A dense, misty forest scene with tall trees and a bright light source filtering through the canopy. The text is overlaid on this background.

13. The Literature of Climate Apocalypse

Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Day 1

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

Course Stuff

- Writing Assignment 2 due to Canvas on Friday May 2 by 5 pm
 - counterarguments and textual evidence
- Reminder that the Final Exam is scheduled for Monday May 19 from 4-6 pm in Tawes 1100 (this classroom)



“February 1, 2025.

There’s a fire today...again.”

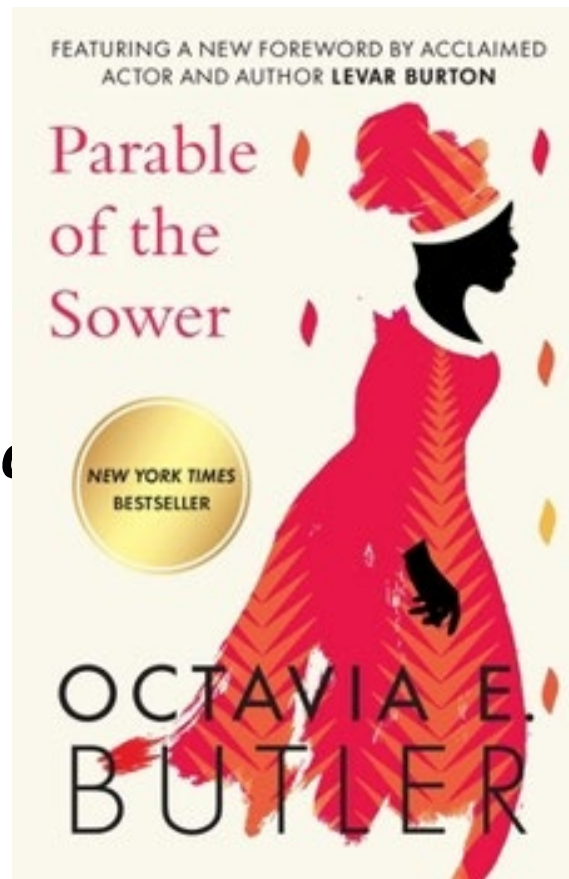
-Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Palisades Fire, January 2025

Octavia Butler (1947-2006)

***Parable of the Sower* (1993)**

- grew up in Pasadena
- wrote speculative fiction in the 1980s and 1990s (including *Kindred*)
- in 1995, she became the first science fiction writer to win a MacArthur “genius” award
- Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998)
- Parable of the Sower* is a story about a young woman in a Southern California ravaged by the effects of climate change, who tries to survive environmental apocalypse



What is Apocalypse? Biblical Accounts of the Apocalypse

- Where does apocalyptic thinking come from?
- Greek *apokalypsis* means 'unveiling' or 'revelation'
- in the Christian Bible, the *Book of Revelation* or *Book of the Apocalypse* is the final book of the New Testament
- endings have particular weight as a key through which to view what has come before
- Christianity is an ardently apocalyptic religion because it focuses on the “Second Coming” of Christ, who will preside over the Last Judgment and the end of the world
- the genre of apocalypse also functions as prophecy
- eschatology* is the branch of theology that is concerned with death, judgment, and the final end of humankind
- Butler’s novel is eschatological science fiction



Detail of the Rider on a pale horse, emerging from a hell-mouth, with John and the Lamb, Royal MS 15 D II, f. 129r

How does the environment signal the coming of apocalypse?

-*Revelations* 6: 12-17 depicts the signs of the coming apocalypse including natural disasters (such as earthquakes, eclipses, and comets):

12 I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold,[e] there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon[f] became like blood. 13 And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. 14 Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. 15 And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders,[g] the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, 16 and said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"



British Library, Add MS 17333, f. 8r

How are ethical/ spiritual and environmental apocalypses related?

The Opening of the *Parable of the Sower*

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God

Is Change.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF
THE LIVING

-what horizon of expectation
is set up here?

SATURDAY, JULY 20, 2024

I had my recurring dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father's daughter.

Today is our birthday—my fifteenth and my father's fifty-fifth. Tomorrow, I'll try to please him—him and the community and God. So last night, I dreamed a reminder that it's all a lie. I think I need to write about the dream because this particular lie bothers me so much. ...

[Lauren dreams that she is teaching herself to fly and she flies through the house]

The wall before me is burning. Fire has sprung from nowhere, has eaten in through the wall, has begun to reach toward me, reach for me. The fire spreads. I drift into it. It blazes up around me. I thrash and scramble and try to swim back out of it, grabbing handfuls of air and fire, kicking, burning! Darkness. (3-4)

The Opening of the *Parable of the Sower*

- Butler set the novel 30+ years in the future from its date of publication in 1993
- form? the journal of the 15 yr old Lauren Oya Olamina describing her birthday
- her family: Cory, her stepmother; her father, Rev. Olamina; and her siblings Keith, Marcus, Bennett, and Gregory
- genre: speculative fiction vs. science fiction
 - potential futures and alternate realities vs. fictions based on scientific advancement and imagined technology
- the opening scenes in Ward vs Butler
- realist fiction (Ward) vs speculative fiction (Butler)
- like Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, this novel thematizes slow violence as opposed to spectacular violence

Community and Environment in the *Parable of the Sower*

-What is Southern California like?

- income disparity
- ineffective politicians
- no rule of law
- environmental degradation

-What is Lauren's community like?

- a gated 11-household compound
- multiracial
- inside vs outside (baptism, Rev. Olamina's work)

-What are the threats to this community?

- Inner vs outer (Amy Dunn)

-What vision of the environment is this?

- scarcity driven (lack of water, food)
- the first rain in 6 years (48)
- the role of fire (wild fires, arson, 'pyro')

-How does Butler's vision relate to the biblical apocalyptic imagination?

Lauren's Views on Climate Change

-Lauren's discussion with her best friend Joanne (56ff)

-the analogy with the medieval bubonic plague:

"Things are changing now, too. Our adults haven't been wiped out by a plague so they're still anchored in the past, waiting for the good old days to come back. But things have changed a lot, and they'll change more. 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're waiting for the old days to come back."

"Your father says he doesn't believe people changed the climate in spite of what 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." "My father has his blind spots," I said. "He's the best person I know, but even he has blind spots."

"It doesn't make any difference," she said. "We can't make the climate change back, no matter why it changed in the first place. You and I can't. The neighborhood can't. We can't do anything."

I lost patience. "Then let's kill ourselves now and be done with it!"

She frowned, her round, too serious face almost angry. She tore bits of peel from a small navel orange. "What then?" she demanded. "What can we do?" (March 5, 2025; Chap. 5; 57)

Lauren on God and Nature

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. A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of.

Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality. Ask seven people what all of that means and you'll get seven different answers. So what is God? Just another name for whatever makes you feel special and protected?

There's a big, early-season storm blowing itself out in the Gulf of Mexico. It's bounced around the Gulf, killing people from Florida to Texas and down into Mexico. There are over 700 known dead so far. One hurricane. And how many people has it hurt? How many are going to starve later because of destroyed crops? That's nature. Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go and who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety. Where's safety for them anyway? Is it a sin against God to be poor? We're almost poor ourselves. There are fewer and fewer jobs among us, more of us being born, more kids growing up with nothing to look forward to. One way or another, we'll all be poor some day. The adults say things will get better, but they never have. How will God—my father's God—behave toward us when we're poor? ...

I wonder if the people on the Gulf Coast still have faith. ... Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane—or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water? But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether? (Chap 2; 15-16)

Earthseed's Belief System: Kinship with the World

Consider: Whether you're a human being, an insect, a microbe, or a stone, this verse is true.

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.

(April 26, 2025; Chap 7; 79)

-“Earthseed” is the religion that Lauren develops based on the idea that "God is Change”

-name?

-Why "The Books of the Living"? as opposed to "The Books of the Dead"

-forward rather than backward looking

-cf Aristotle's idea that the one constant in nature (physis) is change

-how is this an alternative to the “big daddy god” or the “big kid god”?

Keith

- how is he a foil for Lauren?
 - inside vs outside the compound
 - conflict with her father?
 - Lauren's dislike of Keith?
- what vision of masculinity does he embody?

Someone had cut and burned away most of my brother's skin. Everywhere except his face. They burned out his eyes, but left the rest of his face intact—like they wanted him to be recognized. They cut and they cauterized and they cut and they cauterized... Some of the wounds were days old. Someone had an endless hatred of my brother. (Chap. 10; 113)

- What is his role?
 - slow violence: the effects of addiction, drug dealing, familial conflict, and poverty

Lauren's Hyperempathy

Lauren suffers from “hyperempathy syndrome” which causes her to share pleasure and pain, or perceived pain, with other creatures

- origin= her mother's addiction to a prescription drug during her pregnancy

- empathy with the human but also the nonhuman world (the dog she has to kill to end its suffering)

- why does she keep her “sharing” a secret?

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? 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. Failing that, I wish I could find other people who have it, and live among them. A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all.
(Chapter 10, p. 115)

- the geo-engineering of morality through empathy

