she gave them to me anyway. I got hooked on *Mad* but from an emotional distance—since I didn't really want to write anything funny, I thought I shouldn't enjoy reading anything funny. From the '60s through the early '70s I was also very much into comic books—the Superman DC comic books first, then Marvel, and so on. I went around to all the secondhand stores and bought up the back issues as fast as I could. I was living in a world of my own then—or, I should say, in the worlds of other people—and I had no one to talk to about what I was interested in. I don't think I would have enjoyed being involved in a network of SF fans—I've noticed that people heavily into fandom have a lot of little squabbles, which eats up valuable time and energy and doesn't accomplish anything, so I'm glad I wasn't involved with it back then. What I would have enjoyed was having one or two people to talk to about all the strange things I was reading and writing about.

**LM:** I spoke with Delany about the relationship of black culture to science and SF and why there aren't more blacks writing SF. He said that in some ways it's very obvious.

**OEB:** He's right. Writers come from readers, and for a long time there simply weren't that many black SF readers. I got used to reading books in which everyone was white, but a lot of blacks didn't—they just stopped reading or read books they were told were realistic, like historical romances, spy stories, detective novels. For some reason they didn't get into SF, although they later got sucked in by the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* movies. I remember talking to a young black student at a conference in Michigan who told me she had thought about writing SF but didn't because she had never heard of any black SF writers. It never occurred to me to ask, If no one else is doing it, do I dare to 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.

**LM:** You said that when you were starting out, your work consisted of versions of the Patternist series.

**OEB:** For one thing, I never wrote anything "normal"; I never really wanted to. I was fascinated with telepathy and psionic powers and eventually stumbled upon some old J. B. Rhine books, as well as other, more fantastic stories that announced, "You, too, can develop ESP!" I fell in love with that kind of material. About the only genre I never cared for was the ghost story, probably because I stopped believing in the afterlife when I was around twelve—although I didn't get up the courage to tell my mother until I was seventeen or eighteen. What set me off, I think, was going to church one Sunday—I was raised a born-again Baptist—and hearing the minister read a passage from the Bible and then say, "I don't know what this means, but I believe it." Somehow you're supposed to believe and have faith but not worry about having any evidence to support that belief and faith. That just doesn't work for me, and I never went back.

**LM:** Although a lot of your work is about immortality, then, it's not so much about life after death as about finding a way to be immortal while you're still alive.

**OEB:** You're right. When I was in my teens, a group of us used to talk about our hopes and dreams, and someone would always ask, "If you could do anything you wanted to do, no holds barred, what would
you do?” I’d answer that I wanted to live forever and breed people—which didn’t go over all that well with my friends. In a sense, that desire is what drives Doro in *Wild Seed* and *Mind of My Mind*. At least I made him a bad guy!

**LM:** What was it that drew you so strongly to the idea of breeding people? Was it the ideal of being able to control the direction of life?

**OEB:** Basically, yes. I didn’t really understand the direction of my thoughts on this topic until sociobiology became popular and unpopular at the same time. I kept reading things like, “The purpose of such-and-such a behavior is so-and-so”—in other words, the assumption that every behavior has a purpose important to survival. Let’s face it, some behaviors don’t; if they’re genetic at all, they only have to stay out of the way of survival to continue. Then, just a year or so ago, I read one of Stephen J. Gould’s books in which he says much the same thing. I was relieved to see a biologist write that some things—physical characteristics or behaviors—don’t kill you or save you; they may be riding along with some important genetic characteristic, though they don’t have to be. Also, to whatever degree human behavior is genetically determined, it often isn’t determined specifically; in other words, no one is programmed to do such-and-such.

**JM:** Could you talk about how your Xenogenesis trilogy deals with the downside, with the possible dangers of sociobiology?

**OEB:** What scares me now is the direction genetic engineering is taking. I don’t mean creating monsters and other terrible things—although that might happen—but the idea that “familiarity breeds contempt.” I deal with this in *Imago*, where the genetic engineer talks about the fact that it can’t mate within its own kinship area because it thinks “familiarity breeds mistakes.” I’m concerned that once humans feel more comfortable with genetic engineering, we’re not going to exercise that caution and we’ll be more likely to do terrible things just because someone isn’t paying attention.

**LM:** Of course, this immediately raises the question of the purpose of these experiments by whom, and for whose benefit?

**OEB:** They’re going to be put to whatever purpose appears to make the most money at the time. Right now we seem to be operating on the principle that we’ll realize something is going terribly wrong before it’s too late. But when you’re confronted with toxic and nuclear waste problems, the destruction of the Amazon rain forest, the depletion of the ozone layer, and so on, it should be obvious that it may already be too late.

**LM:** You seem to be interested in exploring the issue of where intelligence fits into the scheme of species evolution. In my view, we may be getting too intellectually advanced for our own good—that is, our intellects have evolved more rapidly than our ability to emotionally deal with what we’re uncovering in areas like nuclear power and genetic engineering.

**OEB:** Intelligence may indeed be a short-term adaptation, something that works well now but will eventually prove to be a kind of destructive overspecialization that destroys us. What I’m exploring in my Xenogenesis series is the idea of two competing or conflicting characteristics: intelligence being one of them and hierarchical behavior, simple one-upmanship, the other. Since the tendency toward hierarchical behavior is older and more entrenched—you can trace it all through the animal species of this planet and into the plants, too, in some ways—hierarchical behavior is self-sustaining and more in charge of the intellect than it should be. Whenever we look at the degree to which our behavior is predetermined genetically—and this is where sociobiology comes into play—we get hung up on who’s got the biggest or the best or the most, on who’s inferior and who’s superior. We might be able to stop ourselves from behaving in certain ways if we could learn to curb some of our biological urges.

**LM:** We see this with birth control, for example.

**OEB:** Yes, and also in our everyday behavior. If you become angry with me, you probably won’t pull out a gun and shoot me or reach across the table and grab me (although some people will). Yet a politician may become angry and say, “I’m not going to let this bill go through, even though it will help millions of people, because you didn’t respect my authority, my personal power.” Of course, politicians never actually say that, but we know it happens. The same kind of destructive struggle for domination occurs in some doctor/patient relationships, where patients wind up suffering.

**LM:** That seems to be one of the underlying concepts in *Dawn*—that we are biologically programmed for self-destruction.

**OEB:** It’s less a matter of being programmed for self-destruction than it is that self-destruction occurs because we’re not willing to go beyond that principle of who’s got the biggest or the best or the most. We can, in fact we do, individually. And if we know we are like that, we ought to be able to go beyond it. In *Adulthood Rites*, the aliens say, “We know you are not going to make it, but we are going to give you a second chance anyway.” The constructs (that is, the new generation of mixed children) convince their alien relatives to give humans another chance at simply being human.

**LM:** In all of your work there is a complex balance between the need for beneficial change versus the feeling that such change will produce a loss of humanity.

**OEB:** There are a lot of people (unfortunately, some of them are
writers and editors) who seem to see things strictly in terms of good and evil: the aliens either come to help us or our poor heads straightened out or they come to destroy us. What I hope to wind up with in my work are a 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.

LM: What was your original conception for the Patternist series? I know, for example, that they weren’t published in the order in which you wrote them. Did you have an outline for the whole series?

OEB: No, they were in my head for so many years that I didn’t need an outline. I conceived of the first three books dealing with three different eras: Mind of My Mind takes place in the present, Patternmaster is set on Earth in the distant future, and Survivor, which occurs in the nearer future, deals with those who got away but who didn’t fare well because they were so strong in their religion that they couldn’t consider self-preservation. “Bloodchild” is also a survivor story, though the characters react differently: they survive as a species, but not unchanged. This idea of change seems to me to be one of the biggest challenges I face as a writer—and the inability to face this is a big problem in a lot of SF. Some kind of important change is pretty much what SF is about.

JM: When you actually started to work on this series, did the books take shape independent of one another?

OEB: No, they were all going at once and for a long time I couldn’t finish any of them. I had been able to finish some short stories, which were about twenty pages long, and I finally decided to try writing twenty-page chapters until I finished each novel. Of course, the chapters all ended up being different lengths, but having that goal helped me trick myself into completing the first novel.

LM: You seemed to have developed a fairly elaborate overall concept before you completed the first book.

OEB: I enjoy working with the effects of difficult human situations. The complexity of the Patternist series resulted from the fact that I’d been in that universe, in my mind, for so long. At the time I was writing Wild Seed, for example, all I had to do was see that the numbers and dates were accurate—to make sure that Anyanwu and Doro weren’t the wrong ages, that sort of thing. I felt I could do almost anything because I was so comfortable in that realm. But I had problems in the Xenogenesis universe because I hadn’t inhabited that world, imaginatively, long enough. I had to look back to see what I had said and to make sure everything held together and wasn’t contradictory.

LM: The disease described in Clay’s Ark seems oddly prophetic, given what has happened with AIDS. Had you heard of AIDS when you wrote that book?

OEB: No, I didn’t hear of AIDS until later. The disease I wrote about was based on rabies, which I had read about in an old book of mine. I was fascinated by the fact that one of the side effects of rabies is a briefly heightened sensitivity. I always thought it would be great to contract a disease that was both contagious and a real physical boost. So in Clay’s Ark I wrote about a disease that would be great for you—if you survived.

JM: Kindred seems like a very conscious break from what you were doing in the Patternist series.

OEB: Actually, Kindred was supposed to be part of the series but it didn’t seem to fit, probably because I wanted to be more realistic than I had been in the earlier books. In fact, 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 held 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.” This man knew a great deal more than I did about black history, but he didn’t feel it in his gut. In Kindred, I wanted to take somebody with this guy’s upbringing—he was pretty much a middle-class black—and put him in the antebellum South to see how well he stood up. But I couldn’t sustain the character. Everything about him was wrong: his body language, the way he looked at white people, even the fact that he looked at white people at all. I realized that, unless I wanted to turn Kindred into a wish-fulfillment fantasy, I simply couldn’t make the main character a male. So I developed an abused female character who was dangerous but who wasn’t perceived as being so dangerous that she would have to be killed.

LM: It’s interesting that Kindred was published as non-SF.

OEB: Yes, and that was one of the things reviewers complained about. The idea of time travel disturbed them. Their attitude seemed to be that only in the "lower genre" of SF could you get away with such nonsense, that if you’re going to be "realistic," then you must be completely realistic. Yet readers will accept what someone like García Márquez is doing without complaining. I remember hearing Mark Helprin being interviewed on the radio about Winter’s Tale. When the interviewer referred to it as fantasy, Helprin became upset and said that he didn’t think of his work in those terms, in spite of the flying horse and...
all the other fantastic elements. The implication was that if a work is fantasy or SF, it can't be any good.

LM: Like Márquez, Toni Morrison uses seemingly fantastic elements in some of her work—flying, magic, ghosts—yet her stories are considered realistic.

OEB: Realism in Morrison's work is blurred. There's a scene in *Sula* where two little girls accidentally drown a much younger child and don't tell anybody about it. That's grotesque, maybe even fantastic, but I believed every word. I don't think it's at all unlikely that the girls would try to "Who, us?" their way out of it. There are several other things Morrison does in the book that are equally strange, but they rang absolutely true.

LM: At the opposite extreme, we have the "hard SF" party line, which argues that relying on any fantasy elements is a cop-out.

OEB: What's usually important to the hard SF people is the logic of what they're dealing with; as a result, some of them fail to develop their characters—I call this the "wonderful machine school of storytelling" approach. Why can't writers play around with actual science and still develop good characters? I think I accomplished that in "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," which is the most carefully developed story I've written from a hard SF standpoint. It deals with medicine—I used three existing diseases as the basis of the disease in the story. A doctor I know called to tell me how much she liked it, which is probably the nicest compliment I could have received.

LM: What was the origin of *Wild Seed*?

OEB: I had a lingering sense that *Kindred*, which I'd just finished writing, had once been a different sort of novel that somehow involved Doro and Anyanwu in early America. But neither character appears in *Kindred* because *Kindred* didn't really belong in the Patternist universe—it was too realistic. Because of the nature of the research—slave narratives and history—*Kindred* was a depressing book for me to write. By contrast, I thoroughly enjoyed writing *Wild Seed*. In terms of research, it's one of the hardest novels I've written, because I initially thought that dealing with the Ibo would only involve one people and one language—I didn't realize how many dialects there were. I found a huge ethnography about the Onitsha Ibo that was very useful; and before somebody torched the L.A. Public Library, I also found a book called *The Ibo Word List*, with words in five different dialects. It was a wonderful old book, shabby and falling apart, and it helped me get the language I needed.

LM: How did your conception of *Wild Seed*'s main female character take shape?

OEB: For a while I didn't know how I was going to relate Anyanwu
to the Ibo. The solution came from a footnote about a woman named Atagbusi in a book called *The King in Every Man*, by Richard N. Henderson. Atagbusi was a shape-shifter who had spent her whole life helping her people, and when she died, a market gate was dedicated to her and later became a symbol of protection. I thought to myself, This woman's description is perfect—who said she had to die? and I had Anyanwu give "Atagbusi" as one of her names. I gave Doro his name without knowing anything about his background, but later on I looked up "doro" in a very old, very tattered Nubian-English dictionary and discovered that it means "the direction from which the sun comes"—which worked perfectly with what I was trying to do. And Anyanwu ties into that, since "ananywu" means "sun."

LM: What inspired you to develop the Xenogenesis series?

OEB: I tell people that Ronald Reagan inspired Xenogenesis—and that it was the only thing he inspired in me that I actually approve of. When his first term was beginning, his people were talking about a "winnable" nuclear war, a "limited" nuclear war, the idea that more and more nuclear "weapons" would make us safer. That's when I began to think about human beings having the two conflicting characteristics of intelligence and a tendency toward hierarchical behavior—and that hierarchical behavior is too much in charge, too self-sustaining. The aliens in the Xenogenesis series say the humans have no way out, that they're programmed to self-destruct. The humans say, "That's none of your business and probably not true." The construct character says that, whether the humans are self-destructive or not, they should be allowed to follow their own particular destiny. The idea is that Mars is such a harsh planet—and so much terra-forming has to be done by the people who are living there (even though they get some support from the outside)—that perhaps it will absorb whatever hostilities and problems of dominance arise. It ain't necessarily so, but at least it was something to hope for.

LM: When you decide to use, say, Mars as the backdrop for one of your books, do you actually research the planet?

OEB: In this case, no, since none of the scenes take place on Mars—all I really did was check on the Martian environment, to see if the aliens, who work with biological tools, could do what I wanted them to do. I decided that I could write about them doing it without actually *showing* them doing it because that process is not what the novel is about.

Another idea I wanted to examine in the Xenogenesis trilogy (and elsewhere) was the notion of cancer as a tool—though I am certainly not the first person to do that. As a disease, cancer is hideous, but it's also intriguing because cancer cells are immortal unless you deliberately
kill them. They could be the key to our immortality. They could be used to replace plastic surgery— that is, instead of growing scar tissue or grafting something from your thigh or somewhere else, you could actually grow what you need, if you knew how to reprogram the cells. I use this idea in the third Xenogenesis novel, but I haven’t really done what I want to with it. Probably it’s going to evolve the way shape-shifting did from Wild Seed to Imago. I’ll do something more with it.

LM: How much of the Xenogenesis series do you have worked out in advance?

OEB: I have the ending worked out, not that it will necessarily stay that way. I find that when I begin to write I need two things: a title and an ending. If I don’t have those things I just don’t have enough. Sid Stebel, one of the teachers with the Writers’ Guild, would make us state the premise of a story in one sentence— “This is the story of a person who does such-and-such.” It’s important to me that my stories are about people who do such-and-such, rather than about people who are such-and-such—the latter can make for a very static story that is all describing and explaining and doesn’t really go anywhere. When I write, I sometimes put huge signs on the wall: Action, Struggle, Goal. I tend to be too nice to my characters, and if I’m not careful, nothing particular will happen that taxes them in any way. That doesn’t make for as good a story.

JM: The Bible seems to provide an underpinning to your work. Is that because you see it as a compendium of fantasy?

OEB: I’ve always loved the Bible for the quotable things I could borrow from it. All the subtitles in Wild Seed are biblical, and in Dawn I name one of the characters Lilith, who according to mythology was Adam’s first wife and who was unsatisfactory because she wouldn’t obey him. Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable defines “Lilith” first as a Babylonian monster. I wonder whether her terrible reputation results from her refusal to take Adam’s orders. So yes, I have a lot of fun with names and references; I like to use names that work with who my characters are. For instance, according to its roots, Blake suggests “white” or “black”; and Maslin is a “mingling.” Until I’ve settled on a character’s name—and I frequently use name books to help me—I can’t really work with that character. Some of this probably comes from being taken to the cemetery a lot as a kid. Half my relatives are buried in Altadena, and my mother used to take me with her when she went there to leave flowers. I remember running around copying names off headstones— somehow, having those names made me feel connected to those people.

JM: Do you think of your work as a self-conscious attempt to break down the white-male-oriented traditions and biases of most SF?

OEB: My work has never been traditional, at least not since I stopped writing those terrible stories about thirty-year-old white men who drank and smoked too much. It’s interesting that you use the word “self-conscious,” though—I don’t think I’m self-conscious in the way that you’re suggesting. I write about what I’m interested in, not what I feel self-conscious about. Often, that means writing about a world that seems a bit like the one I inhabit. Let’s face it, people who write about whole universes filled with American whites probably can’t deal with the real world, let alone alien worlds. I remember walking down a street in Cuzco, Peru— I went there with a UCLA study group—with a blonde woman about my height. Everybody around us was brown and stocky, about a foot shorter, with straight black hair. The two of us agreed that this was probably one of the few places in the universe where we looked equally alien.

LM: SF would seem to be a useful area for feminists and people from other cultures to explore, in order to explode some of the biases.

OEB: True, but there’s a trap. Fiction writers can’t be too pedagogical or too polemical. If people want to be lectured to, they’ll take a class; if they want to hear a sermon, they’ll go to church. But if they want to read a story, then it had better be a fairly good story, one that holds their attention as a story. It’s got to compete with TV, movies, sports, and other forms of entertainment, not to mention vast amounts of fiction.

LM: There has been a lot of SF in the last, say, fifteen years, by feminists working with utopian models.

OEB: Yes, and I have some major problems with that— personally, I find utopias ridiculous. We’re not going to have a perfect human society until we get a few perfect humans, and that seems unlikely. Besides, any true utopia would almost certainly be incredibly boring, and it would be so overspecialized that any change we might introduce would probably destroy the whole system. As bad as we humans are sometimes, I have a feeling that we’ll never have that problem with the current system.

LM: Have you received any response from radical feminists criticizing the way the masculine and the feminine in your works seem to be trying to find ways to coexist? I’m thinking specifically of Sally Gearhart, who says that we must do something very radical—like completely getting rid of males—if the planet is to survive.

OEB: No, I haven’t—but does she really think that? Getting rid of all males (except for breeding purposes) or totally emphasizing the feminine won’t solve our problems. If females did manage to take over, through violence or some other means, that would make us a lot like what we already are—it would wind up being self-defeating. I think we humans need to grow up, and the best thing we can do for the
species is to go out into space. I was very happy to read that it’s unlikely there’s life on Mars or anywhere else in this solar system. That means, if we survive, we have a whole solar system to grow up in. And we can use the stresses of learning to travel in space and live elsewhere—stresses that will harness our energies until we’ve had time to mature. Not that we won’t continue to do terrible things, but we’ll be doing them to ourselves rather than to some unfortunate aliens. Of course, we probably won’t get to the nearest stars for quite a long time. I like the idea.

By the time of the interview, when we first see the living writer, we’ve already roamed around in some very intimate parts of his or her mind. We’ve decided some basic things about the person’s concerns, anxieties, and vision of an ideal world. In some ways we know this person we’ve never met better than we know our mother-in-law, our son. In the case of Samuel R. Delany, who becomes Chip as soon as you meet him, the preconceptions Sinda Gregory and I had seemed bound to influence our view of this black, gay, SF writer. In his Upper West Side Manhattan apartment, Delany blasted through those preconceptions during a series of conversations held in the mid-1980s.

Few writers are as rigorous as Chip Delany in analyzing the cultural, sexual, linguistic, and aesthetic biases that control our lives. What follows is a much-abbreviated version of our conversations. Chip talks faster than most people read; and he commands an encyclopedic range of disciplines that allows him to discuss his debts to the poststructuralists and deconstructionists at one moment, the aesthetic implications of how time can be frozen in comic books at the next, and—minutes later—why Rimbaud, Huysmans, and Proust have been such problematic models for certain postmodernists.

Summarizing the personal, intellectual, and artistic influences on Delany’s career is difficult because of the many interactions and paradoxes involved. Imagine a personality shaped equally by Harlem (where Delany was born in 1942 and where he grew up) and one of New York City’s most prestigious schools for the gifted, the Bronx High School