#OctaviaToldUs and It's Time to Start Listening: Grappling with Climate Change and Ecological Sustainability in *Parable of the Sower*

Dystopian novels such as Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* engage in a unique discourse on climate change and ecological sustainability, offering a prophetic gaze into our collective future. According to current scientific data, climate change is predicted to disproportionately affect individuals who are already discriminated against due to their intersectionalities of race, class, and gender. Within patriarchal societies, women are at a greater risk as men primarily occupy positions of authority which allow them to determine communal responses to environmental disasters as well as the development of environmental policies (Sultana 373). Furthermore, those who live in urbanized areas face increased exposure to environmental hazards as a result of excessive population density (Hunt et al. 26). These sources of susceptibility converge in *Parable* in a poignant depiction of the acceleration of slow violence as Butler warns us of the danger of continuing on our current path of prioritizing capital over the welfare of our planet. Through the literary genre of Afrofuturism, Butler effectively collapses space and time in order to draw parallels between the antebellum slavery practices of the past and the expanding phenomenon of debt slavery in the present. This parallel signals the alarming consequences of our current neo-capitalist practices while also emphasizing the fact that systemic inequality is one of the largest threats to our society. While *Parable* sheds light on the darkest side of humanity, it ultimately presents the possibility of a brighter future which promotes inclusive democracy and the empowerment of marginalized communities as the keys to combating climate change.

After Donald Trump was elected to be the 45th President of the United States in 2016, dystopian novels from the 20th century, including *Parable*, skyrocketed to the top of best-seller

lists as they were declared to be "must-reads" for 2017. Due to the policies of the Trump administration, especially those which have downplayed or denied the effects of climate change, Butler's prophetic vision of our current decade is unfolding at an alarming rate within our present reality. However, while novels of speculative fiction such as *Parable* clearly serve as a societal critique, they have also made vital contributions to cultural interventions concerning ecological sustainability (Mossner 193). According to Hubert Zapf, literature is an archetype for "civilizational self-renewal" as it manages to both "subvert and enhance human consciousness and existence in rationalized modern societies" (14). In addition to bringing awareness of societal dilemmas to a wide audience, aesthetic forms also have the potential to become sustainable cultural practices themselves as they present "alternative forms of dealing with the contemporary ecological crisis within longer-term perspectives of evolution and survival beyond short-term economic interests" (Zapf 20). Butler skillfully manages to capture this urgent need for human intervention in her writing as the imaginative setting of *Parable* gives her the ability to make slow violence visible and to portray its accelerated effects as she transcends time itself (Nixon 15). Furthermore, since global environmental injustices have inordinately affected marginalized communities, elements of science fiction writing such as Afrofuturism give writers the means to amplify the nature of their inequality while also giving them a platform to express their collective concerns (Nixon 42).

While forms of slow violence such as climate change do not have instantaneous violent effects which capture our attention through sensationalized media reports, the accumulation and the exponential acceleration of their incremental effects result in "calamitous repercussions which [play] out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2). Consequently, Rob Nixon identifies one of the major challenges of battling slow violence, which he defines as "violence

that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all," as the inability to capture its delayed effects through persuasive stories and images which could foster public concern and drive political action (2). However, by accelerating the projected effects of global warming which results in California being engulfed in perpetual fires, a lack of clean drinking water, the privatization of essential resources, and the disenfranchisement of marginalized communities, Butler makes these disregarded sources of violence disturbingly real. While recounting the reports of the daily news, Lauren's father laments: "Tornadoes are smashing hell out of Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee and two of three other states. Three hundred people dead so far. And there's a blizzard freezing the northern midwest, killing even more people. In New York and New Jersey, a measles epidemic is killing people. Measles!" (Butler 54). Despite the fact that the novel is set in a dystopian version of our future world, these headlines are eerily relevant to our current decade as increasingly severe natural disasters and a global pandemic have ravaged the human population.

Moreover, slow violence presents the danger of compounding the pre-existing injustices tied to class, race, gender, and region (Nixon 30). Women in particular are the main victims of slow violence. Farhana Sultana explains that "climate change is a gendered process" which has larger implications for women when it comes to migration, adaptation, and the development of environmental policies (373). In the world of *Parable*, all of these difficulties directly affect the lives of female characters as they are more likely to be assaulted or robbed while migrating to safer areas, they are often denied the ability to learn basic survival skills, and they are prevented from aiding in the development of sustainable strategies within their communities. However, one of the biggest impediments for the women of Robledo is their inability to achieve equal access to

education. While Lauren's parents provide public education to the children of Robledo, young girls in the neighbourhood are often forced to give up their schooling when they become pregnant, while the Moss girls are completely denied an education by their father. As a result, they become confined to the domestic realm which perpetuates their marginalization as they lose access to the financial opportunities that require academic qualifications (Frazier 51). Chelsea Frazier argues that since this constraint is seemingly justified by the notion that women will always be protected by the men in the community, it effectively restricts their agency and leaves them vulnerable to environmental threats in order to maintain the structure of their community's patriarchal society (51).

Ironically, while women who occupy a lower socio-economic status are more vulnerable to the dramatic effects of climate change, they are also the ones who contain the most knowledge concerning what their households and their communities need in order to survive environmental hazards (Sultana 374). Lauren insists that since the leaders of the community such as her father are trapped in a state of denial about climate change, the younger generation of women must act in order to evade the death sentence of their current lives. She explains that in order to survive, they need to educate themselves and to formulate escape plans in the event of an emergency so that they can survive on the outside. However, despite the fact that Lauren's escape plan saved her life and allowed her to sustain herself outside of the formerly protective walls of her community, many of her neighbours lost their lives due to her father's refusal to allow her to formulate a collective evacuation strategy. Conversely, when Lauren later presents herself as a man, she is finally allowed to assume the role of a leader which dramatically increases the chances of survival for herself and for the other members of her group (Frazier 58). This shift in autonomy supports Sultana's main argument that: "in enabling women to take part in

decision-making processes and having their concerns and voices heard, there are opportunities to reduce women's heightened vulnerabilities, thereby allowing them to better resist, cope with, and adapt to changes" (379). This ability to adapt to and shape change is a central tenet of Earthseed, which promotes the ideology that only when everyone is allowed to participate in the advancement of the community will its members be able to thrive.

Doug Stark argues that Butler further accentuates the widening chasm of social inequality within our society through her creation of hyperempathy syndrome, which effectively "dramatizes the violence of socio-political categorization, and, under the systemic devaluation of non-normative bodyminds, revises a liberal individualist notion of agency in favor of a model for collective action" (152). Hyperempathy syndrome compounds the intersectionalities of oppression as it becomes another debilitating affliction for those who belong to marginalized groups due to their gender, race, and socio-economic status. Through the invention of a disease which amplifies the suffering of the oppressed, Butler causes the reader to develop their own type of hyperempathy syndrome as we become viscerally aware of the misery and suffering of the marginalized members of Lauren's world.

In the field of cognitive cultural studies, literary scholar Hannah Wojciehowski and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese have developed the concept of *liberated embodied simulation* which indicates that "[t]he sharp distinction, classically drawn between first- and third-person experience of acting and experiencing emotions and sensations appears to be much more blurred at the level of neural mechanisms mapping it" (442). This means that when we are reading a novel, the perceptions and the emotions of the characters directly affects us as our brains cannot distinguish between one's own body and that of another, even if the other person is fictitious. Thus, we are able to understand and feel the actions and the emotions that characters are

experiencing as our immersion in their literary world enters into our brain's conception of reality (Mossner 196). Our engagement with the text is also amplified by Patrick Hogan's notion of *situational empathy* which suggests that "by emphasizing with the character's *situation*, we can approximate the character's feelings and concerns, even if that character is different from ourselves" (Mossner 202). Therefore, even if the reader themselves does not belong to a specific marginalized group, reading about their experiences (even if they are fictitious), provides us with an opportunity to understand their specific challenges within our society (Mossner 202).

Since science fiction novels such as *Parable* do not attempt to ground themselves within the realist tradition, the genre finds itself in a unique position to reveal the structure of our world through a critical lens. Hee-Jung Joo explains that this strategy of staging a fictional narrative outside of the realist bounds of our society in order to critique it "is particularly resonant for understanding the concept and workings of race, a category that is socially constructed yet produces real, material consequences" (280). *Parable* effectively foregrounds the continuing struggles of people of colour within the Afrofuturist tradition by portraying various examples of violence enacted upon black bodies, an issue which has reached cataclysmic heights in the present moment as police brutality has fuelled global protests in support of Black Lives Matter.

Alondra Nelson defines Afrofuturism as an aesthetic cultural movement which "simultaneously references the past and imagines the future of black life" by using symbols and concepts of science fiction in order to "imagine possible worlds in the visual, digital, and literary expression of Afrodiasporic cultural producers" (qtd in Streeby 35). In order to achieve this, Afrofuturist narratives such as *Parable* weave the past and the future together as a way of exploring alternate realities of the Black experience which continue to be shaped by racism, oppression, and the legacy of slavery. As a result, they provide the opportunity for marginalized

individuals to rise up as figures of hope who have active roles in shaping their futures in a way that allows them to embrace their culture. Therefore, through this literary genre, the social hierarchies of our realities become destabilized through the abolishment of dominant myths about people of colour which have served as the basis for structural inequality (Stark 156).

As one of the pioneers of the Afrofuturist genre, Butler expertly employs these techniques as *Parable*'s neo-slave narrative reveals that the racial inequality which began with U.S. chattel slavery is still prevalent in modern American society. Through the stylistic tradition of Afrofuturism, the historical past is shown to intrude upon the present, creating an opportunity to revisit the white-washed representation of historical events while also using it as a means of critiquing contemporary society. Madhu Dubey proposes that "Butler persistently revisits slavery in order to challenge the redemptive accounts of US racial history that began to gain sway in the decades following the civil rights movement" (345). Ultimately, Butler does not allow America's national history of slavery to rest as a past era which has largely been defined by white narratives. Instead, she actively revives it in the world of *Parable* as a means of both exposing the legacy of inequality which continues to plague the Black community and of warning us of the possibility of its re-emergence under the guise of "economic servitude" (Dubey 346).

While the global era of capitalism was hailed as one that would break down the borders between nations, it has merely resulted in the "realignment of race and class stratification" which has deepened the divide of racial inequality (Dubey 346). This regression is a central critique of *Parable* as Lauren reflects that "something new is beginning—or perhaps something old and nasty is reviving" once the city of Olivar is sold to a multinational corporation, marking a new era of debt slavery in America (Butler 118). The fortified estates of the wealthy serve as another extension of the antebellum period as they consist of "one big house and a lot of shacky little

dependencies where the servants live," which mirrors the structure of plantations (9). However, while Bankole laments the state of the world as he remarks that "this country has slipped back two hundred years" (Butler 305), Dubey argues that slavery in *Parable* "appears more centrally as a descriptor of the present than as a historical reference point" as it amplifies the racial discrimination which has been perpetuated by capitalist institutions (358). One major distinction between the practices of antebellum slavery and the form that is presented in the novel is that indentured workers are regarded as being disposable as opposed to being seen as permanently owned property. Thus, slaves become expendable sources of unskilled labour which are easy to replace during a period of mass unemployment. Furthermore, Butler's conception of slavery extends beyond the dichotomy of Black slaves and white owners as all people of colour are seen as disposable workers while all women (including white women) are victims of sex trafficking (Dubey 358). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the emergence of debt slavery in the novel is not a mere prophetic depiction of the future of the United States, but a direct reflection of practices which have been employed in third world countries for decades (Joo 287).

For the past thirty years, America has led the world in neoliberal economic policies, unsustainable consumerism, excessive military investment and activity, and the consequential global environmental fallout from these actions. However, Nixon points out that Americans themselves remain unable to grasp the extent of the damage that their nation has caused since the destruction has primarily been inflicted upon foreign countries and future generations (34). Therefore, rather than merely portraying the continued disadvantages of marginalized communities (such as higher rates of poverty, unemployment, limited access to education, etc.) within society as a residual condition from the era of slavery, Butler emphasizes that structural inequality is an ongoing consequence of neo-capitalism (Dubey 358). In *Parable of the Talents*,

Butler directly explains that the source of "the Pox" was a combination of "climatic, economic, and sociological crises" which were fuelled by "convenience, profit, and inertia excus[ing] greater and more dangerous environmental degradation" (*Talents* 8). Notably, this apocalypse is not a global phenomena which results in the annihilation of the world, but a national event which results in the destruction of the United States as a first world power (Joo 283). In this instance, the collapse of the United States is depicted as a direct outcome of the nation's investment in an economic system which is predicated on racial exclusion through the continuation of the American legacies of slavery and colonialism (Joo 281). Consequently, Alexa von Mossner concludes that while "it is not 2025 yet, and as far-fetched and extreme as [Butler's] speculative scenario of an anarchic, unjust, and unsustainable world may have seemed at the time of its publication, it becomes hauntingly premonitory as we approach that date" (205).

Through Butler's depiction of our current decade in *Parable of the Sower*, she reinforces the notion that dystopian fiction can become an effective means of confronting the reader with the dilemmas of reality when "the features of a speculative world [are] familiar enough to be understandable to the reader, and yet strange enough to point their attention toward something that they may have overlooked or taken for granted," such as the ongoing effects of climate change (Mossner 197). While eco-literature has the unique ability to demonstrate the consequences of our unsustainable lifestyles, it also has the power to inspire social engagement with environmental justice as it fosters a sense of empathy and moral responsibility within the reader. Moreover, unlike scientific data, academic scholarship, and environmental policies, fiction has the ability to influence a vast audience (Mossner 195).

As Butler weaves together the past, present, and future to create a dynamic depiction of marginalized experience, she creates a text which serves as a site of memory while also enabling

the creation of a feminist future (Colbert 107). While Lauren is initially cast as a marginalized figure who lacks the power to enact meaningful changes in her community, she transcends these limitations throughout the novel, becoming a prophetic figure who forges the path for a new way of life. Within *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, Lauren declares that "when civilization fails to serve, it must disintegrate unless it is acted upon by unifying internal or external forces" (Butler 101). Consequently, in a world which is rapidly collapsing due to the inability of the American population to shape Change, Lauren emphasizes the importance of diversity as "multiracial alliance [becomes] the only effective vehicle of oppositional agency" (Dubey 359). In order to make her utopian vision into a reality, she establishes the community of Acorn which is built on the promise of the liberation from identity politics, the creation of an inclusive democracy, and the guarantee of equal access to education. Therefore, unlike the "conservationists who seek to conserve environmental resources for the ultimate purpose of sustaining the economy and society as it presently functions," Lauren sees the structural collapse of her world as an opportunity to forge a new, sustainable life out of its ruins (Frazier 55).

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