

Apocalyptic Thought in Octavia E. Butler's Parable Series

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“God is Change:” Octavia E. Butler created a unique narrative of apocalypse where the sole responsibility for the end-times is not upon God or an a-human disaster but ‘human inactivity, [and] its



Figure 1 Symbiosis by Paul Lewin. Used for the Opera of ‘Parable of the Sower’. Copyright © Paul Lewin.

refusal to deal with many... issues that plague our contemporary world’.¹ Butler’s two ‘Parable’ novels are a thesis in secular millennialism where humanity has changed the world for the worse and brought about its own apocalypse. Butler herself has agreed with the analysis that the Parable series is ‘a close extrapolation from current trends: ...class gap, fear of crime,’ etc.²

The series centres on the first-person perspective character of Lauren Olamina, who develops her own religion and becomes a prophetic figure. The journalistic style of Olamina’s account has been likened to the ‘earliest slave

¹ O. E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2019), p. 310.; M. D. Allen, ‘Octavia Butler’s “Parable” Novels and the “Boomerang” of African American History’, *Callaloo*, Vol 32, No. 4, (2009), p.1355.

² *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, ed. By Mimi Mondal & Alexander Pierce (Twelfth Planet Press, 2017) p. 380.



narrators and ... advocates for the enlightenment.’³ Olamina’s story, despite being threaded within a dystopic society has threads of optimism and utopia scattered throughout, ‘allow[ing] readers and protagonists to hope’.⁴ Olamina’s message is proselytised throughout the books and is treated as an opposing faith to the Jaredites who follow the Christian nationalism trumpeted by the right-wing populist president Jarret Steeler.⁵

This series and author have gained popularity and world-wide recognition having been nominated in 2021, almost 30 years post first publication for the *Best Book of the Last 125 Years* award and receiving the Infinity Award posthumously.⁶ The series has also been turned into an opera in 2017 by Toshi Reagon, their work carries on the themes of ‘African American Spiritualism and... mediation on the future of human civilization.’⁷ The art for the promotion of the opera also takes on an afro-futurist aesthetic.

³ Allen, ‘“Boomerang” of African American History,’ *Callaloo*, pp. 1354-1355.

⁴ Raffaella Baccolini, ‘The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,’ *PMLA*, Vol. 119, No. 3, (2004), p. 520.

⁵ Butler, *Talents*, p.59.

⁶ New York Times, ‘What’s the Best Book of the Past 125 Years? We Asked Readers to Decide.’ (2021)

<<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/28/books/best-book-winners.html>> [accessed 01 November 2021]; Nebula Awards, ‘The Inaugural Infinity Award Honoree: Octavia E. Butler’ (2023)

<<https://nebulas.sfw.org/the-inaugural-infinity-award-honoree-octavia-e-butler/>> [accessed 01 November 2023].

⁷ T. Reagon, ‘The extraordinary American singer-songwriter-guitarist Toshi Reagon’s new opera blends science fiction with African American



The attitudes towards the concept of the apocalypse within the books toy with the concept of millennialism. If looked at through the lens of premillennialism, it could be argued that Lauren fulfils the role of the supernatural figure coming to redeem humanity at its downfall as Jesus would in Christian premillennialism.⁸ The texts could be seen to fulfil this premillennialist narrative as throughout are examples of the world continuing to degrade until Lauren restores it to a utopia at the end of the second book: characters continually mark the degradation of society by saying ‘Things are getting worse’.⁹ After all this, it shown that humanity manages to live in a relative golden age of peace and prosperity after people come to embrace the faith of Lauren as she states “I have not given them heaven, but I’ve helped them to give themselves heaven”.¹⁰

However, considering that the books never state or show Lauren to be an outright supernatural or divine figure then she could be considered a simple ‘believer [who] will establish the millennium in the world’ in a postmillennial

spiritualism to construct a mesmerizing meditation on the future of human civilization.’ <<https://toshireagon.com/parable-opera>> [accessed 01 November 2023].

⁸ A. M. Lahr, ‘Christian Nationalism and Millennialism in the USA’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and War*, ed. by M. Kitts, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 314-331 (p. 316).

⁹ O. E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, (London: Headline, 1993), p.39.

¹⁰ Butler, *Talents*, p. 403.



role.¹¹ An example of showing Lauren as nothing but a believer rather than divinity is how the book deliberately shows her creating the book of the living and does not describe it in a particularly supernatural way: “I’ve finally got a title for my book of Earthseed verses.”¹² Despite the fact that Lauren writes the text of her new found religion, she does not claim to have received these words divinely.¹³ She directly states them to be “explorations” of truths rather than anything else.¹⁴

Despite the millennialist lens, the books refute Christianity and especially Christian Nationalism. Throughout, those who stick to Christian theology and do not question it are often led astray by extremists like her brother or the followers of the president’s Church of Christian America and their “re-education” camps.¹⁵ This leads to a unique view of apocalyptic thought being religious in nature but without needing a traditional theology to explain that religious element. The books instead create their own faith to examine

¹¹ Lahr, ‘Christian Nationalism’, pp. 315-316.

¹² Butler, *Sower*, p. 124.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 77.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Bulter, *Talents*, p.223.



the apocalypse through. Butler herself opposed the view that Earthseed was “just warmed over Christianity”.¹⁶

Butler also treats the creation of the apocalyptic world differently to other media. The world of the Parable series is perpetually decaying and degrading. There is never a sudden moment throughout the book where the world is shown to have suddenly ended and instead is an “extrapolation from current trends.”¹⁷ This fits within a millennialist view point of the world decaying till it is pulled back from the precipice by either humanity or divinity.

This stands out from other apocalyptic fiction which usually shows the apocalypse lasting only moment before changing permanently into a post-apocalypse. Examples of this can be seen in *The Walking Dead*: Rick Grimes lives in our modern world only to be hospitalized and suddenly wake up in a Post-Apocalyptic world.¹⁸ For the viewers and Rick Grimes this apocalypse lasted only moments. This is same in *28 Days Later*, where the audience goes from existing in the real world to stepping into the world of the *28 Days Later* and waking up with Jim from his coma in to the post-apocalyptic world.¹⁹ In

¹⁶ S. W. Potts, ‘“We Keep Playing the Same Record”: A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler’, *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, (1996), p.331.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.336.

¹⁸ ‘Days Gone Bye’, *The Walking Dead*, AMC, 16 October 2011.

¹⁹ *28 Days Later*, dir. By Danny Boyle, (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2002).



The Last of Us, the character of Ellie even clarifies “everything came crashing down in one day.”²⁰ This makes the role of the apocalypse unique in Butler’s work. It is the focus of the book rather than what comes after. It seems less interested with “the fetishization of decaying structures” and more interested examining how it could continue to malfunction but still operate.²¹ This fetishism is seen in the photography of both *28 Days Later* and *The Walking Dead* but visually absent from Butler’s work.

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing features of Butler’s work is how it engages with the reader’s reality compared to the world of the book. In a large amount of post-apocalyptic media, there is a nostalgia for the pre-apocalyptic world. This can be seen in the *Last of Us* with the character of Ellie marvelling at the elements of the modern world now gone seemingly forever like air travel.²² In Butler’s work there is still a notion that the past seemed like a better place than the present, but the present in the book isn’t something completely removed. The institutions, businesses, ideas, and structures of the past still exist the

²⁰ ‘Long, Long Time’, *The Last of Us*, HBO, 29 January 2023.

²¹ Sarah Arnold, ‘Urban Decay Photography and Film: Fetishism and the Apocalyptic Imagination’, *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 41, No. 2, (2015), p. 329.

²² ‘Long, Long Time’, *The Last of Us*.



Parables apocalypse, whilst in other media there is a clear separation.

Race is also a strong theme throughout Butler's work. The life of a Black person in the apocalyptic world is something specifically covered and shows its intersectional nature. Race is a defining factor of how some individuals are treated and the experiences of Black people throughout American history is not something brushed over. This is not surprising considering Butler's writing is "fundamentally about social power."²³ However what is interesting is how unique this is in the realm of apocalyptic literature. In TV shows like *The Walking Dead*, when society is destroyed it suggested that Racism immediately disappear. The character of Rick Grimes says, "there are no [n-words] anymore... just us and the dead".²⁴ Butler does not shy away from portraying race as something integral to the experiences of Black individuals in an apocalyptic United States. A particularly prominent example is when Lauren and the other inhabitants of Acorn are enslaved, and parallels are continually draw to the transatlantic slave trade.

These examples show that despite the collapse of society, the institutions that are held up in a nostalgic light in

²³ Potts, "Same Record", p.334.

²⁴ 'Days Gone Bye', *The Walking Dead*.



other works are perpetrators of institutional racism and are not held so nostalgically for Black people. Along with this, the view of the world being something wonderful that was lost after the apocalypse is also a particularly Caucasian perspective as systems that protect and serve white people might on the other hand punish and enslave Black people.²⁵ This is shown throughout Butler's *Parable* series continually.

Overall, Octavia E. Butler presents an apocalypse that encourages the reader to analyse whether it is pre- or post-millennialist. It shows a more realistic apocalypse that doesn't shy away from adding intersectional elements. Throughout Butler persistently challenges the notion of what an apocalypse is by creating her own theological frame work.

²⁵ R. Delgado, and J. Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2023), p. 9.



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