Migrants and Disaster Subcultures in the Late Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Reading of Octavia Butler's Parable Novels

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Affected by a shocking concatenation of ecological, economic, and political disasters, black, white, and multiracial characters in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) seek to cope with apparently insurmountable difficulties. Butler's Afrofuturist *Parable* novels render a disintegrating US society in the 2020s-2090s, which is torn by internal and external chaos: it shows visible signs of pandemonium involving the crisis of individual, communal, and ecological survival. Besides her palpable engagement with ecological problems that tie in with social problems, the storyworlds of Butler's novels, once read side by side with each other, yield a fascinating but also horrifying fictional mapping of the Anthropocene Age, dramatizing the near-contemporary glocal ecological-social crises, and exploring anthropogenic, that is, human-induced, devastation in full swing through the prism of survivors in post-industrial California.[1] In my reading, then, the texts by Butler make up the fictional tapestry of the human risk narrative whose anthropogenic effects on the planet might threaten an ecological holocaust, unless fundamental green changes spur radically alternative modes of thinking and living.

In Butler's *Parable* novels, I claim with ecocritics that nature is to be considered "not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama" (Glotfelty xxi). In the vein of eco-thinking, I ascribe intrinsic value to nature, thus my argument inevitably becomes entangled with the ethical dimension of an "eco-logos" which derives its axiological rationality from the recognition of our planet's vulnerability. As eco-phenomenologist Charles S. Brown proposes:

> Such an eco-logos begins with the rejection of a value-free conception of nature (typical of modernistic thinking), as well as fanciful mystifications of a divine nature (typical of premodernist thinking) by returning to nature as experienced—that is, to nature perceived as worthy of our moral respect and admiration. Such experiences will be self-justifying not by a rationality that reunites the Real and the Good but one that never separates them. (16)

When I engage with Butler's novels, I agree with Scott Hicks, who claims an ecocriticism of color, asserting that "it is not enough simply to add

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 23.2. 2017.

African American fictional and nonfictional texts to the roll of reliable standbys; it is crucial that critics expand the critical underpinnings of an ecocritical canon with the theoretical and analytical frameworks provided" (202). I am interested in how Butler's texts address and construct the interaction of the human and the non-human world to create a storyworld in which distinct characters operate not only according to the logic of the narrative in their local places and (semi)private/communal spaces but also as distinct configurations of the Anthropocene, that is, as agents of a larger story of humans. Pursuing this ecocritical project, I pay close attention to the environment in which the respective characters enact their destiny within their historically and ecologically inscribed narrative space. Though aware of the crucial difference between environmentalism and ecologism, as well as of the multiplicity of scholarly persuasions about the meanings and implications of the terms "environment" and "nature" (along with others, such as "biosphere," "biotic web," or "non-human environment") in ecocriticism/environmental criticism, ecology, environmental justice criticism, social ecology, or political ecology, I deliberately use them interchangeably.

Besides considering the issue of definitions along these lines, beyond the scope of this work, I also intend to suggest, with my apparently anarchistic application of the terms, the principal tenet of ecological thought, that of the intrinsic relationship between the human and the non-human, hence the difference in my treatment of Butler's texts with regard to agency. My objective is to help rethink the constitution of human boundaries through human-to-non-human interdependence and cooperation, or the lack thereof. Attending to intersectional analyses, I also apply a new figure of the universal, "species thinking," or the Anthropocene, with an anthropogenic agency that Dipesh Chakrabarty famously offered for contemporary humanities scholarship in his foundational article, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009). Committed to the eco-phenomenological standpoint described above, I cannot but reconsider, however, the very discursive formations and practices that come into play when the lifeworlds themselves in either novel are constituted "through the interpretative and meaning-bestowing function of our intentional act" (Brown 6), where "our" includes, in my argument, the fictional character's, the author's, and the reader's.

Butler's Earthseed series, comprising *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), is a futuristic narrative with interlocking characters and themes, rendering the tribulations of people with diverse racial and cultural backgrounds in a disintegrating American society beleaguered by

social and ecological systems failures. Although each of the *Parable* novels is enjoyable on its own, their rich implications unfold even better when read as one consecutive narrative. Thus, I must first engage with the storyline and the plot of both to see continuities and discontinuities in their way of addressing problems that connect the human and her environment into a global drama of survival. The last section of my discussion engages with *Parable of the Talents*, scrutinizing its specificities as a toxic risk narrative, as well as exploring the disaster subculture of Olamina's eco-anarchist community as a viable paradigm of planetary survival pitted against the Christian Fundamentalist Camp with its culture of garbage and waste.

Parable of the Sower begins in 2024, when the protagonist, the African American teenager Lauren Oya Olamina, is only fifteen, living in a socially and environmentally toxic American society. Her relative security with her middle-class family in a walled community of Los Angeles is crushed when a band of terrorist drug-addicts destroys her neighborhood and family. Lauren is forced to fight for survival as an outcast. As a vulnerable and lonely young black woman, she is a potential victim to multiple hazards in a chaotic, impoverished society where larceny, theft, murder, rape, prostitution, and slavery are rampant, and a constant threat to the unguarded. Lauren, however, is strong and adamant about coping with the general devastation: she constructs a belief system she calls Earthseed to replace her Baptist minister father's religion in the hope of better chances for personal and communal survival. She not only succeeds in defending herself but sets out to organize a community of survivors to be called Acorn on a secluded farm in Northern California.

The storyworld is constituted of Olamina's journal entries and the extracts from her *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, these two types of text always appearing together as if mutually defining and testing each other, playing out how lived experience correlates to the koan-like wisdom of Earthseed and, conversely, how the spiritual discourse of Earthseed is embodied by human experience. This interesting, somewhat dizzying use of Earthseed-koan and journal-entry interrogates the boundaries of each, intimating the lynchpin of Olamina's philosophy about change in the universe (or universal change), where the assumption of margin and center, outside and inside, frame and core, crisis and regeneration is called into question. The textual fragments are arranged in chronological order as Olamina writes her journal, and the novel operates through internal focalization.[2] *Sower*'s linear story draws on the Ur-narrative of the journey (best known, in our culture, from the Bible, which Butler also references with the title): the black heroine,

whose relative stability and social prestige are demolished by forces she and her family are unable to forestall, emerges from chaos; she takes to the road and, on a dangerous journey, gathers people by spreading the seeds of her religion to form an alternative community at a relatively safe rural location in Northern California. The main survival tool is the Earthseed faith that Olamina gradually constructs to help her fellow-travellers survive and establish a sustainable community at the margin of an impoverished, disintegrating, and dangerous society. That Butler sought to write a mono-focal autobiographical tale with a distinct narrative teleology about an intelligent black female character who, eventually, attains a godly stature is evidenced by an interview with her about *Sower*'s genesis, in which she outlines her intentions in writing this novel:

> I knew that I wanted to tell the story, the fictional autobiography, of Lauren Olamina, who begins a new religion and who, sometime after her death—after people have had time to forget how human she was—might easily be considered a god. I wanted her to be an intelligent, believable person. I didn't want to write satire. ("Conversation with Octavia Butler" 335)

Besides its spiritual scenario, the main topoi of the novel "signify on" classic slave narratives that center on the escaped slave who—on a dangerous journey treading her way up north, also called the underground railroad—follows the North Star and, eventually, arrives in a place which will later become a haven complete with prospects of safety, work, family, and welcoming community.[3]

The multiple-voiced, likewise fragmentary *Parable of the Talents* is more complicated than its prequel, leaning on a script of the heroine, who rises from chaos/hell/human to order/h(e)aven/god. *Talents* begins with the journal entry of Olamina's daughter, Asha/Larkin, whose comments frame the novel that pivots around various textual fragments she has assembled. These focalized objects (in Mieke Bal's sense) making themselves perceptible through the daughter, include journal entries by her mother, Lauren Oya Olamina (*The Journals of Lauren Oya Olamina*), and by her father, Dr. Joseph Bankole (*Memories of Other Worlds*), as well as excerpts from Olamina's book, *Earthseed: The Book of the Living*, and her brother, Marc Duran's *The Warrior*; all this complemented by the information Asha/Larkin retrieves about her mother while beginning research "on the nets" (380). *Parable of the Talents* is, then, the daughter Asha/Larkin's book. As Butler makes it obvious from the start, the novel's storyworld is triggered by Asha/Larkin's desire to piece

herself together within a fragmentary family narrative by suturing several texts into her own. She commits herself to re-editing the family archive while gradually exploring it in order to assemble her own subjectivity, especially by repositioning herself in relation to her mother, Lauren Olamina: "I need to understand myself, and she is part of me. I wish that she weren't, but she is. In order for me to understand who I am, I must begin to understand who she was. That is my reason for writing and assembling this book" (*Talents* 2).

Talents's "textual coherence and narrative tonality" (Genette 208) is structured by character-bound, internal focalization which also allows the reader to gain access to imperceptible focalized objects, that is, the narrative agent Asha/Larkin's feelings and thoughts. The core narrative whereby Asha/Larkin strives to understand herself is her mother's, with its attendant narratives (Bankole's and Marc's) that constantly inflect and reframe Olamina's perspective. Given only scanty information about how Asha/Larkin came upon the textual fragments, and virtually no handle on what her editing assumptions were while stitching the textual fragments into a book (beyond her intention to rethink herself), only guesses can be made about the daughter's intentionality as a meaning-bestowing author-editor who has been traumatized by losing her parents, and by finding the uncle, who turns out to be her mother's staunch adversary.

The core of the multi-embedded narrative is constituted of what *Sower* is: Olamina's journal entries and short verses from the religious book with which she pastors throughout her adult life. Based on these texts, the storyline unfolds as follows: Lauren Olamina establishes Earthseed's first community, Acorn, assisted by her husband and her fellow-settlers. The community grows quickly, but their resilience is tested by a range of apparently insurmountable difficulties which equally beleaguer Earthseed: the Word, its People, and the Community's lifeworld, which is to flesh out the Word. Despite their efforts and survival skills, however, after five years, Acorn becomes powerless in the face of the external aggression mounted against the community when political chaos is replaced by the fundamentalist-nationalist Christian regime of the new American president, Andrew Steele Jarret. Olamina's community is raided by Christian American Crusaders and is methodically turned into a horrible concentration camp resembling a plantation from the slavery past. Although Acorn is destroyed, the Earthseed faith cannot be stamped out: despite the forcible dispersal of the community and the protagonist's individual human losses (Olamina's two-month-old baby is stolen, her husband is killed, her brother, Marc, betrays her, and many of her friends get killed), it is kept alive. With her multiple skills beyond the oratorical, including

portrait drawing, gardening, and refurbishing houses, the black Olamina perseveres in the face of flagrant racism, sexism, and misogyny, and even gains new friends and followers, and thus she becomes a popular speaker on lecture tours around the country once Jarret's power is over. Despite her endeavors to retrieve her daughter, Larkin (renamed by her Christian American foster parents as Asha Vere), and reunite with her (by now, Asha is an educated young woman, supported by her uncle Marc, who has himself become a popular preacher on the opposite side as a Christian American minister), Olamina's hopes are frustrated.

Unsuccessful and disheartened as a mother, she does, however, succeed in spreading Earthseed, which quickly gains ground beyond the USA: in Alaska (now an independent country), Canada, Mexico, and Brazil. Her words generate a cognitive-spiritual-biotic renewal that fulfills the destiny of Earthseed "to scatter the Earth's living essence—human, plant, and animal—to extrasolar worlds" (*Talents* 46). The book ends with Asha/Larkin's bitter words introducing her mother's last journal entry from 2090, on which she comments as Olamina's "narrow" story, thus intimating the underside of Olamina's success: the mother saved the species but lost a daughter and a brother. Put another way: however loveable and intelligent Olamina is conceived of by Butler—as evidenced by the interview above—her heroine's success in achieving the dream of settlement on other stars is sneered at by Asha/Larkin. Olamina's futuristic pastoral ambitions are contested by her daughter's skepticism: instead of paying unconditional tribute to the mother's commitment to saving people on Earth, as well as salvaging Earth's biotic essence for other planets, Asha/Larkin considers this very dedication to humanity a sign of her hubris, speaking to pride, narcissism, even selfishness.

If we glance at these short summaries, the difference between *Sower* and *Talents* is puzzling, especially when an interpretation intends to take the environment into consideration as a vital part, indeed, a shaper of the plot, whose role significantly contributes to the constitution of the human characters, as well as the kind of narrative in which they are fleshed out. *Sower*, in this light, appears to be a dominantly apocalyptic narrative with pastoral impulses, on which Ursula Heise comments:

> Apocalyptic narrative, by definition, addresses the fate of the world as a whole: it is a particular form of imagining the global. As it was deployed by environmentalist writers in the 1960s and 1970s, it paints dire pictures of a world on the brink of destruction as a means of calling for social and political reforms that might avert such ruination. Unlike biblical apocalypse,

> in other words, it assumes that the End of the World can in fact be prevented (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 99), and the destructive intensity of its scenarios is not so much an attempt at accurate prediction as an indicator of the urgency of its call for social change (Killingsworth and Palmer 41).
>
> (141)

Butler's *Sower* likewise portrays the world on the brink of ecological-political collapse, but posits a black heroine who is capable of finding a niche in the post-industrial Armageddon. She not only survives but, at the novel's end, is poised to establish a sustainable, agriculturally based micro-society of well-adapting, ecologically sensitive, and mutually supportive individuals attuned to a common religion in a near-pastoral setting.

I must quickly add, however, that the environmentalist inscription of *Sower*'s narrative does not entirely pursue the romantic escapist-rebirth trajectory of the apocalyptic-pastoral script that shapes either the American environmentalist writing from Thoreau to Gary Snyder, or the European ecovillage-movement.[4] Madhu Dubey also observes the internal contradictions in *Sower* across the divide between two different discourses of African American fiction, the organic/folk and urban literary representation: "[a]lthough it systematically exposes the dangers and limitations of organic notions of community, the novel, in common with southern folk aesthetics, ultimately resorts to such notions in order to achieve a smooth resolution to problems of urban literary representation" (123).

While acknowledging the relevance of Dubey's insight, I propose that, instead of contradictions, the textual tensions in Butler's *Sower* are the effects of a distinct narrative hybridization: the dominantly post-apocalyptic storyworld of *Sower* blends with elements of the so-called toxic risk narrative, which is a different script about a fundamentally unpredictable, hazardous world. This I explore in detail as *Talents*'s dominant narrative below. Here I only sketch out a few features of the riskscape that also shape *Sower*'s hybrid storyworld.

Rather than ascending from pure origins, Olamina inhabits a socially-ecologically hazardous environment from the very beginning, and when she apparently leads her people to a safe haven at the novel's end, Bankole's property turns out to be far from being pastorally welcoming, clean, and regenerating. The journey from her mother's toxic body that begins at birth (the mother was addicted to a prescription medicine that caused her baby's extreme vulnerability, "hyperempathy" and, subsequently, her own death), through scenes of devastation in Robledo (which is destroyed by pyros), to a

plundered farm with ashes and bones (Bankole's family was butchered and their property destroyed), is also short of pure, uncontaminated sites of nature affording chances of birth and rebirth. Yet, the fact that *Sower*'s focalization prioritizes Lauren Olamina's gradual ascendance from a young girl—reduced to what Agamben calls "bare life" (when all of a sudden finding herself in a state of exception, she is deprived of any agency over her life)—to religious leader and community organizer (temporarily out of danger in a prospective good society on a liveable piece of land) confirms the relevance of the assumption that *Sower*'s hybrid textual coherence is primarily inscribed by the apocalypse narrative.

In contrast to *Sower*, *Parable of the Talents* is predominantly structured around a different rhetoric, which blatantly denies safe niches and regenerating margins. There seem to be no pure or purifying resources, or stable places with a sense of belonging awaiting the committed and the conscious. Beyond Acorn, the world is unhealthy and chaotic, with rampant exploitation and hierarchy. When Acorn and its people are gone, anthropogenic hazards and devastation hold sway over a social riskscape in which Olamina navigates to survive, indeed, seeks to salvage samples of biotic material for other planets. Following Lawrence Buell's proposal about a distinct form of environmental literature that demonstrates "toxic rhetoric," and Heise's elaboration of "risk narrative," I propose that *Parable of the Talents* is a novel primarily informed by a "toxic risk narrative" on grounds not only of its dominant themes but also of its multiply-embedded compositional structure. No matter the various sites of focalization, that is, the diversity of textual fragments, they are pulled together by Asha/Larkin, who is a meaning-bestowing function in the text, derailing it from its environmentalist-escapist tracks, as well as keeping them in suspense as troubled points of reference in order to construct her own narrative/self.

When I claim that Butler's *Talents* dovetails with the narrative template of Buell's "toxic rhetoric," I have in mind the structure of four topoi he recommends in the first chapter of *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture in the U.S. and Beyond* (30-54). His taxonomy, informed by a distinct group of contemporary environmental literature, includes the themes of pastoral betrayal, toxic diffusion, the David vs. Goliath scenario (the dichotomy of the common enemy and us), and the Gothification of environmental squalor. Of the four, the first three are salient thematic features of Butler's novel.

The concept of risk narrative was introduced to ecocriticism by Heise in 2008, inspired by risk theory, the concept of risk society, and ecocritical

insights into toxic narrative.[5] Her elaboration of risk narrative draws on interdisciplinary areas of the social sciences, as well as on German sociologist Ulrich Beck's work on contemporary networked or information society—such as *Risk Society* (1992), *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006), and *World at Risk* (2009), to name only a few titles of his extensive work on second modernity and risk society—whose operation runs the risk of unleashing complex systems failures with unpredictable consequences at both the local and global levels. The overall riskscape Heise describes, including Hazmat children's toys and the environmentalist movement, shows our world penetrated by toxicity yet operating with the nonchalance of "business as usual:"

> the fact that toxic cleanup crews have now become as routine a part of children's playworlds as fire trucks foregrounds that the contaminated environment Rachel Carson decried at the inception of the environmental movement in the 1960s is now fully integrated into the ordinariness of everyday life. Some awareness of technological and ecological as well as other risk scenarios, these toys indicate, from carcinogens in food to toxic spills and global warming has, consciously or unconsciously, become an inescapable component of daily routines. (120-21)

This kind of full integration of a hazardous world into everyday life is the very theme with which *Talents* begins, when Olamina's husband, Bankole, sets the diegetic time of the novel, describing the "Pox" as a distinct epoch in American history:

> "the Apocalypse" or more commonly, more bitterly, the "Pox," lasted from 2015 to 2030—a decade and a half of chaos. This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment. It began well before 2015, perhaps even before the turn of the millennium. It has not ended.
>
> I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climactic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises. . . . (7-8)

Just as double-edged as the name Hazmat (from *hazardous materials)*, which is now applied to a toy set, the "commonly" used "bitter" term "Pox"—evoking the once lethal disease smallpox—designates a long period of "torment" or "crisis," whose length and effects are unpredictable, although its causes are clearly tied to anthropogenic systems failures of—what Beck

calls—second modernity.[6] No matter the force and range of the unending destruction with the incalculable consequences it unleashes, it is trivialized by the semi-humorous usage of a slangish term to normalize wholesale systems dysfunctioning. As suggested by Bankole's description, *Talents*'s storyworld is a hazardous fictional universe sustained by "totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration" (Buell 38). This futuristic vision of the US is constituted of a dangerously polarized and disintegrating society, with uncontrolled corporate greed, corrupt police officers, and religious fundamentalists, on the one hand, and drug-addicts, pyros, maniacs, crazies, thieves, slaves, child-prostitutes, victims of Christian America's concentration camps, squatters and migrants, on the other. Squeezed between the two is Olamina's transient Earthseed community, reflecting the operation of the toxic discourse with the struggle between David and Goliath: the heroic small-scale, ecologically and socially sensitive community inside ("we") strives to cope with the engulfing flood of social and environmental perils outside ("they").

Though Butler's fiction seems to be more explicitly tilted toward the problem of systems failures in terms of polluted minds and poisonous American politics, she also makes clear the environmental debts of this social toxification. In fact, the novel bristles with scenes where anthropogenic devastation is articulated in unmistakable terms, as in Bankole's journal entry about dying trees, and Olamina's description of a human-made desert, the latter clearly pointing to the concatenation of social and environmental decay: "Sequoia sempervirens is the botanical name for this tallest of all trees, but many are evergreen no longer. Little by little from the tops down, they are turning brown and dying. I do not believe that they are dying as a result of the heat" (*Talents* 61). The town nearby also looms large as the epitome of eco-social catastrophe:

> The squatter settlement called Georgetown extends well back from the highway in coastal hills. The place is a human-made desert, dusty when the weather is dry, muddy when it rains, almost treeless, plantless, filled with the poorest of the poor and their open sewers, their malnutrition, their drugs, crime, and disease. Bankole says it was once a beautiful area of farms, trees, and hills. (96)

The topos of "pastoral betrayal" (Buell 39) is overtly at work in Olamina's text above, when she is reminded by Bankole of the gently domesticated landscape close to the Pacific coast from a more benign period

of time, antedating desertification. This world of social and ecological disaster is diagnosed by Bankole—testified by Olamina's journal entry of Sunday, November 14, 2032, when she discovers her pregnancy and recalls her husband's childless first marriage—as a place where human reproduction is flat-out wrong. As if phrasing his own incipient environmental ethic, "[he] said the world was going to hell just as fast as it could, and it would be an act of cruelty to bring a child into it. They talked about adopting, but never did" (90-91). In this fictional world of boundless disasters, where the doctor sees no hope for future generations, there is no difference either between nightmare and reality, or between viruses and geological forces: Olamina's nightmarish dream about her family vanishing without a trace is continuous with the imminent disaster threatening Acorn; virus-induced diseases and geological forces both strike with a vengeance, ending the life of Jorge's (a prospective Acorn inhabitant's) mother and father respectively: "He was seven when his mother died of flu and twelve when an earthquake killed his father" (28).

While she considers Bankole's pessimism well-founded, Olamina insists on having a baby of her own and keeping to her original Earthseed tenet (from *Sower*) that sustains her commitment to life, indeed, the multiplication of Earth's vital essence on other planets. What she says of the dying Robledo in *Sower*—"we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place" (78)—seems also applicable to Earth as a dying planet in *Talents*, from where Olamina's plan to transport extrasolar living matter translates into salvaging life from a celestial body doomed to perish. The prototypical first experiment of "seeding," in which they manage to "seed themselves" in fertile ground, involves establishing the Acorn community, where the small sexually and culturally diverse multi-ethnic group of Olamina's friends "seed" their "talents," thus also manifesting the truth of the biblical "Parable of the Talents" from Matthew 25.14-30 with which the novel ends.

Despite deliberate revisions of his much contested Baptist faith, Olamina's faith Earthseed is inspired by her father's religion and teaching, including the biblical "Parable of the Talents" and "Parable of the Sower" (the latter also inspiring her burgeoning new faith in the novel's prequel): the seeds of faith certainly fall on fertile ground and bear fruit on Bankole's property after the Acorn community settles on it.[7] The seeds, painstakingly collected by the Acorn people from neighboring lands, take root after being planted in the soil and produce food not only for the settlers but also for others beyond the colony. They sell healthy, homegrown vegetables and fruits

in nearby Eureka's small, independent stores in exchange for Dr. Bankole's medical supplies.

For all its primitivist-agriculturalist-biblical overtones intimating hopes of an Earthly garden in the midst of toxic chaos, Butler's rendering of Acorn does not suggest an idealized, closed community. Neither would I call it utopian, as Peter G. Stillman does when addressing Olamina's utopian possibilities in *Talents* (22). Rather than an insular, ascetic "ecostery"—from *eco* and *monastery*, designating the monastic variety of ecocommunalism that "provides a personal and local anchor in a world of uncertainty and cultural transition" (Eckersley 164)—Acorn is independent but also open to the outside world. It also prudently deploys technology in order to advance both freedom from toil and communication for survival and safety. No matter how isolated the place, the identity of the individuals and the group is not place-bound: affected by Olamina's ambition to resist safe towns with their suffocating class, gender, and racial hierarchy (as in the episode when Bankole suggests the pregnant Olamina that they move to safer towns in the vicinity), Acorn people choose to learn basic skills of physical mobility and psychic resilience in order to perceive change and adapt to change in tune with the core tenet of their spiritual system. Rather than *rootedness*, which motivates Olamina's brother's, Marc Duran's wounded life—of which Asha/Larkin states, "His gods were order, stability, safety, control" (*Talents* 65)—their different strategy, that of *rooting around* places to find what works best, becomes their guideline for survival. In short, assisted by Olamina, they gradually learn skills of risk perception and risk management to cope with the hazardous world on their own.

This independent community, to which Bankole offered his property for free settlement, is extremely fortunate, given the toxic diffusion of the world around. Though influenced by climate change, the mountains in Northern California are not as hard-hit by global warming as Southern California: "We still get a few substantial fall and winter storms each year, and there are still morning fogs in the spring and early summer" (*Talents* 62). Neither is this piece of land, the Acorn community's home and source of survival, afflicted by environmental hazards. Nowhere in the novel is there a note—in journal entries, book extracts, or Asha/Larkin's personal comments—about dire consequences of monocultural agribusiness, synthetic petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides, or other remnants of industrialized soil mismanagement. Bankole's farm is not situated on top of hazardous materials hidden in the ground, or endangered by the proximity of landfills, sinks, or nuclear waste dumping sites. The river nearby is clean, and

the soil is fertile. The seeds Acornians "scavenge" from other abandoned places take root and grow, and the new seeds from the new plants are able to reproduce the following year, unlike genetically modified Monsanto seeds.[8]

For all the marks of larceny, theft, and neglect, the land of the Acorn community, along with the neighboring region, still shows features of a distinct ecoregion with a degree of biodiversity, where interdependence between humans and the environment holds out the hope of a safer and more satisfying lifestyle for people with diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. As Olamina's utilitarian, risk-averting comment below suggests, even the large, vicious varieties of the desert plant agave can be made to cohabit with humans to ensure their safety against hostile intruders: "Salvaging from abandoned gardens and fields is useful, too. We collect any herb, fruit, vegetable, or nut-producing plant, any plant at all that we know or suppose to be useful. We have, always, a special need for spiny, self-sufficient desert plants that will tolerate our climate. They serve as part of our thorn fence" (27-28).

Interacting with the environment for human welfare, Olamina's people in Butler's *Parable of the Talents* seem to constitute an independent, face-to-face, non-hierarchical, mutualistic, and expressly healthy community, based on organic agriculture, trading, and healing/medical services.[9] But Acorn's small-scale, self-sufficient, environmentally sustainable community—operated by its institution of direct democracy called Gathering, and sustained by its religion, Earthseed—is not a tree-hugging, spiritual-biotic economy, nor a pagan sect, as "Christian American" fundamentalists label them. Rather, Acorn's social setup seems to square with salient features of social ecologist Murray Bookchin's model of the eco-anarchist community that likewise seeks to tackle domination as the main cause of social-ecological devastation.[10] For Bookchin, freedom from hierarchy is "a precondition for the practice of ecological principles" (qtd. in Eckersley 146), thus the backbone of viable radical alternatives to cornucopian, resource-plundering, expansionist capitalism.[11] Both Butler and Bookchin, in their own distinct ways as fiction writer and political scientist, argue for humanity's significant role in the Anthropocene age as the highest form of consciousness and self-reflexivity in organic evolution, hence our inexorable responsibility for the biosphere. When, in Bankole's journal, Olamina points to humans' extrasolar responsibility to *parent* a new biotic world, her argument resonates with Bookchin's ethical message, which asserts "the responsibility of the most conscious life-form—humanity—to be the *voice* of a mute nature and to act to intelligently foster organic evolution"

(*Philosophy of Social Ecology* 44). As Bankole recalls his wife's convictions: "'We can be a long-term success and the parents, ourselves, of a vast array of new peoples, new species,' she says, 'or we can be just one more abortion. We can, we must, scatter the Earth's living essence—human, plant, and animal—to extrasolar worlds: "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars"'" (*Talents* 46).

On closer scrutiny, however, Bookchin's evolutionary stewardship with the hope of creating "more fecund gardens than Eden itself" (qtd. in Eckersley 155) on Earth has its shadowed counterpart in Olamina's vision. When she rejoices over shuttles set in orbit, with people on board in suspended animation, together with "frozen human and animal embryos, plant seeds, tools, equipment, memories, dreams, and hopes" (*Talents* 406), she applauds the successful effort to carry life *away* from Earth to distant planets. This vision implies that Earth's life support systems, crippled by lethal global wars, are under such a weight of stress that life can only be sustained when salvaged from it in space-shuttles. But, despite their fundamentally different view of the Earth's capacity to survive, I suggest that, like Bookchin's social-ecological narrative, *Talents*'s toxic risk narrative is also informed by a kind of "soft managerial" attitude to the environment that Patrick Curry calls "light-green" or "shallow" ethics (61-70). Accordingly, the environment in both authors is considered to possess value only in relation to humans, facilitating their survival, health, and growth.[12]

Among the great variety of disaster subcultures which seek to respond to and cope with sustained social and ecological crises (in squatter camps and settlements, walled communities, secure store complexes, multinational company towns, and groups of homeless migrants on the road), little Acorn—with its risk-managing, spiritually guided, pragmatic lifestyle, surrounded by global toxicity—stands out and so is destined to fail. In accord with the David and Goliath scenario in its toxic version, Christian American Crusaders raid the settlement and conquer body, soul, and land with no particular effort. Given the size of the Crusaders' army, their technologically enhanced weaponry, and their Christian fundamentalist fanaticism unrestrained by legal or moral obligations, the intruders easily crush all attempts at resistance.

Chapters 11 to 14 succinctly demonstrate the vulnerability of the Acorn community's eco-social experiment on the one hand, and the historical durability of repressive technologies, on the other. Systemic and systematic control by physical separation, torture, homophobic and misogynist practices include the immobilization of Acornians by nerve gas, guns, and slave collars,

the latter electronically causing a variety of pain, and even terminating life; breaking up families and separating the sexes; kidnapping children; locking people up and placing them under close surveillance; banning communication among the captives; abusing men and raping women; overworking both sexes; crashing down on lesbians; penalizing by electronic lashing through networked collars; burning books and documents; and methodically denying them nourishment in the Camp's "food dictatorship."[13]

Beyond this physical and mental deprivation, Earthseed people are also demoted from human to non-human by restrictive measures against their practice of maintaining daily personal hygiene: "We can't bathe often enough. We get no hot water and little soap unless we get kitchen duty. If we ask to be allowed to bathe, it's called vanity. Yet we are viewed with disgust and contempt if we stink. We are said to 'stink with sin.'" (*Talents* 234). Just as noxious and dehumanizing as bodily restrictions, the male Crusaders also appropriate and capitalize on knowledge; indeed, they lash Olamina for her prudent suggestion to place a cesspit at an environmentally feasible place. As Olamina writes on Sunday, December 11, 2033:

> Like us, the new people are using buckets as toilets. Some of us are being made to dig a cesspit. I took some lashes for pointing out that it was being put in a bad place. It could contaminate the underground water that feeds our wells. That could make us all sick, including our "teachers." But our "teachers" know everything. They don't need advice from a woman, and a heathen woman at that. It was entirely their own decision a few days later to relocate the cesspit downhill and far away from the wells. (225)

A vital eco-community turned into an aggregate of scared subalterns, Acorn becomes redefined by new physical boundaries when a fence is built around it:

> Someone has put up a sign at the logging-road gate: "Camp Christian Reeducation Facility." The Crusaders have surrounded the place with a Lazor wire fence, so there's no safe entry or exit except at the gate. Lazor wire is made up of strands of wire so thin that they're hard to see. They slice into the flesh of the wild animals who blunder into them. (226)

Wholesale deprivation of Acorn facilitated by a Lazor wire fence, which equally slices into animal and human flesh, becomes manifest with the boundary drawn around an area of limitation. The Camp, where the state of exception becomes the rule, emerges as the "zone of indistinction" between

the human and the animal. It is "the realm of bare life" that of the "homo sacer" of whom Christian America's power is constituted. Butler's rendering of Camp Christian Reeducation Facility conspicuously dovetails with Giorgio Agamben's description of the Camp that he considers emblematic of the biopolitics of totalitarianism, indeed, the "nomos" of the modern, wherein:

> 1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion).
> 2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.
> 3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (181)

Despite the perception that the CA facility is only an exception to the rule (which is Asha/Larkin's argument, considering it only an odd case when a few Christian American fanatics went overboard), the state of exception, modeled by the Camp, issues from the very nature of the modern, with all the baleful implications of the Anthropocene. Put another way, in this logic, Acorn is just as much within the paradigm of the modern as its camp variety, yet the former relates to the latter as the benign to the pernicious, the frugal to the wasteful, or the compost heap to the trash dump. This process of systematic trashing, of both humans and the environment, is captured by Olamina's entry below, also suggesting the very nature of anthropogenic mismanagement:

> After dinner, we rested as best we could, feeling cold, stiff, miserable, and damp on the bare wood floor wrapped in our filthy blankets. Some of us slept, but the storm grew much worse, shaking the building and making it creak. Rain beat against the window and blew roofing off cabins, limbs off trees, and trash from the dump that the teachers had made us create. We had no dump before. We had a salvage heap and a compost heap. Neither was trash. We could not afford to be wasteful. Our teachers have made trash of our entire community. (*Talents* 255)

Camp culture is foregrounded by the text as garbage culture, making garbage of humans and their environment, thriving on abuse and exclusion. Typically, when forced to continue farming, Olamina and her friends, now slaves, are pressured to mismanage the vegetable garden, and even "discriminate" against certain kinds of fruits:

> We were harvesting—often in the rain—salad greens, onions, potatoes, carrots, and squashes, all planted and tended by Acorn, of course. We should also have been harvesting acorns—should already have harvested them—but we weren't permitted to do that. Some of us were being made to cut down both the mature live oak and pine trees and the saplings that we had planted. These trees not only commemorated our dead and provided us with much protein, but also they helped hold the hillside near our cabins in place. Somehow, our "teachers" have gotten the idea that we worshiped trees, thus we must have no trees nearby except those that produce the fruit and nuts that our "teachers" like to eat. Funny how that worked out. The orange, lemon, grapefruit, persimmon, pear, walnut, and avocado trees were good. All others were wicked temptations. (216)

If the Camp's rule to trash humans and non-humans means not only a harmful mismanagement of both but also an erroneous disregard for the interlocking systems of the human and the non-human world, the clue to freedom—in the ecological logic of the text—is to reinstate the humans' active, risk-managing collaboration with the environment. Chapter 14 represents this crucial turn in the novel, when Olamina and her people eventually manage to break free of slavery by responding to the call of the non-human world, indeed, by inviting nature to be the agent of the humans' delivery. The anthropogenic catastrophe of landslide is successfully converted by Olamina into an opportunity to disconnect themselves from the slave collars and vanish from the Camp. This is the beginning of Olamina's journal entry dated Wednesday, February 28, 2035:

> Day before yesterday, we had a terrible storm—truly terrible. *And yet, it was a wonderful thing: wind and rain and cold . . . and a landslide*. The hill where our cemetery once was with all its new and old trees, that hill has slumped down into our valley. Our teachers had made us cut down the older trees for firewood and lumber and God. I never found out how they came to believe we prayed to trees, but they went on believing it. We begged them to let the hill alone, told them it was our cemetery, and they lashed us. Because they forced us to do this, the hillside has broken away and come rumbling down to us. It has buried a maggot and three cabins, including the cabin that Bankole and I had built and then lived in for our six brief years together.
>
> (253-54; emphases added)

The successful slave revolt, the history of which evolves in the remaining part of this chapter, is directed by Olamina, who is not only shrewd

to recognize the intersectional structure and technology of domination in the Camp but also prudent to anticipate the consequences of deforestation. Furthermore, she finds out that cutting down the trees on the hill is the very cause of the landslide that destroys the cabin where the central unit of the slave collar network is hidden. The ensuing chaos is utilized by Olamina and her people to free themselves from the electronic collars no longer in operation. Thus, the environmentalist logic of the successful revolt is made clear: had it not been for the Crusaders' ignorance about the dire consequences of removing trees and, subsequently, for the landslide interacting with humans in their favor, the Acornian revolution could not have occurred at all.

Though born from a drug-addict mother, Olamina can detox her mind even under stressful conditions, such as post-industrial slavery in a Christian fundamentalist Camp. With *change* at its core, the religion of Earthseed helps Acornians conceive of themselves as change manifest, shaped by change, and adapting to change. Change involves sustained awareness of rooting among possibilities of survival, and acute readiness to renew tools of perception in cooperation with the environment.[14] Earthseed, which Stillman calls "a postsecular religion" and "a posthumanist being in the world" (28), could also be read as a post-Buddhist wheel of *dharma* (wheel of life/phenomena), informed by the wisdom of the biblical sower (Jesus/God, who spreads seeds that will take root only in good soil) to enhance the efficiency of Olamina's eco-anarchist risk community.[15] For all their similarities, as only two different manifestations of the same *dharma*—or, to use Agamben's terminology, the paradigm of the modern—the narrative logic of Butler's *Parable of the Talents* leaves no room for doubt about which is recommended as the stronger alternative for survival. As intimated by *Talents*, social and individual survival in the Anthropocene Epoch must inevitably hinge on the cultivation of ecocentric culture, such as in Acorn's frugal economy, where mutual interdependence between people and environment offers the promise of earthly existence even on stars beyond our solar system.

Butler's Afrofuturist novels, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, ingeniously scrutinize—within the context of the dystopian-utopian tradition and the toxic risk narrative, respectively—the concatenation of ecological and social problems, positing humans as part and parcel of the environment, on the one hand, and showing nature (or the non-human environment) as an agential force shaping human societies, on the other. Indeed, her storyworlds fictionalize the intricately entangled "intra-action" (Karen Barad) between the human and the non-human environment, most

blatantly manifest in the power structures of exploitation that invariably instrumentalize, abuse, and degrade minoritized people and nature alike. As all good books that urge readers to reframe the original question to which the text was an answer while written, Butler's Parable novels no longer read merely as her own critique of the conservative backlash in the United States of the 1980s and 1990s. *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* gain new significance as they emerge today, toward the end of twenty-first century's second decade, to frame Butler's compelling answers to our dilemmas; those that indicate wholesale systems failures manifested in a world of fake news and big data, increasing authoritarianism and populism, forced migration and social inequalities, climate change and continued environmental degradation at the peak of the Human Age.

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Notes

[1] The term "Anthropocene Age" denotes the geological epoch caused by human impact on the Earth's eco-system, amounting to the power of a geological force. To designate the next geological epoch following the Pleistocene and the Holocene, the term Anthropocene was first coined and used in the present context by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in the 1980s but, by now, it has found its way to other disciplines than geology, such as anthropology, ecology, geography, ecocriticism, cultural studies, and history. The Anthropocene features not only in scholarly studies but also in "sciencey" culture on the web, such as Team Anthropocene, or in public education via museums of Berlin and Münich, the latter running an exhibition from 2014 to 2016 titled "Welcome to the Anthropocene: The Earth in Our Hands." Among recent publications on the Anthropocene, see Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin in the 12 March 2016 issue of *Nature*, relating the start of this human epoch to massive colonization from the seventeenth century, which marks, they claim, the beginning of unprecedented human population replacement, foodstuff, animal, and human commensal exchange, and accidental transfer of species, all of this entailing the "swift, ongoing, radical reorganization of life on Earth without geological precedent."

[2] Internal focalization poses the question of authorship: who is responsible for combining, editing, and publishing Olamina's texts? My guess is Lauren Oya Olamina herself, in an effort to convince Americans about the reality of her words so as not to be dismissed as absurd fiction. Her habit of hiding useful staples of life, including written documents, may account for the survival of her manuscripts.

[3] For *Sower*'s slave narrative sedimentation, see Marlene D. Allen, "Octavia Butler's Parable Novels and the 'Boomerang' of African American History" (1359, 1363), and Sylvia Mayer, "Genre and Environmentalism: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Speculative Fiction, and the African American Slave Narrative" (175-96).

[4] In line with Heise's contention about contemporary environmentalist alternative scenarios, I refer to Stefan Wolf's documentary, *A New We: Ecovillages and Ecocommunities in Europe* (2010), the narrative of which is organized around the environmentalist template of the apocalypse-pastoral scenario. Suggested by the film's narrative, the documentary's

discourse leans on distinguished groups of environmentalist pioneers, who seek to escape their former toxic life emblematized by stifling cities, dehumanizing work, loneliness, broken families, dysfunctional public education, and capitalist consumerism. Intending to lead a more satisfactory, indeed, sustainable good life, they set about building small local communities in remote rural areas with lavish vegetation, complete with abundant water supplies, fertile soil, and mild temperatures in Italy, Germany, Hungary, Spain, and Portugal. Though differing in their attitudes to New Age spirituality, technology, and even optimal domestic style of architecture, they all assume that nature/the environment is, in essence, pure, healthy, and healing to which to return from technology-induced second nature is also a return from human hubris to virtue, from pollution to health, and from diminished human agency to human empowerment.

[5] For her elaboration of risk narrative, see Chapter 4 of *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Heise's sophisticated argument about risk challenges the sustained allure of the interpretative model in ecocriticism that applies essentialist, nostalgic-romantic-escapist discourses centering on the cult of agrarianism and the sense of place and small community as originary sites of citizenship and belonging. At the same time, her book also works out the concept of eco-cosmopolitanism that aims to link local and global concerns in a sustained green politics.

[6] For a quick overview and critical context of Beck's theory of second modernity and risk society, see Mads P. Sørensen and Allan Christiansen's *Ulrich Beck: An Introduction to the Theory of Second Modernity and the Risk Society* (2013).

[7] In her Sunday, September 26, 2032, journal entry, Olamina clarifies her relationship to Jesus's teaching in "Parable of the Talents": "My 'talent,' going back to the parable of the talents, is Earthseed. And although I haven't buried it in the ground, I have buried it here in these coastal mountains, where it can grow at about the same speed as our redwood trees. But what else could I have done? If I had somehow been as good at rabble-rousing as Jarret is, then Earthseed might be a big enough movement by now to be a real target. And would that be better?" (*Talents* 21).

[8] Canadian singer and song-writer Neil Young's 36th album takes on the aggressive agricultural company, Monsanto, in "The Monsanto Years." It was also Young's company, Shakey Pictures, that released a short documentary in 2015, called "Seeding Fear: The Story of Michael White vs. Monsanto" (dir. Craig Jackson) about the grievances of a fourth generation farmer and seed cleaner against Monsanto's brutal business practices, which include the selling of seeds that do not reproduce. For the context and the film in full, see *Modern Farmer*.

[9] Staying healthy, as Olamina's journal entry claims, is the invaluable asset of this community in a sick world: "We are, as Bankole says, a healthy, young community, but the world around us isn't healthy. Thanks to malnutrition, climate change, poverty, and ignorance, a lot of old diseases are back, and some of them are contagious. There was an outbreak of whooping cough in the Bay Area last winter, and it came up the highway as far north as Ukiah down in Mendocino County. Why it stopped there, I don't know. And there was rabies last summer. Several people in squatter camps were bitten by rabid dogs or rats. They died of it, and a couple of teenagers were shot because they pretended to have rabies just to scare people. Whatever money it costs to keep us healthy, it's worth it" (*Talents* 95-96).

[10] For Butler, see interview with Joshunda Sanders; for Bookchin, see Eckersley's section on Bookchin's social ecology and anarchism in *Environmentalism and Political Theory* (145-78).

[11] For Bookchin's social ecology emblematized by his anti-capitalist, eco-anarchist type of ecocommunalism, see his *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971), *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980), *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982).

[12] Preserving and upgrading the Earth's living essence is also a central issue for the Oankali in Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy, later published as a collection of three works titled *Lilith's Brood* (*Dawn*, 1987; *Adulthood Rites*, 1988; *Imago,* 1989). Lilith Yapo, the African American female protagonist, who survives the nuclear catastrophe on Earth is revived on another planet by extraterrestrials who seek to amend their own "living essence" by Lilith's human genetical material; with this "miscegenation" between humans and the Oankali, they also seek to upgrade/eugenically improve humans who are wired to be dangerously hierarchical.

[13] Olamina's grievance about "our disgusting dinner—a lot of half-boiled, half-spoiled cabbage with potatoes" (*Talents* 254), and her repeated references to the inaccessibility of nutrients reflect one of the basic concerns of contemporary environmental justice criticism and the movements it propels: the basic human right to healthy food for everyone. For "food dictatorship," see scholar and activist Vandana Shiva's *Soil Not Oil: Climate Change, Peak Oil and Food Insecurity* (2008), and her lecture "Future of Food: Dictatorship or Democracy" at the Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability (2014).

[14] This cooperation with the environment is not the kind of strategy, that of return to and symbiosis with nature, which Plisner describes in his ecocritical reading of Butler's earlier novel, *Dawn*: "Butler's 'return to nature' refutes the Western cultural narrative in favor of a symbiotic state, supporting mutualistic relationships and threatening competitive ones. These 'different,' or 'new,' beginnings suggest the possibility of returning to a stratified environment once considered threatening" (147).

[15] Shiuhhuah Serena Chou claims that the organic farming discourse in British and American culture derives from early twentieth-century British and American organic pioneers who "identified China, Japan, Korea, India, and the princely state Hunza as stellar inspirations for agricultural recuperation and spiritual renewal." They associated Eastern gardens on their agricultural expeditions with economic self-sufficiency, and the ecological concept of the food web/wheel of health/wheel of law, in short, Buddhist spirituality (108-09).

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