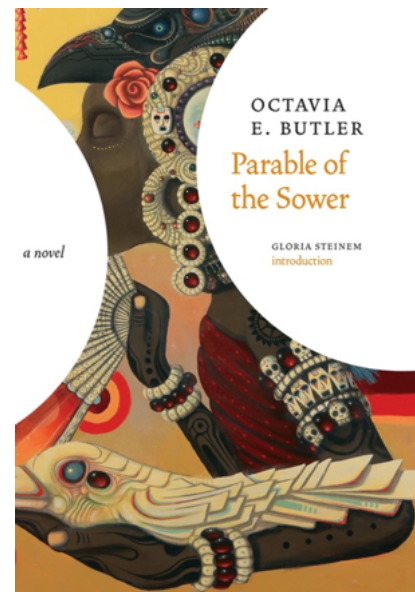


Parable of the Sower

site.uit.no/readrespond/parable-of-the-sower



Stef Craps, Ghent University

A decade and a half after her death, Octavia Butler is having a moment. NASA has named the landing site of the agency's Perseverance rover, which is searching for signs of ancient microbial life on Mars, after the African American science fiction author, and just a few months earlier her 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* finally made the *New York Times* best-seller list.

One reason why this book has struck a chord is that it conjures up a nightmarish vision of an America burning itself down that many contemporary readers find all too recognizable. The first in a two-book series, *Parable of the Sower* offers a prescient glimpse of California in the 2020s. Written as a response to and critique of the neo-conservative assault on the welfare state, and published less than a year after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the novel depicts a dystopian future where society has largely collapsed due to global warming, growing wealth inequality, and corporate greed. Poverty, crime, and exploitation are rampant outside a few gated communities such as the one on the outskirts of LA, Robledo, in which the protagonist—Lauren Olamina—grows up. Strictly speaking, *Parable of the Sower* is not a post-apocalyptic novel, as it is not concerned with sudden endings. Butler extrapolated from current trends, taking them to their logical extremes, without resorting to abrupt transitions or definitive catastrophes. As Lauren puts it, “things are unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit.”

Parable of the Sower also resonates in this time of Black Lives Matter protests and the ensuing societal reckoning with the racist foundations of the US because of its thoughtful engagement with practices of enslavement both past and present. In many ways, the novel is a neo-slave narrative: it tells the life story of a young African American woman through journal entries, her journey north in search of freedom and safety recalls that of fugitive

slaves travelling along the Underground Railroad (as well as evoking Latin American immigrants illegally crossing the border into the US), and the many citations of and allusions to the Bible echo classic slave narratives, as does the importance placed on literacy and the quest for education. Moreover, twenty-first-century forms of economic servitude and social oppression, such as debt bondage to multinational corporations and sexual trafficking, are explicitly interpreted by the characters in terms of a continuation of or variation on antebellum chattel slavery. Thus, the novel challenges redemptive accounts of US racial history and discredits self-congratulatory proclamations of the triumph of capitalism.

An additional reason for the recent resurgence of interest in *Parable of the Sower*, besides its frighteningly realistic “collapse of civilization” story and its timely reflection on the enduring legacy of slavery in America, is that the novel provides a narrative blueprint for a sustainable future, achievable through processes of societal transformation prefigured by the community Lauren founds on the principles of a religion she has created herself. She realizes early on that nostalgia is not a viable solution to the problems ailing society. Ruefully observing that “People have changed the climate of the world. Now they’re waiting for the old days to come back,” she knows that the old order is broken beyond repair. Embarking on a perilous northbound journey on Highway 101 after her Robledo community has been destroyed by drug-crazed intruders, she gathers a diverse group of people around her whom she tells about and teaches the religion she has invented, “Earthseed,” a belief system whose basic tenet—“God is change”—emphasizes flux and impermanence.

Acknowledging that the world is in constant change, and that people can and must adapt, Earthseed rejects individualism, private property, and discrimination based on race, gender, class, or sexuality; it embraces diversity, interconnectedness, and interdependence with the human and non-human world. Through Earthseed, the novel offers a utopian vision that can serve as an alternative model to the unjust and moribund system which led to the political, economic, and environmental crisis. Towards the end of the narrative, Lauren and her followers found the first Earthseed settlement, called Acorn, in Humboldt County in northern California. Earthseed’s ultimate destiny, though, as prophesied by Lauren, is to “take root among the stars”: she imagines the future of humanity in terms of interstellar travel and the establishment of Earthseed communities in solar systems beyond planet Earth.

Empathy plays an important role in facilitating the creation of Lauren’s progressive community. Butler contrasts the callousness and indifference to human suffering of the existing social (dis)order with her protagonist’s extreme sensitivity to the pain of others. Born with “hyperempathy syndrome,” a genetic defect caused by her mother’s drug use while she was pregnant, Lauren can feel the pain and (less often) pleasure of others. She vacillates between seeing hyperempathy as a disability, since it makes her more vulnerable, and an asset, “something that might do some good,” as it could become the basis for a more compassionate and caring society. In fact, *Parable of the Sower*’s attempt to imagine utopia from the ashes is reminiscent of Rebecca Solnit’s *A Paradise Built in*

Hell, which describes the “disaster communities” constituted through mutual aid and collectivity that spring up in response to breakdowns of the prevailing social order, giving the lie to the commonplace notion that disasters reveal the worst in human nature.

However, the feasibility of Butler’s utopian vision as articulated in the novel is a moot point. For one thing, the ending is ambiguous. It strikes a hopeful note, but it is unclear whether Acorn can actually survive in a hostile wider environment marked by violence, anarchy, and climate catastrophe. In any case, as a relatively isolated agrarian enclave, it does not obviously pose an effective challenge to global capitalism. Moreover, as a fictitious genetic mutation, hyperempathy syndrome—the “novum” in this otherwise realistic science fiction tale—may seem like tenuous ground for real-world socio-political change; besides, it sometimes leads to decidedly unethical behaviour. In addition, *Earthseed*’s focus on an interstellar destiny can be seen to undermine its commitment to bettering life on this planet. Even so, *Parable of the Sower* stands out for envisaging ways that could lead to a radically improved world, thus giving contemporary readers a refreshing break from the relentless horror show of the Trump era and the standard doom and gloom that tends to predominate in speculative fiction.