

# Genre and Environmentalism: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Speculative Fiction, and the African American Slave Narrative

Sylvia Mayer

## I

With *Parable of the Sower* (1993) Octavia Butler uses the genre of speculative fiction<sup>1</sup> to delineate a plausible scenario of a future ecological and socioeconomic catastrophe and to tell stories of diverse attempts to come to terms with it. The novel belongs to the tradition of apocalyptic ecologism that was started in the United States by Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962. Like Carson's text, it focuses on the effects of largely anthropogenic ecological damage; but even more than Carson, Butler foregrounds issues of environmental justice. By using a narrator from a socially marginalized group, the young, female, black Lauren Oya Olamina, and by focusing on the experiences of low-income, multiethnic, largely, though not exclusively, non-white communities, she puts emphasis on the nexus of social justice and environmental degradation.

Through diary entries of her African American protagonist Butler envisions a situation that reflects predictions and warnings of environmentalist scholarship, analyses and conclusions from the fields of the natural and social sciences and of the humanities. The novel opens in the year 2024. Lauren is then fifteen years old. She and her family live in the small, walled-in community of Robledo, which is located twenty miles away from the city of Los Angeles, but is—as a product of twentieth-century urban sprawl—still an integral part of its widespread area.<sup>2</sup> The Robledo community suffers from the consequences of climate change in North America: global warming has led to desertification, to long periods without rain on the one hand and rare instances of almost torrential downpouring on the other, to an increase of tornadoes and blizzards. These weather phenomena have deeply affected the economic, the social, and the political structure of U.S. society. Resources have been depleted and privatized, water has become scarce, and so have gasoline and electricity. People have to pay large sums for water and electricity, and they can afford neither cars nor electric light in the house or as public facilities any longer. The infrastructure of the large metropolitan area has totally disintegrated. As a result of water scarcity and pollution, sanitation problems have increased and have caused the reappearance of epidemics like cholera and the measles—

diseases that Western societies assumed they had conquered once and for all, but that can now again be lethal.

The community consists of a handful of families, the remnants of what used to be an economically secure American middle class. Lauren's parents, for instance, are academics, both teach at the college level, and her father is the community's minister. This middle class, however, is rapidly disappearing because the high costs of material survival have dramatically drained its resources. As the narrative unfolds it turns out that the American social structure has changed because of increasing poverty: with the middle class rapidly disappearing, society is divided into a large mass of poor people and a tiny, predominantly white, elite that has to brace itself, for example, by means of private security guards and high-tech security devices, against the onslaught of this ever-growing mass of poor, usually homeless, more often than not drug-addicted people.

Along with the disappearance of the middle class goes the disappearance of a consumer culture and its ethic that has contributed considerably to ecological and socioeconomic deterioration. Large-scale consumption, which used to be the key marker of socioeconomic progress, no longer exists. Only the small social elite can afford to buy new, useful products which are the results of developments in science and technology, while in contrast to this the mass of people has, for instance, to fight the unexpected results of medical-pharmaceutical experimentation with drugs. The fact that science and technology are predominantly evaluated in a negative way can be read as a rejection of the notion that for all environmental problems there is a "technological fix."

Impoverishment has, finally, led to the collapse of the democratic political system. Political power undergoes the process of being transferred to multinational corporations—in the novel represented by KSF, Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company, a Japanese-German-Canadian company. This company has begun to take over whole communities and turn them into what at the beginning of the twentieth century were called "company towns": towns whose inhabitants received protection, but had to pay for this not only by working for the company but with total dependence on it, with handing over their freedom and civil rights.

With this bleak scenario Butler confirms the basic notion of the environmental justice movement that social and environmental justice are indivisible. She departs from traditional preservationist concepts of environment as wilderness and instead endorses a definition that includes "[i]ssues pertaining to human health and survival, community and workplace poisoning, and economic sustainability" (Di Chiro 300-01).

In the first part of the novel, Lauren Olamina's diary entries describe and reflect upon the last three years of her family and her community's struggle to survive in this world of "failing economies and tortured ecologies."<sup>3</sup> This struggle is lost in July 2027 when the walls of Robledo are torn down by an outside mob, when almost all of the inhabitants are killed and the houses looted and set on fire. In the second part of the novel, Lauren chronicles the ten weeks that follow this catastrophe. Together with two other Robledo survivors she joins the stream of thousands of homeless people who move North, toward those regions where ecological devastation has not yet reached as desperate a level as in the South and where the climatic conditions of living allow for an at least slightly better way of living: Northern California, Oregon, Washington, and, ultimately, Canada.

On their way North the little group expands, and in October 2027 about fifteen people, women, men, and children of diverse racial and ethnic background, decide to found a new agrarian community in a hidden region of Northern California. As an intellectual and spiritual foundation they choose to follow a system of belief that Lauren has developed over the years. In the aphorisms which introduce the four sections as well as each of the twenty five chapters of the novel and which are, moreover, presented in several diary entries, her "earthseed religion" unfolds as a concept that consists of ontological and ethical ideas which center around the basic theological dogma "God is change." Lauren has by then become a spiritual and political leader; she has become the sower of a belief which is characterized by principles of environmental sustainability and social justice.

*Parable of the Sower* is a text that obviously presents a social and environmentalist critique and as such illustrates the critical potential of the genre of speculative fiction. Teresa de Lauretis regards this genre as "creative of new forms of social imagination, creative in the sense of mapping out areas where cultural change could take place, of envisioning a different order of relationships between people and between people and things, a different conceptualization of social existence, inclusive of physical and material existence" (quoted in Haraway 5). By aiming at verisimilitude in its imaginative mapping of a plausible future, speculative fiction calls for critical reflection of the reader's present and past. Butler tries to achieve this effect by choosing a temporal setting that is very close to her contemporary reader's world. She uses realist conventions of representation to delineate the features of her social and ecological dystopian future and by means of that facilitates reader identification. In her assessment of the dystopia created in *Parable of the Sower* Madhu Dubey describes the

effect of Butler's extrapolations from current trends in metropolitan development as "a shock of familiarity rather than estrangement" (106).

The goal to articulate social and environmentalist critique is, moreover, at once signaled by the title of the novel, which places it in the tradition of another genre that is defined by its openly moral and didactic purposes: the parable, one of the oldest genres in Judeo-Christian culture. The title and the text of the biblical "Parable of the Sower," St. Luke 8, 5-8, with which Butler ends her novel, function as a framing narrative device to highlight the text's moral, didactic thrust.

In this essay I will show that for the purpose of expressing this kind of critique Butler positions *Parable of the Sower* in the tradition of yet another genre, a genre that is also characterized by its moral and didactic goals and that uses the autobiographical mode to express its critique most compellingly: the African American slave narrative. Butler remarked in an interview with *Crisis* magazine that the writing of her novel had meant to her something "probably more serious than anything I'd written since *Kindred*" (quoted in Miller 352). *Kindred*, published in 1988, is her highly acclaimed contribution to the genre of the neo-slave narrative which employs the narrative technique of time travel and revisionistically deals with slavery from a twentieth-century female point of view. The interview remark points toward the fact that after using several formal and thematic conventions of the slave narrative in *Kindred* for the purpose of rewriting the experience of slavery, Butler uses some of these conventions again in *Parable of the Sower* for the purpose of articulating a social and environmentalist critique.

A close analysis of the novel's narrative structure will reveal that this founding genre of the African American autobiographical tradition figures prominently as an intertextual point of reference in *Parable of the Sower*. As Ashraf Rushdy has argued in his study of neo-slave narrative, intertextual engagement does not only refer to formal appropriation and revision of specific pretexts; following Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, he insists that any new text simultaneously responds to the discourses that shape the cultural matrix in which it is being produced (14-18). I shall show that by means of an intertextual engagement with the slave narrative *Parable of the Sower* addresses issues currently discussed in the fields of environmental philosophy and environmental justice. By doing so Butler's novel acknowledges from yet another cultural and political perspective the slave narrative's seemingly limitless potential for cultural work.

## II

Slave narratives do not simply present a first-person account which is related by an escaped slave, but they consist of a variety of texts, texts that belong to different genres and even different media. Besides the narrative proper, they offer, for example, engraved portraits of the author, testimonials and/or prefaces by white abolitionists, epigraphs preceding the narrative, sermons, poems, anti-slavery speeches and documents like bills of sale or certificates of manumission that are attached as appendices. The main function of such texts, especially of those written by white abolitionists, was to authenticate the existence and reliability of the narrator and his or her report of the experiences in slavery and to add further strength and authority to the texts' ultimate goal, of contributing to the abolition of slavery.<sup>4</sup> *Parable of the Sower*, too, does not simply present a sequence of diary entries. It also displays a variety of texts and genres, most prominently the following: first, Lauren's diary entries which form the major part of the novel; second, the aphorisms that are taken from another text written by Lauren, a text entitled *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, in which she develops her religious concept of earthseed; third, biblical texts and allusions which are scattered all over the novel and among whom figure most prominently parables from the New Testament gospels, either quoted in full such as the "Parable of the Sower" from St. Luke 8, 5-8 (cf. *P* 299), or alluded to such as the "Parable of the Importunate Widow" from St. Luke 18, 1-8 (cf. *P* 124).

While in the slave narrative the texts that accompany the ex-slave's main narrative are intended to be means of authentication and authorization, the combination of texts in *Parable of the Sower* functions as a narrative technique to create what can be called an "ecological mode of representation," a mode of representation that foregrounds process, relationality, and interconnectedness. Seen from a postmodern perspective, Butler's use of a variety of texts and genres can be regarded as a self-reflexive narrative technique that puts emphasis on both the significance of language for constituting subjectivity and on the processual character of identity formation—an argument that is strengthened by the use of the diary as probably the most open autobiographical form, by the creation of a layer of intertextual references, and by several self-reflexive utterances by Lauren.<sup>5</sup> If, more specifically, we apply a Bakhtinian method of textual analysis, the employment of a variety of texts can be understood as a conscious effort to create meaning by means of polyphony and dialogism. As, for example, Michael J. McDowell and Patrick D. Murphy have convincingly argued, polyphony and

dialogism imply process, relationality, and interconnectedness—characteristics that are used for any basic definition of ecology, the science of relationships—and are thus useful narrative tools to create literary representations of the “world diversity” (Murphy 41), both human and nonhuman. The dialog of the various voices that emerges from *Parable of the Sower*—of, for instance, Lauren’s more searching voice of the diary entries, her more apodictic voice of the earthseed aphorisms, the voice of traditional Judeo-Christian theology expressed in quotations and allusions from the bible, or the voices of natural history and of plant ecology books—, this dialog offers different concepts of God, of the human self, and of nonhuman nature which struggle against each other for authority. The implied resistance to monologic concepts of “truth” can be read as a critique of those concepts which have dominated the West in the modern era and have thus contributed to environmental degradation. With respect to her narrator Lauren’s subjectivity, Butler uses this dialogical narrative technique for the purpose of creating an autobiographical self whose perception and construction of itself reflect an awareness of relationality and constant flux.

As in the case of the slave narrative, *Parable of the Sower* opens with a phrase that stresses the issue of authorship and literacy. On the title page of slave narratives we usually find the formulation “Written by Him-/Herself.” Two well-known examples are Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (1861). In Butler’s novel it is a caption on the first page of the novel that corresponds to this formulation. *Parable of the Sower* is divided into four sections according to the years in which Lauren makes her diary entries. Each section begins with an aphorism from her *Earthseed* collection. Only the first one of these introductory aphorisms is followed by a caption that in addition to the title of the text from which it is taken also provides the name of its author: “*Earthseed: The Books of the Living* by Lauren Oya Olamina” (P 1). Whereas the ex-slave’s claim for literacy—and, since literacy was taken as the sign for humanness, for his or her existence as a historical subject in general<sup>6</sup>—needs the authentication of white voices, Lauren authenticates her diary entries—and, by implication, her existence as a historical subject—herself: to the variety of prefatory texts by white abolitionists corresponds another text by her, another text “written by herself.” As an author of several texts Lauren is immediately established as the major authoritative voice of the novel.

Lauren’s authority is, moreover, further strengthened because she is introduced as the author of a genre of texts that assumes high rhetorical authority: the aphorism. Aphorisms can

be defined as concise statements that present a maxim which is expressive of a more comprehensive theory or philosophical system. Lauren's aphorisms accumulate and develop into a whole system of belief, her earthseed religion. As the originator of an environmentally sustainable ontology and ethic which competes with received, non-sustainable theories she, the young, black woman, assumes a status which grants her an indisputable amount of authority.

Another formulaic feature of the ex-slave's narrative is the opening phrase "I was bom," which is followed by remarks about his or her parents and family—relatives who, more often than not, especially with respect to the father, are absent or even unknown. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, for instance, begins with the sentences: "I was bom in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. [. . .] My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion I know nothing; the means of knowing were withheld from me" (23-24). Opening sentences like these illustrate once more the power of literacy: authentication depended to a large degree on the existence of written documents.

The first two paragraphs of Lauren's first diary entry correspond to these typical opening sentences. They, too, provide information about dates of birth and family:

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. (P 3)

In contrast to the slave narrators, Lauren does know both the date of her birthday and that of her father's—the date of the diary entry reveals that both were born on July 20, she in 2009, he in 1969—, and she has known and lived with her father all her life. More important than these differences, however, is the fact that in both cases the opening sentences express a tension between child and father which is later on disclosed as disagreement with the father's religious and political stance. Butler performs a significant thematic revision by drawing an analogy between slavery and a situation of disfranchisement that is the result not only of political and socioeconomic legislation, but also of anthropogenic ecological devastation:

while the slave narrator, in this case Douglass, disagrees with and condemns the system of slavery, Butler's narrator, Lauren, disagrees with and condemns the received political system of her time which has led to socioeconomic and ecological disaster.

For Douglass, the slave system is embodied in his master, whose politics were to a large extent legitimized by a specific Christian theology. For Lauren, despite the fact that her father is opposed to the political system in which she feels caught, it is also her father who, unwillingly, supports its functioning because of his traditional Baptist theological point of view. She disagrees with him, for example, in her assessment of the causes of ecological catastrophe. While she is convinced that it is anthropogenic in nature—"People have changed the climate of the world"—her father does not believe this and insists that "only God could change the world in such an important way" (P 53f.). To Lauren's mind, this point of view has led to an intellectual, spiritual, and political dead-end situation, to the false hope that necessary changes might occur or might be brought about by just holding on and by believing that "the good old days" (P 8) would some time come back. Mr. Olamina resembles the father of Harriet Jacobs, a skilled carpenter who was hired out by his mistress to other plantation owners. In the first paragraph of *Incidents* Jacobs remarks: "On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded" (9). Jacobs' father, the highly skilled carpenter, and Mr. Olamina, the highly skilled college professor and minister, both fail to protect their families because they fail in their assessment of the political situation.

While Douglass' and Lauren's critique differs in terms of the targeted political system, it merges again in that they both regard the respective system as characterized by patriarchal abuse of power. A few paragraphs further down in the opening of his narrative, Douglass claims that worse than not knowing and not being accepted by his presumed father is the legal arrangement the slaveholder's personal lust has created: "The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers" (26). When Lauren writes that she has to struggle "when I try to be my father's daughter," she does not simply express rejection of her impending baptism in a ceremony that her father has arranged, but, more specifically, criticizes and rejects his theology and the rules



and rituals, which are based on it, as patriarchal. The recurring dream she writes about in her first sentence is a dream of escape, a dream of becoming independent, of freeing herself from her father's authority: "I'm learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I'm just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson" (P 4). "No one is teaching me"—her dream allows her to transcend the confines of the symbolic order, embodied and taught by her father, and to envision alternative scenarios, values, and ways of behavior. In her earthseed books she later notes: "A tree / Cannot grow / In its parents' shadows" (P 76).

In addition to that, Lauren's critique can also be read as a critique of the patriarchal structure of black churches. Mr. Olamina belongs to the long tradition of influential, charismatic black preachers and church leaders whose authority originated in African and African American oral culture and has characterized the history of the black church in the United States since its beginning (Lincoln/Mamiya 14). As a Baptist minister he is a member of one of the oldest black churches in the U.S.—a church, however, which until the mid- 1990s had not ordained very many women (Lincoln/Mamiya 44-45). Regardless of the fact that the black churches started in the 1980s to deal with issues of environmental injustice and environmental racism,<sup>7</sup> Lauren's critique of her father, of his theology and his status, implies doubt as to whether the traditional black male church leadership is well-prepared to manage the social and environmental crisis. It points, moreover, to a fact that historians of the environmental justice movement have again and again drawn attention to: the fact that the "vast majority of activists in the environmental justice movement are low-income women and predominantly women of color" (Di Chiro 300). Later on, young, female Lauren assumes the position of spiritual and political leader consciously. Reflecting on her earthseed system of belief she writes: "Then, some day when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I'll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense" (P 73).

That a woman's contribution to institutionalized religion may be valuable and that Lauren's earthseed religion may be a viable theological alternative is hinted at for the first time when she replaces her father after his disappearance—Mr. Olamina has in all probability been killed outside the Robledo walls, on his way back home from work. Lauren preaches a kind of funeral sermon for him that is well received by the community. She uses the "Parable of the Importunate Widow" from the gospel of St. Luke as argumentative point of departure, a parable which teaches the importance of the virtue of perseverance. Lauren's major point is to strengthen her own and her community's capability to persevere after her father's

disappearance; yet, tellingly, since the parable describes a woman's successful fight against a male judge, she at the same time emphasizes the necessity to defy male legal and religious authority. Her comment about the text: "It's one I've always liked. A widow is so persistent in her demands for justice that she overcomes the resistance of a judge who fears neither God nor man. She wears him down" (*P* 124).

Lauren's second diary entry begins with the following sentence: "At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church" (*P* 7). Like the authors of slave narratives she disagrees with the theological concepts that legitimize the power structure and the social dynamics of her community. The slave narrators fought a bible exegesis which served their masters' goal to legitimize slavery by exposing its physical and psychological cruelty as inhumane. As an alternative, they provided a liberating reading of the bible which appealed to the gospel of the universal brotherhood of humanity, a liberating reading which would grant them equality as human beings.<sup>8</sup> Lauren rejects a Christian theology which in her view obstructs any successful coping with social, political, and environmental problems—problems from which both humans, especially the poor and people of color, and nonhuman nature suffer. As a more viable alternative she develops a system of belief that is environmentally sustainable and that can be used as a source for an ethic that guarantees social justice.

The central dogma of her theology and the pivotal phrase in many of her earthseed aphorisms is "God is Change." It is introduced in the aphorism that precedes the first chapter of the novel:

All that you touch  
 You Change.  
 All that you Change  
 Changes you.  
 The only lasting truth Is Change.  
 God  
 Is Change. (*P* 3)

In contrast to her father's concept of a male, omnipotent God, Lauren creates a non-anthropomorphic and non-teleological concept of the divine, a concept that foregrounds what the ecofeminist theologian Carol P. Christ calls "an impersonal process of life, death, and transformation" (68)—in Lauren's words:

As wind,  
 As water,  
 As fire,  
 As life,  
 God  
 Is both creative and destructive,  
 Demanding and yielding,  
 Sculptor and clay.  
 God is Infinite Potential:  
 God is Change. (P 249)

In an early diary entry Lauren reflects on the various anthropomorphic shapes that have been used to conceptualize the divine: “The idea of God is much on my mind these days. I’ve been paying attention to what other people believe—whether they believe, and if so what kind of God they believe in. [...] 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” (P 13). By rejecting concepts of a God in human shape—whether concepts of a male God or of a female Goddess—she avoids running the risk of revivifying received theologies that have been used to legitimize systems of domination. Any anthropomorphic concept of the divine, probably most conspicuously the Judeo-Christian concept that postulates that “Man” was created in God’s image, can enforce human separation from nonhuman nature and legitimize human domination over it. Moreover, especially ecofeminist studies have pointed out that the concept of a male, omnipotent, rational God enforces patriarchal domination over both women and nonhuman nature, and that the concept of a female, earth-like or earth-centered Goddess can enforce essentialist notions and biological determinism.

Read, more specifically, in the context of African American religious traditions, it becomes clear that here, too, Lauren Olamina’s earthseed religion creates new theological space with its focus on the principle of change. She sets herself off from the tradition of creating anthropomorphic concepts such as the deities of the strongly African-related religions of the Caribbean, the Old Testament avenging and liberating God of the slaves, or the incarnated New Testament God, Jesus, who suffers, is humiliated, dies, but is eventually resurrected and thus triumphs over his enemies. Moreover, in contrast to the black American theological tradition she does not foreground the issue of freedom which, according to Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, “has always been the superlative value of the black sacred cosmos” (5).<sup>9</sup> As her earthseed system of belief must function in a situation which is characterized by ecological disaster, as it must provide guidance for survival in such conditions, it is issues of interconnectedness and interdependence with the human and the

nonhuman world that have to be emphasized. Too much emphasis on the issue of freedom might otherwise be misinterpreted as one more call for “liberation” of the human from the confines of a nature that is defined as separate and as inferior—the concept of the modern era in the West which has enforced the process of environmental exploitation and degradation.

Lauren’s non-teleo logical earthseed religion discards any evolutionary concept that implies notions of linearity and progress over time. Several aphorisms make clear that the divine must not be imagined as an omnipotent source of wisdom which gives change a specific direction according to absolute moral criteria:

God is neither good  
     nor evil,  
     neither loving  
     nor hating.  
 God is Power.  
 God is Change.  
 We must find the rest of what we need  
     within ourselves,  
     in one another,  
     in our Destiny. (*P* 225)

The only images of the divine Lauren can accept are images that reflect “change,” that reflect the transformative divine power: images which convey the notion of flux, of relationality and of ecological processuality, images which ultimately express her religion’s cosmic reach:

Create no images of God.  
 Accept the images  
     that God has provided.  
 They are everywhere,  
     in everything.  
 God is Change—  
 Seed to tree,  
     tree to forest;  
 rain to river,  
     river to sea;  
 Grubs to bees,  
     bees to swarm.  
 From one, many;  
     from many, one;  
 Forever uniting, growing, dissolving—  
     forever Changing.  
 The universe  
     is God’s self-portrait. (*P* 287)

Read again, more specifically, in the context of African American religious traditions, such images create a link to earlier manifestations of black belief. They highlight interrelationship and thus point toward the “sacred universe” that dominated the religious thought of the slave population of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As an analysis of the spirituals in particular shows, the slaves did not distinguish between sacred and secular realms, but “when they looked upon the cosmos they saw Man, Nature, and God as a unity; distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole” (Levine 32). Lawrence Levine explains further: “Human beings could ‘read’ the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because Man was part of, not alien to, the Natural Order of things, attached to the Oneness that bound together all matter, animate and inanimate, all spirits, visible or not. It was crucially necessary to understand the world because one was part of it, inexorably linked to it. Survival and happiness and health depended upon being able to read the signs that existed everywhere” (58). While Lauren is on the one hand careful to avoid the African American tradition of anthropomorphizing the divine, she on the other hand takes up this notion of sacredness again.

In Lauren’s system of belief human beings are “earthseed,” and as such consciously expressive of a nature characterized by never-ending transformation: “We are Earthseed. / The life that perceives itself / Changing” (P 117). At the same time they are “Godseed,” and as such a part of the cosmos:

We are all Godseed, but no more or less  
so than any other aspect of the universe,  
Godseed is all there is—all that  
Changes. (P71)

Despite the fact that reason is granted high significance in her system of belief—aphorism after aphorism calls for the use of reason for the purpose of creative adaptation to the conditions of human existence—, Lauren rejects a reductively rationalist definition of humanness that would continue to support the dualistic concept of a separation of human beings from nonhuman nature. Motivated, for instance, by her “hyperempathy syndrome,” the capacity to experience pain in extreme intensity which she was born with because of her mother’s drug abuse, she is very aware of the fact that humans are not merely rational, but also sentient beings. By insisting on a multi-faceted definition that includes body and soul, materiality, emotionality, and spirituality as markers of humanness, Lauren discards any merely rationalist definition. While the following aphorism stresses the specificity of human

intellectual capabilities, it at the same time foregrounds the materiality of being, the significance of the body:

We are Earthseed. We are flesh—self-aware,  
questing, problem-solving flesh. We are that  
aspect of Earthlife best able to shape God  
knowingly. (P 139)

The high status that is still attributed to reason shows that Butler's protagonist is careful not to criticize and reject the human/nature dualism by means of erasing all boundaries between human and nonhuman nature, one of the most conspicuous of which is a different degree of intellectual capability. Lauren tries to redefine reason in a way that defies the kind of rationalism that according to philosopher Val Plumwood has dominated Western thought since antiquity and that has contributed significantly to global environmental degradation. In her study *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* Plumwood delineates in detail how a rationality that poses dualisms—most significantly the “root dualism” reason/nature which then spawns other dualisms such as reason/emotion, reason/body, or male/female—, inferiorizes nature and all phenomena “regarded as nature” and, ultimately, legitimizes limitless exploitation. In contrast to this, Lauren's concept of reason aims at what Plumwood calls “long-term survival.” It is meant to “find a form which encourages sensitivity to the conditions under which we exist on the earth, one which recognises and accommodates the denied relationships of dependency and enables us to acknowledge our debt to the sustaining others of the earth” (196).

By emphasizing the difference between human and nonhuman nature in terms of intellectual capability, Lauren, moreover, avoids the problems which deep ecologists have run into in their attempts to define a self that behaves in an environmentally more benign way. As Plumwood explains elsewhere, deep ecologist concepts of the human self like “the indistinguishable self,” “the expanded self,” and “the transpersonal self” fail in their efforts because of an emphasis to “identify” with nature. “Identification” with nonhuman nature runs the risk of projecting human desires onto it, of turning into an extension of human egoism, and of obliterating the needs of nonhuman nature (cf. “Nature, Self, and Gender” 163-68).

Lauren's earthseed religion allows for the conceptualization of a self which in terms of an environmental ethics can function as a “self-in-relationship,” as a self that is aware of distinctness, of difference, and of particularity, as a self that because of his or her ability to perceive the needs of an other can decide where to place the limits of his or her actions. The

following aphorism shows that this ethical stance refers to both human and nonhuman others, it makes clear that this ethical stance is characterized by a strong environmental justice dimension:

Embrace diversity  
 Unite—  
 Or be divided,  
     robbed,  
     ruled,  
     killed  
 By those who see you as prey.  
 Embrace diversity  
 Or be destroyed. (*P* 181)

Like the slave narratives which tell their stories of escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North, *Parable of the Sower* displays a plot structure based on a spatial movement from South to North.<sup>10</sup> After the destruction of Robledo, Lauren's little group of fugitives moves North. While the escaping slaves sought to free themselves from the system of slavery, the group around Lauren seeks to escape political, socioeconomic and environmental conditions that have also created a system of bondage. Similar to the goal of many fugitive slaves, who hoped to reach the free states of the U.S. or Canada, the Robledo fugitives hope to reach Northern California, Oregon, Washington, or, again, Canada where the natural environment has been damaged to a lesser extent and where the chances for survival are therefore better.

In the slave narratives most narrative space is given to the depictions of the respective narrator's experiences in slavery. The propagandistic function of the texts called for a realistic mode of writing which would lend the descriptions of physical, intellectual, and emotional cruelties on the part of the slave masters a high degree of immediacy. Little space was given to both the escape as such—largely because the narrators did not wish to give away information about successful methods of escape—and to the escaped slaves' life in the free North. The major purpose of the narratives was to present an indictment of slavery. Likewise, in *Parable of the Sower* most of the narrative space is used for Lauren's account of her experiences in Southern California, both in Robledo and on the road North. The major purpose of Butler's narrative is to lend immediacy to Lauren's account of the social effects which a degenerated political and economic system and an ecologically largely destroyed natural environment have on the lives of the inhabitants of Robledo and of the fugitives moving North. By pointing out social effects, which are expressive of physical, intellectual,

and emotional cruelty as well and which manifest themselves most prominently in the rise of discrimination according to race, gender, and class, *Parable of the Sower* demonstrates powerfully the nexus between environmental degradation and social in/justice.

Indicative of this is, for example, the topography of the American Northwest which Lauren's diary entries delineate. Several features recall both the American antebellum slave South and nineteenth- and twentieth-century segregation. In the Robledo area Lauren detects an ensemble of buildings which point toward the "big house" and the "slave quarters" of the antebellum South: "Up toward the hills there were walled estates—one big house and a lot of shabby little dependencies where the servants lived" (P 9). Close to the Canadian border, a line of factory buildings has been created in which a kind of "[d]ebt slavery" (P 111) is practiced, an economic arrangement which recalls the sharecropping economy of the increasingly segregated American South after the Civil War: employers take advantage of the shortage of work, they can pick whomever they want from the "northward-flowing river of people" (P 295), pay extremely low wages, and ignore the need for environmental and workplace safety legislation. The fugitive Emery tells the others that the workers "don't get paid much, so they get into debt. They get hurt or sick, too. Their drinking water's not clean and the factories are dangerous—full of poisons and machines that crush or cut you. But people think they can make some cash and quit" (P 294-95).

Indicators of growing racism are, moreover, attitudes and practices Lauren observes inside and outside of Robledo. She refers to occasional outbursts of "interracial feud" (P 80) between families of different ethnic background in her multiethnic community; her neighbor Mrs. Sims, a sanctimonious, rich, old woman, despises those neighbors, and even her daughter-in-law, who are of Chinese or Hispanic origin—an attitude which makes her complicit in the deaths of her son and his whole family (cf. P 21-23); the arsonists outside the Robledo walls often target "anyone who looks or sounds foreign or racially different" (P 132); corporations like KSF which create company towns prefer the applications from communities whose inhabitants are white—asked about Robledo's chances to apply for the status of company town, Lauren's father answers: "Robledo's too big, too poor, too black, and too Hispanic to be of interest to anyone" (P 110); in the North, in the states closer to the Canadian border where the conditions of living are better, only few black people live—Bankole, another fugitive, remarks about his brother-in-law, who is black like he himself and who settled in Northern California with his family, that he had difficulties finding work there:



“it didn’t help that he was black. Being white might help you win people over faster than he did” (*P* 292).

The flourishing of sexism, finally, is depicted most pointedly in the actions of Lauren’s Robledo neighbor Richard Moss, who is the husband of three wives. Moss is only one example of a trend that has spread across the region:

Richard Moss has put together his own religion—a combination of the Old Testament and historical West African practices. He claims that God wants men to be patriarchs, rulers and protectors of women, and fathers of as many children as possible. He’s an engineer for one of the big commercial water companies, so he can afford to pick up beautiful, young homeless women and live with them in polygynous relationships. He could pick up twenty women like that if he could afford to feed them. I hear there’s a lot of that kind of thing going on in other neighborhoods. Some middle class men prove they’re men by having a lot of wives in temporary or permanent relationships. Some upper class men prove they’re men by having a wife and a lot of beautiful, disposable young servant girls. Nasty. When the girls get pregnant, if their rich employers won’t protect them, the employer’s wives throw them out to starve. (*P* 36)

This depiction is again reminiscent of the situation in the antebellum slave South. Moss and the other men mentioned by Lauren exploit the socially and economically desperate situation of women for the purposes of gaining a higher social status and of satisfying their sexual lust. They exploit and abuse not only the young women they pick up from the street, but any woman, as the situation of the “first wife” shows, who cannot afford to protest because she would otherwise be expelled from the household. Tellingly, Moss legitimizes his behavior by creating another kind of patriarchal religion. Here Butler’s dystopian vision leaves no doubt that as a consequence of socioeconomic and ecological devastation oppressive systems of gender relations would return forcefully.

Studies of the genre of the slave narrative have again and again pointed out the crucial link between literacy, identity, and freedom. First of all, literacy allowed the ex-slaves to write themselves “into existence” and claim their rights as human beings and as citizens. As, for instance, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. have pointed out, the skill of writing had been considered the “visible sign of reason” since the Renaissance in Europe. And since reason was regarded as the essential marker of humanness, illiterate peoples were attributed the status of the sub-human—a means of inferiorizing them and legitimizing enslavement and exploitation. The ability to use the written word gave the ex-slave narrators the opportunity to insist on their humanness: “through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could become a human being by an act of self-creation” (Davis/Gates xxiii; see also Gates). Moreover, literacy allowed them to claim their human and

political rights, to establish themselves as historical subjects. In a more pragmatic context, achieving literacy for the slaves meant performing successful acts of resistance against the slave holding society: it frustrated its attempts to withhold the skills of reading and writing by means of legislation; it provided the means for a revisionist treatment of dominant theological, philosophical, and political concepts on which the argument of apologists of slavery were founded; and it provided the means for gathering the information that was necessary to prepare and conduct their escape.

As in the slave narratives, the issue of literacy figures prominently in *Parable of the Sower*. Butler's choice of the autobiographical mode, her decision to create a protagonist that develops a self by means of diary entries and of aphorisms which ultimately combine to form a foundational religious text, immediately signals the crucial importance of writing for the process of identity formation. In addition to that, several activities and insights of her protagonist Lauren show that Butler's text can be read as performing a kind of consciousness-raising with respect to the crucial importance of both basic literacy, the ability to read and write, and environmental literacy, the knowledge about biological and ecological phenomena, for human survival.

The situation in the years 2024 to 2027 which Lauren chronicles is characterized by widespread and ever-increasing illiteracy. Caused by the collapse of the socioeconomic infrastructure, all regional or supra-regional systems of education have disappeared. Lauren and her parents are involved in the attempts of the Robledo community to create a system of schooling within the neighborhood that ensures at least an education in the most basic skills of reading and writing. Later on, on their way North, Lauren uses her book of earthseed aphorisms to teach some members of the fugitive group to read and write. She knows that only with these skills might there be a chance to find some kind of paid job. She is, moreover, aware of the fact that illiteracy means a loss of the status and the rights of citizen: it precludes access to information and to participation in the political processes. This in turn means that literacy has again—structurally similar to the situation of slavery—become a tool of political oppression, and it can be used by those in power to secure their privileged position.

In one episode of *Parable of the Sower* this structural similarity is made explicit. On their way North, Lauren talks to another member of the fugitive group. Travis is a highly educated young man who was taught to read and write by his mother, a former scientist who also educated him in various aspects of the sciences. He was taught by her while she was working as a cook in a household of one of the few members of the privileged caste. Her status was

that of an indentured servant, and her employer did not know that she was using books from his library, otherwise he would have forbidden her to teach her son. Lauren comments: "Of course. Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could, sometimes suffering whipping, sale, or mutilation for their efforts." As in the case of various slave narratives, the "master's wife" condoned the efforts of Travis' mother. He tells Lauren: "I think his wife knew, but she was a decent woman. She never said anything" (P 201).

The importance of acquiring environmental literacy is expressed in Lauren's attempts to gain as much agricultural, biological, and ecological information about the region of the American Northwest as possible. Aware of the precarious situation of the Robledo community, Lauren very early on starts to gather this type of information from some of her father's and her grandmother's books. In a conversation with her friend Joanne she lists the books she has studied: "Three books on survival in the wilderness, three on guns and shooting, two each on handling medical emergencies, California native and naturalized plants and their uses, and basic living: log-cabin building, livestock raising, plant cultivation, soap-making—that kind of thing" (P 54). Her accumulated knowledge bears fruit when the little fugitive group decides to stay in Northern California and to found the first earthseed community.

### III

In *Parable of the Sower* Octavia Butler has extended the uses of the genre of the slave narrative as intertextual point of reference. In the same way in which African American writers of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated in their neo-slave narratives how large this genre's potential for cultural work is by responding to the specifics of the political and cultural situation motivated by the social movements that emerged in the 1960s, Butler performs an intertextual engagement with the slave narrative that responds to the contemporary global environmental crisis as it presented itself in the 1990s. She employs several formulaic conventions characteristic of this genre for the purpose of delineating a dystopian world characterized by political, socioeconomic, and environmental degradation, and thereby points toward those areas where in our time cultural change ought to take place in order to avoid destruction of the planet's fragile webs of life.

My analysis of *Parable of the Sower* confirms what Donna Haraway claims in her discussion of Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, namely that Butler's fashioning of "speculative pasts and futures for the species seem deeply informed by Afro-American perspectives with strong tones of womanism or feminism" (378). Her use of a black, female protagonist and her thematic highlighting of issues discussed by ecofeminist philosophers and social activists and by members of the environmental justice movement is geared toward an empowerment of politically marginalized social groups.

The ending of Butler's novel leaves the reader wondering whether the small earthseed community will succeed or fail. This open ending, this defiance of closure, signals the rejection of the assumption that human beings will master the problems of environmental devastation after all. In the context of her intertextual project, this can once more be read as an echo to an attitude expressed by the slave narratives. The defiance of closure recalls a special doubt which at least the contemporary African American reader of slave narratives may have had: whether reaching the "free" states of the American North would mean liberation not only from the system of slavery, but, in addition to that, from the social and political mechanisms of racism as well. At the same time, however, *Parable of the Sower* leaves no doubt that transformation toward an environmentally sustainable civilization must be based on the transformation of still dominant social power dynamics and their conceptual sources of legitimization.

## Notes

- 1 As Donna Haraway has pointed out, the acronym SF—usually used for science fiction—has been used since the late 1960s to map a whole field of narrative texts which transcend the borders of realist writing, i.e. modes of writing which strive toward verisimilitude. Haraway regards "speculative fiction, science fiction, science fantasy, speculative futures, speculative fabulation" as belonging to this "increasingly heterodox array of writing, reading, and marketing practices" (5).
- 2 For a discussion of *Parable of the Sower* as an intertextual response to sociologist Mike Davis' study *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990) see Miller.
- 3 Butler 77. Subsequent references to the text will be given in parentheses.
- 4 For an enumeration of the formal conventions used in slave narratives see Olney 1985 and Andrews 1986.

- 5 Most conspicuous are intertextual references to the bible such as those to the already mentioned “Parable of the Sower” and “Parable of the Importunate Widow” to which references, for example, to the book of Job can be added (see *P* 14); as self-reflexive elements the novel’s focus on the significance of literacy can be pointed out—an issue which will be discussed later in the essay—, but also utterances by the diarist Lauren which are expressive of a struggle for meaning such as the following: “I’m not good enough as a writer or poet or whatever it is I need to be” (*P* 72).
- 6 A concise introduction to the scholarly discussion about the relevance of literacy for African American literature is given by Gates 1986.
- 7 In 1982 the largely African American protesters against a toxic waste dump in Warren County, North Carolina, were led by local church officials and by the Reverend Benjamin Chavis, a civil rights activist and head of the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice. See Cole/Foster 20.
- 8 William L. Andrews provides a comprehensive discussion of various slave narrators’ revisionist appropriation of biblical texts; see especially chapter 2 “Experiments in Two Modes, 1810-40” (61-96).
- 9 Lawrence Levine argues similarly with respect to the “sacred world of black slaves” which emerges from a study of oral forms, especially the spiritual (3-80).
- 10 In their introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argue succinctly that this structural device, the narrator’s movement from the South to the North, has become a formal feature characteristic of large parts of the African American autobiographical and fictional tradition of writing (vxiii-xx; see also Olney).

## Bibliography

- Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Cole, Luke W. and Sheila R. Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.
- Davis, Charles T. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Introduction. Davis and Gates xi-xxxiv. ---, eds. *The Slave’s Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Di Chiro, Giovanna. “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice.” *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York: Norton, 1995. 298-320.

- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* 1845. Ed. Benjamin Quarles. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Dubey, Madhu. "Folk and Urban Communities in African-American Women's Fiction: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*" *Studies in American Fiction* 27.1 (1999): 103-28.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 1-20.
- Haraway, Donna. *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. 1989. London: Verso, 1992.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. 1990. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.
- McDowell, Michael J. "The Bakhtinian Road to Ecological Insight." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 371-91.
- Miller, Jim. "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision." *Science-Fiction Studies* 25.2 (1998): 336-60.
- Murphy, Patrick D. "Anothemess and Inhabitation in Recent Multicultural American Literature." *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Eds. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells. London: Zed Books, 1998. 40-52.
- Olney, James. "'I Was Bom': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." Davis and Gates 148-75.
- Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. 1993. London: Routledge, 1997.
- , "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism." *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*. Ed. Karren J. Warren. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. 155-80.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.