

## In the Not-So-Distant Future — a microreview | Nicholas Godoy

...Will we finally be free from political and social upheaval, or will we let it consume the country as a whole until all that is left are the straggling remnants of human civilization?

Octavia Butler presents to the world a strikingly prophetic vision answering just that question: When the world has succumbed to the ravages of climactic disasters, economic decline, and societal breakdown, who will be left standing among the rubble and decay of the old world? The answer may not be as surprising as you might think, yet it is the response to that answer that Butler elucidates the cure-all for a collapsed society.

Published in 1993, the novel's speculative and dystopian depiction of America may feel uncomfortably relevant in today's climate. This feeling can be further exacerbated by the alarming fact that the story's futuristic dystopia begins in the year 2024, a year once thought to be just beyond the reach of our scientific imagination, yet the reality feels much closer to home than most people would like to realize. Taking place in a decaying California, *Parable of the Sower* explores a society that has collapsed under the weight of extreme wealth inequality, environmental destruction, and societal upheaval, forcing individuals to resort to drastic measures for survival. At its essence, the narrative reflects Butler's sharp social critique and deep insight into human responses to crises, serving as a serious warning about the repercussions of disregarding social, economic, and ecological justice.

Butler envisions a fragmented America: One that has allowed the fortunate few to rise to an otherworldly elite status, while the majority of America must dwell within shambled, walled communities on the fringe of society and civilization. With essential resources like water and food becoming highly scarce and valuable, coupled with the uncertainty of safety that comes with living in such communities, Butler creates a stark dichotomy between the few elite and the common man, those protected by private security which has been dictated a luxury, and those who must come together to overcome the harshness

outside the walls. Law has become privatized, becoming a commodity instead of a basic human right. Climate change has led to severe droughts and raging fires, leaving the land a scorched wasteland, unfit for agriculture, and corporations and private interests have taken over the responsibilities of government institutions. Through these pivotal notions and glaring critiques, one is left to wonder where the line between speculative fiction ends and reality begins. After all, this is just science fiction, isn't it?

The writing of Octavia Butler is most easily recognized for its distinctive and clear narrative style. This method is further complemented by a thoughtful tone that strongly emphasizes the book's themes of survival, adaptability, and transformation within a deteriorating society. The book's structure resembles that of journal entries, utilizing straightforward and easy-to-understand language in order to create a more personal and engaging reading experience, allowing readers to connect with the main character, Lauren Olamina, as she strives to grasp her role and purpose in a war-torn setting. One of Butler's most impactful techniques is her use of Lauren's first-person narration. Presented as a diary, Lauren's entries are both personal and prophetic, which creates a sense of intimacy with the reader. This format lends an immediacy to the events Lauren describes, as though the reader is experiencing her journey and insights in real time. By removing an omniscient narrator and giving Lauren complete control over the story's perspective, Butler emphasizes the importance of individual experience in navigating societal collapse—a theme central to *Earthseed*, which encourages self-determination and adaptability.

Though the events and characterizations are greatly exaggerated for the novel's effect, Octavia Butler did not simply pull these centralized themes from thin air. Rather, she engaged with the pressing societal issues at hand during her time writing this piece, which continues to remain as relevant today, in the year the story actually takes place, as when it was written in 1993 when these issues were but just symptoms of a much larger issue at hand. The 1990s is a decade most notably marked by its significant political and societal movements that are still resonating within the country 31 years later. Anti-globalization protests have begun in response to the advocacy for a more "interconnected" society; those

protesting argued that a globalized society would only lead to further exploitation of workers, a loss of culture, and further damage to an already weakened environment. Climate awareness skyrocketed with the news of a depleting ozone layer, leading to a surge in activism that steadily saw its return decades later, and the anti-apartheid movement continued to act as a model for global human rights activism. All of these instances of globalized protests and activism served as the basis for *Parable of the Sower*, which Butler wished to utilize as a warning to having these pivotal movements disregarded in favor of commercialization.

If one were to compare this story to something a little more contemporary in terms of its style of writing and societal themes present, then English majors may be able to draw its comparisons to Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and Cristina River Garcia's *Liliana's Invincible Summer*, as all three narratives utilize a first-person narration in order to portray a more personal, more reflective and intimate perspective to the lives of each individual. In regards to the style of writing, all three novels make use of a journal and diary entry format so as to add a layer of intimacy, readers become entranced by the immediate and personal narration, which serves to fuel their understanding of the matters at hand. Each narrative addresses some form of societal issue, whether it be environmental, as is the case with *Parable of the Sower*, concerning immigration policy, such as with *Lost Children Archives*, or gender violence and inequality, as portrayed within *Liliana's Invincible Summer*, these themes help to provide a level of social commentary that can continue to resonate with ongoing discussions about the importance of social and environmental justice.

Butler presents us with a grim reminder of the consequences of our collective actions. Through very real instances of globalization and corporate greed, Butler envisions a world that has lost itself to the private wishes of the upper elite class. Taking into account the influences and context of the decade it was written, this story serves more as a foreboding warning, the inevitable that has yet to come, more than just a piece of speculative science fiction. In response to societal disorder, Butler emphasizes the importance of individuality, of adapting to change as it comes, and of letting go of the past to build a future ahead. She presents to the readers a crumbling and dying

world on the edge of total collapse. Butler thrusts readers into her world; where we are forced to reflect on the very real-world implications of unchecked inequality and a neglected environment in lieu of corporate gain, making this novel a timeless and important piece of speculative science fiction that continues to remain as relevant today as when it was written in 1993.