WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

Design for Sharing Demonstration Performance
UCLA Royce Hall
March 6, 2020
ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

**Octavia E. Butler’s Parable of the Sower**

Created by Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon

Based on the novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* by Octavia E. Butler, this genre-defying work of theater features a powerhouse ensemble of 20 singers, actors, and musicians. It harnesses 200 years of black musical tradition to bring Butler’s acclaimed science fiction books to life in song.

Written by singer, composer and producer Toshi Reagon in collaboration with her mother, Bernice Johnson Reagon (song leader, composer, scholar, social activist, and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock), *Parable of the Sower* is a mesmerizing theatrical work of rare power and beauty.

At this special performance for youth audiences, Toshi and members of the cast will perform selected songs from the production, as well as other songs connected to the themes of community and social action.

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**About the Creators**

Toshi Reagon is a versatile singer-songwriter and producer, drawing on the traditions of uniquely American music: rock, blues, R&B, country, folk, spirituals and funk. Toshi has been performing since she was 17 years old. Her career really launched when Lenny Kravitz chose her, straight out of college, to open for him on his first world tour. Some of Toshi’s proudest moments include playing for her godfather Pete Seeger’s 90th birthday celebration at Madison Square Garden, and performing with the Freedom Singers at the White House, in a tribute to the music of the civil rights movement. As a composer and producer, Toshi has created original scores for dance works, collaborated on two contemporary operas, served as producer on multiple albums, and has had her own work featured in films and TV soundtracks.

Born in Atlanta and raised in Washington, DC, she comes from a musical—and political—family. Both her parents were civil rights activists in the 1960s, and founding members of the Freedom Singers, part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Her mother, Bernice Johnson Reagon, is a major cultural voice for freedom and justice; singing, composing, teaching, and speaking out against racism and injustice of all kinds. She is Professor Emeritus of History at American University, Curator Emeritus at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, and the author of two foundational texts in the study of African American music and cultural history, *Wade in the Water: African American Sacred Music Traditions* and *Africans in America: America’s Journey Through Slavery*. She is also the founder of the legendary a capella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. Her pioneering work as a scholar, teacher, and artist have been recognized with a Presidential Medal for contribution to public understanding of the Humanities and a MacArthur Fellowship.

Together, this powerful mother-daughter team wrote the music and lyrics for *Parable of the Sower*. 
WHO WAS OCTAVIA BUTLER?

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in Pasadena, California in 1947. As the first science fiction writer to be awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, and the first black woman to enter the predominantly white and male world of science fiction, Butler’s pursuit of a writing career required her to traverse many uncharted waters.

Butler responded to her own self-doubt by writing affirmations and notes of encouragement to herself. “I am a bestselling writer,” one entry, dated 1975, reads. “I write bestselling books.” She sometimes ends these affirmations with “So be it! See to it!” Butler also kept journals and made copious notes about her characters, ideas and themes while writing. Sometimes in notebooks, and sometimes written on a scrap paper, or in shaky handwriting while riding a bus, these notes give us insight into her creative process as it unfolded, her broader thinking about the world, and her determination to succeed.

Butler published 12 novels and a collection of short stories. She was the recipient of both the Hugo and the Nebula Awards, prestigious prizes for science fiction or fantasy literature. She is perhaps best known for her critically acclaimed 1979 novel *Kindred*, which takes place in both 1970s Altadena, California, and the antebellum South and explores topics of race, power, and our relationship with the past.

Today, her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, are often called prophetic or prescient. Set in 2024 in a dystopian version of Los Angeles, *Parable of the Sower* imagines what kind of collapse might result if the forces of climate change, mass incarceration, big pharma, gun violence, the tech industry, and profit-driven government continued unhampered for 30 years. “This was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy,” Butler once said in remarks at MIT. “All I have to say to that is: I certainly hope not.”

Her untimely death at age 58 in 2006 shocked and devastated members of the science fiction community. Butler and her work continue to influence writers and readers around the globe. Contemporary writers have published multiple anthologies, containing both stories and essays, in her memory. At The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens near Pasadena, scholars continue to learn about her work and her life through the study of the Octavia E. Butler Papers.
This is the coming-of-age story of a woman's struggle to help the free poor of her time to unite, help one another and partner the Earth—restoring it, not subduing it. The elements swirl around them but their enemies are the rich and the free poor themselves.

Octavia E. Butler, notes on Parable of the Sower, "This is the coming-of-age story..." ca. 1989. Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. ©Estate of Octavia E. Butler
In Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, Southern California in 2024 is a landscape of devastation caused by environmental disasters and governmental corruption. There has been no rain for years; people will kill for fresh water. Homelessness, hunger, drug addiction, and violence are rampant.

Lauren Oya Olamina is the 15-year-old daughter of a Baptist preacher. The family lives in the walled—and heavily armed—town of Robledo, near Los Angeles. Lauren feels disconnected from her father’s religion, and has begun a notebook with a series of short poems that reflect her own understanding of God. She calls her new religion Earthseed. In the novel, each chapter opens with an Earthseed verse.

Lauren is also what’s called in the novel a “sharer.” She has an unusual hyper-empathy syndrome, causing her to physically feel what other people—and to a lesser extent, animals—feel when they’re in pleasure or pain. Some people think of this as a disability, others consider it a kind of superpower. It’s a trait that helps make Lauren concerned with improving life for everyone around her, but also makes her extremely vulnerable.

Robledo is attacked and destroyed in a terrible fire, and Lauren’s family is killed. Along with a small group of survivors, Lauren begins a long and dangerous trek north, following rumors of jobs, safety, and farmable land.

Lauren’s group gathers followers along the journey, forging a new community from a diverse collection of survivors. Under Lauren’s leadership, they establish the first Earthseed community, a settlement they name Acorn.

The central idea of Lauren’s Earthseed philosophy is that change is the only controlling force in the universe. She sums it up in this verse:

> All that you touch You Change.
> All that you Change Changes you.
> The only lasting truth is Change.

She believes that humankind's destiny is to travel beyond Earth and live on other planets as our needs outgrow Earth’s resources, and that we should not try to subdue or control Earth. The only way to succeed is to be united as a community with shared goals.

**KEY TERM: ADAPTATION**

When a novel, short story or other written work is the basis for a movie, play, TV series or other kind of media, it is known as a **literary adaptation**. This production of *Parable of the Sower* is a musical adaptation of Butler’s novel; Toshi Reagon and Bernice Johnson Reagon used their own art form to explore the themes and ideas in the book in song and on stage. For Toshi, some of the most important ideas are kinship, community, and how we can work together to overcome the challenges we face—in Butler’s words: *unite, help one another*.

**KEY TERM: SCIENCE FICTION**

Science fiction (sometimes called sci fi or just SF) is a form of fiction or storytelling that typically deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts like advanced science and technology innovations, space exploration, time travel, parallel universes, and extraterrestrial life. It often explores the potential consequences of scientific, social, and technological innovations or failures.
This page from one of Butler’s pocket notebooks shows us her thoughts on why stories matter. It also helps us think about representation, and who decides what stories get shared.

In the middle paragraph, she reflects on the reality of life in the “old west”—which would have included many different races and backgrounds—as opposed to the predominantly white representation of it in popular Westerns on TV (like The Lone Ranger).

Butler was a black woman writing science fiction, a genre that has historically been dominated by white men. She famously said: “Why aren’t there more SF Black writers? There aren’t because there aren’t. What we don’t see, we assume can’t be. What a destructive assumption.”

*Parable of the Sower*—and much of Butler’s other writing—was groundbreaking because it featured young women of color, a group that was rarely represented in science fiction.

“One future,” she writes in this note, “is more and more of us writing ourselves in, telling our own stories.” It’s a future she helped make true.

**DISCUSSION**

What stories have mattered most to you?

Does it matter if the story is fiction or nonfiction?

Are there voices or stories in your community that you feel are lost or ignored?

Do you think Butler means literally writing about ourselves when she says “writing ourselves in? What are other ways to share important stories or amplify voices?

What are some challenges we are facing today in Los Angeles? Can taking positive action make us part of “the story” of those issues or problems?

Do you agree with Butler that “What we don’t see, we assume can’t be”? Why or why not?
ACTIVITY: SO BE IT! SEE TO IT!

Octavia Butler declared her vision of her personal future in the form of written affirmations. Check out the Huntington Library link below to see a full page of them. Affirmations are positive statements that can help you to challenge and overcome negative thoughts and self-doubt. Many people find that when you repeat them often, and believe in them, you can start to make positive changes toward your goals. One thing that affirmations do is help you state your goals and dreams clearly and specifically. They often start with “I am” or “I will.” Butler used the phrase “So be it! See to it!” as a call to action or a final declaration of her determination to reach her goals.

Create your own affirmations. What are your dreams for the future? What problems or issues will you solve? What will you achieve for yourself and your community?

You can do this in writing, or vocally in a group. You might choose to add a call-and-response element, where the group responds to each affirmation with “So be it! See to it!”

Dig Deeper: Videos and Further Reading

Hear Toshi and her collaborators talk about the novel and the creation of this performance.

Listen to Toshi play solo acoustic versions of two songs from the production.

See selected items from Octavia Butler’s archives at the Huntington Library’s website.

Learn more about Butler and her far-reaching influence with Radio Imagination—a 2016 project featuring 10 artists and writers making new work inspired by her personal papers.

You’re the Critic: Performance Review

Put yourself in the role of a music critic. In 2-3 short paragraphs, review your visit to Royce Hall to see Parable of the Sower. Here are some things to think about when writing your review:

• What words would you use to describe this performance?
• Did you experience or learn something new?
• Was there a theme or idea in the work? What was it?
• How did the performance make you feel?
• What was your favorite piece or moment? Why?
• Would you recommend this performance to a friend? Why or why not?

If you need some more help, look in the newspaper for theater or concert reviews in the Arts section. Read a few to see how they are structured, what is included and what is not.

We’d love to hear your feedback—send us your review!
WHAT WE CARRY: POETRY AND ART ACTIVITY

Explore themes of community, overcoming adversity, memory, and personal history.

In the novel, Lauren has to leave the only home she’s ever known, eventually establishing a new home, with new people and new ideas. We want to invite students to consider what they might carry in their hearts, minds and memories, when they can’t physically carry the tangible things that make a home or community.

In this activity, students will read a poem by Chinese American poet Wang Ping called “The Things We Carry on the Sea,” write their own poems, and create a visual art piece that incorporates their poem.

Materials required are black and white construction paper, markers or crayons, and glue sticks.

SETUP & WRITING
- Share the plot and themes of Parable of the Sower.
- Have students read “The Things We Carry on the Sea” by Wang Ping (available here at poets.org)
- Discuss what sorts of things the poet includes. What is not included?
- Most lines begin with “We carry…” Consider, who is the “we” in this poem?
- Ask students to brainstorm together as a class, what they carry in themselves. What knowledge, attributes, experiences or memories do they already have? Look for both specific details and universal ideas.
- Ask each student to write their own poem, using the words “we carry.”

VISUAL REPRESENTATION
Share the images below for inspiration, and discuss. What do they have in common? How are they different? For those that feature musical notes, note that they could, of course, be replaced with words. All the images are black and white, or feature just one accent color.

Using any of these as inspiration, students should cut out or draw a silhouette or shape that represents themselves—a profile, a hand, a head—and either fill it with the words of the poem (as in the top 3 images) or surround it with the words of their poem. See the next page for works in progress and things to consider in the process.
ARTISTIC DECISIONS
- Where and how big should the shape/silhouette be? Could there be more than one?
- How much of the poem to include—the whole thing or only selected words/phrases?
- How big or small should the words be, and how should they be arranged inside or around the shape?
- What’s the one accent color? How does it represent or enhance the ideas in the poem?

WORKS IN PROGRESS
Below are some images of student work at various stages of this project. As in any creative pursuit, there is no “right way.” There are many individual interpretations of the same concept, even within the same classroom.

Special thanks to The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens' Education Division for their contributions to these materials.