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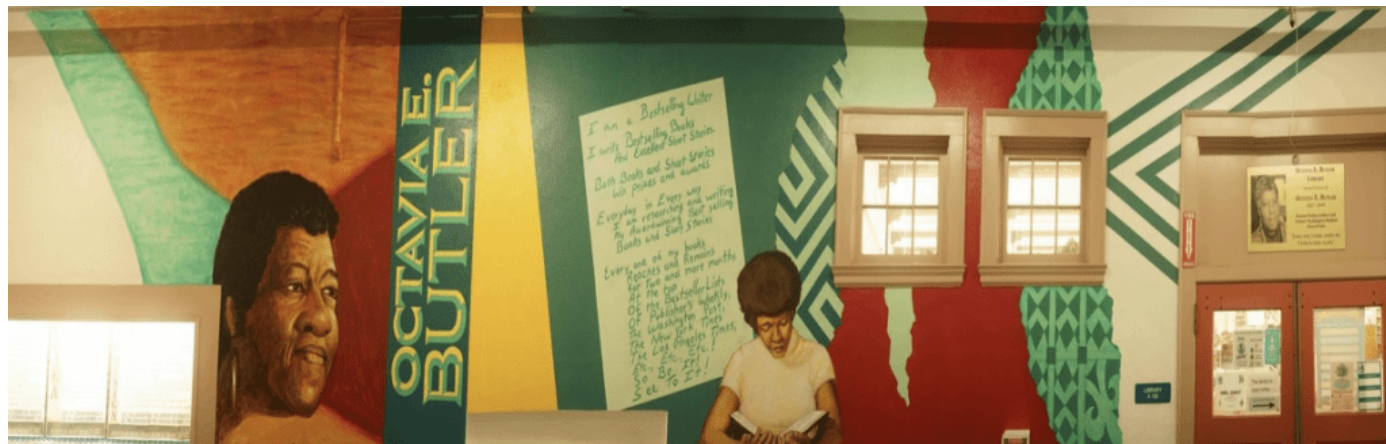
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TRACING OCTAVIA'S FOOTSTEPS

Published May 6, 2022

By Lynell George



Roberto Quintana painted the expansive Butler mural at Washington STEAM Multilingual Academy.

PHOTO BY CLAYTON DAILY/MURAL BY ROBERTO QUINTANA

Writer, visionary and boundary-shattering plot twister Octavia Estelle Butler came from modest means, but she used the wealth of what she did possess to catapult her beyond her own imagination.



A multi-award-winning author known for her signature works — “Wild Seed,” “Kindred,” “Parable of the Sower” and others — Butler knew precisely how important it was to map and build worlds, especially the ones we inhabit.

Born in Pasadena in 1947, Butler spent her early years in and around the northwest section of the city. She attended Pasadena public schools and was a fixture in both the local and main branches of the city’s libraries. In those stacks is where she began to form a notion of what it takes to be a writer. “The Pasadena Public Library had been my second home since I was six — since I realized ‘Fun with Dick and Jane’ was really someone’s idea of what a little kid should be content with,” she said in a speech she gave in 1982.



L.A. Parent's Summer Camp Directory



Octavia Butler.

PHOTO BY CHING-MING CHEUNG

Butler spent more than a decade living in Los Angeles. A life-long bus rider, she settled into a busy Mid-City neighborhood that provided access to transit and walkable options. And, while Butler never learned to drive in a city that seemed almost to demand it, that lack didn’t stop her from traversing expanses of time, place and imagination.

This June, she would have celebrated her 75th birthday, but she died in 2006 at just 58 years old. While much is gone, much is present, persistent. Influence echoes. And now that Butler’s star continues to rise, new readers are ever curious to understand how



What follows are some pivotal points on Butler's Pasadena/Los Angeles map that were essential touchstones along the way: Some have endured, others live on as other entities, but the environment retains the story. She saw to it by writing it all in.

Pasadena Central Library

285 East Walnut St., Pasadena

Butler's mother worked as a domestic — sometimes day work and sometimes live-in — and often brought her daughter castoffs — old magazines and storybooks. But most significantly, her mother escorted her to the library. First: local Pasadena branches and the large Central Library in view of Pasadena City Hall.



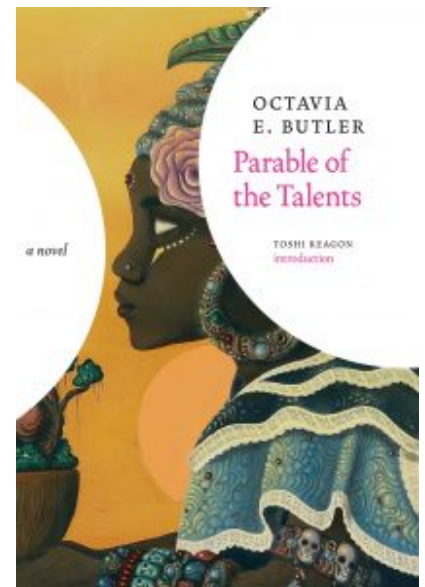
“I’m a writer at least partly because I had access to public libraries,” Butler once wrote. She read her way through the Peter Pan Room, the main library’s children section, impatient to become old enough to dive into the adult stacks. “Public libraries in particular are the open universities of America. They’re free, they’re accessible, they may offer special services to shut-ins, to children, even to nonreaders. They offer worlds of possibilities...”

Note that the library is currently closed for earthquake retrofitting.

Washington STEAM Multilingual Academy

(formerly George Washington Junior High School)

1505 N Marengo Ave., Pasadena



BOOK COVER COURTESY
SEVEN STORIES PRESS





Butler was part of Washington's graduating class of 1961 before she attended John Muir High School nearby on Lincoln Avenue. Photos from the time feature her with the same serious gaze we see in her author photos.

Washington was a key stop for her because it was where one of her teachers, William A. Pfaff, took time enough to type up one of Butler's early short stories. Washington's school library was dedicated to and named after Butler in the spring of 2020, and Roberto Quintana of Art & Soul Productions painted the library's expansive Butler mural. This year, the Pasadena Unified School Board approved renaming the school to Octavia E. Butler Magnet, and school officials launched a science fiction contest and festival in her honor.

Pasadena City College

570 E Colorado Blvd., Pasadena

After high school, Butler enrolled at Pasadena City College, where she earned an associate's degree in 1968. There, she had hoped to be able to embark on a formal writing program, but that wasn't available. Instead, she skipped from major to major, settling on a course of study called "International Education," which, she said, was "essentially journalism."



However, in her last semester at PCC, she signed up for a Black literature class that expanded her horizons. It was where she was introduced to the writers Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright and W.E.B. DuBois. "Before that class, I had read James Baldwin and had been aware of Langston Hughes, had read a few books about, but not by, Frederick Douglass and others who endured and escaped slavery. Thanks to the class, I



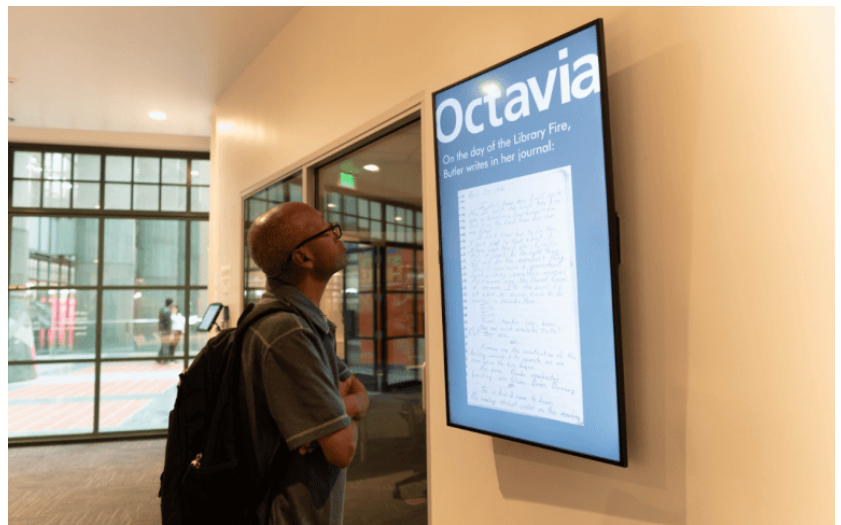
became aware of many others and began reading them, and gradually began thinking about the novel that eventually became 'Kindred.'”

Los Angeles Central Public Library

(Home of the Octavia Lab)

630 W 5th St., L.A.

Butler fell in love with this showcase library at a very young age. It was here that she wrote her first full novel, “Patternmaster,” a draft, at the time, she considered to be “utterly unpublishable...” But the routine — taking the bus from her Mid-City home, jotting ideas down on the way, of having a place to go — made the dream feel much more concrete: “Because turning up everyday at the library at a specific time felt like going to a job. Sitting around at home trying to write felt like — and often was — goofing off.”



The Octavia Lab is a do-it-yourself studio space at the Central Library of the Los Angeles Public Library. PHOTOS COURTESY CENTRAL LIBRARY OF THE LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY

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When the library was a victim of arson on April 29, 1986, Butler wrote emotionally, in one of her spiral notebooks, about losing “a loved one.” “I stood on the corner of Fifth Street and Grand in downtown Los Angeles and watched black smoke pour from the windows.” She’d traveled downtown to tutor adults at the building “...as a part of my effort to pay back a little of what I felt I owed to the library in general.”





While it didn't look like it was going to be salvageable, the building survived, after years of fundraising efforts and extensive rehab. Butler was relieved. As an homage to her unflagging support, in 2019 the library established a state-of-the-art "makerspace" named the "Octavia Lab" in her honor. It's a do-it-yourself hands-on audio/visual/art studio open to the public and located on the library's ground floor.

California State University, Los Angeles

5151 State University Dr., L.A.

At Cal State L.A. in 1968, Butler took courses in English, speech, social sciences, history and anthropology. Again, unable to find a major in creative writing, she made the decision to redirect her path. Instead of formal work toward a bachelor's degree, she carved out a plan to take evening writing classes at UCLA while working a variety of jobs. Her time at the university was rich. She saved the campus bulletin and course catalogs, which are full of circles around classes that piqued her interest.



The Open Door Program

Classes held at the Carthay Film Center

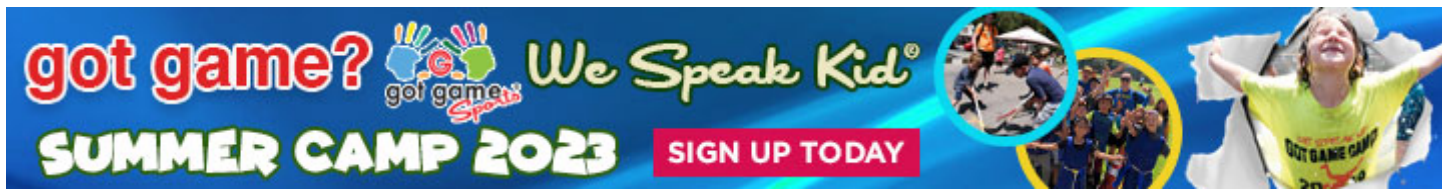
Pico Boulevard near Fairfax Avenue, L.A.

One of the significant turning points for Butler was her time in the Open Door Program. Sponsored by the Writers Guild of America West, the program was established in the wake of 1965's Watts Uprisings and focused on bringing in aspiring "minority" writers to work with professionals.

Through this group, she met writers Sid Stebel and Harlan Ellison, who provided the



afternoon of readings, and it was compelling enough for the Los Angeles Times to note on Dec. 10, 1969: “Thematically, most impressive was ‘Dare’ by O.E. Butler, which begins as a conventional drama of black militancy and winds up with scathing irony that shatters militancy itself.”



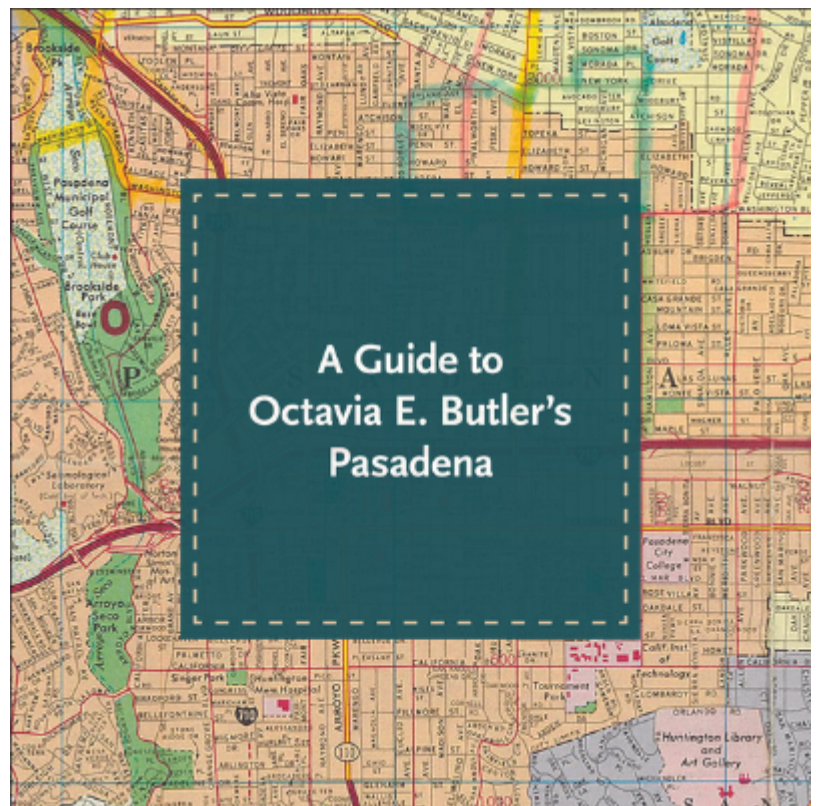
Later, it was Ellison who took note and saw to it that Butler would attend the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Workshop. Butler spent the summer of 1970 at the workshop in Pennsylvania. “It’s where” recalled Butler, “I began to get honest criticism.”

UCLA Extension

145 Gayley Ave., L.A.

After dropping out of Cal State L.A., Butler put herself on a rigid schedule of part-time/full-time jobs and long stints of writing toward concrete goals. “Writing was the only thing I cared about, so I left school to write,” she said.

In 1969, she enrolled in a creative writing workshop at UCLA Extension. Her days could be quite long, especially when folding in the commute by bus across the city. Initially, she felt most comfortable crafting short stories, but long form terrified her. In 1976, she took a writing course with one of her inspirational



This map of Octavia E. Butler’s Pasadena was produced in conjunction with The Huntington’s “Mapping Fiction” exhibition, which explores the ways authors and mapmakers have built compelling fictional worlds.



UCLA. It was around this time Butler was working on her book “Patternmaster,” chapter by chapter or, as she would say, “story by story.”

PHOTO COURTESY THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY, ART MUSEUM, AND BOTANICAL GARDENS



The Broadway Department Store

Broadway Service Building Warehouse

3838 N. Mission Rd., L.A.

During some of the toughest years, Butler held a series of what she called “horrible little jobs” — dishwasher, telemarketer, office temp and potato chip inspector among them. For a time in the 1970s, she worked for the now-long departed department store The Broadway in its warehouse facility. The physicality of the job, while challenging, freed her mind to turn over the literary scenarios she would revisit once she returned to her desk. “Rows of furniture sitting high on racks. Racks of big cardboard boxes, I push conveyors of boxes,” she wrote in a diary of the time.

Reading about the uncertainty of those years in her journals is heart wrenching. “I am at loose ends only in that I am not certain when or even whether Broadway will call...But I cannot be certain because Broadway has taught me not to be certain,” she wrote, “I must change...We must become a writer — one who writes for a living as well as a way of life, one who sells regularly.”



Eso Won Book Store



While libraries continued to be a mainstay, Butler was a devoted bookstore shopper. In her archive at the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, one sees that she saved old flyers, bookmarks and other ephemera from now long-shuttered local independents, including Sisterhood Bookstore in Westwood, Change of Hobbit on the Westside and Midnight Special in Santa Monica.

One of her regular stops along with her neighborhood indie, Vroman's, was Eso Won Books. Over the years, the store moved locations, one on La Brea Avenue and Plymouth Street in Inglewood, and then later on LaBrea and Rodeo Road (now Obama Boulevard). Butler followed. She was a frequently featured author, and the owners, James Fugate and Thomas Hamilton, still speak of her fondly. One of the old Eso Won locations was one of the first places I saw her in person. As a teenager, sitting mere inches away from her, I could not yet see into what would be my future, but she offered me a glimpse of what it looked like to call oneself a writer and the tools it took to navigate there.

Lynell George is a Grammy Award-winning author and journalist based in L.A. A former staff writer for The Los Angeles Times and L.A. Weekly, she is author of three books, including "A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky: The World of Octavia E. Butler."

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