

TOSHI REAGON

2017-2019 ANDREW W. MELLON FOUNDATION DISTIL FELLOW



Singer. Composer. Guitarist. Producer. Curator. Mom. These are some of the words that Toshi Reagon uses to describe herself, but there are so many more that can be added to that list to reflect the astonishing scale of her creativity and influence: innovator, visionary, activist, and more.

Reagon is bringing her multi-faceted approach to social consciousness and community engagement to her role as Carolina Performing Arts' first Mellon DisTIL Fellow. She will begin her work within the frame of her opera adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*. The work developed by Reagon and her mother—scholar, singer, activist and Sweet Honey in the Rock founder Bernice Johnson Reagon—will have its US premiere in Chapel Hill this November.

The novel explores struggles related to race, gender, and resource inequality in a dystopian vision of America wrecked by environmental disaster and political mismanagement. “The book encompasses so many systemic issues in society and communities that I thought it would be a rich foundation on which to launch this residency and fellowship,” says Reagon.

“There are lots of faculty members on the UNC campus dealing with issues in *Parable* that I can be in relationship with,” she says. Reagon will partner with the Department of City and Regional Planning, among others. “We’re having wide-ranging conversations with faculty, students and community members and surfacing lots of ideas. I’m excited to help take these conversations and turn them into tangible events across multiple artistic platforms throughout the time I’m in residency.”

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Reagon is particularly excited about the deep relationships she will be able to develop because of the length of the fellowship. “Usually when I’m asked to do a residency, I show up for a few days and then leave,” she says. “But this is such a unique and wonderful opportunity where I get to interact at such a deep level. People are communicating with people who they don’t usually work with. And to have funding to develop something that can be used after I leave and that can have a big impact is just incredible.”

She says that it’s an honor to be asked to be in the realm of academia. “I’m particularly happy to be at UNC and in the Triangle,” says the Brooklyn-based artist. “This is a wonderful, deeply caring community that really knows who they are, what they are, what they should be, what should be held, and what should be released. To have the opportunity to be in dialogue with such an incredible group of people with diverse and clear voices warms my heart and makes me want to be a brilliant contributor.”

“I’m going to learn a lot while I’m here because the people teaching are brilliant,” she says. “My mind has been blown from the conversations I’m having and the connections being made across departments.” Reagon points out, “I didn’t go to college because I started my musical career at 17 and hit the road. But there is more than one way to learn and to go to college. It’s so amazing and beautiful that I’m in residence here and I am thrilled about it. I feel like I am making my ancestors proud.”

- MICHELE LYNN

WHAT TOSHI IS WORKING ON

Chapel Hill City Read: a city-wide “reading club” experience focusing on Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*

Performances of Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (page 26)

Mellon DisTIL Fellowship Workshop: a public gathering to explore the questions and connections at the heart of Toshi’s Mellon DisTIL Fellowship work

