

Season 1, Episode 2: Let the Ancestors Speak

Published Nov 28, 2017

Run time: 57 minutes

[trickle of water in the background increasing to a rushing water sound as Autumn speaks]

Autumn: She was pointing out to me that the sounds that our ancestors as they were like jumping from ships - during the middle passage and drowning in the ocean - are still in the ocean. Right? They're still in the bodies of water that we like exist in now. But- And so there's- Right? This like- It's like- It gives me chills even to like think about. And...And so there's this way in which like, Oh yeah! Ancestral memories are coming through me, and also, ancestral memories didn't go anywhere.

[rushing water sound keeps playing in background as vocalization and beat begin]

Autumn: I'm Autumn Brown.

adrienne: And I'm adrienne maree brown.

Autumn: And this is *How to Survive the End of the World*.

adrienne: Our podcast about learning from apocalypse with grace, rigor and curiosity. In today's episode, we wanted you to know more about who we are. And we thought one way to let you see us is to open the window on our creative practices.

Autumn: In this episode we end up diving deeply into the practice of writing fiction. Which leads us into a conversation about channelling our ancestors.

adrienne: We really felt it was important to have this episode early in our season, because we really believe that we're in an imagination battle right now. That we're living in a world that someone else created. In power dynamics that someone else created. And that it's our responsibility to imagine what we actually want and what we actually need to really create futures that are viable for more and more of us. And some of the work of creating those futures is writing fiction.

[beat ramps up and then fades]

[instrument plucking intermittently in the background]

adrienne: So, our Octavia Butler quote today... "You don't start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap, and thinking it's good stuff. And then gradually, you get better at it. That's why I say, one of the most valuable traits is persistence. It's just so easy to give up."

adrienne: So, this quote feels super relevant to both of our lives when it comes to writing. Um, (clears throat) for me it feels like there was a long period in my life where I was like oh, I'll just

be a facilitator, and I'll just like support other people, and maybe even edit other people into writing, and even write non-fiction. But I'll keep putting aside the part of me that passionately wants to write fiction. And it feels like it's been this like continuous nudging nudging nudging in my system of like - Wait. You really do want to do this, and you're not gonna be great at it at first. And so, a couple years ago, I got the opportunity to go to the Clarion Writers workshop, which is something that Octavia went to, and part of how I'd heard about it. And, I remember sitting in that writing workshop. I came in like- Oh, I feel pretty good. I've got good ideas. I'm excited about what I'm gonna write. I'd done some writing coaching in the past with some other people and I was like, I got this. You know? And then showing up there and just being surrounded by people who were incredible writers. And just being like I know nothing. (Laughing a little) I don't know how to make a story. I don't know the genres that they're talking about and referencing. I don't know how you actually build out a character, how you actually write dialogue. Like, I know nothing. And, um, and really choosing, like ok, I'm gonna write all day everyday as much as I possibly can. And just use this time to get better. But it was one of the first times that I was like- Oh this is something that like I can't just like write and post. Which is how I often do my blog. It's just like I wrote it. I posted it. It was true. It was how I felt at that moment. It's gone. And with this it was like, Oh, this is craft. And like that's a different kind of craft. You know, accessing your vulnerability is a craft. But, really being like- Oh short story writing, fiction writing, novel writing, developing characters- all of that is craft. And this is a craft that I could spend my entire life learning and never maybe produce anything for the public, and still be very satisfied with the learning. But, it is like this ongoing practice. It's this ongoing craft development. And that I have to be passionately, persistently doing it if I want it to happen. What has your writing life been like?

Autumn: Well, and actually just answering by similarly saying that like my...like entry point to writing fiction was so surprising to me. And... and my journey with it over the last seven years, has been similarly really feeling like um- uh- navigating the space between like the part of it that's about craft and the part of it that's about the way a story will unveil itself to you. And, that there is an amazing amount of like mystery involved in the process of like- of creating a piece of fiction. Because, in my experience, um the way that I came to writing fiction was that I basically got bowled over by a story that kind of was insisting it's way out of me. And that I had never ever ever wanted to write fiction. Like, it was wasn't like- It wasn't like it was an active animosity towards writing fiction at all. It was just like not- Literally something that had not ever occurred to me. And, I grew up as you did. We both grew up reading lots of science fiction. Um, and in my adulthood I came to really understand that that was like the preferred genre for me to read. Right? That I was just like Oh! I just love this genre. I love everything about it. Like, I am unabashedly a science fiction lover. Like I could give zero fucks about people who want to genre bash. It's just like I don't know what you're talking about. This is literature as far as I'm concerned. And like, you know, there's this whole weird thing around like genre anyway. I don't even feel like I fully understand it, because I sort of feel like yeah- literally any genre contains both like amazing literary work and terrible work that not literary. Or, like vampy stuff that's neither terrible nor literary. And like I just don't understand. (laughing). I don't understand it. But anyway. Oh yeah, go ahead.

adrienne: Well just a quick thing on that, that I think is really hilarious, is like when we were

doing *Octavia's Brood*, you know, one of the words we came up with was genre-cide. That we were like, we want to obliterate (laughing) this commitment to genres that no longer feels useful. And feels colonial. Right?

Autumn: (snaps fingers)

adrienne: Like it's like, oh this whole idea that you have to categorize every kind of writing into a very specific box um-

Autumn: To market it.

adrienne: To market it to people. To be like, oh you like this, here's the other stuff you can buy that fits into that. And you like this and we will determine what is quality or not quality writing. Like based on the kind of genre that you're doing. And like real literature is only written by a certain kind of people. So, I just think it was like such an important piece to us. And I think it's so important when you're like oh, we're in the realm of imagination. And the idea that in the realm of imagination we would say oh this whoooooole imagination, this entire world that's getting created. Because even if you're writing about an 1860's love story, you're making up a world you don't know. Like, you're determining what it is, and you're creating the conditions of it. And you might be laying a history on it, but history is also so...um...

Autumn: Invented.

adrienne: Invented, and fluid, and like- determined by the victors. And all these things. So, it- it really is saying oh the past gets written by certain people. Who gets to write the future? Or who gets to write even the present, or the near future. And it amazes me. Like I look at writers like oh Don DeLillo or something, where I'm like, that feels like visionary or speculative fiction. But, he gets read as just like Great Literature. You know? Whatever

Both: (laughing)

Autumn: Exactly.

adrienne: Yeah I love that point

Autumn: Yes! So, for me, it was- it was interesting too in terms of the craft piece because I went to- I absolutely went to a writing college. Right? Like, I went to Sarah Lawrence College, where everything- um every- all of the academic work is sort of framed through the lens of writing. Um, but I never took any creative writing courses while I was there. So, I really missed the whole- I missed the whole like uh- uh- piece of learning that happens there that's around craft. Um, although interestingly, I remember that I did take a course that was called "The Art of the Critique" where it focused a lot on how to actually critique artwork. And so (laughing) I am someone who tends to have like very strong opinions about like theatrical productions, and other people's writing and like how everything should be. Um, so that was an interesting sort of hold-over. But, um, but anyways. So, as, in terms of the- the entrée into fiction writing. Because I had been for years I had been, I had similarly had a block that I had been writing for, you know, since like 2006 and um had done a lot of political writing. Um, and had had some pieces published. Uh, but what happened for me was that I moved from New York City to rural Minnesota in 2010. And within a couple of months of arriving in my new home, this story just really came to me. And it really felt like, um, it felt like how I think often a lot of the writers that I admire and respect describe the sort of experience of inspiration. Or the experience of like sort of being called by a story that I just- I had this character- I had this person who- it felt like she was inhabiting me. And, um, and I know that, you know, part of what was happening for me too

was that I was processing as a- as a new parent. At the time I had, you know, a two-year-old and a two-month-old. And, I think as a new parent I was really, um, processing a lot of confusion and fear and um, you know, processing the experience of having lost a community that really supported me as a parent in the process of moving. And so I think that there was a lot- like uh spiritually and psychologically that was happening for me as a part of why that story came to me. But in terms of the story itself, you know, I almost feel like with *Small and Bright*, which is the novel that I'm currently working on. And that- it is that same story that came to me in 2010. I don't feel like I can claim ownership of that story at all. And one of the ways in which I really understand that is that like I've literally been writing this story since 2010. Do you know what I'm saying? And it hasn't become any less interesting to me. And I also haven't felt any more of a sense of like complete clarity around what all happens within the narrative. Um, one of the things that's been kind of cool for me about having worked on the story for so long, you know it's been seven years now, is that the structure of the novel is complete. Um, but not all the narrative has been written. So, there's still many parts of the story that are unveiling themselves to me. And a lot of- For me a lot of my writing practice right now is about finding enough stillness in my life to allow it to emerge. Um... And- And- And I- I had my first experience of going on a writing residency in the fall of 2016. Um, and- And similarly it was (laughing)- Similarly to what you describe about Clarion, it was really interesting to be in a space where, um, you know it was at a artists residency space that primarily serves visual artists. But there's always a small cohort of writers. And so it was me, and like fifteen other writers. Many of whom have published multiple books. Many of whom have been writing for decades. And- And just, you know, sort of peeking into different peoples writing studios and witnessing like- Um, the various ways that people visualize their writing process was just astounding to me. Um... And, I felt like- I felt like I soaked up so much knowledge just from being among other writers about what is sort of acceptable. The range of things that are acceptable to include in a writing process. I remember arriving, and- And actually my father-in-law, who is a poet, had warned me before I went to the writing residency. He was like just be aware that you're gonna have to sleep a lot. Like, you are gonna be very tired (adrienne laughs in the background) and you are gonna sleep a lot and just let that happen. And I was like are you kidding me? Like, I'm not gonna sleep a lot. I'm gonna like totally just write the whole time. And he was completely right. I absolutely spent a hu- a significant part of my whole first week there sleeping. In fact, I got on this schedule where I would wake up in the morning, go to breakfast, come back to my room, go back to sleep, wake up in time for lunch, and then go eat lunch, and then I would go to my studio. And then I would write from then until dinner. Eat dinner. And then go back to my studio and write until really late at night. And I just got into this groove where I was like just really allowing myself to fully rest down my nervous system. Which turned out to be a really- the key- to actually being able to allow parts of the story to come- To come through me that had really just been awaiting an opportunity to come through. And that's- That's been one of the really beautiful uh experiences for me about this- about this story. That like- That, um... That I know that the complete version of the story is there. But, it- it- it- it's sort of been this um, in many ways like the- the process of writing this novel has been a thing that has actually held me accountable to my own need to care for myself. More than like lots of other things in my life. (laughing) Because the story's like, well I'm waiting for you as soon as you're actually ready to set- set yourself down.

adrienne: I love, I love that. I love that idea. It reminds me of this amazing TedTalk I saw from Elizabeth Gilbert, who did *Eat Pray Love*. And I remember being like oh *Eat Pray Love*. You know people had their- a lot of different thoughts about it.

Autumn: Fuck *Eat Pray Love*! (laughing)

adrienne: (laughing) Exactly. Everybody was like eenh! You know? But I remember, you know, reading it. I often will do this of trying avoid what the like majority of people or whatever are saying about something until I get to experience it myself. And that was one of those books where I was like, ok, people have their feelings about this let me just read it. And I was like, I love it. (laughs) You know?

Autumn: (laughing)

adrienne: It was like I wanna do that. And I- And I felt-

Autumn: Speak your truth adrienne.

adrienne: Exactly. (laughs). I was just like no. I feel like a lot of, um, kinship with this idea of just being like oh I wanna find myself. And I need to go away from the life I have to do that. Uh, fundamentally that was the point of it. But, in the TedTalk, um, and I- I also see the critiques of like oh who gets to do that.

Autumn: Mmm.

adrienne: But, in the TedTalk she gave, she talks- She tells a story about this poet.

[stringed instrument plays a strong chord]

-Excerpt from Elizabeth Gilbert's TedTalk-

Elizabeth Gilbert: The extraordinary American poet, Ruth Stone, who's now in her nineties, but she's been a poet her entire life. And she told me that when she was growing up, in rural Virginia, she'd be out working in the field and she said she would like feel and hear a poem coming at her from over the landscape. And she said it was like a thunderous train of air. And it would come barreling down at her over the landscape. And when she felt it coming- cus it would like shake the earth under her feet- she knew she had only one thing to do at that point. And that was to do, in her words, and she would run like hell to the house. And she'd be getting chased by this poem. And the whole deal was that she had to get to a piece of paper and a pencil fast enough. So that when it thundered through her she could collect it.

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adrienne: I think about that a lot when it's like when does writing come? And how does writing come? And like for every kind of writing I do I feel like it's basically that. That it's like a poem is coming. Now a song is coming. Now a blog is coming. Now a column is coming. And I really have tried to put myself in the way of that work that feels like oh that's distinctly mine. But all of those are also faster turn around. It's like oh I wrote that. I got the poem done. There's the whole thing. Um, and with the novel, it's been such a slower process. And so I love this, what Octavia says is that when you think you're doing good writing, you're writing crap. And you know slowly you keep doing it. Cus I feel like I also, I've been working on *Grievors*, um, gosh...

probably like seven, eight years.

Autumn: Four or five years right?

adrienne: Well seven or eight years. Because I started *Grievors* before “The River”. And then, wrote “The River”. And then sort of came back to it. *Grievors* was a story that I also took to VONA. Which is Voices of Our Nation. Um, which, when I went, it was a one week retreat. All with people of color. It was the first year they’d ever done the speculative fiction workshop. Tananarive Due was teaching it.

Autumn: Wow

adrienne: And it started on Octavia’s birthday. And we were just like- We are so amazed!

Autumn: (laughing quietly)

adrienne: It just felt like this is so special and so important.

Autumn: You know for our listeners, you might want to explain what the river is.

adrienne: Oh that’s great. “The River” is the story that I included in *Octavia’s Brood*, and you know, I always thank god for Walidah Imarisha, who was the co-editor of that book. Because, I had started out submitting a different story that I thought was so interesting and so cool. And like kind of a spy story like... But then when she read it she was like Hmm there’s a lot of patriarchy in this story actually. Which I hadn’t seen when I was writing it. Because for me, there’s this much longer story around it that like, balanced everything. But it was like Oh, that’s not showing up in the, you know, seven pages that are here. And so I was like well I do have this other story. Which I had kind of written and like set aside. Cus it moved so slowly. And that was “The River”. And she read it and she was like, This is the story. Work on this. And so I worked on “The River” and included it in *Octavia’s Brood* and got really positive feedback for it. It got re-published a few other places. Um, in Apex Magazine. In Cicada Magazine. And it was just like Oh, this is a great story. And *The Grievors* weaves in and out of that story. Like-

Autumn: Mmmmm.

adrienne: It’s in a similarly, um, you know, it’s more explicitly about grief. Obviously. It’s more explicitly about like grief as this plague that people can’t overcome. And it’s specifically about Detroit as this epicenter of grief and that there’s something to be learned there. Um, but it’s also about, in the same way “River” was, a city that is on sentient land. That has something to say and wants to be a part of whatever the transformation is. And I feel that way about this planet that we live on. So it’s been like this beautiful way of me being like how do I be in this dance of hopelessness about our species in a lot of ways. But hopefulness about the planet that we live on. And like how do we get in right relationship with her in order to get in right relationship with ourselves. Um, but VONA was like such an important learning process. And Clarion was such an important learning process. But the thing that I learned in both of those places was oh, in order to write fiction, unlike anything else, I have to take myself away, and get into my writer’s rhythm. So what you were just talking about, that like, I need to sleep a lot. I need to be able to stay up late. Like, I think of that. Like oh there’s that circadian rhythm. And then there’s writing rhythm. And sometimes they align for me. Like, I find that often I will wake up really early. And get into a pattern of waking up really early. But I won’t write really early. Like I’ll wake up really early and I’ll meditate. Or I’ll reflect. Or I’ll do other things. And then again, I will sleep. And sleep and sleep. And cry. Um-

Autumn: Hahaha! Right?

Adrienne: Right? (laughing) So I'm like Oh! There's all this- All these other things that sort of get piled up on top of my creative center. Because in order to survive life, you have to be so creative to just get through. You know? Like all the oppression that is being piled on top of you. It's like I'm being creative and this pile of places where I need to be creative is so high. So there's something about saying, "I'm gonna find a way to make a week for myself." Whether it's in my home or whether I go to Mexico or somewhere else. And I've started really setting aside resources to make sure that I can go find places that I can be alone to get into that rhythm. Once I get into that rhythm, I've never had a problem with producing stuff in that rhythm. You know? And one other thing I wanna add here is that Tananarive Due, who is an incredible, black, horror writer. Um, who I- I'm just like go read all of her stuff. Her *Living Blood* series. *The Good House*. She just has written incredible stuff. She's been an incredible mentor and coach to me. And one of the things she often said was, "You find the short story first." Like always find the short story. Find the short version. Find the epicenter of what you need to write. And make sure that you've got that and that it's good and that it can stand alone. Then, you can flush that out and build it in a million different directions. But, find that short story first. And it feels in- That that is in relationship to that Octavia quote. Cus it's like, you need to get good. But be persistent and be disciplined to find the epicenter of it. Find the thing that's at the core. Then, you know, be persistent enough to keep going out in all the different directions that it needs to serve.

Autumn: (quietly) Yeahhh.

adrienne: But i think people often want to skip that step. And be like (singing operatically) I'm writing a novel! You know? It's like yeah. And what's the essence of that?

Autumn: Mmmhm. Yeah. um, on the crying tip. My best friend Alexis Powell, who's just an incredible visionary artist, like, both uh, director, and filmmaker, and an incredible musician, songwriter, singer. Just incredible incredible artist. Um, just finished a residency. And one of the things that she shared with me, like several times over the course of the residency, is how much she was crying. That she was just crying the entire time. (laughing). Um, and, I've got to check with her to make sure she's okay with me sharing that in this podcast.

adrienne: (laughs).

Autumn: But I doubt- I doubt she'd have a problem with it since she um, did this amazing, um, video series on instagram documenting her experience at the writing residency. That involved a lot of wigs and amazing just acting on her part. But um, but yeah. So I think that that's really real. And and on that short story tip. One of the things that's been really interesting for me and my writing process, is like collecting the short stories that are also waiting to come through me. And, noticing that, there is this other piece around writing that um... that has been true for me. And my sense is that it has also been true for you. That like, sometimes the writing is- Like sometimes the writing process is awaiting an invitation. Um, and so, I noticed that, you know, the first chapter of *Small and Bright* was published in *Octavia's Brood*. And, you know, maybe...uh... five or six months after that happened, I had an editor of a different science-fiction anthology reach out to me and say, "I am putting together this anthology and I would really like to publish another- A new piece of work from you. Um so if you have a story that's ready, um, and you could submit it by this date, um, I would like to publish it." And what was interesting in that moment was that I did have- I had several stories that I had um sketched but not written. And one that I was really excited to write. That it was like again- It had been just like inside me

for awhile. But it took that invitation for me to finally carve out the space to write it. And to give the attention that it needed. Um, and that's this story that's called "Hard and Ancient Work" that came out in the Procyon Science Fiction Anthology in 2016. And it was a very powerful experience for me to notice that um once- Especially with short stories, I think the amazing thing with short stories is that once you have this sketch in place, the actual process of writing the story can happen very fast. You know I think that I had this sketch in place for a few months. And then it wasn't until I went on this vacation to Mexico, and I wrote- I wrote the entire story in the course of like four days. Um, and again, but a story that had been sort of, kind of holding- Holding space, waiting inside me for probably three years or something by the time that I actually wrote it. Um, and I think that, similarly, in terms of my relationship with the novel that I'm writing, *Small and Bright*, that um, having people who've read that first chapter and have reached out to me. Both like friends, but also complete strangers who've like reached out to me via email and said "Please finish this book. Please finish this book. I cannot handle the cliffhanger that this character is left on at the end of the short version, the short story version. Like, please please please. I need to know what happens to her! And having- It's a very surreal experience to have people that you don't know feel so strongly about something that you've created that when you put it out into the world you were like well I guess we'll see if anyone pays any attention to this.

adrienne: Well and something I think that's important to not there, and it's not across the board, but something I think that's important to note is that so many women of color that I meet, and queer people of color that I meet, they're the ones who struggle the most with like I don't know if this is any good. And are often writing stuff that is actually really incredible. Hah

Autumn: (laughs a little)

adrienne: But the response is, you know the response in yourself, there's so much socialization that's like oh not you, you couldn't possibly be good at this, or you couldn't possibly have written something amazing. And it's like oh no, yes I did, actually. (laughing) Right?

Autumn: (laughing)

adrienne: And it's like you only hear it back when it lands with all these other people. And they're like oh no this is amazing actually. Um so that's one thing. I think the second thing is like it's so important that we create those invitations for ourselves.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: So, I feel like that was a big part of what *Octavia's Brood* ended up being. Was like here's an invitation. Both to the people who submitted and wrote stuff, and to all these other people who came through the writing workshops, and all these other spaces that we created. Um, where it was like oh this is an invitation. And what it made me realize is I'm constantly like paying attention now to like oh what are the anthologies? What are the invitations that are out there? And how exciting it is that there's more and more and more. It feels like every time I turn around there's another anthology being announced. Like oh Junot Diaz is doing something on global distopias. And Sheree Renee Thomas is constantly doing stuff. Um, it's amazing to see the one that was for stories for Chip. Where people were like let's do an anthology for Samuel Delaney while he's alive. So that he can kind of see all the ways that people love his work now and right in the here and now. Um, and just feeling like this is how it should be. Like there should be tons of people of color creating our own collective collections. And creating our own

sections of genres, multi-genres, that get to be in conversation with each other. And, it also makes me think of the people who I think are bravely kind of forging their way across all these spaces. Sofia Samatar leaps to mind, she just released a collection called *Tender Stories*, and she spoke at WisConn two years ago. And she gave this incredible talk about how, as a writer, I have lots and lots of different voices. Which I feel like it was so exciting to hear someone talk about that and feel a lot of permission in that?

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: That, I feel like I've always admired writers where it's like oh you open it and you're just like oh this is Nalo Hopkinson, like this is amazing. And, I get so moved by that. But then I feel like when I go to write it's much more like I have no idea what's gonna come out. There's-

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: You know, there's so- Because I am so..um, we are so multi-diasporic it's like we're just all over the place with where we grew up, the influences we had, it's not traced back to one clear lineage for us. There's like many places that we're intersecting in. And I think that shows up then in the voices that come out. Where I'm like I have no idea what ancestor person this is who's casting forward into the future. Um, but, hear the voices, it's very clear. I know it, I've got to write it. So, you mentioned earlier that you had a question about my writing process, did I answer that already?

Autumn: Uh, no you didn't

adrienne: (laughs in the background)

Autumn: So the question was actually like how did you start writing fiction? When did that happen for you? And... um and was it confusing when you started?

adrienne: Oh. I love that question. Um, you know I feel like I was almost always writing fiction. Like I feel like from a very very young age, I was writing, and I was drawing. And I would often do the two together. Like, drawing these like female figures for the most part and then writing stories about their lives. Or writing little pieces. I remember I wrote something that was a piece of fiction that Mom found and was like super disturbed by. (laughs). It was like a doctor experimenting on a patient or something.

Autumn: Aha! Ha!

adrienne: And it was just like me processing through like weird stuff around bodies and like who has access to bodies. I think it was after... I had had some-

Autumn: (says something muffled)

adrienne: Yeah. I had had this horrible hosp- Well I had two really traumatic hospitalizations when I was young. But one was I had like a kidney stone. And I went in. It was like I was thirteen I had a kidney stone. I went into the OBGYN. Or no, I went into the emergency room. And I was with Dad. And this guy doctor was like- kept asking me if I was pregnant. And I was like way far from, you know, sex and pregnancy and all that. I just had no clue what he was talking about, and I was just, I don't think I had even started my period yet. I was just like I'm... feel like I'm dying. You know?

Autumn: Right.

adrienne: And he wrenched my legs open to give me a pap smear exam. Um, and so I remember, I think part of it was like oh I've got to process this somehow. And so I wrote something that was processing that for me. Um, and so I remember using fiction very early on

as a way to be like how am I understanding what's going on?

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: But, I don't remember feeling confident about my fiction until like my late twenties. That I started writing the blog in like 2003, and I felt very comfortable finding like a political voice. And like honing that political voice, um. I shifted from being an announcement based writer- being like here's an event, or here's something that's happening- into like just here's my thoughts on what's happening. And my thoughts matter because of my social location. And they matter to me. And they matter to this group of people that I'm dealing with. And I kept writing fiction on the side. But I started being like Oh I'm not good enough. Because I kept reading people and being like they're so amazing. All this feels so pedestrian when I go back and read it after reading something by Octavia. Or after reading something by Samuel Delaney, or William Gibson, or the writers that I love. Um, and I really feel like there was something in the lead up to *Octavia's Brood*. And there was something about getting into VONA that was like oh, someone else is reading my work and feels like it's good. The other thing that happened around that- Actually, I totally forgot about this, the Kresge award that I received. I put in like, here's my blog writing. But I also sent them three short stories. And, that was- That was the first time anyone had read those three stories. "The River" was in there, and two others.

Autumn: Hmm!

adrienne: And they gave me this award. They were like oh yeah. And I remember being like oh snap. (laughs). The pressure is on.

Autumn: Someone gave me money! (laughing)

adrienne: Someone gave me money and now I have to know how to be a writer. (laughs) Um, and feeling like the imposter syndrome stuff that comes with that immediately. And feeling like the only thing that assuaged me was like ok I'm diligently writing my blog at all times. And I write everyday. And so yes, I deserve this. I have written for free for a long time. Um, and so that was like how I got through the award. Cus I think people are always like Oh the award. It's so easy to receive those. And it's like actually, no. They become a different pressure, their own pressure.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: Um, and even now I struggle with my fiction writing. Like, I feel so confident in other realms of my writing. Um, and I'm learning to work with editors and all that but I still- My fiction writing still feels like the most vulnerable like unskinned, unformed, raw version of my imagination coming out. It feels like a lot of the things that are the deepest contradictions that I hold get played out most in my fiction writing.

Autumn: Mmmmm hm.

adrienne: And so...But! This is my goal. I really want to have my novel in the world by the time I'm 40. And I'm about to turn 39 (laughs). So I'm like push push push push!

Autumn: No pressure.

adrienne: It's like it's time to stop fronting on myself. I've got the content, and I want to put it out there.

Autumn: Yeah. And I'm- I imagine for you that, right? That there's- You're also going through this experience right now. Where you've just had the *Emergent Strategy* book come out. Where... Um that is such a marriage of so many parts of your life. But is like an explicitly like- It's a nonfiction strategic book that's also very much based on Octavia Butler's work in some

way. Or really drawing on it. And I- I- I would imagine that there's some interesting thing that's happening for you around like the fact that you've got this very successful political piece that's come out while you're also trying to birth this fiction work. Right?

adrienne: Absolutely.

Autumn: Yeah.

adrienne: Yeah, I mean it's actually totally a mindf-(bleep sound)-k cus it's like ohhh! Oh my gosh, people love this. Like, maybe I just need to stick in this zone?

Autumn: Right.

adrienne: Like this is what people like. And they affir- You know there's so much affirmation that comes back. But it's also because *Emergent Strategy* is weaving together lots and lots and lots of people's ideas.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: Like so many people. For me, I look at it as a collective experience even though it's like I'm the one who- I'm the conduit for that collective experience in this instance. And people trust me to be that conduit. But, the fiction it's just like wuuh! You know, it's like what if people read this and they're like Phony! Like she can't write. Or she has no ideas of her own. Or this is just whatever. You know? It's also like we're constantly regurgitating ideas. So it's saying like I have the right to take all this material of life and regurgitate it and pull it together in a way that is distinctly my own.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: And... You know... And then the scary part is like I'll share that with people and see what comes back. And, like, knowing like the first novel for most people is rarely the great american novel, or like the massive successful novel. Like Octavia put out *Kindred*, and like Kindred did- Kindred did so well. But it wasn't her first novel.

Autumn: Right.

adrienne: You know? And I think that it's so- For me it's so important to remember this. Oh she had other work that I find incredible, but that wasn't received. You know? It was like ohh cool. Okay cool. But then *Kindred* was the one that was like oh this grafts most with what people are familiar with, and like can sort of conceive of reading about. Right? It's like oh. Slave era america. Like yes. Got it.

Autumn: Trapped in slave era! (laughs)

adrienne: Right? We're not time travelling all over the place, you know? Or interacting with aliens or any of the other weird stuff that she did. And so I think that's also a thing. Is being like, my book starts off with some things that are familiar, but there's a lot that's unfamiliar to even me as I was writing it. So I'm like- I love that you talked about the mystery of your own story. That I'm like, this story is telling me what it wants to be. These characters are telling me who they want to be.

Autumn: Yes.

adrienne: And I always kinda laugh when writers say that. And then when you're in the experience you're just like oh, I'm so blessed to be receiving this. And let me do right by it.

Autumn: One quick thing I wanted to say about Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, that I think is like- Oc- Octavia Butler's like the queen of... uh reversals. Like, you know what I mean? (laughs). And just taking something that is, particularly in terms of the types of novels that she wrote, taking

something that is sort of a tried and true writing tradition, and then just reversing the way it happens. So, *Fledgling* is a great example of taking like the whole concept of writing a novel about vampires, and then making it this whole thing about sexual taboos and race. You know? And being just like guess what I'm gonna do something totally different with it. And *Kindred*, I think, a really good example of that in ways that- that we often don't recognize. That like one of the things that's interesting that's happening in *Kindred*, is you have this character that's time travelling without any consent to be doing so. And almost every time travel novel I've ever seen or heard about or even time travel story, people are intentionally choosing to travel back in time. And usually the confusion is that they end up in the wrong time, the one that they didn't intend to go to.

adrienne: (laughing).

Autumn: Right? (laughing) Uhum, or they travelled forward instead of backward. Whereas in *Kindred*, it's literally this person keeps getting sucked back in time because her ancestor needs her to save him. Her white ancestor needs her to save him. Right? And so it's this whole like- It's this amazi- Incredible like- In some ways such a simple device that she's using that makes this incredibly powerful story that's unlike any time travel story, you know, I've ever read. Um, and that's one of the things that I- I think- And I- I- I can't help but wonder with her, and I don't know that there's a way to know this. Maybe some people who've like looked through her papers extensively would know. But, I wonder with her, how much she was aware that she was doing those reversals with those... um... those like um very traditional devices. Writing devices. Or if, similarly to what we've experienced, that there was an unveiling where she was sort of in the midst of writing and realized that I'm doing something totally different right now.

adrienne: I love that question. And I feel like that would be a good one- It makes me be like Oh we need to have Ayana Jamieson on the show.

Autumn: (whispering) Ah yes!

adrienne: Because she and Moya Bailey are basically at the heart of Octavia Butler Legacy Network. Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network. And have been doing a lot of going in the Huntington Library and reading through Octavia's journals. And Octavia left all the bread crumbs apparently.

Autumn: (laughs).

adrienne: There's just so much journaling and thinking and planning and plotting for her own life, for her stories. Um, edit after edit after edit of her stories. There's so much in there. So I think it would be great to have- have- have them on. Um, Ayana and Moya. And I think also they're writing a biography of Octavia.

Autumn: (quietly) Whaaaaaat !

adrienne: Based on what they're learning in there. So, I think we can- We're about to know more.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: Um, but one thing I wanted to throw in as you were talking is, you know, the graphic novel of *Kindred* just came out. John Jennings and Damian Duffy did this gorgeous graphic novel. And re-reading *Kindred* in that way also illuminated for me. I'm like oh! There's those aspects of what she's doing differently. And then how she does gender is so different. Because she's like- The character of Dana is... a very modern person. A very modern woman. And

initially in the time travel she's like I'm not changing for y'all slave owners. (laughs) Like I'm not wearing a dress. I'm wearing pants. I'm whatever. And I just love that it's like, oh, where are the places where we think I could hold this line or be stubborn, that fall apart when you start to put your characters in new conditions.

Autumn: Mmmmmmm.

adrienne: And be like, oh, what do we actually know about power? Our own personal power. How willing are we to fight for that? And, I feel like, that is also a place of persistence. Of being like I might write my initial story, and then how to I persist at the visionary fiction element of it. Where I start to persist about what is the politic I'm advancing. And that there is a politic that I'm gonna be persistent about advancing, that if I just write a story without being thoughtful, um, about the social conditions, the political conditions of my time, and of the ti- of the things that I want to generate, then, it's very easy to end up telling a story that just, um, reinforces all the status quo. And so I think that there's something, and I wonder, you know I always think about this, I'm like, you know, how much did Octavia think, oh I need to write a story that really addresses hierarchy. Or, you know? Does the brilliance of hierarchy emerge in the writing? Either way, she does that work. Right?

Autumn: Yeah. And I think that actually leads me to another, uh, aspect of Octavia's lineage that I find really, uh, powerful for all of us who are, um, black and brown writers. Which is that- and something that I think in- what little I've seen of her notes and journals, you see really clearly that she was a highly ambitious writer about her writing. And that she really had her sense of herself as someone who was going to be powerful, and famous, and infamous. As a writer. And, that that was part of her goal. Was not just to publish her work, but also to be famous at what she did. And, that like she has these affirmations that she said to herself or that she wrote to herself. About the level of fame she wanted to rise to. And um for me, just seeing that and obviously there's sort of a vulnerability to those notes being available to us, after she's died. But, I'm- I doubt that she would've had any embarrassment around the fact that she was a highly ambitious writer. You know? And I think that that's an interesting thing for me to hold as...um... as a a brown woman who like... you know... um- the- the work that I do in the world is very much about political education and facilitation and assisting people who are on the frontline work and movement building. To do their work better. But, rarely am I putting myself in a position where I am ambitiously trying to sort of um be in the center or sort of be a leading voice of whatever the work is. Right? Like I'm very much an intermediary, in terms of my political work. Um, but, what would it look like if I decided to say my ambition is to be like, an incredibly famous, brown, queer woman author? Right? And like I'm not just trying to write a great story. I'm trying to write a great story that's going to be read by millions of people. Like, that's such a different framework for thinking about the work that we want to do. And yet, it becomes so important when we think about, you know, what the project that you and Walidah were advancing with *Octavia's Brood* was- It was such an inherently political project in saying like, we are going to be centering a completely different set of voices. And a completely different set of experiences. And a completely different vision for the future that we want thru this writing. And so, you know, thinking about- Thinking about the ambition of being read by millions, through the lens of I want to be read by millions, not just because I want people to like- I want people to love me. But, like I want to be read by millions because I want people to be- I want people to be

imagining this future. And that's like a- That's a- It's a- It's like is it a burden ? Or is it a gift? Like what is it that she was really taking on with that ambition? And what is it that we're really called to take on with our ambition as writers who want to be famous writers.

adrienne: Well, the thing that's hilarious is I'm like, I don't want to be a famous writer. (laughs) I'm like- I feel like- I think of my-

Autumn: Sorry

adrienne: I mean no, it's fascinating. It- And I always wonder like would that have been the goal if she'd like tasted fame first? Um, because I feel like even small tastes of fame really change how it feels. And, you know I say this, I'm a voracious writer. And I love writing, and I love creating like a small bubble of people who love my writing. Like, I- I keep a safe little bubble around me of people who are like Yeah girl! You're brilliant.

Autumn: (quietly laughing)

adrienne: Um, but then, everytime I start to dip my toe out, or that bubble starts to grow, every single time I freak out. And, I pull back. And several times I have like pulled back from what could've been my launch point or something. You know, I've had so many opportunities where people are like, this person wants to interview you on this major platform. Or this person wants to publish your work here. And, I'm like (makes gagging noise), you know, something chokes inside of me with that.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: And so, that's been a piece of work that I've really been up to. It's like, even again, like *Octavia's Brood* and even *Emergent Strategy* feel both like they're rooted in the collective. They're rooted in so many people. And so, even as the attention flows in, I can redirect it out, and redirect it out towards look at all these people. And, I feel like, oh I have the energy to do that, I have the capacity to do that. And so, I- I- really wonder about that. I'm like oh, how do I get out of my own way as a writer? And say like, I do believe that there are ideas, and there are stories in me that should be heard by lots and lots and lots of people. Like more people than read *Octavia's Brood*. More people than are gonna read *Emergent Strategy*. Even more people than that. And I'm like how would I get comfortable with that? Because so far I have not felt comfortable with that.

Autumn: Well, and this- And this doesn't necessarily need to go into the podcast, it might not even be totally appropriate for podcast land, but like I would push back gently on the idea that you are successfully redirecting people's attention away from you when it comes to *Emergent Strategy*.

adrienne: (says something inaudible and laughs)

Autumn: Do you know what I mean? It's like it's not- And I think that there is a sense- And this is I think the thing that like- I think the thing that I'm trying to get at with Octavia's ambition as a writer is there's a sense that, you know, you might wanna hang on to some idea that you can control the way people are giving attention to your work, but ultimately, once you're work is out there, you can't actually control how people are giving attention to it. And so I think that, like when I see those notes from Octavia, it seems like, she was like casting a spell. You know what I mean? That she was doing this sort of spellcasting of like this is the type of attention that I want on my work. Right? (laughs). But knowing that ultimately there's actually no control. (quiet pause)

adrienne: So, you're right. I totally love that point. This is actually one of the things I've been wrestling with, is the distinction. Like, when *Octavia's Brood* came out, Walidah and I would travel with it. And we would go places and the response from people was just like this is so cool. Y'all have done something like really really really cool. Yeah when *Octavia's Brood* came out, it felt like we're pushing. You know? We want these stories to get out there. We're taking every opportunity can.

Autumn: Well it's an anthology of stories.

adrienne: It's an anthology of stories, we want to get it out there. And, that when peopl- Like afterwards, people were not worshipful of us. They were worshipful of Octavia through us and through the work. And they were excited about us, but the energy was still moving through towards Octavia and through towards all the writers. And the difference with *Emergent Strategy* has been like, in the like- I mean- First of all- Well part of it (laughs)- Coming out of the Allied Media Conference, this might've been just like such a special experience, and it might not happen again. So, I know that. But, at Allied Media Conference, it was like a worshipful energy was flowing towards me. Like a divine- Like they were like oh, something divine has happened. This book is not just like a book, it's not just theory. It feels like a sacred piece of work. Which is how I felt when it was coming through.

Autumn: Mmm.

adrienne: And, it's amazing that it travelled all the way through me. And through the editing process and through the publishing process. And when people are picking it up, they're feeling that sacredness.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: Um, but then yeah, the energy that comes to me that way, and I'm like I don't know what to do with that. People are bringing me presents. And all this stuff, and I'm like, I don't know what to do with all that. Um, and, I feel like that was- That would be even more compounded if the fiction that I write, which also feels like- I get into a very sacred space to write that fiction, and I really feel like I'm having a conversation with the universe. I'm telling some stories that are coming through from beyond me. Whatever you want to call that beyond me place where the stories live. That intersects with the experiences I have enough to translate into characters and language and conversations. Um, so I do feel like there's that like maybe I need to get more ambitious. Or maybe I just need to recognize that there's a part of me that already is ambitious and has been pushing through the part of me that's scared to be known. And it's just like you might be scared, the story's gonna come through anyway. You might be scared this book's gonna come through anyway.

Autumn: Mhm.

adrienne: And maybe my next decade of work will be getting out of the way. Um, and allowing the stories to really come through. And figuring out more hermyty practices. Cus I feel like Octavia was also a hermit.

Autumn: Totally.

adrienne: You know I'm like more extroverted than she was in a lot of ways, and yet more scared of fame than she ever seemed to be.

Autumn: Yeah. Yep. Completely. And I think in terms of that piece around like what's coming through you, I think you know, one of the things we really have to own as people who are of the

African diaspora, is that we are- We have literal generations of ancestors who were silenced in such brutal and horrifying ways. And, um, you know one of the things that I've been really working with in my own like spiritual practice, and a lot of the therapeutic work that I've been doing is like reckoning with all the ways in which, um, my ancestors visit me and come to me. And, um, and sometimes those are like extremely f- like frightening experiences. And yet, I'm having to learn like how to receive those experiences as these like incredible gifts of like- And that like- And there's a level in which it's like- There's a level on which it's about um historical trauma, generational trauma, and like- And the way memory lives in our bodies. But then there's also um, there's also these other interesting ways in which we have to recognize those voices are still alive. You know, I was talking with our friend Alexis Pauline Gumbs about

adrienne: (quietly) Love her!

Autumn: (singing) Love her! About some work that she's been doing around um, uh, uh sound and um water. And she was sharing with me this really interesting, again kind of terrifying piece of information, that like sounds like remain in the water for so much longer than they- It takes much longer for sound to disperse in water than it takes for sound to disperse in air. And so, sound can remain in the water for literally generations.

adrienne: Ooh.

Autumn: And so, she was pointing out to me that the sounds that our ancestors made as they were like jumping from ships during the middle passage and drowning in the ocean, are still in the ocean.

adrienne: Mmmm.

Autumn: Right? They're still in the bodies of water that we like exist in now. That- And so there's- Right? There's like- It's like- It gives me chills even to like think about. And so there's this way in which like oh yeah ancestral memories are coming through me. And also ancestral memories didn't go anywhere. You know what I mean? Like so much of this stuff that um- So much of what we're living in now is this unprocessed trauma that has not gone anywhere. Right? And so it's like, when- When I think about it in that way, that like what is my- What is my responsibility as a writer? You know, people think that they get to choose about whether their writing is political or not. I'm just like Ah ah ah. N-n-no. No. Like.

adrienne: (laughs).

Autumn: Like you're writing is political regardless of who you are and where you stand. It's about how conscious you are about the politics that you're writing from. And like, if I'm gonna be responsible, it's not like- It's not even just being responsible to the politics that I'm offering. It's also being responsible to all of my ancestors who were silenced. And the stories they want to tell. The stories that have to come through me because who else is going to be telling this story? Right? Like, we might be among the last generations on this earth that even can tell these stories. Like (laughs) like if it's not u- Like if not us, who?

adrienne: Well, I re- I mean, you just blew my mind. And my heart and my body.

Autumn: (singing) Thank you!

adrienne: You're so smart. And so just connected. Right ? Because I think- So two things jump to mind. One, is I have to talk about Lucille Clifton here. A few years ago, our friend Alexis, um, recommended this book to me called *Soul Talk*-

Autumn: Who we have to have on the show! We have to have Alexis on the show.

adrienne: She has to be on the show. Like, we should text her right after we finish. So, but so, she recommended this book *Soul Talk* to me. Cus I was going through this period of like am I a witch? What's going on? That's a whole nother show.

Autumn: (bursts out laughing)

adrienne: (laughs) I literally- I literally emailed her and I was like am I a witch or a priestess? What's going on Alexis? And she was like uh, read this book. So. The book is called *Soul Talk* and it's by Gloria Hull. And she interviewed, and wrote, and like thought about all these women right at the um, sort of the turn of the century- No, turn of the decade of the 1980s. It's just like basically right around there. Like who was making art? Who was creating? What conversations were they in? And so she talks to Toni Cade Bambara, and Sonia Sanchez, and all these people. But, Lucille Clifton is one of them. And Lucille Clifton talks about this. That, in a certain point in her career, she started to be woken up, like pre-dawn hours, with these poems. And she recognized like slowly that it was her slave ancestors sending these poems down the line to her. And that she needed to wake up early and be there to receive them. And that it was not optional. That she needed to hear it. So that jumps into my heart. And I'm like that's how it feels! It feels like something long ago and f- and still to come. Like that I'm at the junction of time. You know it's like time is this cycle, but there's also this behind and this ahead. And then I'm like being pulled along that line to like make the connection between those ancestors, those silenced voices, and they're deepest longings cast forward seven generations. Twenty generations. As far ahead as can be imagined for human existence. And in that spectrum, you know that's almost always the place where I'm like get out of the way. Just write down what needs to be written down and put it out there. And it- it feels like- Just such a like oh the pep talk I always need is not like you're a good writer, or you know, people want to hear what you have to say. The pep talk I always need is like, this is your spiritual calling. This is your work. It's always been your work, the first thing I ever did was writing. The thing I have consistently done through everything else is writing. And, there's- And writing is the way I get- It's like the blackest self that I am. Right?

Autumn: Mmm.

adrienne: Like it's the way that I feel the most connected to a blackness that is not simply about oppression and pain and like denial of humanity. But, this blackness that is a through line from all the way back to all the way forward. That it's like, oh I carry forward a blackness that comes from before our trauma. And I can feel it in me. That I'm like, there's blackness pre-trauma existing in me.

Autumn: Yes!!!

adrienne: And I get to like write that- write that and put my attention on it and grow it with the stories that I tell. So, ah! Thank you. I feel like you just did therapy on me.

[beat starts playing and low strings come in]

Autumn: We hope you enjoyed our second episode. If you like what you hear, let us know. You can comment on our podcast on social media. You can repost us on social media. But you can also make a sustaining donation through patreon. By visiting our page. Which is patreon.com/endoftheworldshow. Thanks for listening.

[more of the same music plays]

Autumn: *How to Survive the End of the World* is produced and edited by our beloved Zak Rosen. Today's episode features music from Tunde Olaniran, and Blue Dot Sessions. And a special shout out to our movement comrade Mahfam Malek who came up with the name for this podcast.

[music keeps playing and then fades out]