

Octavia Butler
Samuel Delany

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[The material below is an edited version of a discussion held at MIT on february 19, 1998. In addition, we also have posted a special essay by Octavia Butler based on her opening remarks before the open discussion.]

The Value of Literacy

Jenkins: This is a question partially directed toward Octavia because it picks up on some of the stuff you were just talking about. I was just re-reading *Kindred* over the weekend, and I was really moved again by the issue of literacy -- the slaves' hunger for education, for the ability to read and write and the risk that's involved in that context of teaching literacy. And it reminded me of two other moments in your writing--one of which you referenced, the "Speech Sounds," the loss of literacy, the loss of language altogether and the dystopian world that's created there.

And the other is a moment in *Dawn* when Lilleth demands writing implements, demands books, and is told, "Well we can fix your mind so that you don't need any of that stuff. You can simply remember things and we can modify you." And she seemed to think that something fundamental to her humanity would be lost at the moment in which her mind is modified so that she no longer needs the ability to read and write. And I thought that those three moments juxtaposed together posed some powerful questions about how important the issue of literacy is in your writing and the way in which you think about the world. And I wondered if you might want to build on that a little bit more.

Butler: Hmmm. It's obviously very important to me, and because I come from the kind of family I come from, I don't think it could be otherwise. My mother was taken out of school after about three years of education and put to work. She didn't get to go to school until she was about eight years old and, unfortunately, they put her in the third grade. So you can imagine what kind of education she had; she was very fortunate to be able to read and write at all. She focussed so strongly on the need to be able to read and write and to get along in the world in ways that she wasn't really able to do.

I think literacy was probably a lot more popular when it was the forbidden fruit. That's a terrible thing to say, but I'm afraid it may be true. Any forbidden fruit is desirable. When I was a kid, there were so many older people pushing me that I wouldn't have dared to drop out of school; at least, not before I got out of high-school. I remember talking to a younger guy--he was about 10 years younger than I was--and I said something like, "How could we possibly have done anything but go on to school and try to make something of ourselves with all those people pushing us." And he said, "What people?"

I don't know. I don't know how well this answers your question but what I'm seeing, especially in the black community, is that there isn't that hard push as much as there used to be, and that's frightening. That scares me.

Delany: I don't know whether there's anything more important, really, when all is said and done. My grandfather was born a slave; he was a slave in Georgia. And our emancipation came when he was seven years old. Quite illegally, he had been taught to read and write before emancipation, so that when he was

seven years old, he already knew how to read. And after emancipation, there wasn't time to learn how to read; he couldn't have learned afterwards because when his family was on its own, there simply wasn't the time to get that sort of education.

He ended up as the vice-chancellor of a black college, and the whole purpose of this college was to teach other blacks to read and write, and also teach them many, many other things as well. It was a very practical, hands-on education. It was a college, but there were cooking classes; there were lots of classes in how to lead your life. And so my family has always been involved with that from the very, very beginning. But, dare one say, if his owners had not decided that they were going to let this kid learn how to read beforehand, my family and my family history would have been very, very different.

The reason he was the vice-chancellor is because the chancellor had to be white for legal reasons because there were papers that had to be signed and what have you, and black signatures were not valid on these papers. But in the same way that he would not have been the vice-chancellor of a black college, I wouldn't be a college professor today, I don't think.

There isn't any problem that I can think of in the United States that doesn't finally go back to education because education is how you learn how to solve the problems, even if we haven't solved them now. And I think black, white, gray or grisly, I think education is really our most important problem right now.

The Future of Literacy

Butler: I've wondered, and this may be the audience to put this question to, what the likelihood is of a future in which reading is no longer necessary for the majority of the people. I don't much like the look of that future, but I wonder if when computers, for instance, can be addressed verbally, can be spoken to, whether it will still be necessary for people to be able to read and write. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Burstein: Well one of the things that I was recently reading was an essay by Spider Robinson which points out that reading is actually difficult. He was walking along the street in his hometown, and I think it was in Vancouver, where he saw that somebody had written on a piece of sidewalk and immortalized in stone a nice big heart with the names "Tood and Janey forever." He couldn't believe that anybody in this society would go to the lengths of naming their son "Tood." So his only conclusion was that young Todd didn't know how to spell his own name, and what he found to be worse was that this is somebody who is old enough to have the hots for Janey and possibly produce progeny and yet he cannot spell his own name.

And in this essay, Robinson points out that television and radio in some ways is the most natural way for us to receive information because there's less decoding that has to go on. Perhaps, Samuel Delany can talk more about that. There's less decoding of the symbols. The information is presented there right for you, whereas when you're reading, you actually have to learn to decode the symbols before you get a full-flavored understanding of the story. And although it can spark our imaginations more, once it becomes as simple as it is now to have the information presented visually and orally, he wonders what's going to happen to reading. You thought the World-Wide Web was slow because it was just a problem of computers; it's our way to make sure people keep reading the stuff rather than just looking at the pictures.

Michael McAfee: To sort of answer your question, the first thought that comes to my mind is: Reading and writing itself will be necessary because all our languages developed somehow from the need to put down a permanent symbol for someone who might come along later and have to look at it. Whether it's standardized

English or not is another question, depending on our desire to communicate with people outside a certain area. If all of a sudden, I decided that "Oh, I only need to talk to about 50 people, and we all come up with our own little slang terms, or even our own little ways of jotting them down, there's really no need for me to have to do standardized English." So that might be a way of a communications breakdown in the future, rather than the erasing writing and reading altogether.

Craig McDonough: I'd like to directly address Octavia's question. As a perceived need for literacy drops, what we may see is a growing despotism of those who can read, who can control the information flow. And getting back to the fragmentation, the balkanization of language through slang may become a way that some people would possibly use to control segments of the society--the same way that in the past, people think and react to their neighbors differently on the basis of religion, color, or small shifts in language. You see it in very insular areas. There are places where you can still go today and you can live there for 40 years and you're still one of their flatlanders rather than being somebody who has lived there.

Butler: It sounds like history swinging around to an educated priesthood again. It's odd. We tend to think whatever we have is going to be lasting forever. Whatever we knew when we were able to learn what our society was made up of will last forever, and then it doesn't. And we wind up with something very strange.

Alan Wexelblat: I'm a graduate student at the Media Lab here. To answer Octavia's original question, I think it's important, first of all, that we remember that literacy is a relatively new invention. It's only been around a couple of thousand years, and at its arrival it was decried as leading to the downfall of the training of men's, of course, men's minds.

And the second thing is that I think it's important that we not confuse literacy with education. I agree with the point that you made about the importance of education, and I do see a future coming in which literacy will not be the ultimate pre-requisite for education as it is in our society today. I think new technologies will allow that shift in the expected and necessary skills for participating in our culture. I suggest to you a book by Neil Stevenson called, *The Diamond Age*, which is essentially a book about how to educate children.

One of the things he posits is that there are several parallel languages. There's a sort of written textual language, but there's also a sort of commonly used pictorial language which, for example, enables people who can't read words to actually operate appliances. That is, they look at the pictorial symbols and they figure out how to operate the food processor or whatever it is, based on the pictorial symbols.

In particular, a lot of the work within the Media Lab has been oriented towards trying to figure out how to teach children to learn through a philosophy called, "constructionism," that Seymour Papert, one of the professors there, pioneered. In it he basically argues that learning happens through building, not by reading about things or listening to things, or even watching things, but rather by being involved in the construction and building of artifacts. I would like to see a world happen very soon in which that philosophy was more widely accepted, in which there were not just microscopes for every student but also full lab science kits, and kids could actually build little science projects and try out experiments and do things and build things. I think that learning would happen a lot better in those environments and that literacy, or lack of literacy, would be a lot less of a problem, if that were to happen.

Delany: The point is, of course, that literacy has not been around, as you say, that long. We could lose it in another 75 years, and the world would continue. We survived the first 3 1/2 million years without being able to do it; if we're going to be around for a million or so more, maybe we'll survive that without it, too.

Nevertheless, I think literacy does do certain things. It has certain good things that should be encouraged. I'm not a believer in the replaceability of one medium by another. I think the media are irreplaceable, and it's very easy to fall into the argument that, "Ah, literacy is dying before television and movies and what have you." And while that, indeed, may be the case, I still think television and movies are really good things, and really interesting things, and that fascinating things go on there. But I also think fascinating things go on in texts, and I think we'd lose something if we lost our textual facility.

Butler: I agree with you, we would go on, but this is rather like a discussion that I can recall having on a science-fiction panel. Someone was saying about global-warming, "Well, the temperatures have been different before, and things have changed before." And I said, "Well, you're absolutely right, of course, but there weren't nearly so many of us, and we hadn't organized our society around certain things being so, that we grow this crop in this area and that we feed this many million people with it." That kind of thing.

I think that losing literacy would change us drastically, change the kind of society that we have, and I think we would develop a kind of literate priesthood, whether they were a priesthood of God or of something else. They would be the people who knew the secrets, and I don't really see that as a very nice world to live in.

Delany: But we could also develop an illiterate priesthood, you know.

Phil: I'm in the computer entertainment industry. In the computer entertainment industry, literacy has vanished. Whereas in 1984 about 1/3rd of the best-selling game programs were text-based games, by 1986, there were none--zero--on the market. And, in fact, I've just read a couple of interviews with John Romero and Ken Williams where they're asking, "How can we get the rest of the text out of the games. How can we get rid of these text-bubbles?" And there are still people writing text-games, but it's sort of goes on by samizdat; it's underground. And the thing is that the people playing these games are very literate; they're not unable to read. They don't want to read. . .

Delany: . . . while they're playing games.

Phil: No, the term "game" is perhaps misleading. You can write fiction, you can present many other forms of artistic experience, but what they want to experience are things that are best presented graphically. For instance, I read an interview with John Romero who is the person who designed "Quake," and "Doom," to us, graphical violence games that introduced this concept of running around and killing everything you see and watching its blood spurt. And he commented how he was so addicted to video games that once he was playing an asteroids game and his father came and bashed his head against the machine and took him home and beat him up for playing the games. And I thought, "This is interesting. This is the kind of thing that he wants to do and the kind of game he wants to make."

And so I think the problem is not literacy so much as why our society produces people who don't want to read and don't want that type of experience.

Butler: There is the quotation--I don't recall who said it--"There's not that much difference between a person who doesn't read and the person who can't read."

I wanted to draw a comparison. When I was a kid, I lived on comics. My mother actually went into my room one night or one day when I wasn't home and ripped all my comic books in half. (GROANS) A familiar experience, I suspect, for anybody growing up when I was because they were supposed to rot your mind. When I was reading comics, comics had a lot more language, a lot more words, and a lot more story. It wasn't just Jack Kirbyesque people swatting other people and standing with their legs four feet apart. And gradually, it became just that, so that there were fewer and fewer and fewer words, less and less story, and a lot more people beating each other up or wiping each other out.

And I find it interesting that computer games are going this way. I find this drift toward simplicity, no matter what the genre or venue, scary, frankly.

Reading Hypertext

Burstein: I have a quick question primarily for Samuel Delany. In your other role besides writing science fiction, you're also a professor of literature at UMass-Amherst, and I know that you do write a lot of essays analyzing texts. I've read some of your work in the "New York Review of Science Fiction," for example. I wonder if you have any comments you might make about the concept of hypertext. A few years ago, people were talking about hypertext as this whole major new thing, the end of the "book." For example, if you're reading something and you don't know a word, you can click on it to get to the definition. Or if you're reading about, let's say, Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, you can click on names and find out more information. You have people who actually were constructing "hypertext novels," where you have a book that is not read linearly and where a different path would give you a different reading experience. I was wondering if you had any opinions on this.

Delany: Some of them are very interesting. Some of the Michael Joyce work is very interesting. One lists the names of people who've done interesting things--Katherine Kramer.

The one thing, however, I think that does need to be pointed out to people when they're talking about interactive art and the notion of something being interactive. The amount of energy that you spend, for instance, to get yourself together to go to a gallery and walk around the gallery from picture to picture is much more than the amount of energy that you spend to click from image to image on a computer screen. So that the energy that you put out to be interactive with classical texts--they are much more interactive--is greater because you have to do things to get to them that involve you in a much larger way than the way you interact with something on a computer screen.

All texts, in a sense, are hypertext. You come to a word you don't understand, so you look it up in the dictionary. You read a passage and you stop and you think about another book; you may even put it down and go get another book off your bookshelf and read something about something else. Texts are not linear. Texts are multiple and for anybody who really reads and enjoys reading, it is an interactive process.

What hypertext and the interactive material do is make that a much less energy-intensive process; as such, on the absolute scale, they are less interactive than the ones we've got now because in order to interact with the ones you've got now, you have to put out more energy. Now I think something is gained by having the interactivity require less energy. It becomes a medium in itself that's interestingly exploitable.

But not only do you limit the amount of interactivity, you also limit the places you can go. So the interactive text is not an expansion of what we've got now; it's a delimitation of what we've got now. If you read, as I was doing a couple of days ago, Walter Pater's "Plato and Platonism," I stop every two pages or less and have to go read a section from Heidegger or read a section by Derrida where he's talking about Plato. "Is that where this idea came from? Oh! Why is he using this word 'parousia'? Didn't I see this word?"

Just bear in mind that the interactivity in the new different interactive art is less energy-intensive and there are less places that you go within it. It's fascinating, and it's lots of fun, but it's not more interactive than what we had before; it's less interactive.

Butler: I don't have access to this kind of thing on computer but, oddly enough, what you're talking about sounds very much like the way I start looking for ideas when I'm not working on anything. Or when I'm just letting myself drift, relax.

I generally have four or five books open around the house--I live alone; I can do this--and they are not books on the same subject. They don't relate to each other in any particular way, and the ideas they present bounce off one another. And I like this effect. I also listen to audio-books, and I'll go out for my morning walk with tapes from two very different audio-books, and let those ideas bounce off each other, simmer, reproduce in some odd way, so that I come up with ideas that I might not have come up with if I had simply stuck to one book until I was done with it and then gone and picked up another.

So, I guess, in that way, I'm using a kind of primitive hypertext.

Burstein: I find interesting what you say that hypertext is actually limiting. I don't think I've actually run across that opinion before because everybody talks about hypertext being expansive and exploratory. But I think I see your distinction.

Delany: Traditional reading is more interactive in terms of requiring more energy to interact, and there are more possibilities for interaction. I don't know if any of you remember that old, ancient technology called, "the card catalogue." (LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE) I am so happy with the libraries' being on-line. They're great, but we do lose something when we lose the card catalogue because there's a kind of serendipity; there's a kind of propinquity that simply comes from the fact that you stumble over another title of another book and you say, "Oh, that's interesting" because I'm looking up something else.

It's the same thing with the physical books on the shelves. Anybody who does actual research in a library knows that you look on this shelf and then you turn around and you look on this thing, it's not related alphabetically; it's not related subject-wise; it just happens to be the book you need. And if you don't have the physical propinquity of the way the books are arranged, you're going to miss out on this opportunity, and this limits the kinds of research gems that can come up.

I'm not saying we should go back to card catalogues, but I'm just saying, again, the media are not replaceable. If you do replace one medium by another medium, you're going to lose something, and, frequently, this is going to be something that's going to be missed.

The Age of Misinformation

Vicka Khoury: I'm actually a neuro-linguist at the University of Washington. I'm just working in Boston these days. I wanted to respond to the literacy issue in general. I think there's something implicit in what you were saying before that equates literacy and things that you read with truth and says that things that you read are or ought to be truer than things that you hear. And while I agree with the irreplaceability of any of the media and with the importance of literacy and the importance of access to information in any medium, I also think that it's as possible to lie in texts as it is to lie verbally.

Butler: I was not, by the way, talking about print-truth being more true than spoken truth. Not at all. One could spend enormous amounts of energy, print, computer time, broadcast time, etc. on garbage. I wouldn't recommend that anybody take something to be true simply because it was written down. As a matter of fact, this is an argument I used to have with people quite a bit. Something was written or on TV, so it must be true. No, the importance of literacy is that you can look around and find out more about what is true, as opposed to being confined to what somebody's willing to tell you.

Delany: We talk about this being the age of information, but this is not the age of information. This is the age of misinformation. And the thing that we have to remember is that misinformation tends to be simpler and more stable than information, kind of like an intellectual Parkinson's law where bad money drives out good. Misinformation tends to drive out information because of the relative simplicity and the stability of misinformation.

One of the things that literacy and texts have going for them is that it stabilizes the argument so that you can look at it long enough to actually do a little analysis of it. A purely verbal interchange about information tends to be a little bit more slippery and harder to analyze because all you end up analyzing is the comparatively simple elements which tend to be the things that are misinformed.

Also what is information in one context becomes misinformation in another context. What the popularizer of science writes in his or her popularized science book is information but if it was given to the specialist, then it becomes wild misinformation. It depends on the context. That is why I think really this is the age of misinformation, par excellence.

Butler: Or it's the age of being snowed with so much stuff that we can't tell the difference.

Who Controls the Web?

Melissa: Basically, I wanted to ask about this idea of literacy on the Web and especially, more specifically, children's education through experience with the Web. I've had this argument before with people, that they feel that you can just put somebody in front of a computer and they'll have access to the Web, and everything will be wonderful. But it's a question of what's there for them to have access to. A lot of people take it for granted that everything that's in the real world, scanning the bookshelves, what not, will eventually find its way into the Web, and eventually find its way to all the children's minds, and we'll live in a happy, joyful place.

But there is a real danger that a certain group will have control of what actually goes onto the Web. As far as science fiction goes, there's a group on the Web now that likes science fiction, so that gets on the Web a lot, but as access widens to the larger population, different things come on. I wondered if you thought that the ideals of freedom through science would get drowned out in the noise.

Delany: Well, I don't think it's any accident that sex plays the part on the Web that it does. And I think that that's fundamentally very healthy because I think desire is a big problem in the human condition.

When new media come along, the first thing they want to deal with is desire, and it's usually the sign that something good is going on rather than something bad is going on.

Butler: What do you think of the efforts at censorship?

Delany: And then you get the efforts of censorship, and I'm not a big fan of censorship, to put it mildly.
(LAUGHTER)

Race, Cyberspace and Equality

Teresa: Mr. Delany, I was re-reading your book, *Triton*, and that's always fascinated me. One of the things I noticed was that everything was equal. There was absolutely no distinction as far as race, gender, or what have you, but then, at the same time, everything about a person could be changed; they could change their physical appearance, even their height, and even their skin color or their sex. And I guess my question for you is: Was that actually necessary for that to come about for them to be able to achieve equality?

Delany: First of all, I don't know whether they're really equal. The lines of inequality don't run along the usual crevices. They don't run between genders; they don't run between races. They run in other places, and certainly all the material in the appendices explains how, for instance, one of the places where inequality does run is between the people who have been there for a while and the people who are new to the place.

Triton is a playful attempt to just see what it would look like if things were different, and if things worked in a different way from the way they actually do, and if certain things were more flexible. That's why it's not a utopia; it's a heterotopia. It's not the best of all possible worlds by any means.

Jenkins: One of the conferences we're planning in the future for the Media in Transition series is an event focused around race and cyberspace and the issue of cyberspace poses some parallels to the situation you described. The famous New Yorker cartoon that promised, "In cyberspace, nobody knows you're a dog," implies, of course, that you construct your on-line identity or that you give only what information is necessary. In many ways, this parallels the fluidity of identity which science fiction writers imagine in their stories. So one of the questions is: What happens to race in cyberspace? Is it a good thing or a bad thing that people can choose to have a race or make their race disappear when they write in cyberspace? And what are some of the implications of that?

Butler: Well, OK, I'm not on-line--I've got to say that upfront--but it seems to me, we've got this window where we can do that kind of thing and play that way and be whoever we choose to be in cyberspace. But soon, that window will close. With respect to showing people's pictures, at first it will be "Well, if you want to," and then it will be expected, you know; otherwise, some might wonder, "What are you hiding?" I don't know how it'll work, but I'm wondering if by our pictures' being shown, or videos of us as we are speaking, that we lose the window.

Delany: The problem, of course, is not race, itself. It is all those forces that make certain white people think that somebody black might want to hide their race or that makes people who are black like me say, "That's the last thing in the world I would hide." And it's those forces, per se, that are the problem. And it's the interplay of those forces that creates the problems, and that's a set of material socio-economic forces that I don't think really go away when you sit in front of a computer.

Science Fiction and the Black Community

Jorge Enteronas: I study literature here at MIT, and I had two quick comments or questions. First, to Mr. Delany. As a black, gay man, I really like to thank you for helping to open up a space for us to write and express ourselves. Literacy has been really important in the African-American tradition--written literacy, especially, writing. The Talking Book and slave narratives, equality through literacy in the Harlem Renaissance, the search for a black aesthetic in the '60s. And I was just kind of wondering what you felt your place, as science fiction writers, was within the African-American literary tradition.

Delany: Well, one's own place is something that other people have to tell you. (LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE) You sound kind of like a fool saying, "Well, my place in the tradition is. . . ." because it is something that other people assign to you. So, in a way, my place is whatever place you are kind and generous enough to give me.

Butler: What you said about "place" is probably true in one sense. In another sense, I think my place is wherever I happen to be standing. I don't write just one kind of work, and I used to get criticized for writing science fiction at all back in the community because the idea was "You should be doing something more relevant," which was a big word when I was in college. And I was not behaving properly; I was not contributing. And if that didn't stop me, I don't think worrying about my place now would. (LAUGHTER)

Burstein: Just for your information, if you want to know their place in the science-fiction community, speaking on behalf of the entire science-fiction writing community, I will say that both Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler are very well-respected for what they've been able to do with our genre. The fact that they've been able to transcend it in some ways and yet have both remained extremely loyal to it is something that, at least, pleases every science-fiction writer whom I've ever come across. People in the science fiction field sometimes tend to think we are in our own little ghetto, and the fact that you have literary writers of such calibre who are willing to identify themselves as being science fiction writers is very gratifying. It helps to spread the idea that stories of this sort do not have to just be thought of as, well, like that movie that Octavia was describing before.

Jenkins: Another way to circle around this question is to say, "Are there opportunities which science-fiction grants authors for debating issues of identity that more realistic or melodramatic or other forms of narrative don't offer, particularly around issues of race?"

Butler: To me, the attraction of science fiction is just the freedom, that there isn't anything I can't do in it. There isn't any issue that I can't address. I don't know that I can address things better because I'm writing science fiction; it's just that I can address more things.

Delany: I think anything that presents itself as some kind of social debate becomes the kind of thing that science fiction is set up to address. Science fiction has a self-image as an intellectual enterprise and because of that, it welcomes information in a way that I would say that the literary genres tend to be wary of, such as vast amounts of data, vast amounts of information, big debates over abstract questions, like "Well, we don't want it to be propaganda, do we? It's got to be art." (LAUGHTER)

I think science fiction doesn't have the same fear of data that the literary genres have sort of grown up with. This probably has both good and bad sides. The upside is that we rush in blindly where the angels are afraid to go. So often when there are social questions, you'll find them first reflected and talked about in science fiction. I

think of the history of feminism. I don't think anybody could really talk about the history of feminism without talking about all the ways in which science fiction has some of the earliest and the most powerful examples of people thinking about this situation. So it welcomes a certain kind of social debate that the literary genres have to wait around until it's all settled before they will go and take it on.

The Ghettoization of Science Fiction

Nick Pappadakis: I'm at the Artificial Intelligence Lab. Very briefly, the ghettoization of science fiction, it seems to me, is due to this anti-intellectual trend that our society has had for many, many years and that, maybe, finally is beginning to abate.

Delany: I don't think the reason science fiction is not accepted is due to just anti-intellectualism. Science fiction is not accepted because it is primarily seen as a working-class kind of art. It's a working-class practice, and it is given the kind of short shrift that working-class practices of art are traditionally given. Movies started out the same way but because their fantasies appeal across class-lines--everybody wants to be rich and beautiful--they somehow managed to escape the limits of being just a working-class art.

Butler: Are you sure it isn't because it's also seen as something terribly juvenile?

Delany: Well, it's seen as juvenile because it's working-class art. (LAUGHTER)

Butler: Well, I mean, literally juvenile. I was at a New Mexico writer's group speaking to them a few years ago, and they told me that a very well-known mystery writer had been there the year before, and one of the women had told him that she wanted to write science fiction. And he said, "Why? Nobody over 14 will ever read it?"

Delany: And yet, Alice in Wonderland is also a juvenile book. It's also for children, and it still makes its way into the literary canon. And the parables in Genesis from the J-writer, according to Harold Bloom, are children's teaching tales, and do we have any other more sacred literature?

Arina Azamson: It seems to me that the point of education is to teach people to think abstractly and especially with science fiction, it seems that you can do so much of that. Could you talk a little bit about how you view science fiction in dealing with problems abstractly?

Delany: May I leap into this? I would actually argue with your initial premise. The point of thinking abstractly is so that you can think concretely. Abstract thinking is a tool to help your concrete thinking, so that the final point of education, I think, is to think concretely, not abstractly. The abstraction is simply a tool to facilitate the concrete thinking.

And, again, if you have the education, then the dangers are less dangerous. If kids are educated properly, I think, then you don't really have to worry about what's on the Internet or what's on anything because they'll know how to deal with it. There is a whole level of the country that believes that the way you keep children safe from sex, as though it is something that they need to be kept safe from, is that you don't let them know that it exists. You don't talk about it, and you don't explore it.

Although I am a black, gay man, I also have a wonderful 24-year old daughter, and there was never any censorship in our house. Some bizarre movie would come along and she'd want to see it, so we'd all go see it. And what we did is we talked about it if it had something sexual in it she didn't understand. And she's a very

happy 24-year old at this point, and she hasn't self-destructed. And I don't see her about to do that at any time in the near future. Education is the best way that you deal with all these things that everybody thinks of as so dangerous. Educate people and they're not dangerous anymore if people know how to handle them, and what to do with them.

Butler: I'm not sure how to bring this in. It goes back to the non-literate video games we were talking about earlier. I hit little periods during my writing when I'm overwhelmed by my own writing and by my own problems and whatever and I take a week or so when I read novels, preferably nice trashy ones, and I listen to music. And I wind up generating quite a few ideas doing that; that's my excuse. I don't do it very often, but I do do it.

I went to the grocery store looking for a good novel to read--well, I said "trashy," you know--and what I found was the novel as confession story and the novel as video game where the big deal was to kill the bad guy. And I think that maybe the need for a little abstraction is not that bad a thing, really, when you consider this degree of literal-mindedness.

I don't like it when people talk about my work in terms of good guys and bad guys--this kind of simplicity--because it happens often and I never write that way. I've never written a novel about the good folks and the bad folks. I've always written novels about where all the characters have something to say for their position. And even if they cannot avoid a collision, it's not about the good guys winning or losing. So a little abstraction is probably good for us all.

Carla Johnson: I do want to say "thank you" to both of you for writing because when I was growing up, it was one thing that I could count on to see myself reflected in both your work, and that's why I always stayed with science fiction. It's the only place I can see myself, whether if I'm going to be black or if I'm going to look at myself in the different kinds of sexuality that you might have. I prefer short stories but you're the only two that I actually have full science fiction novels of because I can't stay with the hard science fiction. So, thank you.
(APPLAUSE)

Speaker: One of the things that intrigues me about both of your work is that it's science fiction, but one of the things that makes me love it so much and come back and read the same stories over and over again is that it's such incredibly powerful fiction that grapples with complexities. And at the risk of over-generalizing, I say that I read non-fiction for information and read fiction for truth. And so I, too, want to affirm and thank you and just express such gratitude for the work that you've given us, for the opportunities to really grapple with those many truths. And especially a note of thanks for Blood Child for we got a little bit of fiction and non-fiction. The question that was raised earlier about where you sit in the African-American literary tradition, I'm happy to say that you sit firmly in that tradition--especially your stories, Ms. Butler, are virtually all about ordinary black women thrust into extraordinary situations and having to deal. So it's inspirational and affirming.

I'm not a science-fiction writer but I am a writer. And I thank you for being such an incredible role-model.
(APPLAUSE)