



Sears, Rachael I. "Butler: To Take Root Among the Stars." *Plaza: Dialogues in Language and Literature* 5.2 (Summer 2015): 22-31. PDF.

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Butler: To Take Root Among the Stars

Like Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler borrowed from the well-established utopian/dystopian tradition and made her own unique contributions to the genre, as well. Unlike other classic dystopian novels that typically place the reader within the already dystopian society and either a) leave them there, or b) only suggest the dystopian regime fell sometime in the distant future, Butler's *Parable* novels place the reader in a dystopia, but by the end of the novel, the seeds of a utopia have been carefully planted with the promise of a rich harvest to come. *Parable of the Sower* opens in the year 2024, a time of chaos and deterioration for planet Earth. Because of humanity's refusal to address environmental issues, the world has become an ecological disaster. Climate change has devastated crops, in turn driving up prices and crime. This domino effect has rendered the government powerless and large portions of the population are homeless, starving, and dangerous. The *Parable* novels' protagonist, Lauren Olamina, seeks to escape this oppressive situation and establish a socialistic community, Acorn, based on her spiritual and environmentally-friendly teachings known as Earthseed. *Parable of the Talents* recounts the destruction of Acorn by the Christian American fundamentalists who have since taken over the ineffective government and seek to solve the Earth's environmental problems by leading people out of sin and back to God. One dystopian government has been replaced by another. Despite the setbacks, Earthseed flourishes and its followers do eventually "take root among the stars."

As with most dystopias written in the last century, the government and its institutions in 2024 America cannot be trusted. Lauren Olamina, like most of the young adult or adult citizens in Robledo, carries a gun whenever she leaves the relative safety of the neighborhood. As one of the last walled communities, they have installed an alarm to warn them when intruders have broken in. They have come to expect no help from the police, or the firemen, for that matter. In speaking of them, Lauren says, "They never helped when people called for help. They came later, and more often than not, made a bad situation worse" (*Sower* 105). Alex, the protagonist from Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* has similar sentiments in regard to the police. When he is released from the State Institute for Reclamation of Criminal Types, he is first rescued by the police from being beaten by a group of old men, then taken out of town, brutalized, and left for dead by the same pair of cops (Burgess 155). Best to leave the policemen alone. This theme of distrust for governmental authorities is an essential part of Winston's paranoia throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as well. He constantly worries that the Thought Police are after him for one act of treason after another. Of course, he is right to be so nervous; Big Brother *is* always watching and eventually catches him in the end. A comparable situation exists in Atwood's Gilead; instead of Big Brother watching, "The Eyes of God run over all the earth" which is essentially the same thing (Atwood 193). The informants, or Eyes, are everywhere, all the time.

Butler's use of violence in the *Parable* novels is reminiscent of the way Burgess employs violence in *A Clockwork Orange*. Both societies incorporate the terror a gang can create to make a point. The

“paints” in *The Parable of the Sower* shave their heads, paint their skin bright colors, start fires, and kill people (*Sower* 101). Lauren questions her brother, Keith about the paints and learns that they “take [a] drug that makes them like to watch fires. Sometimes a camp fire or a trash fire or a house fire. Or sometimes they grab a rich guy and set him on fire” (*Sower* 101). According to rumors, the paints “did it to fight for the poor to expose or destroy the goods hoarded by the rich” (Butler 198). Whatever their original purpose was, the goal seems to have shifted from playing Robin Hood to vandalism, spurred by a drug-induced high. Likewise, the gangs of “droogs” in Burgess’ futuristic London plan out their crimes—mostly theft, beatings and rape, though occasionally things lead to murder—then head to the Korova Milkbar to drink alcohol spiked with drugs before putting their plans into action (Burgess 1). The “paints” recede to the background in *Parable of the Talents*; instead, the henchmen of Christian America repeatedly rape the women at Acorn and have control collars around everyone’s necks to inflict pain whenever they like (*Talents* 200). Though these two societies may have different reasons for what they do, yet the result is the same: terrified citizens, destruction, and senseless violence.

The dystopias of the twentieth century tend to squander their national resources; or, perhaps, squandering of natural resources leads to dystopias. Whichever way the cycle works, the *Parable* novels are Butler’s prophetic vision for what awaits America if she continues on the path she is currently on. In Butler’s 2024 America, people are forced to live off their own family gardens, if they are so lucky to still have property that has a patch of earth to farm on. Everyone else, the vast majority of society, lives off the streets, reduced to living off scraps, or worse, resorting to cannibalism. Privatized cities are popping up to desalinate water (*Sower* 110); agriculture has succumbed to agribusiness conglomerates (*Sower* 264). Similarly, though Atwood does not directly say apparently, oranges are a rarity (Atwood 47), vegetables are only available in season (Atwood 47); and meat is often unavailable (Atwood 48). In a land poisoned with chemical and nuclear waste, it is not surprising that natural resources have become scarce. In a land devastated by climate change and its freakish weather, it is not surprising, either.

Unquestionably, Octavia Butler’s *Parable* novels are rightly labeled as speculative dystopian fiction. They address many of the repeated themes from dystopian tradition; and yet, the *Parable* novels uniquely address the recurring themes of utopian tradition, as well. Indeed, according to Oscar De Los Santos:

Utopias are seldom plot driven and better defined as futuristic travelogues of idealized government and technological advances which yield near-perfect societies and/or perfect worlds. Since utopias center on pristine projections of the future, they can make intriguing, but seldom exciting reading. Moreover, as Lester Del Roy notes, too often utopian writings are further debilitated by their writers’ tendencies to pontificate. (109)

This utopian description does not initially seem to fit Butler’s *Parable* novels, and yet, many of the characteristics De Los Santos lists above are evident in the *Parable* novels, particularly in regard to detailed travel, idealized government, technological advances, and pontification.

The utopia-as-travelogue has been popular since Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Other famous utopian travelogues include Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. Just as these utopian authors provide detailed descriptions of the new land they encounter, Lauren also gives precise and detailed information about how and where her band is traveling as they make their way north. When Harry and Zahra, two escapees from Robledo, decide to join Lauren on her journey, they plot out part of their course: “We walked down to the freeway—the 118—and turned west. We would take the 118 to the 23 and the 23 to the U.S. 101. The 101 would take us up the coast toward Oregon” (*Sower* 161). Lauren records their reaction to seeing the ocean for the first time, despite being natives of California: “Late today we came within sight of the ocean. None of us have ever seen it before, and we had to go closer, look at it, camp within sight and sound of it. Once we had decided to do that, we walked shoeless in the waves, pants legs rolled up. Sometimes we just stood and stared at it: the Pacific Ocean—the largest, deepest body of water on earth, almost half-a-world of water” (*Sower* 188). Using her grandparents’ old maps, Lauren is able to find places for them to stay,

cities to restock their supplies, and detours whenever the way is blocked (*Sower* 198, 219, 226).

The government in the *Parable* novels is far from ideal, which is why Lauren puts no faith in it and establishes her own community, governed by its own laws. As with many utopian communities, education is a high priority in Acorn. Larkin, Lauren's daughter, writes in her journal that, "Every member of Earthseed learned to read and to write, and most knew at least two languages—usually Spanish and English, since those were the two most useful. Anyone who joined the group, child or adult, had to begin at once to learn these basics and to acquire a trade" (*Talents* 24). The "laws" of Acorn are based on Earthseed—the truths of which "existed somewhere before [Lauren] found them and put them together. They were patterns in history, in science, philosophy, religion, or literature" (*Talents* 127). The community at Acorn is essentially socialistic; everyone does their part and everyone benefits from each other's labor. In exchange, each individual can rely on the community for safety, shelter, food, and education. The only prohibition is "preaching other belief systems" (*Talents* 32).

Parable of the Talents, more so than *Parable of the Sower*, illustrates the utopian drive for technological advance. Lauren frequently references her desire for Earthseed to "take root among the stars" throughout both novels; however, it is only in *Parable of the Talents* that this dream becomes a reality, expressly because of technology. Lauren mourns the defunding of the space program in *Parable of the Sower* (20), but at the conclusion of *Parable of the Talents*, Earthseed has become a wealthy and powerful force, more than capable of reviving a space program to literally send its followers to the stars. Lauren, by the time the first shuttles leave for space, is too old to be considered for the journey. Still, she is overcome with pride that the Destiny is finally becoming a reality:

Today's shuttles have been loaded with cargoes of people, already deeply asleep in DiaPause—the suspended-animation process that seems to be the best of the bunch. Traveling with the people are frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams and hopes. As big and as space-worthy as they are, the shuttles should sag to the Earth under such a load. The memories alone should overload them... I will go with the first ship to leave after my death. If I thought I could survive as something other than a burden, I would go on this one, alive. No matter. Let them someday use my ashes to fertilize their crops. Let them do that. It is arranged. I'll go, and they'll give me to their orchards and their groves. The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars, after all... (*Talents* 406-7)

As to "pontificating," though Butler goes about it in a different way, her protagonist, Lauren, spends a great deal of time indoctrinating both her followers and the reader. Unlike the typical utopian author who establishes the main character as a channel through which to share their ideas on government, economics, politics, religion, or society, Lauren goes about promoting her ideas more subtly. Butler places her characters in an environment devastated by climate change to encourage her readers to do something about it *now*. By showing the harrowing effects of the growing gap between economic classes, Butler predicts a future full of petty theft and violent crime—one that *can* be avoided, if the appropriate steps are taken in the present. Meanwhile, Lauren *is* pontificating, if somewhat indirectly. Each chapter in the *Parable* novels opens with lines from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, which is a collection of Lauren's thoughts of Earthseed. Each new resident at Acorn is given the collection to read upon arrival (*Talents* 127). Lauren's answer to any question is somehow tied up in Earthseed.

Following the pattern of utopian/dystopian writers before her, Butler used both current and historic events as material for her novels. Like Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Octavia Butler "writes such a close extrapolation from current trends that her dystopias produce 'a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement in which readers can readily see how our present can lead to these future dystopias and thus be warned about allowing present trends to continue'" (Stillman 16). In an interview, Butler, like Atwood, insisted that her only "sources" for her dystopia were simply the news: "The ugly things in the novels happened because today's dangers—drug use, illiteracy, the popularity of building

prisons coupled with the unpopularity of building and maintaining schools and libraries, the yawning rich-poor gaps and global warming—group up to be tomorrow’s problems” (“How I Built Novels” 14). Butler, too, lived through the political and economic conservatism of the 1980s and used her *Parable* novels to attack the political and religious policies of that era. In his article, “Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities and Human Purpose in Octavia Butler’s *Parables*,” Peter Stillman summarizes Butler’s complaints against the Reagan Administration:

In *Sower*, published in 1993, [Butler] maps a United States where governments at all levels have lost even the minimal ability to maintain order, defend human rights, and protect the environment; where multi-national corporations act freely and repressively without fetters; and where extreme income inequalities exist. That dystopia of eviscerated and impotent government reflects the realization and intensification of the dreams of the Republican right in the Reagan years. (15)

Butler’s attack was primarily aimed at the right-wing government of the 1980s in *The Parable of the Sower*, then shifts to attack the right-wing religious movement of the same period in *The Parable of the Talents*.

To further illustrate how the government has failed its citizens, Stillman continues by pointing out that in 2024 America, “Public health care has deteriorated. Drinking water is not safe. Public education has collapsed from under-funding and except for the home-taught only members of the older generation are literate. Police and fire protection must be bought” (*Sowers* 18). As if that were not enough, the income disparity has left the majority of the population in poverty or near-poverty. Closely tied to this overwhelming gap between the rich and poor is the re-introduction of slavery. Olivar, a small coastal town, has been bought out by a foreign company, KSF. The company runs the town, offering “smaller salaries than [workers of] their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, [and] jobs” (*Sower* 110). The trick is that their meager salaries do not cover all the bills and the workers eventually fall into debt slavery. Such is the fate of those who are seduced by the privatized cities.

Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe, members of Lauren’s band traveling north, bring the realities of privatized cities into focus; they experienced it personally. Emery tells a heart-wrenching tale of her life on a big agricultural conglomerate where she lost her husband to a treatable illness, but because they had no money to pay for medical services, he wasted away. Now, left alone as the mother of three children, she could not afford to pay the rent on the farm, so her two sons were taken away from her to help settle the debts (*Sower* 264). Grayson Mora undoubtedly shares a similar story. Their daughters, Tori and Doe are not strangers to abuse; they curl into a fetal position whenever they are anxious, fearful of impending physical abuse. What is more, all four of these ex-slaves are “sharers,” like Lauren—victims of hyperempathy, meaning they feel other people’s pleasure and pain as though it is their own. Of course, in this world, they tend to feel more pain than pleasure. As it turns out, Lauren learns from Emery that the bosses at the farms liked to have sharers as workers, and would “sometimes[...] pay more for people who have it. Especially kids” (*Sower* 278). No doubt a sharer would be easier to keep in line.

It is impossible to read Butler’s novel without seeing how she used American history to create a potential dystopian future. It is no secret that “In order to have access to a cheap labor force, thereby increasing profits, many American businesses build factories in third world countries to take advantage of locals who are willing to work for what would be criminally low-wages in the United States” (Allen 1357). By reintroducing this reality, Butler “plays on our collective historical memories of African American slavery and debt servitude” (Allen 1357). The story Emery tells could easily pass as a slave narrative from the antebellum era. Consequently, *Parable of the Sower* is written in a first-person, journalistic style which serves to “connect Lauren to the long line of black heroes and heroines in African American literature beginning with the earliest slave narrators” (Allen 1354-5).

The similarities do not end there. The history of the Underground Railroad is a beautiful testament to the human spirit’s desire for freedom and willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve it.

Butler incorporates this part of America's past into the *Parable* novels, just as Margaret Atwood did in *The Handmaid's Tale*. An old American folksong entitled "Follow the Drinking Gourd" gives specific instructions for the slaves to follow in order to reach freedom in the North. The "Drinking Gourd" would commonly have been used to drink water from during the day; therefore it was a relatively common term, unlikely to cause suspicion. The "Drinking Gourd" however, served as a code name for the Big Dipper, or the constellation which points to the North Star, Polaris (Bresler). In this way, "Butler ingeniously plays upon African American mythology to seek life among the stars, a science-fictionalizing of the African American slave myth that the path to freedom lay in following the North Star" (Allen 1363).

In Butler's *The Parable of the Sower*, she imagines a fictional "future in which she deals with many wounds of the past for many African Americans and other marginalized groups" (Allen 1354). Moreover, "She teaches us as readers both important lessons about history as well as techniques we might use to survive the impending environmental, societal, and economic crises that are destined to evolve as a result of our current actions (or inactions)" (1354). Her emphasis remains upon "community and communal sharing as a balm against poverty, racism, and sexism so prevalent in the larger world" (1363).

The *Parable* novels were written in 1993 and 1998, respectively, and center upon the concerns of Third Wave Feminism, in addition to their focus on dystopian speculation and American history. Unlike First and Second Wave Feminist movements that had specific goals activists were trying to meet, Third Wave Feminism is much more ambiguous and multifaceted. With so much being done in the name of women's rights the 1960s and 1970s and then the backlash of the 1980s, it is difficult to determine where Second Wave Feminism "ends" and where Third Wave Feminism "begins." Where *is* the divide between the Second and Third Wave movements? In her article "Communicating Third Wave Feminism and New Social Movements: Challenges for the Next Generation of Feminist Endeavor," Amanda Lotz explains:

Some scholars and activists have considered the transition from second to third-wave feminism as defined by a general shift because many of the women writing as Third Wave Feminists are too young to have experienced Second Wave Feminism activism[...] [others] suggest the Third Wave generation was born between 1963 and 1974; [still] others argue years of birth are less relevant than having the experience of coming-of-age during the conservative era of the 1980s. (3)

Perhaps the last suggestion serves to provide some ideas as to what truly drives Third Wave Feminism. Those who came of age during the conservative 1980s certainly had plenty to react against. In addition to reacting against political and religious conservatism, a trend among Third Wave Feminists is an emphasis to "challenge sexism, racism, homophobia, economic injustice and other forms of oppression" (Lotz 3).

Of particular interest is the Third Wave Feminist subgroup called Women-of-Color Feminism. Lotz describes the Women-of-Color Feminists as a group that "focuses on including the intersection of various oppressions in feminist thought and activism[...] Women-of-Color adopted the term to define themselves and their activism against experiences of racial exclusion in Second Wave Feminist organizations" (Lotz 4). Butler was born in 1947, and as a woman of color she fits into this subgroup. In her works, attention is given to both Second Wave Feminist concerns from which women of color were excluded, as well as the issues brought to light by the Third Wave Feminist movement, specifically challenges to sexism, racism, homophobia, economic injustice, and ecological waste.

A key topic among Third Wave Feminists (and Second Wave Feminist, for that matter) is gender and sexism. Butler's *Parable* novels offer two opposite views regarding this issue. 2024 America is no place for a woman to be. When the inevitable destruction of Robledo—the neighborhood she grew up in—finally occurs, Lauren loses sight of her stepmother, Cory, and her three brothers. Worrying about their safety, Lauren thinks, "a woman and three kids might look like a gift basket of food, money, and

sex” (*Sower* 142). As Lauren and her friends, Harry and Zahra, head north one evening, they are visited by “Two big, dirty-looking guys[...] standing nearby, watching [them], watching Zahra in particular” (*Sower* 169). She was, after all, the neighborhood beauty. Apparently in this dystopia, children cannot even trust their fathers—Jillian and Allie, two more survivors that join Laura’s group traveling north, were sold into prostitution by their father (*Sower* 217). Women, for the most part, are seen as weak, easy targets. Traditionally, sex slavery is associated with young, defenseless females, and there are plenty of examples of female sex slavery in the *Parable* novels, but interestingly, Butler also makes a point of exposing this depraved practice among young males as well. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren buys her brother, Marcos, off a pimp named Cougar. According to Marcos, Cougar was his second pimp, the first one being a man named Zorro (*Talents* 129). Marcos initially appears just as feeble and helpless as any young girl would after such a hellish experience.

Conversely, Lauren Olamina is an empowered, confident, young woman. Despite her youth and her gender, Lauren is clearly the head of her group of stragglers and eventually her utopian community, Acorn. Lauren knows what she wants and, more importantly, knows how to achieve it. The terrified inhabitants of her old neighborhood are settling for survival, whereas Lauren says, “If all I had to look forward to was marriage to him [Curtis, her boyfriend] and babies and poverty that just keeps getting worse, I think I’d kill myself” (*Sower* 80). Lauren plans to get out of the neighborhood and establish a community based on Earthseed, the religion she has created (*Sower* 114). Throughout the novel, Lauren repeatedly protects her friends, makes decisions, and effectively leads, despite her status as a young woman.

Women-of-Color Feminists and Third Wave Feminist in general are more attuned to the matter of race and how it is still an ongoing problem in our society. The Robledo neighborhood in *The Parable of the Sower* illustrates the status quo in terms of racial tension. As a group of teenagers from the neighborhood go out for target practice with Laurence Olamina (Lauren’s father) and Jay Garfield, another adult, Laura explains that “sometimes there are problems. The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days. On the street people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind[...] Our neighborhood is too small for us to play those kinds of games” (35). The society depicted in *The Parable of the Sower* is one obsessed with arson, which Lauren attributes to the arsonists’ “dislike[...] [of] anyone who looks or sounds foreign or racially different” in addition to being “frustrated, angry and hopeless” (132).

As with sexism, Butler shows the other side of race relationships, too. Almost all the couples that form in the nascent Earthseed community are interracial. Harry, a white man falls in love with Zahra, a black woman; Travis and Natividad are a black and Hispanic couple; Emery had a Japanese father, a black mother, and a Mexican husband, making her daughter, Tori a beautiful mix of Asian, African, and Hispanic ethnicities (*Sower* 264). Emery falls in love with Grayson Mora, “a tall, thin black Latino” (*Sower* 266). As Marlene Allen aptly writes, “Lauren creates a society that includes members that are ‘black, white, Asian, and Latino, rich and poor, gay and straight’ and she formulates a worldview whose primary tenet is to ‘embrace diversity’” (“Octavia Butler’s *Parable* Novels and the ‘Boomerang’ of African-American History” 1359).

Butler addresses the topic of homosexuality more explicitly in *The Parable of the Talents*; however, it is not completely absent in *The Parable of the Sower*. It is clear from Zahra’s experience on “the outside” that homosexuality is not acceptable in 2024 America, just as it is being hotly contested now in 2015. When Lauren tells Zahra and Harry that she plans to travel disguised as a man, Zahra replies, “Mixed couples catch hell whether people think they’re gay or straight” (157). Clearly the main issue is one of race; however, it is also apparent that homosexuality is not a favorable lifestyle either.

In *The Parable of the Talents*, Lauren’s brother, Marcos Duran, who eventually becomes a famous Christian America pastor, “had said without ever quite saying it that he preferred men sexually, but his church taught that homosexuality was sin, and he chose to live by that doctrine” (379). Lauren, however, has never been one to bend to conformity, yet she seems somewhat surprised by her own

homosexual interest. Since she often traveled as a man for safety reasons, Lauren confused Nia, a lonely woman who had started to take an interest in Lauren as a *man*. When Lauren reveals her true identity, Nia is shocked and disappointed:

“But you...,” [Nia] said. “I can’t get over it. I still feel...I still feel as though you are a man. I mean...”

“It’s all right.”

She sighed, put her head back and looked at me with a sad smile. “No, it isn’t.”

No, it wasn’t. But I went to her and hugged her and held her... She had been alone far too long. To my own surprise, I realized that under different circumstances, I might have taken her to bed. I had gone through 17 months at Camp Christian without wanting to be with anyone. I missed Bankole—missed him so much sometimes that it was almost physical pain. And I had never been tempted to want to make love with a woman. Now, I found myself almost wanting to. And she almost wanted me to. But that wasn’t the relationship that I needed between us. (*Talents* 371)

Butler’s treatment of lesbianism is revolutionary. Although Lauren is the founder of an inclusive religion and community, even she can be taken off guard sometimes. Lauren, like Marcos, was raised in a more exclusive religion that declared homosexuality sinful, and yet, unlike Marcos, she is able to embrace the complicated intricacies of human sexuality. Nothing further is indicated in *Parable of the Talents*. It appears that Lauren never remarried, but did she ever form other sexual relationships, homosexual or otherwise? Butler leaves the reader no hints.

Butler exposes a myriad of feminist concerns in her *Parable* novels; however, she champions the concerns of Ecofeminists unlike any dystopian novelist before her. Unlike many dystopian fiction novels, “The future of Butler’s novels is unique because the situation is not caused by a catastrophic event such as nuclear war, an invasion by aliens, or hostile takeover by robots or cyborgs. Rather, the devastation of both the Earth itself and human social and economic structures occurs because of humanity’s inactivity, its refusal to deal with the many social, economic, and environmental issues that plague our contemporary world” (Allen 1355). As such, Butler’s *Parable* novels are ideal texts for Ecofeminists to use as prophetic warnings about humanity’s future.

Butler once said that “ecology, especially global warming caused by profligate use of fossil fuels, is almost a character in *Parable [of the Sower]*. On the stage of a postmodern, postindustrial, post-revolutionary world—a world in which capitalism is devouring feudalism—in *Parable* a search for ‘good ground’ begins” (“Octavia Butler”). With this in mind, central to the problems plaguing 2024 America are the effects of climate change. In an attempt to draw her best friend, Joanna, into her plan to escape, Laura explains:

“Things are always changing. This is just one of the big jumps instead of the little step-by-step changes that are easier to take. People have changed the climate of the world. Now they are waiting for the old days to come back.”

“Your father doesn’t believe people changed the climate in spite of what the scientists say. He says only God could change the world in such an important way.”

“Do you believe him?”

She opened her mouth, looked at me, then closed it again. After a while she said, “I don’t know.” (*Sower* 53-4)

Joanna may still have doubts; however, individuals need only look at the world around them to see that Lauren is right. By listening to the radio, Lauren discovered that cholera is devastating Mississippi and Louisiana, tornadoes are demolishing Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee, a blizzard is entrapping the northern Midwest, and New York and New Jersey are losing citizens to a measles epidemic (*Sower* 51). As for California, they had not seen rain in over six years (*Sower* 45).

Due to the extreme weather that has indisputably had negative effects on agriculture, there is not enough food to support the population of 2024 America. Naturally, this affects animals as well.

Butler makes a powerful statement when she portrays the new relationship between dogs and people. Once “man’s best friend,” dogs are now feared, since they are known to scavenge human remains. After all, they are starving too, and as Lauren says, “The dogs used to belong to people—or their ancestors did. But dogs eat meat. These days, no poor or middle class person who had an edible piece of meat would give it to a dog” (*Sower* 39). Later on, Lauren saves Dominic, an infant, from being eaten alive by wild dogs (*Sower* 192).

As if that were not bad enough, starvation is so prevalent, some people have even turned to cannibalism. As the group continues to struggle north, Lauren sees something she will never forget:

That night, looking for a place to camp, we stumbled across four ragged, filthy kids huddled around a campfire. The picture of them is still clear in my mind. Kids the age of my brothers— twelve, thirteen, maybe fourteen years old, three boys and a girl. The girl was pregnant, and so huge it was obvious she would be giving birth any day. We rounded a bend in a dry stream bed, and there these kids were, roasting a severed human leg, maneuvering it where it lay in the middle of their fire atop the burning wood by twisting its foot. As we watched, the girl pulled a sliver of charred flesh from the thigh and stuffed it into her mouth. (*Sower* 250)

Toward the end of the novel, as the small community is closing in on the future settlement of Acorn, they are caught in a firestorm, yet another manifestation of climate change. Butler repeatedly uses fire as a symbol of complete destruction throughout the novel; however, the symbolism is most powerfully seen here. After the tragedy of losing one of their members, Jillian, to an attack by the “paints,” the young community of Earthseed gathers enough strength to make the final push to Bankole’s land in the north. While enjoying the relative safety on the road, “[Emery] caught sight of something[...] and she gasped. We followed her gaze and saw fire creeping over the hills behind us—far behind us, but not far enough” (*Sower* 278-9). With little warning, the tiny sprout of Earthseed is almost completely destroyed, just as the Earth has been for decades before.

Just as Third Wave Feminism is multifaceted, so too is Ecofeminism. Besides Butler’s evident connection to Ecofeminism in general, the *Parable* novels also highlight some of the more specific characteristics found in Spiritual Ecofeminism and Transformative Ecofeminism. In her definition of Spiritual Ecofeminism, Rosemarie Tong writes:

Spiritual Ecofeminists posit a close connection between environmental degradation and the Judeo-Christian conviction that God gave humans “dominion” over the earth[...] Implicit in the thought of most spiritual Ecofeminists, therefore, is the view that unless “patriarchal” religions such as Judaism and Christianity can purge themselves of the idea of an omnipotent, disembodied male spirit, women should abandon the oppressive confines of their synagogues and churches and run to the open spaces of nature. (260-1)

Lauren Olamina is dissatisfied with the religion she has grown up with, realizing that it does not satisfy her questions, both spiritually and intellectually. As the child of a Baptist minister, she knows the Bible inside and out, but for some reason it sounds hollow. As the reader enters her world and watches her mature, much of her time is spent contemplating who (or what?) God is:

The idea of God is much on my mind these days. I’ve been paying attention to what other people believe— whether they believe, and if so what kind of God they believe in. Keith says God is just the adults’ way of trying to scare you into doing what they want[...] A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. They believe in a kind of super-person. Some say God is another word for nature...Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality...Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us? (*Sower* 13-14)

Out of her dissatisfaction, she creates her own brand of religion called Earthseed that ultimately defines God as Change, neither male nor female, neither loving nor hating. Pure change. And something that can be molded (*Sower* 71).

According to Tong, “[another] important feature of earth-based spirituality is the kind of *compassionate life-style* women typically lead” (262). When first introduced to Lauren, she is, like everyone around her, in survival mode. But even at the onset of the novel, it is apparent that she is a compassionate person and will continue to grow into that attribute. A three-year-old child, Amy Dunn, the offspring of an incestuous relationship and loved by no one, captures Lauren’s attention and heart. She takes Amy in and teaches her the alphabet and pre-reading skills (*Sower* 33). Then suddenly, without warning, Amy is killed by a stray bullet and Lauren is surprised by her own reaction to Amy’s death—the truth is, despite Amy’s pestering nature, Lauren had grown to like—maybe even love—Amy, an outcast, and mourned her death (*Sower* 48).

As Lauren is forced into the outside world, she understandably becomes more cautious, less trusting, and less compassionate in order to survive. Regardless of what commonsense would dictate, however, Lauren’s compassionate nature shines through again and again as she protects a young family from dogs, takes into the group two fierce sisters, Jillian and Allie, who had been forced into prostitution, accepts an orphaned boy, and offers food to two starving ex-slaves.

A logical conclusion might be that science and technology are the natural enemies of the Ecofeminist; however, one of the tenets of Transformative Ecofeminism is that “science and technology [should] be used only to the extent they preserve the earth” (Tong 268). Clearly, the human beings of 2024 have *not* used science and technology to this purpose and now they are in danger of extinction. Lauren’s solution to the problem lies in her Earthseed philosophy that “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars,” literally (*Sower* 78). Oddly enough, in a country that cannot afford to feed and meet the basic necessities of its citizens, they are still sending astronauts on missions to Mars (*Sower* 17). Lauren firmly believes that, “Space could be our future... I believe that. As far as I’m concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they can hurt us. It’s hard to get anyone to see that, though, when there’s so much suffering going on just outside our walls” (*Sower* 20). Years later, Lauren’s own daughter, Larkin, renamed Asha Vere when she was kidnapped and “adopted” into a Christian American home, expresses this same view:

I found that Earthseed was a wealthy sect that welcomed everyone and was willing to make use of everyone. It owned land, schools, farms, factories, stores, banks, several whole towns. And it seemed to own a lot of well-known people—lawyers, physicians, journalists, scientists, politicians, even members of Congress. And were they all hoping to fly off to Alpha Centauri? It wasn’t that simple, of course. But to tell the truth, the more I read about Earthseed, the more I despised it. So much needed to be done on earth—so many diseases, so much hunger, so much poverty, such suffering, and here was a rich organization spending vast sums of money, time, and effort on nonsense. Just nonsense! (*Talents* 380)

In her essay, “Liberation Through the Acceptance of Nature and Technology in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” Melanie Marotta observes that “[w]hen used alone, technology does not provide the means for protection and survival, but when utilized with nature the result is preservation of human life[...] authentic liberation can only be achieved through a symbiotic relationship between technology and nature” (38). It is too late for science and technology to preserve life on Earth, but there is a chance that it might help to preserve humanity out among the stars.

Butler’s *Parable* novels borrow generously from the utopian/dystopian tradition, however, her unique perspective as a female African-American science fiction writer offer new ideas to this well-established genre. Unlike the dystopian authors before her, she leaves her readers with a sense of hope at the end of her novels—there is a chance for humanity yet. Unlike the utopian authors of an early time, Butler’s utopia is not well-established; everything is *not* perfect, not yet. There is still a long period of trial and error to work through before her ideal planet can be established. Butler masterfully contends with both Ecofeminist and feminist issues in her *Parable* novels, provoking her audience to

make changes in the present for the betterment of the future.

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