

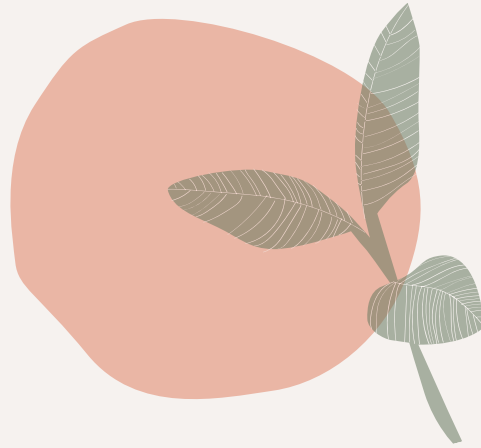


"Seed to tree, tree to forest": Octavia Butler's Visionary Fiction and Approaches to Intergenerational Optimism

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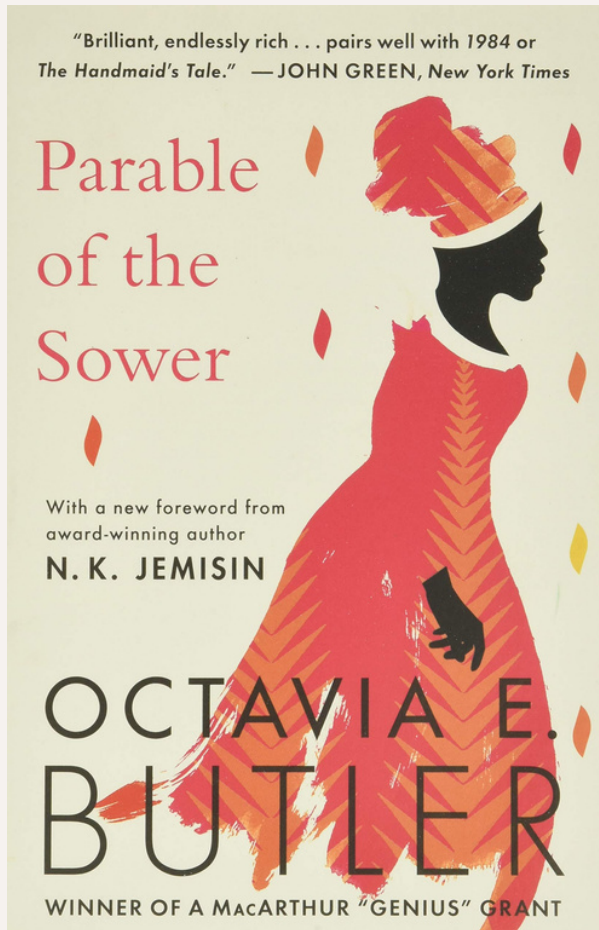
Murmurations at the Ends of the World: Brock English MA Colloquium
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"To plant a tree is an act of ***intergenerational optimism***, a selfless act at once practical and utopian, an investment in a communal future the planter will not see; to plant a tree is to offer shade to unborn strangers."

- Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

Overview



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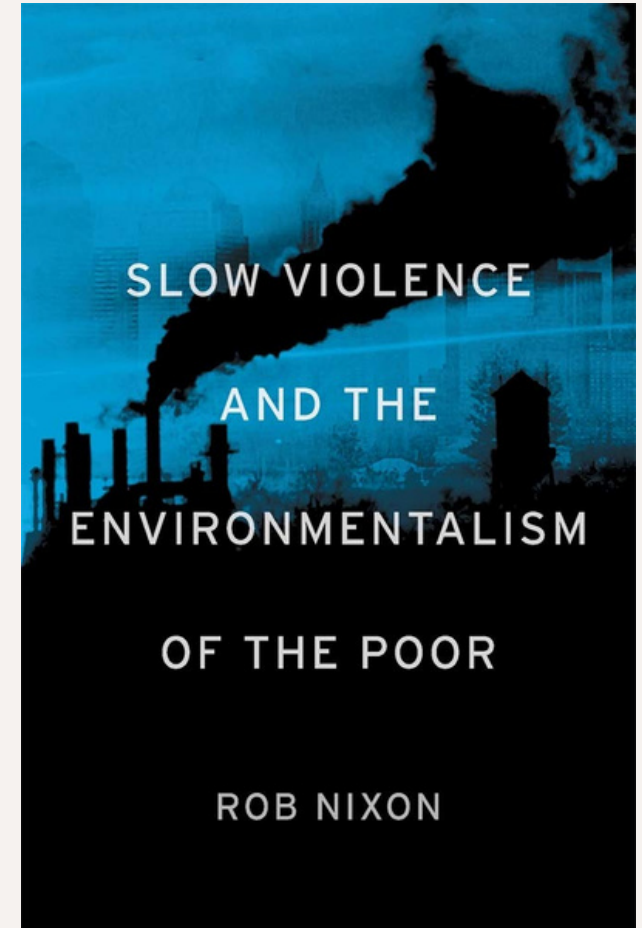
Written in 1993, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* chronicles Lauren Olamina's life in **the dystopian landscape of the 2020s**, as society has irreversibly changed due to **climate degradation** and **wealth disparity**. Taking the form of an epistolary novel, Lauren's journal entries further the narrative from her young-teenager days in the relative safety of her walled community to her eventual propulsion into the borderless and ruleless "outside" several years later after a particularly traumatic night.

Notably, Lauren has **hyperempathy**, a condition caused by her mother's drug addiction, which allows her to "feel what [she] sees [...] or believes [others] feel" (Butler 12). Eventually, as she grows her own community, cemented in her belief that "no one should travel alone in this world" (317), the novel ends with Lauren naming their small but mighty community "**Acorn**" (328).

Overview cont'd

As Rob Nixon explores the role of **“slow violence”** in our worsening state of environmental degradation, felt most directly by those that are never offered a moment in the spotlight—as his subtitle, “the environmentalism of the poor,” suggests—my project begins to emerge within the **intersectional context** of the **environmental humanities** and **literary studies**.

My MRP will pick up on theoretical threads left by Nixon, specifically those pertaining to the idea of **intergenerational optimism** and conservation efforts that promote **collectivity, empathy, and forward-thinking initiatives**, to explore a prime example of visionary speculative fiction: Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. My project will focus on **Lauren's growth and hyperempathy**, and the text's notion that there is always strength in numbers—even when those people are strangers.



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RESEARCH QUESTIONS



To what extent can empathy—even in the heightened sense as presented through Lauren Olamina—emerge as a key factor when imagining collective and intergenerational responses to our future?



In what ways does Butler's *Parable of the Sower* work to shape the way we understand our contemporary environmental situation?



How might we use visionary fiction as a way to acknowledge slow violence, and imagine our own acts of intergenerational optimism when imagining the construction of new worlds?

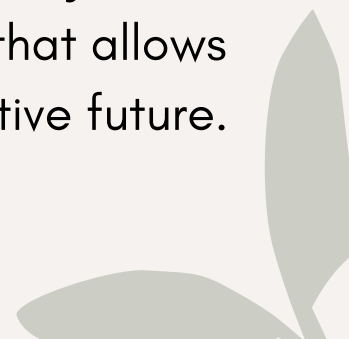


Methodology

With my research questions in mind, my project will specifically rely on a close reading of *Parable of the Sower*, as I explore elements that are necessary to my research:

Lauren's hyperempathy (and, the eventual emergence of other hyper-empathetic characters) and the **dystopian setting's depiction of hope and collectivity in the face of trauma**. With this process in mind, I will bring together key concepts—like **"intergenerational optimism," "the context of love," "witnessing," the notion of empathy,** and the **emergence of restoration/conservation efforts** in the face of dystopia—with a conversation of Butler's novel. I will look at these interwoven ideas as a possible response to both collective and environmental trauma.

Moreover, in *Octavia's Brood*, activists argue that *Parable of the Sower* falls under the subset of speculative fiction known as **"visionary fiction"**: that is, fiction that **"encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice"** (brown & Imarisha 4). Therefore, I will consider visionary fiction as a form that allows us to work through the aforementioned issues, looking forward to a collective future.






Methodology cont'd

After experiencing the traumatic loss of her brother, Lauren considers the following: **"If hyperempathy syndrome were a more common complaint, people couldn't do such things.** They could kill if they had to, and bear the pain of it or be destroyed by it. **But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?"** She continues on, claiming that, **"I've never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help.** I wish I could give it to people" (Butler 115).

For my project, I aim to **extend this thought process** as a way into my close reading, considering these ideas amid our current moment of environmental degradation and trauma.





Jim Miller, "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" (1998)

Argues that Butler offers a post-apocalyptic "hoping" based off all she's learned in the past. He writes: "As an African-American woman writing within a largely white women's tradition, her work often questions the assumptions shared by many white feminist utopian writers [...] Thus, her largely dystopian fictions challenge not only patriarchal myths, but also capitalist myths, racist myths, and feminist-utopian myth" (Miller 337).

John Blair Gamber, "'Failing Economies and Tortured Ecologies': Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*" (2012)

Highlights the text's management of the interconnection between ecological and social concerns; Gamber claims the Parable duology "privilege[s] a conception of community that [...] embrace[s] a much more shifting, adaptive, even subversive set of social relations" (Gamber 26).

Janet Fiskio, "Apocalypse and Ecotopia: Narratives in Global Climate Change Discourse" (2012)

Navigates the existing discourse around climate change, and specifically considers the potential found in the genre of speculative fiction when it comes to thinking through environmental concerns. She notes: "Lauren's hyperempathy [...] is part of what enables her to create a community, particularly with former slaves who are also hyperempaths" (Fiskio 30).



adrienne marie brown & Walidah Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015)

This book brings together social justice activism and speculative fiction, as various contributors imagine their own visions of futurity in the writing tradition established by Butler; as noted in the introduction: “Because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world” (brown & Imarisha 4).

Shelley Streeby, "Speculative Writing, Art, and World-Making in the Wake of Octavia E. Butler as Feminist Theory" (2017)

Establishes Butler as a genre-defying force of nature, writing: “the umbrella term “speculative” is useful both for recognizing the boundary-crossing dimensions of Butler’s writing, in its defiance of narrow definitions of genre, and for describing Butler’s contributions to feminist theories of knowledge production, political leadership, and imagining the future” (Streeby 512).

Phoenix Alexander, "Octavia E. Butler and Black Women's Archives at the End of the World", (2019)

Highlights that despite the subject matter, Butler’s text—along with its sequel—manages to “trace an unlikely narrative of hope” (Alexander 348) and that she considers global warming within “the larger context of social issues [...] alongside ‘the rich-poor gap,’ ‘literacy problems,’ ‘drugs,’ ‘prisons,’ and declining educational resources” (351).



Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species" (2012)

Highlights the fact that mutually-benefitting interdependence is not only evident in all realms of life. She notes that we cannot submit to the urge to "remove the love," (148) feeding directly into notions of collectivity and intergenerational optimism regarding our future.

Donna Haraway, "The Camille Stories" (2016)

A part of Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, "The Camille Stories" emerges as a collection of stories that does the work of bringing together speculative fiction and theory, specifically feminism and eco-criticism.

Kyle Powys Whyte, "Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene" (2017)

This text explores how "some Indigenous peoples already inhabit what our ancestors would have likely characterized as a dystopian future" (Powys Whyte 207). He highlights that dystopia is not always synonymous with doomsday, emphasizing the power in reconciliation and accountability when looking at the past, present and future.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy" (2017)

Growing up with an Indigenous epistemology, Simpson highlights the "context of love" (Simpson 150) in all parts of life. Like Powys Whyte, she asks us to consider what kind of future we are looking towards if we neglect empathy, love and community.

As I consider my project where it stands now, I feel it is fitting to finish with a verse of Earthseed, Lauren's handcrafted religion that she creates throughout *Parable of the*

Sower. **"They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change—Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving—forever Changing"** (Butler 315).



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