

Library Journal

Your novel also explores unjust parts of history that still echo today, beginning with a mention of Henrietta Lacks. How did setting your story in an archive aid you in exploring these themes?

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The book started as an epic science fiction poem and evolved into a story within a story, with poems and images woven into the novel. My protagonist Xandria Brown is an archivist and curator at The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens. The Huntington is the actual location of Octavia E. Butler's literary archive.

It was probably the first museum I visited on a class field trip and one of the last places my mom and I spent time together before she died. We went to the Butler exhibit *Telling My Stories*. I thought it would be interesting to write a character whose passion and life's work was to tend to memory, history, African American ephemera and realia embodied in the archive while suffering with memory issues herself due to debilitating long-COVID, brain fog, generational health issues, and grief. Xandria briefly muses on Henrietta Lacks in an opening interview with the National Museum of African American History and Culture because of the similarity of their situation—lack of consent.

LJ

Your novel also features AI characters with their own goals and limits. Could you also talk about your approach?

SJ

I can't stand Siri or Alexa. I can't stand chatbots either. Who does if you're on the receiving end stuck in an inefficiency loop. For chatbots I prefer to use digits instead of speaking to them because I'm convinced our voices are being scraped. After feedback from beta readers and my editor, Siri and Alexa as characters had to go—people already have predetermined views based on how they interact with existing personal assistants. Renaming happened in a later draft with an easter egg—a nod to Ntozake Shange's sister characters Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo. There are over 10 non-human tech characters each with specific intended functions. Also based on feedback from my editor, I developed a storyboard and a character analysis on their external problems,

wants, goals, tasks, perceived needs, stakes, etc. For example, Sassafras wants to be recognized as super useful and to be able to see (it has no vision system.) Unlike Cypress Telepresence whose purpose is remote work, and who isn't very intelligent. Work envy – both human and compute intelligence – is also a theme of the novel.

LJ

There are also medical uses for your AI, one of whom monitors Xandria's health and mental state. Would you like to talk about their relationship with Xandria and each other?

SJ

Medical uses were inspired by:

- The FDA approved the use of RFID implants in 2004 for patient ID and medical records (first implanted in 1998)
- The American Medical Association weighed in on potential benefits in humans for medical purposes but also has articulated concerns with ethical issues from being chipped.
- In 2016 [Neuralink](#) was founded by Elon Musk and a group of scientists and engineers. In January 2024 they announced they had successfully implanted their first device in a human.

The interconnected yet fraught relationships between Xandria's various assistive technologies for her reasonable accommodation is interesting and surprised me. It shouldn't though, my experience in various corporate settings is that work families/pods develop (outside of prescribed teams) as well as full on rivalries and project sabotage.