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Title: Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum: Octavia E. Butler's Typewriter as Time Machine

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Like many here in D.C., along with millions worldwide, I was struck and saddened by the recent passing of actor and Howard University alum, Chadwick Boseman. Perhaps best known for his role as T'Challa and his alter-ego Black Panther, Boseman led the nation of Wakanda in the Afrofuturistic film, *Black Panther* (2018).

An object in the Anacostia Community Museum's collection set the stage for Boseman's Black Panther. Writer Octavia E. Butler's typewriter, pictured here, was manufactured around 1976, the year Boseman was born. Butler used this typewriter to craft stories that, like the movie, meld science, technology, and African American protagonists who lead the creation of possible futures, all hallmarks of Afrofuturism. Think of her typewriter as a time machine.

Travel back in time to the late 1950s. In Los Angeles, California, ten-year-old Octavia E. Butler began writing science fiction at a time when few African American writers did. She asked her mother for a typewriter, later reflecting, "She did day work; she made not very much money....here she had a daughter begging for a typewriter." Butler eventually composed her first ten books on a typewriter, only transitioning to computer after her mother's death. She won top honors for her work, including Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards as well as a MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as the Genius Grant.

Fast forward to the mid-1970s, when the turquoise Olivetti 46 typewriter was made in Spain. Butler used the portable machine to travel in time and space with her writing. She later donated the typewriter, replacement ribbons, and several translations of her works to the Anacostia Community Museum when she participated in an exhibition that featured the typewriter called [All the Stories Are True: African American Writers Speak](https://anacostia.si.edu/Exhibitions/Details/All-the-Stories-Are-True-African-American-Writers-Speak-2881) (2004). [Link address: <https://anacostia.si.edu/Exhibitions/Details/All-the-Stories-Are-True-African-American-Writers-Speak-2881>]

The typewriter took Butler to a safe space where she could create and explore. From there, she journeyed in time and place, asking what it means to be human by imagining past and future worlds. For example, her novel *Kindred*'s protagonist travels between mid-1970s California and antebellum Maryland, so readers can empathize with what it might have been like for an African American woman to experience enslavement. The characters and contexts that Butler created and inspired can help us to think—and feel—about issues ranging from climate change to racial injustice.

Addressing the then-absence of characters of color in science fiction, Butler populated her stories with people who looked like her—African Americans, as well as beings of many hues and hybridities (bodies, genders, and sexualities). Her typewriter-time machine charted paths leading still more artists to freely imagine, including superheroes like Black Panther, embodied so powerfully by Boseman.

For Butler, empathy and building community are superpowers that can transform horror into hope. Fittingly, writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs calls the musical adaptation of Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower*, a "congregational opera." From Afrofuturism to hopepunk, many continue to draw on Butler's vision of a future where Blackness and Black people not only persist, but help to bring worlds into being.

Butler's typewriter takes us to the twentieth century, when typewriters became time machines for many writers, but also to future worlds that she constructed through her writing. Today, her typewriter can launch us on a journey to learn about an extraordinary writer and her hope for a better future.

What is your time machine?

Butler's inspiration to write came from seeing a science fiction movie. She knew that she could write a better story. What inspires your creativity? What tools do you use to spark your imagination, communicate ideas, engender empathy, and build community? What is your time machine?

To learn more about Octavia Butler and her typewriter, visit ACM's related Learning Lab, [Typewriter as Time Machine: Octavia E. Butler's Typewriter](#).

[Link address: <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/typewriter-as-time-machine-octavia-butler-s-typewriter/bmKzerwhHR4cAZ03/>]

Images

Image #1, Caption: Author Octavia E. Butler gave this [Olivetti 46 typewriter](#) to the Anacostia Community Museum. It dates to the mid-1970s. Butler participated in ACM's exhibition, *All the Stories Are True: African American Writers Speak*, which featured her typewriter, in 2004. Anacostia Community Museum Collection, Smithsonian Institution.

[Link address: https://anacostia.si.edu/collection/object/acm_2004.0007.0001]

Image #2, Caption: Photo of Octavia E. Butler taken by the author's mother, Octavia M. Butler. Undated. Anacostia Community Museum Collection, Smithsonian Institution.