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Grace Paley, Octavia E. Butler, and Wendy Wasserstein in the CUNY
Graduate Center Bathroom

Marleen S. Barr

I was recently watching Audrey Hepburn lust after Humphrey Bogart and William Holden (playing the very wealthy brothers David and Linus Larrabee) in the great 1954 movie *Sabrina*. Since this was the fifth time I had seen the film, I knew that Audrey/Sabrina would attain her heart's desire. My viewing pleasure consisted of noting all the reference to places which are familiar to me as a New Yorker such as Broad Street, the Long Island Railroad, and Long Island Sound. I was jarred from my mid-twentieth century way back machine eye candy complacency when I heard "B. Altman." For me, B. Altman is no nostalgia location. B. Altman figures in my current professional writing life. The former B. Altman Department Store is nothing other than the present location of the City University of New York Graduate Center. Between attending wonderful academic lectures and writing in the Grad Center library, well, I almost live in the place.

The lust I experience in the academically reconfigured B. Altman building is as intense as Audrey/Sabrina's quest to land the love of her life by marrying one of the Larrabee brothers. I am not talking about a tryst; I refer to trying. The love of my life is trying to promote my novels *Oy Pioneer!* and *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir*. I love these novels as much as Audrey/Sabrina loved David and Linus Larrabee. But, unlike Audrey/Sabrina, I never coveted the attention of rich men. I have, instead, chased famous female authors within the confines of

the Grad Center. No contemporary versions of Bogart and Holden for me. I engaged in self-promotion by throwing myself at Grace Paly, Octavia E. Butler, and Wendy Wasserstein. How I did so is inimitably *Marleen*, not *Sabrina*. Just as well. Even when I was an infant, I was not petite enough to resemble Audrey Hepburn. No matter that my mother went to Julia Richman High School with Bogart's wife Lauren Bacall and Bogart wanted Bacall to play Sabrina. Yes, my mother brought Bacall home to schmooze with my grandparents. But this is another story about fame. The following story is about celebrity female writers in the Grad Center, not famous actresses.

I know the Grad Center like the back of my hand. So when I stood in the lobby and heard Grace Paley say that she had to use the bathroom, I looked at her shoes and headed straight for the lobby floor women's facilities. I sequestered myself in a stall and waited for Paley to enter. When I heard someone arrive, I looked under the stall to see if the shoes in my line of sight were the ones on Paley's feet. Sure enough they were. I positioned myself by the mirror directly in front of the stall Paley was using. The stall door opened. Paley stepped out

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“Ms. Paley,” I said feigning surprise and turning away from the mirror. “I can't believe it's you. I can't believe that I have the accidental chance to meet you. You're my favorite writer. I revel in your Jewish female New York voice. I emulate you because I'm a Jewish female New York writer too. Actually, I'm known as a feminist science fiction scholar. But I have a first novel in press called *Oy Pioneer!* You, of course, know how hard it is to promote a first novel. I am getting up all of my courage to use this accidental meeting as an occasion to ask you for a blurb. I can't lie. This meeting is no accident. I heard you say that you had to use the bathroom

and I followed you in here. This took courage. This is Paley-esque. Surely you appreciate my chutzpah. So, can I please have a blurb from you?”

“I am very busy. I don’t write blurbs. But I am in Vermont for the summer. You can contact me there.” I whipped out a piece of paper. Paley wrote her address on it.

“Thank you so much, Ms. Paley. I’ll certainly write to you.”

“You’re welcome, dear,” said Paley as she exited the bathroom.

I did in fact write to Paley. She never answered me. I cherish the address that I have written in her own hand.

I also encountered Octavia E. Butler in that lobby floor Grad Center bathroom. I did not stalk her, though. When Butler emerged from the very same stall Paley had used, I was shocked to the extent that I was speechless. Eschewing the idea that there is a magic toilet stall in the Grad Center which spews out famous women writers to enable me to engage in self-promotion, I eventually found the words to introduce myself to Butler. I thanked her for agreeing to contribute a story to my *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction’s Newest New Wave Trajectory*, the first academic anthology about black women and science fiction. Butler was very gracious. Knowing that she was shy, I engaged in no further self-promotion. I was in awe of Butler to the extent that I surreptitiously followed her down Fifth Avenue for several blocks. The terms of her contribution to *Afro-Future Females* were that she merely requested a copy. I was never able to honor her request; she passed away before the anthology was published. I

memorialized Butler in the anthology and subsequently wrote an account about working with her which appeared in the black studies academic journal *Callaloo*. I remain grateful that I was able to meet Butler in person.

A toilet stall did not figure in my planned Grad Center encounter with Wendy Wasserstein. My friend Charlotte who worked in the Grad Center events department came up with the idea of having me do a reading with Wasserstein to benefit the Child Development Center. Reading with Wasserstein in the ninth floor Skylight Room was an offer I could not refuse. It was scary, though. She was, well, the famous Wendy Wasserstein--and I was an about to be published first time novelist. At least I was able to read from my manuscript copy of *Oy Pioneer!* before she took the stage. Wasserstein would have been an impossibly hard act to follow. Reading with Wasserstein was the most balls sodden self-promotion that I have ever undertaken. Immediately after the ordeal was over, I sought the feedback of Carol, an audience member and my lifelong friend.

“How did I do?” I asked Carol.

“You did very well. But Wasserstein was better.” Carol always tells me the truth.

“Of course Wasserstein was better. Quick. I need courage to ask her for a blurb. Should I do it?”

”

“Go for it.”

I approached Wasserstein with trepidation. “Ms. Wasserstein, it was an honor to read with you. As you know, I am a fledgling novelist. Would you help me by blurbing my novel?” “No,” said Wasserstein. I walked away with my head down. She headed for the bathroom. I did not follow her. I was sure that the ninth floor bathroom, unlike its counterpart on the lobby level, did not contain a toilet stall which seemed to be magical.

I published a fictitious account of the reading in *Women In Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*. I described how Wasserstein and then Grad Center president Frances Degen Horowitz (who did resemble Audrey Hepburn either) went flying around the Skylight Room in a manner which would do Peter Pan proud. I left out the part about how Wasserstein curtly refused my blurb request. But thus it was. I did relate the story to Wasserstein’s biographer Julie Salamon a few years later, though.

I went on to marry an alien and write about it in novel number two, *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir*. I said alien, not extraterrestrial. I married a French Canadian who is not an American citizen. I named him Pepe Le Pew and pictured him on the novel cover as a skunk astride a flying saucer. This is another story which has nothing to do with the Grad Center. I am as happy with my husband as I imagine Audrey/Sabrina was with Linus Larrabee. When I look back upon my self-promotional efforts in the Grad Center, I have to admit that they were not very successful. But I do have wonderful memories of in person encounters with stupendous celebrity women writers. I don’t know how the story of my fiction writing career will end. My *Oy* novels are a trilogy. The third installment is written and in circulation. I am trying to get an

agent. If you are an agent and you are reading this, can we talk? Can we talk in the Grad Center? I promise not to stalk you in either the lobby floor bathroom (supposed magic stall aside) or the Skylight Room floor bathroom.

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Marleen S. Barr is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction and teaches English at the City University of New York. She has won the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism. Barr is the author of *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, *Feminist Fabulation: Space/Postmodern Fiction*, and *Genre Fission: A New Discourse Practice for Cultural Studies*. Barr has edited many anthologies and co-edited the science fiction issue of PMLA. She is the author of the novels *Oy Pioneer!* and *Oy Feminist Planets: A Fake Memoir*.