

MOTHERING WHILE BROWN IN WHITE SPACES: Or, When I Took My Son to Octavia Butler's Exhibit¹

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Mothering while brown means all the times I've been told, not asked, to leave white spaces while with my child—university classrooms, academic conferences, exhibits, museums, cafes, restaurants. So you mother while brown anyway. You don't have the luxury otherwise. You mother while brown in white spaces and white buildings and white walls and white statues and all you can see is the whiteness of their white teeth telling you to please kindly just shut your kid the hell up, go away, and leave it all for them again. Mothering while brown in white spaces means that my son Alonsito is a liability, a distraction, a nuisance, an irritant, an aberration of a little brown boy with brown eyes that they refuse to look into because they will only see the emptiness of their nice, polite, white policies reflected back to them, their rules and regulations printed on official white sheets of paper.

I mothered while brown when I visited Octavia Butler's archives, which are housed in a sprawling white space, the Huntington library in San Marino, California, twelve miles away and a thirty-minute drive from Boyle Heights, where I live, and even longer on public transportation. The Huntington was founded by Henry E. Huntington, a white settler who amassed a fortune in California with railroads and property rights upheld by the land and labor of others who looked like us. His name hides their names but I know this isn't all his. Here, the price for admission is \$21 for students with ID and \$13 for "youth over four years old." (Are four-year-olds considered "youth" or preschoolers? How do they demarcate this difference? You question this, but

you know the answer is eaten by the accumulation of wealth.) I had applied for an internal fellowship through my institution where I was asked to justify in an essay why I should gain access to Octavia's archives for my dissertation. My application was rejected and instead it was awarded to a white woman who studies Elizabethan literature. She has access here but I do not. So I pay the money to see Octavia's archives behind glass and rules and time and distance and money. I do it for Octavia because I have no other choice.

My friend, another brown woman, drove from East LA and picked my son and me up for the long drive across town. From the car, I watched the landscape shifting from a brown space to a white space as we traversed from freeway to freeway, through smog and sunlight. We ride past white multi-million-dollar mansions that line the streets leading up to the Huntington. Octavia grew up in Pasadena, four miles and a ten-minute drive away, but I know that she did not benefit from the wealth of this neighborhood. She wrote in an essay once that her mother cleaned homes for white people and that they ordered her to use the back entrance, unseen. Here, the white majestic mansions have vast green, green lawns as if the droughts in California never existed. These white mansions are cleaned so well that you almost can't tell the subtle differences in the gradients of nice white bright paint on doors, columns, pillars, bird fountains, mailboxes. You have to look closely at the wealth, look very closely at the unseen. But Octavia's archives are here, so you go and pay the money at the admission booth. It is a lot of money. They don't need our admission fees, but they ask for it and collect it anyway. You bring an avocado and a bag of plantain chips and a water canteen and an applesauce cup to save money on lunch.

We enter the Huntington grounds. A pamphlet proudly states that there are 50,000 native plants here, neatly maintained in acres and rows and hills and fences, with tiny signs displaying their Latin names in neat white print. (I know that these are not their true names.) We walk toward the white building that contains her exhibit.

I hold my son's hand and walk up the white steps and see the window of the front door entrance, tinted like the black hole nothingness of a police car window. They can see outside but we can't see inside, and this bothers me. I need to see. I open the door to enter and a white male docent hovers at the door as if he saw us coming all along; his hand holds the door open just a crack while he blocks the rest of the entrance with his body. His only words were, "No toys," and he's not even looking at me, he's looking at Alonsito. He is a seven-year-old brown boy. My son holds his favorite stuffed animal, a Chihuahua the size of my hand. No toys. Unsettled, I tell my son this and I place the prohibited stuffed Chihuahua into my purse with his head sticking out and my son is satisfied. "That way he can still see," he says. We enter. I want to see the galaxy of her notebooks, drawings, letters, and photographs, all behind thick glass that will soon be coated with my fascination as evidenced by the stardust of my fingerprints.

Before we enter the room of the exhibit, Alonsito walks four or five feet in front of me. The white male docent rushes to me and says, "He can't be unattended." He is wrong, he is not unattended, but the space between me and Octavia's archive cracks in half with this assertion of his authority. We enter the exhibit and Alonsito then crawls on the floor while he talks to himself about space robots in some kind of a battle. The docent walks over to me again and says, "He can't be on the floor. He can sit on the bench over here." I look over when he gestures with his hand trailing behind him, almost like an afterthought, to give us an idea about how to get rid of ourselves.

I look and "over there" means outside of the exhibit, on a bench, in front of a large wall printed with a blown-up portrait of Octavia sitting in a chair with a bookshelf behind her. Next to her portrait is large text that informs visitors of exhibit name: "Octavia Butler: Telling Our Stories." The main exhibit room is mostly empty and my son isn't bothering anyone but the docent wants us to leave. He is waiting. Remaining inside the exhibit are white mothers with their children and their

toys. The docent does not speak to them. I overhear the white mothers. They paid the money and they do not know who Octavia is. “Oh, she wrote books?” Their children play with their toys. The docent spoke to me three times but he didn’t speak to them. They leave their fingerprints on top of mine, pointing at this or that, a world they do not experience that’s contained neatly to satisfy their curiosity in glass display cases. They are in a wormhole that they don’t even know exists, bending time and space easily to their will, a superpower that I will never have. But I can see the unseen. I see them all. I leave and they do not. The docent says nothing when he watches my son and me walk outside the door. He thinks that it’s his space, safe once again, as he peers through the tinted window.

A sign in the exhibit reads, “Who has power, who does not, how one can acquire power, and how power should be used—all of these pervade Butler’s work.” The white mothers in the exhibit do not know who Octavia is. They do not know her power, or mine. They were not asked to leave. Their children can play with their toys in a white room with white walls that was made for them, for their leisure on sunny days just like this one with their expensive “Oriental” parasols that they buy from the café for their slow walks among the plants. I walk outside. Alonsito runs in the cool springtime air with his arms up as if to collect all the sunlight. His Chihuahua is now liberated from my purse and he plays hide-and-seek with it among the looming tree trunks, the branches, the leaves. He belly laughs and it reverberates back and forth across this white space and time and no one tells him to be still, be quiet, be gone. Outside, I’m not alone. I see the 50,000 native plants who have been here all along and who will be without their Latin names, soon. They will flourish under the brilliance of 50,000 stars. I know because this is what Octavia foretold about mothers, children, and many, many suns.

Notes

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