

# An Afrofuturist Reading of Historical Metaphors and Future Writing in *Parable of the Sower*

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**Abstract:** As a foundational figure in Afrofuturist literary tradition, Octavia Butler deploys speculative fiction in *Parable of the Sower* to critically deconstruct the themes of race, power, and historical memory. Utilizing Afrofuturism as its theoretical framework, this paper analyzes the historical metaphors and future imaginaries in *Parable of the Sower* through the lens of Afrofuturist historiography and futurity. It argues that, through its dual engagement with history and the future, this novel not only disrupts the white-centered futurist narrative, reconstructing black history, but also amplifies the voice of the African American community and opens up possibilities for marginalized groups to imagine alternative futures. By depicting the process of home destruction and the subsequent rebuilding of a multiracial community through the perspective of a young black girl, Lauren, whose hyperempathy as a medium that bridges history and the future, Butler subverts the conventional linear narrative of progress and vividly demonstrates the agency and subjectivity of African Americans within both disaster and futurist narratives.

**Keywords:** *Parable of the Sower*; Afrofuturism; Historical metaphor; Future writing; Community

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## 1. Introduction

Octavia Butler was an African American author chiefly noted for her science fiction novels about future societies and superhuman powers. She became the first science fiction writer to be awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship. Her speculative fiction novel, *Parable of the Sower*, published in 1993, depicts a futuristic United States society from 2024 to 2027. It is set in a post-apocalyptic Earth heavily affected by climate change and social inequality. The novel follows Lauren Olamina, a young black girl who can feel the pain of others and becomes displaced from her home. Several characters from various walks of life join her on her journey north and learn of a religion she has envisioned and titled Earthseed.

The term Afrofuturism, first coined by Mark Dery in 1993, is a genre of black science fiction and a critical framework that expresses the voices of the African American community. Ytasha L. Womack conceives of Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.” She defines it as “[b]oth an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory,” which incorporates genres of

“science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs”<sup>[1]</sup>. Afrofuturism envisions black futures that reanimate the black people’s struggle for human rights and, in the process, imagines alternative futures. It has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural “Pan-African” movement<sup>[2]</sup>. As an Afrofuturist text, *Parable of the Sower* presents in alarming fashion decaying public education systems, escalating energy, food, and water expenses, unimpeded violence and crime, drug addiction, homelessness, deregulation of minimum wages, global warming, drought, failing religions, and a dismantled space program, among many other disasters<sup>[3]</sup>. It also vividly reflects the dual expression of historical memory and future vision through the depiction of Lauren’s experience.

Scholars at home and abroad mainly focus their attention on this novel from the context of utopian and dystopian studies. Jim Miller talks about how Butler views the dystopian future. He states that she has recreated the longing for a beautiful world and has also inserted herself into the tradition of feminist utopian writing<sup>[4]</sup>. Ruffin talks about how Butler rewrites the biblical narrative and appropriates the parables<sup>[5]</sup>. Although this novel has been interpreted from the perspective of Afrofuturism, there is relatively little attention paid to the connection between its historical metaphors and its concept of the future. Based on these researches, this paper mainly analyzes this novel from the perspective of Afrofuturism’s historical consciousness and the way it envisions the future. It explores how Butler, through the genre of science fiction, reflects Black history while also challenging mainstream future narratives and opening up possibilities for marginalized groups to imagine the future.

## 2. Historical metaphors in *Parable of the Sower*

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler does not write a historical novel in the traditional sense. Rather, she integrates the memories of the past into her vision of the future through the lens of Afrofuturism. For a long time, futurist scholars have argued that Africa is incompatible with the concept of the future, therefore, their narratives have always excluded the entire African descent community, resulting in the long-term historical neglect or even erasure of the value of communities of African descent<sup>[6]</sup>. But the black community has never been silent. “Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures”<sup>[7]</sup>. This is the Afro-American tradition, the blackest aspect of the black tradition. It’s also their way of survival and self-expression<sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, learning to decipher these complex codes constitutes a central pathway to understanding black culture and its meanings.

The plots in the novel that evoke Black history are not direct historical representations but metaphorical devices. Whereas direct representation attempts to reconstruct historical reality within the narrative, metaphor conveys history’s essential logic through the future scene. This is also the uniqueness of Butler’s writing style. She chooses to transform historical experience into a metaphor in the context of the future, aiming to reveal the essential characteristics of historical trauma. As Butler and Potts note, *Parable of the Sower* is still fundamentally about social power. It is much more a close extrapolation from current trends. The increasing class gap, the fear of crime, and the chaos of the cities are not mere imaginations. All of this has happened before. Moreover, it is a consequence that Americans have brought upon themselves<sup>[8]</sup>. Curtis also argues that the *Parable* series is not simply a description of the ways in which things might go wrong; it is a diagnosis of what Bankole notes is our human “refusal” to confront such challenges<sup>[9]</sup>.

Therefore, the dystopian setting in the novel is neither a simple prediction of the future nor a direct

representation of the past. When the novel depicts the debt exploitation of Olivar or the walls of Robledo, Butler does not replicate the nineteenth-century plantation or the legal codes of the Jim Crow era. Instead, she extracts the structural violence of history from its specific historical events and re-embeds it into a future scenario of capitalist collapse. Through this metaphorical treatment, Butler reveals to readers that apartheid, slavery, and the Great Migration are not historical processes that have ended. They will continue to exist in the future and will continue to have an impact on the present in different forms. It is the depiction of a series of dystopian scenarios in the novel that embodies a retrospective engagement with and reflection on the historical experiences of the African diaspora, primarily encompassing racial segregation, slavery, and the Great Migration.

### **2.1. Racial segregation in *Parable of the Sower***

At the outset of the novel, Butler situates the reader within Lauren's walled community. The neighborhood is enclosed by high concrete walls and secured by locked iron gates, with residents taking turns standing armed guard at night. Beyond the walls lies an anarchic zone ravaged by arson, robbery, drugs, and famine, while within them a tenuous form of everyday life—organized around schools, churches, and family gardens—is barely sustained<sup>[10]</sup>. Butler depicts this spatial polarization in rich detail: children are warned never to climb over the walls alone, and are even told that people outside are not neighbors, but potential enemies. This spatial division of class is also steeped in racial overtones. It echoes the racially segregated districts mandated by law during the Jim Crow era and, later, the redlining policies of the Federal Housing Administration in the mid-twentieth century. Under such conditions, American urban space has persistently been carved up along a line called racial segregation. Butler projects this landscape into California in 2024, signaling the ongoing presence of segregation in American society. Although this separation ostensibly functions as a protective mechanism, it ultimately protects no one. In the novel, the wall is eventually destroyed by fire, and Lauren sets out on her northbound journey into exile.

### **2.2. New slavery and great migration in *Parable of the Sower***

Christina Sharpe proposes that individual black lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery<sup>[11]</sup>. Beyond the walled community's metaphor of racial segregation, the depiction in which the town of Olivar is purchased by a multinational corporation presents a new form of slavery.

The corporation promises residents a safe working environment, stable wages, and basic services on the condition that they sell their land to the company, sign long-term labor contracts, and accept the corporation's comprehensive management of their daily lives<sup>[10]</sup>. At the same time, wages are paid in company-issued tokens that can only be used in corporate-owned stores, and residents' rights to travel and migrate are strictly curtailed. Confronted with this seemingly reasonable arrangement, only Lauren perceives the exploitation underpinning the system. In her journal, she characterizes it as an old slavery under a new sign and wonders if those people who sign the contract could get what they want<sup>[10]</sup>. This question inevitably calls to mind the debt peonage systems of the post-Civil War American South. After the legal abolition of slavery, Southern states continued to bind Black laborers to the land and to prisons through sharecropping, indentured labor, and convict leasing. In the novel, the corporation's promises to the residents clearly amount to a futuristic extension of this new slavery: within a capitalist framework, slavery is both legalized and rendered invisible. When no alternative appears more ostensibly fair or reasonable, dependence on capital becomes their

only viable option. In this sense, whether in the past or future, slavery has never truly ended. It has merely changed its form.

Womack suggests that Afrofuturism allows “a total re-envisioning of the past” along with the future “rife with cultural critiques”<sup>[1]</sup>. And this narrative mode is reflected in Lauren’s journey to the north. After the fire destroyed the community of Robledo, Lauren and other survivors travel north on Highway 101 through devastated California to find a safer place to live. This escape scene is undoubtedly reminiscent of the Great Migration of the first half of the 20th century, when millions of southern blacks went north to escape Jim Crow laws. Although this journey once again touches on the theme of exile, unlike the previous narratives centered on black escape, this escape group is obviously composed of multi-ethnic members, including blacks, whites, and Latinos. Butler pointed out in interviews that she does not write about the future so much as an extended present<sup>[12]</sup>. This means that the retrospective of history in *Parable of the Sower* is not a simple copy of the past, but a new structure that re-presents history from the perspective of the Afro-descendant community. This act of historical reconstruction poses a powerful challenge to white-centered futurist narratives. This time, the voices of the African diaspora are no longer submerged. This re-centralization process also laid the foundation for their subsequent imagination of the future. The core of Afrofuturism exploration is actually the various ideas that drive the concept of diaspora<sup>[13]</sup>. Their migration experience is a concrete manifestation of these ideas.

In short, Butler uses the novel to present reality to the public in a grand and shocking way, forcing people to recognize their position in the world, and at the same time reflecting on what they are doing and where various potential problems will eventually lead them. In this way, it also lays the foundation for the subsequent shifts and transformations of the power relationship in the novel<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 3. Future writing in *Parable of the Sower*

In *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism* (2003), Kodwo Eshun points out that the central task of Afrofuturism is to create “counter-futures,” that is, to challenge the white-dominated sci-fi imagination, thereby regaining the right to imagine the future for oppressed groups<sup>[15]</sup>. Womack further elaborates that Afrofuturism not only focuses on technology and outer space, but also is deeply rooted in spirituality and myth-making. It attempts to create a new worldview and belief system based on the experience of the African diasporic experience<sup>[1]</sup>. The *Earthseed* precisely reflects such a counter-futures spiritual practice.

#### 3.1. The future text—*Earthseed: The Books of the Living*

*Earthseed* is a religion designed for survival in a dystopian world. The name comes from seeds of plants that travel great distances via wind, water, and animals. Lauren believes in humans seeding themselves far away from dying places to begin new life amidst challenges. She believes in adaptation and acceptance of change. Therefore, the core belief of *Earthseed* is that God is Change. This creed fundamentally redefines the divinity. Even though Lauren is the daughter of a Black Baptist minister and preacher, she rejects her father’s God. The novel suggests that the notion of God in the traditional sense is highly inflexible. Traditionally, people believe in “a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God”<sup>[10]</sup>, which have patriarchal and authoritarian connotations. Lauren is also intrigued by the unknown gender of the universal God. She asks, “Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us?” All people in her community believe that God is omnipotent and omniscient in the traditional sense<sup>[10]</sup>. However, after knowing the suicide of her neighbor,

Mrs. Sims, a staunch believer of the Bible, who was rapped and robbed, she becomes skeptical about the primary belief. Even religion didn't do any good to her brother, Keith, even though he was forcefully made to confess and apologize in the church congregation. She realizes that her father's God does not protect the street poor, women, and disenfranchised. She doesn't seek God who metes out judgment and punishment and protects rich people and disregards the suffering of powerless, marginalized, and disenfranchised people. *Earthseed* thus becomes all the more profound. It does not passively await salvation, but actively saves itself.

As a female protagonist who creates a new religion, Lauren exemplifies qualities of Afrofuturism. In her refusal to accept a violent society as the norm, Lauren performs as a protagonist of critical dystopia who does not bow down to hegemony. However, as a black female preacher who envisions a new religion that is inclusive, subjective, and communal and is rooted in science, Lauren envisions a new path that contests black female subjugation. Historically, black women have always been dismissed as thinkers, intellectuals, and preachers. They have been relegated to the status of chattel, slaves, and domestic servants. Her venture as a founder of a religion is unconventional, as historically major world religions have been initiated by men, their Gods are men, and their prophets and preachers are also men. The book, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, which is her personal journal of survival notes, becomes a religious manifesto. Alexander argues that Butler's journal entries in particular served as an important, authoritative, yet protected space for her to articulate her own ambitions and concerns about her career, and granted some form of control in how she imagined her work to be read<sup>[16]</sup>. Lauren's notes also serve the same function. She constructs a safe space for herself while articulating her aspirations and imagination for the future.

To a certain extent, her God is inflexible, malleable, tangible, and inclusive, and doesn't come from "any mythology or mysticism or magic"<sup>[17]</sup>. *Earthseed* doesn't demand any observance of rules and regulations, sacrifices, or momentary benefits apart from attending the weekly gatherings. As it is mentioned,

"A victim of God may,  
Through learning adaptation,  
Become a partner of God,  
A victim of God may,  
Through forethought and planning,  
Become a shaper of God"<sup>[10]</sup>.

That means Lauren's God doesn't have any image, but the entire universe is "God's self-portrait"<sup>[10]</sup>. As Lauren explains, "*Earthseed* deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action"<sup>[10]</sup>. Her God is not an entity but a process; her followers are not a cult but pray to themselves. Lauren also named the futurist community Acorn, which is itself a declaration of power. Just as Adam named all things, Lauren named her new world. The Black girl gained the power to write the future upon the ruins.

### **3.2. The medium for writing the future: Hyperempathy**

It is noteworthy that the root of Lauren's series of ideas is her hyperempathy. It actually serves as the link between history and the future. In the novel, it is not portrayed as a heroic superpower but rather as an extremely dangerous physiological vulnerability. Lauren refers to this condition in her diary as sharing. According to doctors, hyperempathy is "organic delusion syndrome," which occurred because her biological mother consumed "Paracetco, the smart pill, the Einstein powder"<sup>[10]</sup>, causing permanent damage to Lauren's neurotransmitters. She can share both pain and pleasure, but is forced to experience more pain because she

lives in a violent society. During the relatively secure period in the Robledo community, hyperempathy was already a burden to her. Once she embarked on the path of flight, it became almost a fatal vulnerability. The novel repeatedly depicts her collapsing in pain at gunfight scenes when others are shot, requiring cover and assistance from her companions. Lauren explicitly acknowledges in her diary that “sharing is a weakness, a shameful secret. A person who knows what I am can hurt me, betray me, disable me with little effort”<sup>[10]</sup>. She therefore insisted on keeping this secret from outsiders, and for a time even refrained from mentioning it to her companions in the group.

On the one hand, this narrative strategy allows readers to experience these hardships alongside Lauren’s perspective, rather than observing suffering from a detached, objective point. On the other hand, it provides a concrete experiential foundation for Lauren’s theological belief that God is Change, rendering her philosophy more accessible to her fellow travelers and more persuasive to readers. Butler shows hyperempathy as a biological conscience instead of disability. Belonging to the African American community, which has suffered violence for centuries, a black girl having a biological conscience implies that the world can be a better place. Lauren also reflects in a similar tone, “But if everyone could feel everyone’s pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?”<sup>[10]</sup> Lauren wishes there were other shares because, according to her, “A biological conscience is better than no conscience at all”<sup>[10]</sup>. Although she suffers immensely living in a violent society surrounded by pain, which she experiences intensely, her hyperempathy is still a sign of hope in a dystopian world. As Tarshia Stanley suggests, hyperempathy “liberates her from egocentrism in that it requires her constant contemplation of the safety of the collective to guarantee her own”<sup>[18]</sup>. Her hyperempathy ensures that she feels more about the safety, survival, and solidarity of all in her community. It thus becomes a force for action and change that bridges social divides, transcends geographical boundaries, and advances justice. The process of establishing the Acorn traces an ideal path from individual to collective responsibility and ultimately to a broad social movement<sup>[19]</sup>.

In *Earthseed*, she mentions that “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars”<sup>[10]</sup>, which blends religion, science, and black history, embodying distinct characteristics of Afrofuturism. This principle also subverts the stereotype that science fiction equals a white future. According to Kimberly Ruffin, Butler shows “the possibility that religion can be compatible with scientific advancements that may help secure the continuation of the human species”<sup>[5]</sup>. Lauren uses religion as a goal for traveling to interstellar space, which is unlike other religions whose collective destiny is heaven. Shirley White states that “Whites ... recoiled at the idea that Africans, whom they considered less than human, could indeed have the right to heaven just as they did”<sup>[20]</sup>. But the religion she founded explicitly denies heaven. The activism it advocates was in stark contrast to the political system and mainstream culture at that time. For example, Lauren describes the presidential candidate Christopher Morpeth Donner as a “human banister” who advocates social irresponsibility. Donner’s fear of change can be seen from his prejudice against space and scientific exploration. However, Lauren believes that space could be their future. The practical efforts of the characters to establish the Acorn community are like a rehearsal of future community politics. The end of the novel deliberately does not make a conclusion, nor does it guarantee the ultimate success of the community, this approach has played a dual role. On the one hand, it opens up speculative space for marginalized groups to envision emancipatory futures. On the other hand, it also shows that such undertakings are inherently risky, require continuous efforts from generation to generation, and are always likely to fail. This narrative subverts the linear view of progress of traditional futurism.

## 4. Conclusion

As a classic text of Afrofuturism, *Parable of the Sower* reconstructs the history of African Americans on the one hand and conceives a diversified future with black subjectivity as the core on the other hand. The presentation of history and the imagination of the future in the novel show that the two are not opposite or broken, but deeply intertwined. Butler's near-future setting suggests that history may be a continuation of the future, that is, the future unfolds as an extension of existing historical trajectories. In the mainstream future narrative dominated by white people, Butler subverts the traditional narrative mode from the perspective of a young black girl. She not only provides the possibility for marginalized groups to imagine their own future, but also allows readers to see the power and determination of women in the face of crisis. The multi-ethnic community and the new religion embody the alternative future of pursuing diversity, social justice, and freedom from oppression. In this sense, Lauren is a nonconformist Afrofuturist shaper, not a preacher<sup>[18]</sup>. The communal values presented in the novel continue to offer rich resources and insights for contemporary society.

However, there are still some limitations in this study. On the one hand, it focuses primarily on the first novel in the *Parable* series and does not adequately address the further development of *Earthseed* in its sequel, *Parable of the Talents*. On the other hand, when applying Afrofuturism, this paper foregrounds the perspective of history and future at the expense of exploring the connections between Lauren's hyperempathy and, for instance, contemporary or disability studies. Future research can try to explore these dimensions from a more comprehensive time dimension or an interdisciplinary perspective to further deepen the understanding and research of Butler's works.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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