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Missing Octavia: A Review of *Strange Matings:  
Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and  
Octavia E. Butler*

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It is, as they cite Hilary Rose, a “dream laboratory” for feminist science studies. The authors point out how Haraway sees Octavia Butler’s work as disruptive of the totalizing tendencies and boundary policing prevalent in sociobiology. Interestingly, they also see in Haraway’s work the evolution of a set of reading protocols that they compare to Samuel R. Delany’s. Finally, they compare her use of story in understanding nature/culture to Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Carrier-Bag Theory of Fiction” (1986), nicely setting up the final chapter of the book.

“Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others” is Donna Haraway’s generous contribution to the volume, a tour de force in which she weaves together acacia seeds and ants with Le Guin’s story “The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the *Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics*” (1987), essentially rewriting the story to demonstrate symbiosis between nature and culture, story and science, so that, as she concludes, “sympoiesis displaces autopoiesis and all other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies. Sympoiesis is a carrier bag for ongoingness, a yoke for becoming with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperation” (145-46). This rousing conclusion shows how—although she, like Le Guin, rejects the seminal story of the hero for the more generative one of the carrier bag—she is nevertheless a heroic figure for a great many sf scholars. Someone (or something) has to sow the seeds, and Margaret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick continue the propagation in this fine book.—**Joan Gordon, Nassau Community College**

**Missing Octavia.** Rebecca J. Holden and Nisi Shawl, eds. *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler*. Seattle: Aqueduct, 2013. iii + 314 pp. \$20 pbk.

“The last Christmas card Octavia sent me had a photo of Mt. Rainier on the front. Not only did she love that mountain, she resembled it. She towered over everything ordinary; she made her own weather” (2), Nisi Shawl exults in the introduction to her co-edited anthology *Strange Matings*, a melding of poems, remembrances, interviews, leaked emails, and academic essays honoring the life and work of the late Octavia E. Butler. The sense of grief evinced by Shawl’s ecstatically mournful testimonial bears witness to Butler’s larger-than-life impact on both the field of science fiction and the lives of those with whom she was close; coming to press seven years after Butler’s unexpected death at the young age of 58, there is a sense that for the writers of *Strange Matings*—both for those who knew Butler personally and those who were touched by her only through her work—this loss still feels very raw, as if it somehow happened only yesterday. As a still-grieving devotee of Butler (though I never met her myself), I feel utterly unqualified to speculate how this book will come across to a more emotionally detached audience of casual fans or non-fans, if any such people would have reason to take up *Strange Matings* in the first place. I can only say that, for myself, the book’s

bittersweet mix of joy and tears has the necessary and wonderfully cathartic quality of an Irish funeral. The book creates a space where fans of Butler's work can grieve together with those who knew her well and with those who only wish they did; the acknowledgments page gestures towards this larger community of fans, scholars, and fan-scholars in its recognition of the contributions of WisCon and the Carl Brandon Society to the project, along with individual supporters including Nalo Hopkinson, Lisa Yaszek, and Catherine Prendergast.

This jagged charge of shared, collective grief makes *Strange Matings* unlike any other scholarly book I can think of. Even the more academic essays frequently find themselves slipping into the rhetoric of personal witnessing, as one can see simply from scanning the titles: "The Impact of Octavia Butler's Early Work on Feminist Science Fiction as a Whole (and on One Feminist Science Fiction Scholar in Particular)"; "How a Young Feminist Writer Found Alternatives to White Bourgeois Narrative Models in the Early Novels of Octavia Butler"; "Growing (Up) with Octavia E. Butler"; "Octavia Butler, 'Speech Sounds,' and Me." As Holden herself admits in the introduction, she and other writers in the book find themselves unable to hold to the academic convention that would only call her "Butler" after the first use of her full name; instead, she is always "Octavia," even to those who never actually met her. Here then the book, only half-academic, becomes another kind of strange mating that speaks to the difficulty of *really* caring about something, and someone, in a discursive field that pretends to an ideal objectivity and emotional detachment from one's research material—where "love" is at best an embarrassment to be left unspoken and at worst a cause for suspicion or alarm.

This is not to say that the book is purely or uncomplicatedly hagiographic, or that its interest is limited entirely to the emotional sphere. Although—or perhaps because—it was written and edited by those who loved Butler, we get glimpses of her full personality throughout the book: her shyness, her loneliness, her dark moods, her abiding pessimism, her tendency towards brutal self-criticism and abandonment of cherished projects, and her frustration with the speed and quality of her writing, especially as her health began to decline. Of course such moments take nothing away from her legacy or importance; if anything, the complicating gestures turn her into even more of a heroic figure, humanizing a writer whom fans and students commonly encounter as a kind of holy person, almost a secular prophet. The overall mood of the text is not altogether unlike the aura surrounding Lauren Olamina in Butler's own *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), a character Butler sometimes thought of as her best self, even her super-self—except that, unlike in the novels, there is no one here who can find one bad word to say about her. "Yes, she could have founded a religion," writes Steven Barnes in his remembrance, "and its followers would have been good, decent, aware human beings" (107). We see in Benjamin Rosenbaum's "Goodbye My Hero" a sense of Butler as teacher through a recounting of his experiences at the Clarion Writers Workshop (where she herself got her start

under the mentorship of Samuel R. Delany and Harlan Ellison); we see in other essays reflections on how Butler might help us to be better teachers to our own students; and we see in the memories of her friends a model for generosity, solidarity, and hope.

While both the remembrances and the academic essays are exemplary—particularly those by Thomas Foster and Steve Shaviro, which draw out connections between texts from disparate moments in her career—and the book as a whole a necessary reference for anyone working on Butler’s career or simply finding themselves missing her voice, for me as a fan-critic the most touching parts of the book were the short glimpses of Butler’s irreplaceable personality as seen through her own informal and casual utterances. In a previously unpublished interview with Shawl that is threaded through the volume, we find Butler gently teasing her friend, playing off the audience with an ease and confidence that belies the social anxiety that plagued her in other contexts; in informal emails to Nnedi Okorafor, we see Butler responding to 9/11 and the war on terror not as author or artist but as horrified citizen. In Shawl’s interview, we see Butler explaining why the novel she somewhat famously disavowed, *Survivor* (1978), went south, as well as a sardonic recognition that telling people not to read it only made them desperate to do so; in a letter included in the volume as a facsimile, we see her trying to return her publishing advance for *Parable of the Talents*, which she very regretfully concluded she would never complete. Still other contributions give us a glimpse at the texts we have lost, including tantalizing hints of the unfinished *Parable of the Trickster* (now available in fragments at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA), which Shawl suggests should itself be thought of as the Trickster of the PARABLES series, its haunting ghost always half-there and half-not. Tananarive Due, in her remembrance, similarly links Butler’s literary fictions to her life and death in a transcendent, quasi-religious register, one that encompasses the strange mating of joy and mourning and memory and discipleship that runs through the volume as a whole: “Thank you for sharing your spirit with us, Octavia. You left a great gift behind for us, but we were greedy. We wanted more. We thought we had more time. How could I have forgotten what you taught us? You tried to warn us all along. You distilled it into words in *Parable of the Sower*. The only last truth is Change” (236).—Gerry Canavan, Marquette University

**Critical Astigmatism.** Gerald Alva Miller, Jr. *Exploring the Limits of the Human through Science Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. x + 238 pp. \$85 hc.

*Exploring the Limits of the Human through Science Fiction* delves into sf as a form of critical theory ideally suited to exploring the “different characteristics that define humans (i.e., identity categories, such as gender), the forces that motivate them (desire), the social formations that dominate them (power structures such as discipline and control), the power of memory and narrative that serve as humankind’s primary means for ordering reality and generating discourse, and humanity’s potential to evolve beyond the