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**Climate Change, Human Mobilities, and Octavia Butler's Parable Novels**

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# Climate Change, Human Mobilities, and Octavia Butler's *Parable* Novels

Cambio climático, movilidades humanas y las novelas *Parábola* de Octavia Butler

Mudanças climáticas, mobilidades humanas e romances *Parábola* de Octavia Butler

*Maxwell Woods*

UNIVERSIDAD ADOLFO IBÁÑEZ

## Abstract

With the onset of global climate change and the human-induced alteration of ecosystems across the planet, the territories on which nations and communities rely are undergoing massive transformations. If the foundation of the nation-State is sovereignty over a fixed national territory, then climate change is a threat to the basis of our political reality: the nation-State. As a result, many expect that climate change will disrupt settled national existences, upend our current political reality, and produce new flows of human migration. As such, the relationship between migration and climate change is frequently understood in terms of security and how so-called 'climate refugees' will threaten political-economic stability. Recent science fiction emerging from the Americas, however, has imagined new forms of political agency emerging from the intersection of climate change and migration. In this article, I will demonstrate how Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels imagine a new political agency based on the emerging figure of the climate refugee. Rather than trying to avoid a perceived migration crisis provoked by climate change (i.e., preserving the nation-State political system in the face of climate change), Butler develops a new climate change political agency based on the climate refugee.

**Keywords:** climate change; migration; Octavia Butler; neoliberalism; refugee.

## Resumen

Con el inicio del cambio climático global y la alteración de los ecosistemas inducida por el hombre en todo el planeta, los territorios de los que dependen las naciones y comunidades están experimentando transformaciones masivas. Si el fundamento del Estado-nación es la soberanía sobre un territorio nacional fijo, entonces el cambio climático es una amenaza a la base de nuestra realidad política: el Estado-nación. Como resultado, muchos esperan que el cambio

climático perturbe las existencias nacionales asentadas, trastoque nuestra realidad política actual y produzca nuevos flujos de migración humana. Como tal, la relación entre migración y cambio climático frecuentemente se entiende en términos de seguridad y de cómo los llamados “refugiados climáticos” amenazarán la estabilidad política y económica. Sin embargo, la ciencia ficción reciente que surge en las Américas ha imaginado nuevas formas de agencia política que surgen de la intersección del cambio climático y la migración. En esta presentación, demostraré cómo las novelas *Parable* de Octavia Butler imaginan una nueva agencia política basada en la figura emergente del refugiado climático. En lugar de tratar de evitar una crisis migratoria percibida como provocada por el cambio climático (es decir, preservar el sistema político del Estado-nación frente al cambio climático), Butler desarrolla una nueva agencia política de cambio climático basada en el refugiado climático.

**Palabras claves:** cambio climático; migración; Octavia Butler; neoliberalismo; refugiados.

## Resumo

Com o início da mudança climática global e a alteração dos ecossistemas induzida pelo homem em todo o planeta, os territórios dos quais as nações e as comunidades dependem estão passando por grandes transformações. Se a base do Estado-nação é a soberania sobre um território nacional fixo, então a mudança climática é uma ameaça à base da nossa realidade política: o Estado-nação. Como resultado, muitos esperam que a mudança climática desestrua as existências nacionais estabelecidas, desestrua nossa realidade política atual e produza novos fluxos de migração humana. Dessa forma, a relação entre migração e mudança climática é frequentemente entendida em termos de segurança e de como os chamados “refugiados do clima” ameaçarão a estabilidade político-econômica. No entanto, a ficção científica recente que emerge das Américas imaginou novas formas de agência política que emergem da interseção entre mudança climática e migração. Neste artigo, demonstrarei como os romances *Parable* de Octavia Butler imaginam uma nova agência política baseada na figura emergente do refugiado climático. Em vez de tentar evitar uma suposta crise migratória provocada pela mudança climática (ou seja, preservar o sistema político do Estado-nação em face da mudança climática), Butler desenvolve uma nova agência política de mudança climática baseada no refugiado climático.

**Palavras-chave:** mudança climática; migração; Octavia Butler; neoliberalismo; refugiados.

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With the onset of global climate change and the human-induced alteration of ecosystems across the planet, the territories on which nations and communities rely are undergoing massive transformations. In other words, if we accept that the foundation of the nation-State is sovereignty over a fixed national territory<sup>1</sup>, then climate change is a threat to the basis of our political reality: the nation-State. As a result, many expect that climate change will disrupt settled national existences, upend our current political reality, and produce new flows and channels of human mobilities. As such, the relationship between migration and climate change is frequently understood in terms of security and how so-called “climate refugees” will threaten national political-economic stability<sup>2</sup>.

Recent science fiction emerging from the Americas, however, has imagined new forms of political agency emerging from the intersection of climate change and human migration. In this article, I explore how Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels imagine a new political agency based on the emerging figure of the climate refugee. Rather than trying to avoid a perceived migration crisis provoked by climate change (i.e., preserving the nation-State political system in the face of climate-change mobilities), Butler develops a new climate-change political agency based on the climate refugee.

As Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff and Carlos Rojas Sancristoful argue, there is now an extensive bibliography on migration and literature in the Americas<sup>3</sup>. As Paula Bianchi notes, one problematic of migration in contemporary literature has been that of how “these fictions narrate the impossibility of the common”<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Giorgio Agamben's comments on the refugee—comments that are at the core of this article—emphasize the necessity to reimagine a collective politics of the migrant, of those figures who frustrate any attempt to imagine a cleanly conceptualized national commonality<sup>5</sup>. The argument of this article is that climate change furthers this impossibility of the common, but that climate fiction is imagining new modes of developing such commonality from the position of the climate refugee.

After introducing the concept and problematics of the climate refugee in the first section, most of the article will be dedicated to outlining how Octavia Butler conceives the intersection of climate change and migration in her *Parable* novels. First, I will delineate how she recognizes that the so-called climate refugee is in fact a consequence of the neoliberal restructuring of the political economy; the climate refugee is an inherently political (not exclusively environmental) phenomenon. Second, I will then note how she theorizes the possibility of a new politics of the climate refugee that moves beyond the nation-State, environmental degradation, and capitalism. Lastly, I will conclude that this utopian vision for climate migration is nonetheless part and parcel of the neoliberal logic that she wishes to escape. As such, Butler challenges any attempt to perceive

<sup>1</sup> Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present, Future* (Malden: Polity, 2016); Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Bettini, “Climate Barbarians at the Gate?: A critique of apocalyptic narratives of ‘climate refugees,’” *Geoforum* 45 (2013): 63-72; Ingrid Boas, et. al., “Climate migration myths,” *Nature Climate Change* 9 (2019): 901-3.

<sup>3</sup> Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff and Carlos Rojas Sancristoful, “Literatura de migración en las Américas: afectividades, fronteras, corpografías,” in *Literatura de migración en las Américas: afectividades, fronteras, corpografías*, edited by Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff and Carlos Rojas Sancristoful (Creative Commons), 4-7.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Bianchi, “Fronteras, balidos, recorridos: Gabriela Cabezón Cámara, Fernanda Trías, Nadia Villafuerte,” in *Literatura de migración en las Américas: afectividades, fronteras, corpografías*, edited by Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff and Carlos Rojas Sancristoful (Creative Commons), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

the climate refugee as a utopian figure of our Anthropocene future or as a destabilizing and even threatening political subject whose existence needs to be prevented.

## On the so-called climate refugee

A new figure of our ongoing environmental crisis has emerged: the climate refugee. According to the UNHCR, between 2011–2021 “weather-related events triggered an average of 21.5 million new displacements each year”<sup>6</sup>. One think tank, the Institute for Economics and Peace, estimates that by 2050 1.2 billion people could be displaced due to climate-related events<sup>7</sup>, though the more common estimate is 200 million by 2050<sup>8</sup>. Publishing their thinking in French in 2007 and English in 2010, Collectif Argos not only outlines concrete examples of already existing climate refugees –the Indigenous community of Shishmaref in Alaska relocating due to the coastline disappearing, those from Bangladesh fleeing their dramatically altered environment, Lake Chad residents leaving due to a water crisis, and so on– but develops a concrete argument as to why the definition of “refugee” should be expanded from its exclusively political definition –i.e., refugee refers to those fleeing political persecution– to include “persons displaced by global warming”<sup>9</sup>. In the upcoming decades, we are told, we will witness the rapid expansion of those who are displaced by climate change and no longer have an identifiable homeland, those who we can call climate refugees.

The concept of the climate refugee has been heavily critiqued. The IPCC (2014), for instance, goes so far as to say, “There is widespread agreement in the scientific and legal literature that the use of the term climate refugee is scientifically and legally problematic”<sup>10</sup>. The reasons for this are multiple: reserving the word, “refugee,” for those “persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” allows us to highlight specific problems, meaning that expanding its definition will “dilute the available international mechanisms and goodwill to cater for existing refugees”<sup>11</sup>; the term, “refugee,” refers under ordinary circumstances to those who cross international borders, thereby ignoring that the majority of those displaced by climate-related events will remain within their home nations; and, perhaps most significantly, reasons for migration can rarely if ever be reduced to a single cause like a changing climate<sup>12</sup>. As the IPCC puts it, “most migration and climate studies point to the environment as triggers and not causes for migration decisions”<sup>13</sup>. In other words, climate change “reinforces” “mass human migration” rather than causing it<sup>14</sup>. Upon closer analysis, the notion of the climate refugee lacks analytical rigor.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, “Displaced on the frontlines of the climate emergency,” *UNHCR*, 2021, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/065d18218b654c798ae9f360a626d903>

<sup>7</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Ecological Threat Register Press Release,” 9 September 2020, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ecological-Threat-Register-Press-Release-27.08-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Oli Brown, *Migration and Climate Change* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Collectif Argos, *Climate Refugees* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>10</sup> IPCC. *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 771.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *Migration and Climate Change*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Migration and Climate Change*; Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini, “Introduction: Life Adrift,” in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 1–21.

<sup>13</sup> IPCC, *Climate Change*, 771.

<sup>14</sup> Boas et. al, “Climate migration,” 902.

Although these critiques should be recognized, the fact remains that today the changing climate is one issue among many pushing some individuals and communities to migrate. Even the IPCC notes that “a survey of 86 case studies of community relocations in Pacific Islands...found that environmental variability and natural hazards accounted for 37 communities relocating”<sup>15</sup>. Historically, this is rather unsurprising given that environmental change has frequently provoked migrations. For instance, the US Dust Bowl caused the movement of millions in the first half of the twentieth century<sup>16</sup>, and the arrival to Ireland in the 1840s of the potato mold, *phytophthora infestans* (commonly known as potato blight), devastated the Irish agricultural economy leading to the emigration of nearly 1 million Irish (about 12 percent of the national population)<sup>17</sup>. That the climate crisis will lead to millions migrating, then, is not a particularly notable revelation since environmental change has been a common historical trigger for human migration.

So how do we resolve the tension between the real fact of environmentally-induced migration and the already identified problems of conceptualizing the climate refugee? As Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini argue, this tension can be resolved by understanding “the *relations between climate change and human migration*... as a relation of power rather than as a hard fact awaiting to be discovered, or an empirically observable phenomenon”<sup>18</sup>. In other words, the climate refugee – though it should be noted that Baldwin and Bettini oppose the use of this term – is not a “natural” consequence of climate change but is instead a consequence of the inability of national and international political bodies to adequately respond to the shifting needs of their communities in the era of climate change. Again, this is not new. The Irish potato famine was not a natural disaster but was a consequence of multiple political and economic decisions made principally (but not exclusively) by the British empire, leading some to claim that the event was an example of genocide<sup>19</sup>. Even identified cases of climate refugees like those from New Orleans displaced by Hurricane Katrina are not so clear given that it is now widely acknowledged that this displacement was more precisely generated by the political failures of the New Orleans municipal government and the Louisiana state government to update and maintain flood infrastructure, in addition to the federal government failing to provide adequate support for those desiring to return<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the climate refugee is a product of intersecting economic, political, and environmental crises.

So, does this mean that the concept of the “climate refugee” is useless? That, since the climate refugee is more precisely a consequence of political decisions with respect to the environment and migration, the notion should be eliminated due to its misleading nature? For instance, it would be misleading to call mid-nineteenth-century Irish emigrants “environmental refugees” since

<sup>15</sup> IPCC, *Climate Change*, 1625.

<sup>16</sup> David Theo Goldberg, “Parting Waters: Seas of Movement,” in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 99.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Mulhall, “Black 47: Ireland’s Great Famine and its after-effects.” *Embassy of Ireland, USA*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.dfa.ie/irish-embassy/usa/about-us/ambassador/ambassadors-blog/black47irelandsgreatfamineanditsafter-effects>

<sup>18</sup> Baldwin and Bettini, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>19</sup> This is a popular nationalist argument dating back to John Mitchel and most recently outlined by Tim Pat Coogan. This thesis has been critiqued by scholars like Mark McGowan. Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot: England’s Role in Ireland’s Greatest Tragedy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Dublin, Ireland: R & T Washbourne, 1882); Mark McGowan, “The Famine Plot Revisited: A Reassessment of the Great Irish Famine as Genocide,” *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 87-104.

<sup>20</sup> John Arena, *Driven From New Orleans: how nonprofits betray public housing and promote privatization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Johnson, Cedric (ed), *The Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Carol McMichael Reese, Michael Sorkin, and Anthony Fontenot (eds), *New Orleans Under Reconstruction: The Crisis in Planning* (New York: Verso, 2014); Maxwell Woods, “Imagining the Anthropocenic City: The New Face of Urban Renewal in New Orleans and Josh Neufeld’s A.D.: *New Orleans After the Deluge*,” *Literary Geographies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 84-102.



British imperial policy produced the potato famine; the Irish were displaced by colonialism, not by the environment. Similarly, displacement by Hurricane Katrina was a consequence of conscious political decisions, not climate change<sup>21</sup>.

I recommend that the concept of the climate refugee maintains its utility when we refocus on how climate change is undermining the stability of national territory. As Simon Dalby argues, "Global environmental change now challenges the principles of territorial stability... with long-term implications for how geopolitics will play out"<sup>22</sup>. Dating back to Hannah Arendt's comments on Statelessness, it has been acknowledged that political life is dependent on one's belonging to a settled national territory<sup>23</sup>. Following David Montecino, the concept of national belonging assumes "the characterization of human groups according to the territory that they inhabit, without considering their mobilities and interchanges"<sup>24</sup>. All this points to how climate change challenges the very basis of national sovereignty by transforming the environmental integrity of a territory. As Dalby puts it, the question posed by the migration/climate change nexus is the following, "How does the international system, premised on a precise and fixed cartography deal with the fact that anthropogenic climate change is rendering that fixed cartography something at best temporary?"<sup>25</sup> If recognition of political status requires that one is identifiable to a national territory, what happens to those migrants whose national territory no longer exists as such due to environmental change? Turning to Giorgio Agamben's analysis of refugee status – "refugees ... represent such a disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-state... because by breaking the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*, they put the originary fiction of modern sovereignty in crisis"<sup>26</sup> – we can justify the notion of climate refugee to the extent that climate change puts "the order of the modern nation-state" in crisis by destabilizing the national territory<sup>27</sup>. In other words, the climate refugee is a product of the inability of the nation-State political system to adequately respond to climate change; the climate refugee is the "disquieting element in the order of the modern nation-State" during the era of global climate change.

This is perhaps why climate refugees have been represented in Hollywood as desperate, fleeing masses with little to no agency or identity of their own. As Andrew Baldwin notes, this is put on display in the climate apocalypse films of *The Day After Tomorrow* and *The Road*, wherein climate refugees are reduced to uprooted and deterritorialized populations with no other options<sup>28</sup>. This can be additionally seen in the movie, *mother!*, where refugees are represented as destabilizing the ecosystem of the "mother" (i.e., Mother Earth), which is metaphorically represented as her (upper-middle-class) country house. In each of these instances, climate refugees are outside the pale of politics: they are fleeing desperate masses reduced to instinctual reactions to stimuli (i.e., climate-related events) whose only options are seeking refuge in and thereby destabilizing another

<sup>21</sup> Woods, "Imagining."

<sup>22</sup> Simon Dalby, "On 'Not Being Persecuted': Territory, Security, Climate," in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 44.

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1962).

<sup>24</sup> David Montecino Vieira, "De la proliferación de las fronteras: la problemática de analizar literatura intercultural en el contexto de la alta globalización," in *Literatura de migración en las américas: afectividades, fronteras, corpografías*, edited by Tatiana Calderón Le Joliff and Carlos Rojas Sanristoful (Creative Commons), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Dalby, "On 'Not Being Persecuted,'" 46.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 131.

<sup>27</sup> To clarify, Agamben does not use the term "climate refugee"; he is speaking about political refugees. I am putting Agamben's discussion of refugees into dialogue with discussions of climate change and human mobilities.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Baldwin, "Rearranging Desire: On Whiteness and Heteronormativity," in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 211-226.

territory. Within the popular imagination of the Global North, the climate refugee often holds no political agency and has no potential to do so. Baldwin's analysis calls on us to imagine alternative cultural-political imaginaries of the climate refugee beyond Hollywood apocalypticism<sup>29</sup>.

The point of this introductory section has been primarily to outline the already existing debates on the notion of the climate refugee and the problems therein. Accepting the critiques of the concept, I suggest redefining it through an appeal to Agamben's recognition that the refugee is a challenge to the order of the modern nation-State. Recognizing that climate change is altering the very foundation of the nation-State (i.e., the national territory), the notion of the climate refugee serves to identify not so much those who are displaced by climate-related events—migration can rarely if ever be reduced to a single cause—but rather the human consequence of the erosion of the territorial foundation of Westphalian sovereignty. "Climate refugee" is therefore the signifier used to identify the following question: What does political belonging mean when climate change no longer permits the existence of stable national territories?

This is, of course, not a question unique to climate migrants. Jacques Derrida's theorization of hospitality, for instance, already demonstrates this issue when he notes how the "foreigner" is perceived as a threat to national authority, and the granting of "hospitality" to the foreigner ironically reinforces that authority insofar as such hospitality still nonetheless centers the sovereign's power of granting hospitable welcome<sup>30</sup>. As Claire Colebrook notes, for instance, Barack Obama's granting of refuge to Syrians as an "American" act "sustains the notion of a homeland that may open itself to unfortunate others and yet all the while (ideally) remain the same"<sup>31</sup>. Yet some have now been asking what hospitality looks like in the era of climate change when "the notion of a homeland" no longer has any stable existence<sup>32</sup>. That is, the problematization of hospitality during a global-scale environmental crisis points towards new notions of political being that no longer rely on the distinction between migrant/native. What is political existence when the notion of a stable territory—and with it, stable national citizenship—has been undermined? When we all become, in some sense, climate refugees? Climate change requires that we rethink political community and political agency beyond the limits of the nation-State, and we can assign the signifier, 'climate refugee,' to the figure representing this political crisis. In the following sections, I recommend that an analysis of Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels provides an innovative response to this problematic by imagining a new political agency founded on the climate refugee.

<sup>29</sup> This is not even new. H. Bruce Franklin noted decades ago that J.G. Ballard's environmental apocalypticism was in fact fear over the effects of decolonization and the collapse of the British Empire. The climate refugee as racial other has a long literary genealogy. H. Bruce Franklin, "What Are We to Make of J.G. Ballard's Apocalypse?" *JGBallard*, [https://www.jgballard.ca/criticism/ballard\\_apocalypse\\_1979.html](https://www.jgballard.ca/criticism/ballard_apocalypse_1979.html).

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, translated by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Claire Colebrook, "Transcendental Migration: Taking Refuge from Climate Change," in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Nigel Clark, "Strangers on a Planet: On Hospitality and Holocene Climate Change," in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 131-149; Maxwell Woods, "Hospitality, or a Critique of Un/inhabitability," *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 2 (2019): 202-222.

## Neoliberalism, the climate refugee, and Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) have been described as a powerful example of climate fiction insofar as they describe a dystopian society ravaged by environmental degradation. Set in the near-future west coast of the United States, the novels speak of a world in which crime, massive social inequality, waves of migrants, and political, social, and economic instability are the norm. Within this setting, the novels follow the life of Lauren Olamina as she grows up initially in a middle-class gated community, is displaced when her neighborhood is invaded by crazed civilians, starts a new religious movement called Earthseed (more on this in the next section), migrates as an internal refugee along the west coast, and attempts to survive the neofascist government that takes control of the United States and persecutes those who do not live up to their definition of a morally upstanding Christian life (e.g., those who participate in so-called 'heathen cults' like Earthseed).

In the context of the novels, climate change is a constant background element that is one more cause of the near-future dystopian reality. As Lauren's daughter and the narrator in the second novel, *Parable of the Talents*, describes social existence after a new equilibrium has been found in the wake of the initial sociopolitical collapse,

I have read that the period of upheaval that journalists have begun to refer to as "the Apocalypse" or more commonly, more bitterly, "the Pox" lasted from 2015 through 2030... This is untrue. The Pox has been a much longer torment... I have also read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climatic, economic, and sociological crises. It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises<sup>33</sup>.

Here, the narrator makes clear that the dystopian future cannot be reduced to the unique cause of climate change. Mirroring the research cited in the previous section, she is well aware that any such "torment" is a consequence of a concatenation of issues. For example, Lauren becomes a refugee because of an attack by civilians on her middle-class neighborhood, the inability of the US government to respond to such displacements, and, eventually, persecution by a neofascist government. If the *Parable* novels have been identified as climate fiction *par excellence*, the dystopian future described in the novel cannot be ascribed uniquely to human-induced environmental alteration.

That said, climate change plays a significant role in the social collapse described in the novels, even serving as a broader metaphor for the transformation of the world, "But things have changed

<sup>33</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1998), 13-14.

a lot, and they'll change more...People have changed the climate of the world"<sup>34</sup>. Turbulence of all forms –social, political, economic, and so on– is the new norm of the world, and climate change is one more element of this new order. In the novels, the changing environment presents a threat to sociopolitical stability even in more privileged communities like the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Olivar,

Olivar is a lot richer than we are, but since it's a coastal city, its taxes are higher, and since some of its land is unstable, it has extra problems. Parts of it sometimes crumble into the ocean, undercut or deeply saturated by salt water. Sea level keeps rising with the warming climate and there is the occasional earthquake...it can't protect itself from the encroaching sea, the crumbling earth, the crumbling economy, or the desperate refugees<sup>35</sup>.

Like “desperate refugees” and a “crumbling economy,” territorial instability and rising sea levels are seen as a social threat. My heretofore discussion of ‘social collapse’ in the *Parable* novels refers specifically to a crisis –Olivar needs to “protect itself” and has “extra problems”– generated by social, economic, territorial, and environmental turbulence. Even Lauren's explicitly political-economic displacement can be linked to the changing environment insofar as a lack of access to basic necessities like water has strained socioeconomic structures to such a point that organized civilian groups are willing to invade gated middle-class communities to access them; the novel's dystopian society is a consequence of the inseparable intersection of political, economic, social, and environmental turbulence.

As such, the *Parable* novels are marked by the constant presence of migrants seeking an environmentally stable territory, a stability that is associated with an escape from economic, political, and social turbulence. For instance, we see innumerable migrants from California traveling north on foot to Washington, Oregon, Canada, or Alaska and described as an “ever-flowing river of people moving north”<sup>36</sup>. This reconfiguration of human mobilities –the movement of people from California to Oregon or Canada is now a primary migratory highway– provokes an increased protection of borders, with migrants “shot every day trying to sneak into Canada”<sup>37</sup> and “hostile guards” in Washington and Oregon protecting “state lines”<sup>38</sup>, a hardening of internal US borders that previously did not exist. The imagined geopolitical reconstitution generated by climate change is one in which formerly politically, economically, and environmentally stable territories (e.g., California) are now the source of migrants who are perceived as a threat to the territories that maintain stability and integrity under climate change.

Perhaps more notable, however, is the neoliberal redefinition of the State in *Parable of the Sower*<sup>39</sup>. To (over-)simplify, neoliberalism can be defined as the post-Fordist redistribution of

<sup>34</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019), 57.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, *Sower*, 118-119.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Rarely discussed, the end of the *Parable of the Talents* witnesses the return of national sovereignty and the stability of the nation-State system, even if the individual nations themselves have been drastically altered. Additionally, early in *Parable of the Talents* we witness a necropolitical definition of sovereignty, in which migrants are treated as disposable life, just as Achille Mbembe notes that

certain powers that had been claimed by the national State during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into the hands of capitalists<sup>40</sup>. In this sense, neoliberalism is “a state-led project of social engineering that seeks to reformulate the institutional forms of state-society relations”<sup>41</sup> in such a way that favors capital. If the State is a “social relation”<sup>42</sup> defined by “the exercise and effects of *state power* as a contingent expression of a changing balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through, and against the state system”<sup>43</sup>, then neoliberalization is the process whereby capitalists take hold of the national State and claim its accumulated powers. In this way, many of the defining features of neoliberalism –deregulation, the multinationalization of corporate structures, globalization, the financialization of the economy, and so on– are in fact symptoms of this structural process of redistributing State powers<sup>44</sup>.

In *Parable of the Sower*, neoliberalization is seen with the redistribution of certain State powers into the hands of the multinational corporation, KSF<sup>45</sup>. Faced with environmental and economic crisis, the upper-middle-class town of Olivar makes the following agreement:

the voters and the officials of Olivar permitted their town to be taken over, bought out, privatized. KSF will expand the desalination plant to vast size... [With] Olivar, [KSF] gets an eager, educated work force, people a few years older than I am whose options are very limited...[KSF] have long-term plans, and the people of Olivar have decided to become part of them—to accept smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific<sup>46</sup>.

In the face of perceived intertwined political, economic, and environmental crises, democratic municipal politics is exchanged for corporate control in order to guarantee economic stability and political security. Such an agreement was made possible by the legislation of US President Donner, who “has a plan for putting people back to work. He hopes to get laws changed, suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board”<sup>47</sup>. Neoliberalization is not a consequence of the environmental crisis, and the environmental crisis is not a consequence of neoliberalism; instead, both are intertwined.

the enslaved African had become disposable life for the slaveowner. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>40</sup> Maxwell Woods, *On the Chilean Social Explosion* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>41</sup> Marcus Taylor, *From Pinochet to the ‘Third Way’: Neoliberalism and Social Transformation in Chile* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Jessop, *The State*, 53.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> I do not engage a deeper theory of the State (and especially the neoliberal State) and the question of sovereignty because I have done so elsewhere (Woods, *On the Chilean Social Explosion*). For those interested in my thinking on the matter, they should turn to this other work.

<sup>45</sup> The connection between the *Parable* novels and their historical context of US neoliberalization starting with Ronald Reagan has been extensively discussed elsewhere. Stacey Balkan, “Inhabiting the Chthulucene: Forging Tentacular Intimacies at the End of the World,” *ISLE* 26, no. 4 (2019): 846; Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making through Science Fiction and Activism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Butler, *Sower*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> This has also been noted by Jim Miller. Although Miller’s analysis was helpful in the development of this article (hence my citation), I do not engage his work more explicitly in the body because I am implicitly critiquing his argument that, “In the world of multinational capitalism, Butler is telling us, national boundaries are meaningless” (Jim Miller, “Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler’s Dystopian/ Utopian Vision,” *Science Fiction Studies* 25, no. 2 (1998): 354). Multinational capitalism does not eliminate national boundaries, but instead uses them to their advantage (Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (New York: Verso, 2016). Butler, *Sower*, 27.

Effectively, the event of Olivar's receding coastline is conceptually transformed into a crisis which can only be resolved, according to President Donner, through neoliberalization. As Derrida argues, a crisis serves "to determine, so as to limit it, a serious and more formless threat... By determining it as crisis, one tames it, domesticates it, neutralizes it –in short, one economizes it"<sup>48</sup>. In other words, by identifying an event as a crisis, one accepts a brief moment of turbulence in order to guarantee control and stability in the future<sup>49</sup>. In the *Parable of the Sower*, neoliberalization depends on this logic of crisis, in which the current moment is redefined as turbulent in order to justify the neoliberal mode of organizing social relations as the only manner of providing future stability.

With this neoliberalization of the US sociopolitical landscape in Butler's post-climate-change future, we also witness the redefinition of the citizen. Olivar is seen as attractive for KSF because of its "eager, educated work force" that is willing to sacrifice its professional and upper-middle-class status, "Anyone KSF hired would have a hard time living on the salary offered. In not very much time, I think the new hires would be in debt to the company. That's an old company-town trick –get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery"<sup>50</sup>. The worker is transformed into a debt and productivity asset. Yet the difference from old company towns, Lauren continues, is that individuals will "[fight] like hell to get taken in and underpaid by the company"<sup>51</sup>. In other words, rather than the relations of production offered by KSF generating a collective subject like Marx's proletariat, the world of *Parable of the Sower* depicts the hyper-individualization of the workforce in which the citizen is now reconceptualized by the State in terms of their productivity and debt in relation to multinational corporations.

As Wendy Brown has noted, this redefinition of citizenship and migration is an effect of neoliberalization. Under neoliberalism, she argues, "the human is reduced to a bundle of credit-seeking assets... those without such assets take shape as a problem organized and represented by financial coordinates (credit, debt, default, currency and bond ratings)"<sup>52</sup>. *The Parable of the Sower* takes this argument to its logical extreme. The citizen as the individual with certain guaranteed rights and protections under a nation-State is effectively eviscerated, meaning that all individuals are in the process of being converted into what previously was categorized as the migrant and redefined as a threat or benefit to the credit rating of the reconstituted neoliberal State. In other words, the figure of the climate refugee points towards a redefinition of the citizen: the citizen converted into a desperate migrant (e.g., rising sea levels represented as an environmental crisis undermine the stability of the national territory) is granted security and stability based on the debt and productivity assets they offer. Climate change is conceptually converted into a climate crisis in order to strip citizens of rights and transform them into assets. In the *Parable of the Sower*, the neoliberal assetization of humanity under climate change is the process whereby citizens are broadly transformed into climate refugees. For instance, the citizens of Olivar are effectively transformed into climate refugees without even moving from their homes.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, translated and edited by E. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>49</sup> Maxwell Woods, "Punk urbanism: insurgency, crisis, and cultural geography," *Social & Cultural Geography* 22, no. 5 (2021): 666-685.

<sup>50</sup> Butler, *Sower*, 121.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>52</sup> Wendy Brown, "Climate Change, Democracy and Crises of Humanism," in *Life Adrift: Climate Change, Migration, Critique*, edited by Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 35.

This process whereby an event (e.g., rising sea levels) is transformed into a crisis that can only be resolved via massive political-economic reform (e.g., Olivar's agreement with KSF supported by President Donner) is by now a widely acknowledged phenomenon commonly identified using Naomi Klein's term, "the shock doctrine"<sup>53</sup>. This can be seen, for instance, in the neoliberal redesign of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina; the supposed "Hurricane-caused destruction" of public housing and the 'emergency political measures' necessary to rebuild the city (i.e., neoliberalization) were in fact political programs that had been designed years earlier—the city had been wanting to tear down public housing for decades (and the actual destruction to the housing by the hurricane was minimal) and the neoliberalization of the city had been on the docket as well<sup>54</sup>. This is not even new to the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. In the nineteenth century, the arrival of potato blight to Ireland was transformed into a famine due to the British empire and other actors' political failures, and the unique 'solution' to the famine offered by the British empire was the transformation of Ireland's traditional agricultural economy along capitalist lines<sup>55</sup>. What Octavia Butler's novels imply is that climate change is being conceptually converted into a climate crisis so that citizens can be converted into asset-wielding free workers; in *Parable of the Sower*, the climate refugee is imagined as the new norm for human subjectivity<sup>56</sup>.

## Climate mobility alternatives

If climate change is not inherently a climate crisis but has to be conceptually transformed into one—a crisis that can only be resolved via neoliberalization and the general transformation of citizens into climate refugees—then what other viable non-crisis conceptualizations of climate change exist? What other response is there beyond neoliberalization? To the dystopian neoliberal future of climate refugees struggling to find some semblance of stability in company towns, Octavia Butler offers an alternative: Earthseed. Earthseed is a syncretic new religious movement that responds to the near-future neoliberal moment in which the United States finds itself. One of the primary beliefs of the movement is, "All that you touch / You change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God Is Change"<sup>57</sup>. In this way, rising sea levels and climate change are not seen as an environmental crisis, but rather as manifestations of "the only lasting truth": change. What is left up to the human is to productively intervene in this change, "A victim of God [who is Change] may, / Through learning adaption, / Become a partner of God, / A victim of God may, / through forethought and planning, / Become a shaper of God"<sup>58</sup>. The turbulence of climate change is not a crisis to be resolved via neoliberalization; instead, it is a basic reality of life to which we must adapt.

<sup>53</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> *Arena, Driven*; Johnson, *Neoliberal*.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Rubenstein, *Public Works: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>56</sup> This critique of representations of "climate-induced migration" as "a future crisis" is also discussed by Bettini, "Climate Barbarians." The idea that the climate refugee is the new norm is (much more precisely and elegantly) reflected in Boas et. al., "Climate migration," 902, who critique the concept of "climate refugee" as it is colloquially used, "new research... should examine and address 'climate mobilities' as the new normal rather than the exception.. Instead of asking whether climate change causes human mobility, research should focus on whether and if so how climate change will alter existing interconnections and human mobility patterns under different scenarios of global warming and mitigation and adaptation politics, and how these are in turn shaped by existing mobilities." I am arguing that Octavia Butler develops a representational paradigm to do just this.

<sup>57</sup> Butler, *Sower*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

I am recommending that Butler offers a new form of coordinating human life based on turbulence. Those at Olivar had accepted KSF's offer because they sought guarantees and security; Earthseed, to the contrary, eschews such notions and bases its social vision on turbulence itself – guarantees and security are impossible to achieve, so it makes no sense to accept offers like those of KSF. In other words, Earthseed integrates profoundly the idea that stable national belonging is by no means 'natural,' but in fact is "the outcome of a violent expulsion of the migratory movements that are its original *and* ongoing condition"<sup>59</sup>. As Colebrook argues, the nation is the attempt to "transform a world of movement to a world of fixity"<sup>60</sup>, whereas in reality, "Climate change and migration are the way of the world, the very conditions of life"<sup>61</sup>. The neoliberal dystopia of KSF is only possible upon accepting the notion of the stability of national territorial belonging as natural; Earthseed, on the other hand, moves towards a new dynamic mode of being on an always changing earth. Earthseed interrogates how social relations are organized once we are separated from the environmental basis of the nation (i.e., the fixed and stable territory).

So what, concretely, is this new mode of organizing social relations? After migrating from her southern California home, Lauren moves north and starts a new small agriculture-based community, Acorn, founded on Earthseed beliefs. As Thelma Shinn Richard argues, this community troubles traditional lines of kinship: the "citizens" of Acorn are multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual.<sup>62</sup> Even the family units living at Acorn eschew traditional kinship lines, with biological lines of allegiance frequently breaking down and adoption later in a child's life being common. Furthermore, I put 'citizen' in quotes because the community challenges even this concept, with people being free to join and leave as they please; national belonging does not characterize Acorn's social formation. Typical of this community is the case of Jorge Cho, who is described upon arriving to Acorn by Lauren, "He and his sister and brother, three Korean kids in a poor neighborhood of Mexican and Central American refugees, managed to survive, but they had no time to learn nonessentials. Now we're teaching them to read, write, and speak English because that will enable them to communicate with more people"<sup>63</sup>. Overcoming strict distinctions between race, nationality, and biological family, Acorn presents an alternative mode of community building based on the lives of refugees like Jorge Cho and his siblings.

This is not to say that Butler is naive with respect to such symbiotic coexistence. Much of her work is dedicated to exploring the relations of power that emerge with respect to differences based on species, gender, race, and nationality<sup>64</sup>. The task at hand, however, is to transform relations marked by difference from one of hierarchy to one of "symbiosis"<sup>65</sup>, with symbiosis defined as the mutually beneficial harmonious cooperation between two or more entities defined in terms of their difference (whether it be different species, race, nation, and so on). As is stated in the Earthseed sacred text:

<sup>59</sup> Colebrook, "Transcendental," 119.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>62</sup> Thelma Shinn Richard, "Defining Kindred: Octavia Butler's Postcolonial Perspective," *Obsidian* III 6/7, no. 1/2 (2005): 118-134.

<sup>63</sup> Butler, *Talents*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Zakiyyah Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> Shinn Richard, "Defining," 123.



Partnership is giving, taking, learning, teaching, offering the greatest possible benefit while doing the least possible harm. Partnership is mutualistic symbiosis... / Partner one another. Partner diverse communities. Partner life. Partner any world that is your home. Partner God. Only in partnership can we thrive, grow, Change. Only in partnership can we live<sup>66</sup>.

Partnering beyond allegiances of gender, race, class, nationality, and biological family and living in symbiosis with the Earth is the imagined utopia of the *Parable* novels. Earthseed's symbiosis as embodied at Acorn envisions a social existence founded on the experience of climate refugees.

Butler's final socio-political configuration, then, is one of a decentralized set of autonomous agricultural communities like Acorn living in dynamic symbiosis with their local environment, "Earthseed is about preparing to fulfill the Destiny. It's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment. It's about treating education and adaptability as the absolute essentials that they are"<sup>67</sup>. Communal belonging is now much smaller in scale (i.e., no longer a national imagined community), ecologically minded, autonomous, plurinational, interracial, and responsive to the changes in one's immediate ecosystem. Furthermore, the drive towards capital accumulation is eschewed in favor of the proliferation of life. Butler's imagined future is one of a decentralized system of small-scale communities living in symbiotic relation with their local and always changing environments.

Additionally, the Earthseed community is based on migration. If turbulence is the state of the world, then the changing of place is also the norm. Butler takes this to its logical extreme by calling for interstellar colonization, "Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths. The universe is Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars"<sup>68</sup>. Migration is doubly redefined. First, the previous common binary, in which migration is the contrary of national citizen, is eliminated. Instead, differentiation in human political existence is found in the articulation of change in general and migration in particular; the question is not *if* one is a migrant –as stated earlier, the *Parable* society is one in which the climate refugee becomes a general condition– but rather how one navigates being a migrant. Second, migration is now seen as the proliferation and extension of life. To migrate is not to assimilate into an already existing socio-environmental structure, but rather to lay one's roots down in a new space, one that is always already under change. The question of environmental ethics, therefore, is reframed as the value of one's intervention in a socio-ecological structure (i.e., the particular way in which one shapes change) rather than the preservation of an existing socio-ecological structure.

Earthseed reconceives political and ecological belonging. Socio-political existence is now based on intermixing and non-national community building, rather than the security and guarantees of the nation or neoliberal company town. Ecological belonging is based on the proliferation of

<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Talents*, 125.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>68</sup> Butler, *Sower*, 77.

life forms in new habitats and the ethical shaping of environmental change. In short, Earthseed's citizens, if we can even use that term in a meaningful way anymore, are climate refugees, and the new socio-ecological structuration of the world is one in which migration, communal flexibility and openness, and climate change (but not climate crisis) are the basis of existence.

## From critique to complicity

For this reason, Octavia Butler's vision in the *Parable* novels has frequently been perceived as offering a desirable and just vision for restructuring society in response to climate change<sup>69</sup>. If climate change is to upend current forms of national political existence and reorient human mobilities, then how can this be accomplished in a manner distinct from the neoliberal shock doctrine? Through *Earthseed*, Butler seems to offer a viable response. Nonetheless, little has been discussed in terms of how the novels are additionally (self-consciously) complicit in the very political-economic structures they ostensibly protest.

Take, for instance, *Earthseed*'s focus on environmental change as "The only lasting truth." As Frédéric Neyrat (2019) notes, "the axiom of the paradigm of turbulence," which can be defined as, "Nothing is ontologically anchored; nothing is definitively stable; nothing is assumed apriori," emerges as a powerful tenet in the late twentieth century following the transformation of global currency exchange into a "floating" system in which, "the rate of exchange would be determined by the state of market fluctuations"<sup>70</sup>. This eventually led to the end of the Bretton Woods agreement in the 1970s and, with it, the popularization of ecological thinking structured around turbulence and resilience<sup>71</sup>. As Neyrat's analysis implies, the rise of turbulence-based ecology is coterminous with neoliberalization, given that free-floating exchange was one of the necessary material foundations of the global hegemony of neoliberalism<sup>72</sup>. In this sense, *Earthseed* is functionally a neoliberal religion.

Developing Neyrat's thinking, what *Earthseed* is missing is a critical distance from the turbulence of neoliberalism: its practitioners "adapt themselves for survival without ever being able to question the fact that the turbulence of which they are victims was perhaps knowingly constructed"<sup>73</sup>. Butler's thinking oscillates between responding to Neyrat and being a perfect target of critique. On the one hand, by *Earthseed* stating that change is the "only lasting truth," the religious movement transforms the political-economic project of neoliberalism into an ontological and metaphysical truth. *Earthseed* effectively reifies neoliberalism. On the other hand, we can see *Earthseed* as perceiving how the end of the prominence of the nation-State as the hegemonic political formation is itself an opportunity to reorient our political-ecological imagination. In this view, the perception of ecological turbulence is not the consequence of neoliberalism, but rather neoliberalism is one possible response to the reality of ecological turbulence.

<sup>69</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, "To Get Ready for Climate Change, Read Octavia Butler," *ElectraStreet*, November 2017, <https://electrastreet.net/2017/11/to-get-ready-for-climate-change-read-octavia-butler/>; Janet Fiskio, *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice: Poetics of Dissent and Repair* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>70</sup> Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, translated by Drew S. Burk (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 71-3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>72</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Neyrat, *Unconstructable*, 82.

This critique is further complicated by extending the perception of turbulence back in time as a consequence of shifting our perspective to Black life in what is today called the United States. As Paul Gilroy was already showing in *The Black Atlantic*, turbulence has been the reality of Black existence since the opening of the Middle Passage with the transatlantic slave trade<sup>74</sup>. As others argue, the turbulence witnessed in Butler's *Parable* novels is not only a reflection of neoliberalism, but also of Black diasporic thought dating back centuries<sup>75</sup>. Although the current hegemonic discussion of turbulence is a consequence of neoliberalism, some subaltern turbulent epistemologies predate neoliberalization. Yes, the hegemonic discourse of resilience and turbulence is a neoliberal ideology, but not all philosophies of turbulence are equivalent.

Nonetheless, the *Parable* novels self-consciously recognize this tension between supporting and critiquing neoliberalism and colonialism. For instance, it can be argued that especially the second novel engages the US ideology of Manifest Destiny, in which US citizens have divine providence to colonially expand their settlement. In *The Parable of the Talents*, Lauren focuses on the necessity of "the Destiny" and its relationship to interstellar migration, "We need the stars... We need purpose! We need the image the Destiny gives us of ourselves as a growing, purposeful species. We need to become the adult species that the Destiny can help us become!"<sup>76</sup> How this "Destiny" is distinct from US Manifest Destiny to colonially expand into what is today known as the western United States is never made clear. Indeed, the elimination of the western frontier, and with it the material basis of Manifest Destiny, was similarly perceived as a social crisis of the elimination of the US *raison d'être*, as expressed in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893); Lauren's preoccupation with losing a sense of "purpose" as a result of losing a direction in which "we" can expand has colonial precedent in the USA. Moreover, the USA eventually revived the ideology of Manifest Destiny by replacing westward expansion with *space-travel* expansion<sup>77</sup>. In effect, Lauren is participating in the reproduction of US imperialism through her discussion of "the Destiny" of expanding into the stars.

This link to imperialism is made explicit in the epilogue of the second novel when the ship that finally takes flight to the stars is named *Christopher Columbus*. Lauren dissents, trying to distinguish Earthseed from colonialism, "I object to the name. The ship is not about a shortcut to riches and empire. It's not about snatching up slaves and gold and presenting them to some European monarch... The name is nothing"<sup>78</sup>. This is, in some sense, the tension that lies at the heart of the *Parable* novels: To what extent is the God of Change an ideology of neoliberalism, and to what extent is it a rejoinder to neoliberalism? To what extent is the Earthseed community overcoming national, linguistic, and racial allegiances, and to what extent is it a reproduction of US imperialism? Although Butler tries to respond to the new flows of climate migration by imagining Earthseed as an alternative to the dominant response (i.e., neoliberalism), this distinction is never entirely clear with Earthseed often participating in the ideologies upholding US imperialism and neoliberalism.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: London, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> Fiskio, *Climate Change*; Kevin Modestino, "Octavia Butler's *Parable* Novels and Genealogies of African American Environmental Literature," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>76</sup> Butler, *Talents*, 163.

<sup>77</sup> Linda Billings, "Frontier days in space: are they over?," *Space Policy* 13, no. 3 (1997): 187-190.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Talents*, 363.

Butler was well aware of this conundrum. As has been repeatedly noted by others, Butler wanted to write more *Parable* novels in which she would describe life on extraterrestrial planets. Yet, as Shelley Streeby notes, Butler continued to come up against the problem of colonization. What would distinguish this extraterrestrial migration from the originary act of colonization? As Streeby concludes, “intellectual, practical, and ethical questions about colonization and the difficulties of creating a truly mutualistic symbiosis between people from Earth and other worlds seemingly prevented Butler from finishing a story in which Earthseed refugees successfully spread throughout the galaxies”<sup>79</sup>. Is Earthseed an embrace of migration and its flourishing of life, or is it a reproduction of US colonialism and Manifest Destiny? Butler is attentive to how her utopian imaginary cannot be neatly separated from US imperial ideology; the triumph of Earthseed would not mean the end of neoliberal and imperial thought. Butler finds herself in this struggle between imagining a post-nationalist, post-colonial, post-capitalist, and migratory future, and the recognition that this utopian imagination is frequently a reproduction of the very imaginaries that she wishes to evade.

## Conclusion

It has been recommended via a rephrasing of Giorgio Agamben that the *climate refugee* is “the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today... the forms and limits of a coming political community”<sup>80</sup>. As argued in the first section, there are multiple issues with this argument given that the very conceptual clarity of “climate refugee” is questionable. For instance, it ignores the specificity of the *political* nature of “refugee” and it is impossible to reduce migration to a single environmental cause. Nonetheless, I have used the concept in this article (perhaps idiosyncratically) because climate change challenges the very basis of national existence—i.e., the stable and fixed national territory—and the climate refugee can be imagined as the subject that emerges in the wake of the destabilization of the nation-State system. The climate refugee is not the figure who is exclusively displaced by climate-related events, but rather the figure that emerges as a result of the kaleidoscopic crises formed at the intersection of climate change, the modern nation-State order, and neoliberal political economics.

I have argued that Octavia Butler particularly attempts to imagine a new politics of the migrant formed at the intersection of neoliberalism, the crisis of the nation-State, and climate change. Earthseed becomes a means to reimagine the climate refugee not as a threat to national security, but rather as the potential for a new mode of political belonging in the era of climate change. Nonetheless, I concluded, we are left with the lingering question of whether such a migratory politics is in fact a symptom of the neoliberal and imperial restructuring of the world. Butler finds her thinking trapped between utopian escaping from neoliberalism and complicity in that very neoliberalism.

<sup>79</sup> Streeby, *Imagining*, 83.

<sup>80</sup> Agamben, *Homer Sacer*, 16; Woods, “Hospitality.”

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