Rethinking The End of the World: Ecological and Social Collapse in Three Contemporary Novels

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, 1.8 million acres burned in California—the state’s worst fire season in recorded history, according to one official (Romero). In 2017, hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, killing nearly 3,000 people and creating the longest major power outage in U.S. history (Brindley). That same year, the Maldives began building new islands in order to relocate citizens facing catastrophic sea-level rise (Dauenhauer). The growing list of environmental disasters brought on by climate change has made the end of the world an increasingly tangible possibility. But what does it mean for the world to end? Although “apocalypse” literally means “revelation,” it has traditionally been associated with the end of the world. Our ideas of apocalypse have changed drastically—from divine punishment to human-induced calamity—yet natural disaster has remained a common thread. This paper examines conceptualizations of apocalypse as environmental disaster in three contemporary novels, all of which belong to an emerging literary category called “Climate Fiction,” that explores the causes and consequences of catastrophic climate change.

In recent decades, climate change has become a subject of political strife and a socio-cultural phenomenon. In the 1970s, the United States and Sweden made the first scientific efforts to assess the threat of climate change and human beings’ role in it. The issue did not attract global attention until 1987, however, when the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development released a report entitled Our Common Future, detailing environmental degradation in various forms, including preliminary data on climate change. Since then, humankind’s role in changing the climate has become extremely contentious, despite the continued
accumulation of scientific evidence demonstrating the severity of our impact on the natural world (Bolin).

In order to better understand the role of climate change in the recent reinvigoration of apocalyptic thinking, I have chosen to study *Oryx and Crake*, by Margaret Atwood (2003), *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy (2006), and *Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia Butler (1993). These novels represent a range of writing styles, but they share certain key features that mark them as having emerged out of a specific historical moment. All three were written when discussions of climate change had infiltrated popular consciousness. The final three decades of the twentieth century saw a heightening of environmental awareness (Trexler and Johns-Putra 186-187), and the last ten years have brought an explosion of novels addressing the topic of climate change as it has been theorized since the 1970s. Consequently, Trexler and Johns-Putra argue, “the peculiar composite that is climate change as a meteorological, ecological, and cultural phenomenon demands, in its turn, a new literary and critical climate” (197).

Climate change produces such a radical alteration of the environment that it requires an equally radical theoretical shift if we hope to adequately understand and represent it. According to Clark, “Climate change ‘deconstructs’ existing models of thought including Baconian objectivism, market economies, the nation state, the individualistic liberal rights tradition, and ‘development’ as material affluence” (Clark 45-68; Trexler & Johns-Putra 194). Dominant ideologies such as these depend on the exploitation of natural resources. They privilege human interests, viewing the natural world primarily as a source of wealth. Identifying environmental degradation
as the principal cause of climate change means rejecting, or at the very least amending, these ideologies. Similarly, Cohen argues that climate change “provides evidence that contemporary technological, philosophical, and economic orders ‘appear to be reaching self-generated limits,’ leading to a complicated situation in which climate change is both of our culture and beyond it at the same time” (Cohen; Trexler & Johns-Putra 194). Climate change results, on the one hand, from a culture predicated on a capitalist, free-market economic system that exploits environmental resources. Yet it goes “beyond” this culture because free-market capitalism ceases to function in a radically altered climate—it no longer makes sense to extract and burn fossil fuels when any additional atmospheric CO₂ could make Earth uninhabitable. In this way, climate change disrupts traditional notions of “progress” and “civilization”: it indicates that the direction in which we have gone since the Industrial Revolution is in fact leading us toward destruction. Thus, the emerging genre of climate fiction is one manifestation of a larger paradigm shift.

Another label useful for categorizing the novels considered here is that of “post-apocalyptic” fiction. Chang contends that the genre of dystopia has undergone a change since the turn of the century, from earlier “critical dystopias” to a new type of post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction in which the possibility of utopia (i.e., hope) is greatly diminished. Novels such as Oryx and Crake and Parable belong to this latter phase. Chang distinguishes between “apocalyptic” and “post-apocalyptic,” asserting that “the use of the term ‘post-apocalyptic’ suggests that ‘post-apocalyptic dystopia’ portrays not just ‘the end of the world’ but rather, according to Hall, ‘the end of the world as we know it’” (3). Like climate fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction signals the
downfall of prevailing neoliberal ideologies. Further, it “extends, along with what remains of humanity, into a post-apocalyptic period” (DiTommaso 4; Chang 16). An important feature of post-apocalyptic texts is that they envision a continuation of some sort beyond the apparent end of the world. The three novels I examine may be considered post-apocalyptic in that they portray the ongoing struggle of humans to survive even after most of the population and the familiar landscape have been wiped out.

In undertaking close readings of these three novels in conjunction with each other, I hope to achieve a better understanding of climate-change fiction and post-apocalyptic dystopia, tracing the evolution of climate-change discourse over the last thirty or so years. Through my analysis I demonstrate that Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower belong to a growing category of environmental literature, characterized by extrapolation from current trends, that denounces our treatment of the natural world and shows us what we stand to lose if we do not change our present behavior. These novels take up traditional tropes of apocalypse and nature-writing and re-present them in light of contemporary concerns about climate change. For these authors, I contend, climate change represents not merely an environmental shift, but a radical reorganization of society that requires us to reassess our concepts of “progress” and “civilization” if we intend to survive. Although essentially pessimistic, these novels do not suggest that we abandon all hope. Rather, they examine the aspects of human civilization that are worth preserving and encourage us to embark on a new relationship to the environment, one that emphasizes human responsibility and our fundamental connectedness with each other and with the world.
around us. In sum, I read *Oryx and Crake*, *The Road*, and *Parable of the Sower* as exemplars of a larger cultural effort to comprehend and forestall ecological apocalypse, understood not only as an alteration of the physical world, but as the failure of modern civilization and its associated principles.¹

*Oryx and Crake* is the first book in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, followed by *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy, later known as Snowman, tells the story of his best friend Crake, a psychopathic scientific genius, and Oryx, an ex-child prostitute whom they both love. A third-person omniscient narrator alternates between following two timelines, recounting the story from the perspective of Jimmy: 1) Snowman remembers his past life as Jimmy, up to a worldwide pandemic and 2) present-day Snowman watches over Crake’s genetically engineered humanoids and undertakes a journey back to the Paradice Dome, where Crake created the disastrous virus. Jimmy and Crake grow up together and after they graduate from college, Crake becomes involved in high-profile scientific projects, the most important of which is the Paradice Project. Eventually, Jimmy goes to work for Crake at the Paradice Dome, where he meets Oryx in person for the first time and learns about the BlyssPluss pill. Marketed as promoting sexual health and general pleasure, the pill secretly contains a virus programmed for timed release. The Children of Crake (“Crakers” for short) are humanoids that possess a

¹ It may appear that I conflate climate change and environmental degradation. However, my reasoning for discussing climate change concurrently with other types of environmental damage is that I understand climate change as symptomatic of practices of environmental destruction that have been going on for decades, centuries even. In other words, I see the “anthropocene”¹ not as an entirely new era but rather as a dramatic intensification of existing tendencies. The prospect of ecological apocalypse in the form of catastrophic climate change forces us to confront this history. Therefore, I treat climate change as a type of synecdoche for climate disaster in general.
number of adaptations, including the ability to heal by purring, insect-repellant body odor, and blue genitals. Following the deaths of Oryx and Crake, Jimmy watches from the Paradice Dome as the virus, which has been distributed globally, becomes active, killing vast segments of the population and creating a global catastrophe. After the chaos subsides somewhat, Jimmy leads the Crakers out of Paradice to their new home by the seashore. When Jimmy, now calling himself Snowman, returns to Paradice several years later for supplies, he finds a radio and hears another human voice for the first time since the pandemic.

_The Road_ tells the story of an unnamed man and his young son as they journey south in a dark, barren, and violent world. The novel mainly employs the third-person perspective but it occasionally slips into first and even second person. The son was born after an unspecified apocalyptic event, while the father remembers the world as it was before. Father and son travel along old highways with a shopping cart full of whatever they can salvage, raiding abandoned houses to survive. They share a tight bond: “each the other’s world entire” (McCarthy 6). Above all, the father wants to survive so that he can protect his son. The few people they encounter are usually desperate and hostile. Eventually, father and son reach the coast, but the father has been coughing up blood, and it becomes clear that he is dying. When his father dies, the boy meets a family who say they are “the good guys” (a phrase the man and the boy use to distinguish between desperate cannibals and people like themselves), and they adopt him.
Parable of the Sower is the first book in a two-part series, the second being Parable of the Talents. In Parable of the Sower, Lauren Olamina, a precocious teenager, describes in her diary her creation of a new religion and way of life, Earthseed, and her struggle to survive in a world plagued by social and environmental chaos. Drug addiction, violence, religious fundamentalism, political instability, racism, and sexism are just a few of the issues Lauren encounters. The tale takes place between 2024 and 2027. Following the destruction of her home in the fictional walled community of Robledo, California and the murder or disappearance of the rest of her family, Lauren embarks on a journey northward, gathering a group of followers along the way. She suffers from a delusional disorder called “hyperempathy syndrome” that causes her to experience other people’s pain. Eventually, she and her followers reach Humboldt County, CA and decide to establish a community called Acorn.

My analysis is divided into two parts. In Chapter One, I discuss how language functions both stylistically and thematically. Understanding the role of language in these novels enables us as readers to discern how the texts present themselves as texts. I focus on the ways in which the novels might contribute to a larger environmental discourse. Among other things, I look at writing, conversing, naming, preaching, and storytelling. I seek to answer questions such as: What is the role of language in human society? How can language function as a tool for change? Do the novels situate themselves within a larger environmental discourse? Considering the novels as text-objects in the world means going beyond whatever goals their authors

2 Butler was working on a third book in the series when she died; it remains unfinished.
may have had when writing them and examining them as linguistic formulations that may be interpreted in multiple ways.

In Chapter Two, I investigate how the environment is represented in the three novels. Here I examine the environment as a setting, the role free-market economic systems have played in environmental exploitation, and the importance of our taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions. I attempt to answer questions such as: How is the natural world represented in these novels? Do the novels promote or disparage specific ways of relating to the natural world? Are we as readers meant to conclude something about how we should treat the environment? This section will take into account both the authors’ intentions and the implicit and explicit messages that the novels themselves convey.

In conclusion, I propose that climate fiction, building on traditional elements of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, attempts to undermine dominant paradigms and change our relationship to the natural world by reexamining our present practices and hinting at alternative ways of living and being.

**What Can Fiction Do?**

Scholars from Nietzsche to Foucault to Derrida have theorized about the power of language. At the most basic level, language shapes our perceptions of the world. It can be used to educate, to persuade, and to define and redefine meanings. Writing serves as an important mechanism of cultural critique—genres like satire and parody derive their potency from their ability to comment on cultural tendencies familiar to their readers. However, not everything said or written about a subject
translates into action. Rachel Carson is often credited with initiating political activity against pesticide usage—and sparking the modern environmental movement—with the publication of *Silent Spring* (Andrews 202; Kline 11). Yet the book’s detractors labeled it “science fiction” (Andrews 218), implying that only a non-fiction book should be taken seriously. While the efficacy of non-fiction as a catalyst for environmental activism has been acknowledged, the power of fiction remains contested.

In *The Power of the Story*, Michael Hanne raises several important points about fiction’s impact. He emphasizes the importance of context when considering the causal power of fiction. That is, many novels seen as having a political impact, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or *The Satanic Verses*, appeared during periods when the political and social issues they addressed had already become part of public discourse (Hanne 3). When this happens, it is difficult to determine cause and effect—did the novel cause the movement or did the movement cause the novel? In short, timing of publication plays an important role in determining how we interpret and respond to fiction; a novel released at just the right moment might be the final stimulus needed to push participants in a social movement to engage in decisive action. Hanne also makes the point that fiction, because it allows a variety of interpretations, may be appropriated and made to suit the needs of multiple parties. For example, “proslavery Southerners sought to use *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a rallying point for southern feeling against the North” while at the same time “abolitionists used it as a propaganda

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3“Non-fiction” is a nebulous term, given that any act of writing or even speech may be considered “fiction” insofar as it implies a selection of facts in order to generate a specific meaning and is therefore not a direct window onto so-called “objective” truth. The boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are difficult, if not impossible, to demarcate.
weapon against slavery” (Hanne 5). This means that a novel may have an “impact” completely opposite to what its author intended. Therefore, while it is important to consider the writer’s intentions when we examine a novel’s effect, we need not let our analysis be limited by them.

What then, does all this mean for environmental disaster fiction? At the very least, it gives us reason to hope that novels such as Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable might have a chance of motivating social, political, and economic changes in our behavior toward the environment. It also means that we must consider environmental disaster fiction within its particular historical context, without overlooking the possibility that these texts might be interpreted in multiple ways and used to serve purposes not intended by their authors.

The Roots of Environmental Disaster Fiction: Utopia and Dystopia

In a general sense, “utopia” refers to an ideal place or state of existence. However, the term itself presupposes the impossibility of such a place: the Greek word means “no place,” and its inventor, Thomas More, likely used it satirically (OED; Greene 2; Skult 368). According to Greene, “Long before they are enacted as actual models of living, utopias tend to make their appearance in texts. Within historical narratives, they are, more often than not, nostalgic projections on a reconstructed past or a distant locale” (2). The concept of utopia has always remained hypothetical, since no substantive utopia has ever existed. Therefore utopia can appear only as a theoretical projection or a modified reconstruction of the past. Moreover, as the Greek term indicates, utopia is intimately connected with space
Architecture draws on theories of utopia in seeking “to change and better society” through “thoughtful construction of space” (Greene 6). Any effort to create a utopia involves manipulation of physical space, while any attempt to write a utopia requires the construction of imaginary space. According to Skult, “Utopian space has to grow out of a pre-existing ‘starting point,’ our own frame of reference with which we can compare the utopian world” (368). In other words, the utopian space can exist only in relation to a known, present space.

The concept of dystopia originates in utopia itself. Dystopia is often conceptualized as a utopian experiment gone wrong (Greene 6). The passage of time usually reveals flaws in an idea that at the outset might have seemed perfect or utopian. To put it another way, “all utopias can also be read as dystopias” (Skult 375). What is good for one person is not always good for another, and, depending on one’s perspective in both time and space, the same scenario might be considered both utopian and dystopian. Thus, dystopian novels often explain the origin of the dystopian scenario through a character’s misguided attempts to create a “better world” (such is the case in Oryx and Crake). Like utopia, dystopia is constructed in relation to reality. In Skult’s words, “a dystopia must grow out of a recognizable time and space, even if the dystopia itself is entirely imaginary” (368). Similarly, Stark contends that “Dystopian literature is a repository of our already existing fears, projected into a future world” (78)\textsuperscript{4}. As dystopian novels, references to the present, to recognizable experiences, figure prominently in Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower.

\textsuperscript{4} Stark also asserts that dystopian fiction has “a strong didactic function” such that novels like The Road may be read as “a warning about impending environmental catastrophe” (71).
CHAPTER 1
ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE AND THE REMAKING OF LANGUAGE

Introduction: Style and Aesthetic

*Oryx and Crake, The Road,* and *Parable of the Sower* are stylistically very distinct. Atwood adopts a witty and satirical style; McCarthy’s language is concise yet poetic; Butler keeps her tone clear and direct. As in most “good” writing, the writers’ stylistic choices amplify and clarify their thematic concerns. Furthermore, language itself becomes a central theme in all three novels. As I discuss its significance in each text, I will consider how the writing style bears out or subverts different characters’ contentions about the nature of language. Ultimately, I propose that each author establishes a “new” language. As mentioned in the introduction, climate change necessitates a paradigm shift. Thus, part of the linguistic specificity of climate fiction derives from the imperative to establish a linguistic framework equal to the task of talking about climate change.

Overall, Atwood’s narrative style in *Oryx and Crake* may be described as satirical. Her particular brand of satire is marked by dark humor and understatement. For example, Snowman flippantly observes, “Still, as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some people had their doubts” (Atwood 24). Obviously, asserting in the face of a long list of disastrous environmental shifts that “some people had their doubts” is putting it mildly. Moreover, the syntax of the passage, with its accumulation of events
connected by “and” (polysyndeton) indicates a cheeky, even careless dismissal (on Snowman’s part) of clearly calamitous changes. One can almost hear Snowman’s bored, sarcastic tone as he lists one event after another as if enumerating flavors of ice cream. Atwood’s playful treatment of climate change and her use of irony emphasize the discrepancy between the seriousness of events and her characters’ reactions to them.

One of the most striking features of Atwood’s satire is her use of neologisms, in the form of invented brand names. Invented brands include corporations such as HelthWyzer, RejoovenEsence, and AnooYoo, as well as products like Happicuppa and ChickieNobbs. As Grimbeek observes, these brand names are “simultaneously familiar and strange” (95) because they exaggerate current branding practices. The pervasive presence of outrageous brand names alludes to the insidious influence of capitalism in Atwood’s dystopian world. Grimbeek notes that brand names can be trademarked only if they are unique (91). Hence, the ridiculous misspellings are intended to make the names distinct in a society saturated by brands. Many of the fake brands also involve puns and double meanings. For example, AnooYoo may be read as “a new you” or alternatively “a no you,” comically hinting at the dubious nature of the beauty products this corporation sells. Similarly, CorpsSeCorps, supposedly an abbreviation for “Corporation Security Corps,” contains the word “corpse,” alluding to the corps’ proclivity for killing as opposed to protecting. These double meanings add a touch of humor to an otherwise ominous story, but they also

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5 The use of brand names in Oryx and Crake has been commented on extensively by Grimbeek in “Wholesale Apocalypse: Brand Names in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake.”
6 Atwood’s use of neologisms also extends to government entities (CorpSeCorps) and animal hybridization (“rakunk” and “pigoon”).
remind the reader of the sinister potential of nearly everything in Atwood’s fictional world. The brand names in *Oryx and Crake* connote a society in which language has been reduced to an instrument for the seduction and deception of consumers. As we will see later on, the debasement of language is a major concern for Atwood.

In contrast to Atwood’s, McCarthy’s style in *The Road* relies heavily on simple declarative sentences. For example, the novel begins thus: “When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more grey each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world. His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath” (McCarthy 3). McCarthy breaks just a few lines into four separate sentences, giving the prose an impressionistic, halting quality. Fragments abound. The text lends itself to slow, deliberate reading. Despite the lack of conventional “flow,” the prose possesses a distinctive rhythm, which McCarthy achieves through various forms of repetition. In the passage above, “dark” or “darkness” appears three times, and “cold” appears twice. Note also the alliterative “w” and the alliterative “d” as well as the assonance of “cold glaucoma.” Rhyme appears frequently, as in “days” and “grey.” McCarthy’s writing recalls epic poems such as *Beowulf* or Homer’s *Odyssey*, which rely on a combination of concision and rhetorical layering to communicate complex ideas.7

McCarthy’s economy of language reproduces important characteristics of the world the man and boy inhabit. Volker contends that McCarthy “realizes an aesthetics of scarcity: the language and syntactic structure appears as thin and famished as the

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7 Mitchell makes similar observations in “‘Make It Like Talk That You Imagine’: The Mystery of Language in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*” (207).
literary characters it depicts, and as empty and scarce as the landscape through which father and boy are traveling” (78). While Volker rightly suggests that the bare-bones sentence structure and lack of grammatical variety mirror the oppressive sameness of a landscape nearly devoid of life, I disagree that McCarthy’s language is “thin” or “empty.” In fact, for all its brevity, the text is rich with symbolic and allegorical meaning.

Interspersed with the straightforward descriptive passages and simple dialogue, lyrical outbursts appear unexpectedly. These evocative passages often occur when the man remembers his past: “In that long ago somewhere very near this place he watched a falcon fall down the long blue wall of the mountain and break with the keel of its breastbone the midmost from a flight of cranes and take it to the river below all gangly and wrecked and trailing its loose and blousy plumage in the still autumn air” (McCarthy 20). This vibrant description of a scene at a lake the man once visited contains many of the stylistic characteristics present elsewhere in the novel, including alliteration (“falcon fall”) and rhyme (“fall,” “wall”). However, the passage stands out for the simple fact that it is one of the longest sentences in the novel. The imagery is also distinctive, made vivid through the use of expressive adjectives: “gangly,” “wrecked,” “loose,” “blousy.” Mitchell suggests that these lyrical sections appear concurrently with flashbacks, memories, and dreams (212)—that is, McCarthy uses them to differentiate between the barren, desolate world of the present and a richer, more meaningful past. This is often true, yet in some passages McCarthy employs lyrical language in descriptions of the post-apocalyptic world. For example:

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8 These adjectives offer a welcome reprieve from the endless repetition of adjectives such as “cold,” “dark,” and “grey.”
“The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by breath, trembling and brief” (11). In this excerpt, the sentences remain typically short, yet the tone contrasts with other purely expository sections of the novel. Words like “temporal” and “void” recall the highly formal language of nineteenth-century poetry, and the phrase “everything uncoupled from its shoring” is just vague enough to be metaphorical. Here, lyricism transforms the very desolation of the world into something beautiful—the same work of renewal that the novel itself performs.

Linguistic “errors”—sentence fragments, lexical errors, incorrect usages—appear frequently in the text, suggesting that conventional prose cannot capture the world McCarthy envisions. He omits the apostrophe in all contractions ending in “nt.” He also combines words (“treetrunks,” “bakingpowder,” “diningroom”) and employs lexical errors common in spoken language such as “set it in the floor” (McCarthy 129), “off of” (3, 156) and “such few” (107). Unusual words like “claggy” (79), “kerfs,” (103) and “pipsissewa” (40) turn up in otherwise ordinary descriptions. McCarthy’s experimental style also extends to the narrative perspective. As mentioned earlier, The Road switches between first, second, and third person. According to Mitchell, “In a post-apocalyptic world, the very role of narrator seems suspect, excluded by default, as if narrative and language itself were effectively annulled by global conditions” (217). The unstable narrative perspective suggests a world in which one’s identity and very existence are continually threatened.
Likewise, the declining population threatens language yet paradoxically leaves room for its reinvention.

Butler does not draw attention to her writing style in the same way that Atwood and McCarthy do. *Parable* is accessible, fluid, and clear, without sounding overly expository. Lauren narrates her story through a series of entries in her Earthseed journals. The entries yield substantial insight into Lauren’s character; her level-headedness and maturity prevent the writing from becoming chaotic or excessively emotional. Her tone remains largely matter-of-fact, and she is naturally analytical. The first entry begins: “I had my recurring dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father’s daughter” (Butler 3). This pattern of short, simple sentences, alternating here and there with slightly more complex ones, remains consistent throughout the novel. The diction reflects the influence of mythology and religious writing: the repetition, in this first entry, of “when” and “it comes” lends the passage a rolling rhythm reminiscent of oral storytelling and the Bible.

The most unusual characteristic of Butler’s writing style is her use of verse. Each chapter begins with a short excerpt from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Earthseed verses also appear in the middle of chapters when Lauren reads what she has written to followers and potential converts. The verses reduce the time that Butler has to spend explaining Lauren’s belief system because they speak for themselves. Butler reports, “I needed the verses because I was having such trouble with the novel . . . trouble in the sense that I was slipping into re-writing my old stuff, which is what
writers do after a certain point” (Fry 10-11). Like Atwood’s neologisms and McCarthy’s grammatical and lexical choices, Butler’s verses add freshness to the writing.

**The Novel As Collage: References to the Bible and Other Texts**

All three novels draw, to some extent, on previous texts, most importantly the Bible. These intertextual references remind us that all writing has a history, whether that history be oral or textual. By combining multiple textual sources, the authors acknowledge that writing involves collecting facts and ideas and bringing them together in novel and illuminating ways. All writers participate in and contribute to a larger textual-cultural tradition. Nevertheless, each author continually modifies and expands this textual history in order to convey his or her own insights. Thus, writing entails both recapitulation and creation.

A number of critics have discussed the biblical references in Atwood’s *MaddAddam* series, including allusions to Adam and Eve (Fiskio), Noah’s ark (Bahrawi), Moses (Appleton), and the book of Revelation (Snyder; Bouson; Canavan). An in-depth analysis of biblical themes in *Oryx and Crake* would exceed the scope of this paper, but a brief examination of Atwood’s biblical allusions can help us understand how she views text and language. First off, the Crakers, who live in the Paradice Dome until they are forced to leave their Eden after the plague, imitate Adam and Eve sent out to populate the earth. Second, Snowman’s flashback to his journey from the Paradice Dome, when he led the Crakers to the seashore, clearly

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9 The next book in the series, *The Year of the Flood*, even more explicitly invokes the book of Genesis: members of the God’s Gardeners community (a green religious group) call themselves Adams and Eves and refer to Crake’s bioengineered plague as “the waterless flood,” as in Noah’s Ark.
resembles Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt in Exodus. Finally, as will be discussed in more detail later, Snowman assumes a messianic or prophetic role in relation to the Crakers. Thus, textual allusion in *Oryx and Crake* locates the novel within traditional Western cultural frameworks while at the same time subjecting the values associated with these frameworks to harsh scrutiny.\(^\text{10}\)

Critics have likewise noted textual resonances in *The Road*. Hillier discusses McCarthy’s use of the Book of Job and the Book of Genesis. For example, the phrase “curse God and die,” which appears on page 114 of *The Road* is a quotation from Job (Hillier 678). Likewise, the woman who adopts the boy at the end of the novel tells him that “the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time” (McCarthy 286), recapitulating the biblical passage in which God breathes life into Adam (Hillier 686). Similarly, Edwards discusses the juxtaposition of a “seemingly Edenic past with a clearly hellish present” (58), which would make the apocalyptic event a type of fall from grace. He also describes the father as “a sort of anti-Adam, who literally sees his world being uncreated before his eyes” (Edwards 59). The world the man and boy inhabit is dark and barren, evoking biblical imagery of the nothingness that existed before God created the Earth. *The Road* also contains allusions to other texts: Hillier discusses echoes of Dostoevsky and Ovid. Much as Atwood does, McCarthy situates *The Road* within an already established canon of Western textual-cultural history.

\(^{10}\) The novel clearly alludes to the Western biblical tradition, yet the references are so ambiguous that they might just as easily represent other cultural tropes, especially those relating to the concept of apocalypse. Many cosmologies besides the Judeo-Christian creation story describe an event that in some way wipes out most of the population so that life can begin anew. For example, the Mayan creation myth found in the Popol Vuh, like the story of Noah, includes an apocalyptic flood that enables a new wave of human life (Ximénez).
Of the three novels, *Parable* plays most explicitly with religious and ceremonial language. In the tradition of the Bible, Lauren creates her own religious text from her journals: *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. She affirms the importance of text to religious teaching when she observes that in times of crisis “People . . . reach back to the Bible, the Talmud, the Koran, or some other religious book that helps them deal with the frightening changes that happen in life” (Butler 221). Religious texts serve as a source of comfort, and they contain wisdom that can be consulted in times of need. The title of Lauren’s series of books not only emphasizes the need to survive, it also inverts the title of the famous Egyptian funerary text, the *Book of the Dead*. Just as the spells contained in the *Book of the Dead* were meant to aid the deceased on their journey to the afterlife, the *Books of the Living* are intended to aid the living on their journey to the stars. Like many religious leaders, Lauren writes in verse because it is easier to remember and pleasant to hear. The verses break up the narrative sections of the novel and provide useful summaries of the tenets of Earthseed. Reading *Parable of the Sower* feels, at times, much like reading the Bible or some other religious text.

The title of the novel, *Parable of the Sower*, harks back to the Biblical parable of the same name. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus recounts the story of a man who repeatedly plants seeds, but without success—the seeds are eaten by animals, withered by drought, and choked by thorns. Finally, the seeds land on fertile soil and bear fruit (Luke 8:5-8). The parable has traditionally been interpreted as Jesus’ way of explaining that when he spreads his “seeds of truth,” many of his teachings will fall

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on deaf ears. But eventually, his words will be heeded and Christianity (or “the Way,” as Jesus referred to his followers) will take root. According to Tweedy, “the ‘parable of the sower’ foreshadows Earthseed’s eventual emergence as a viable religious faith” (10). Lauren becomes a Jesus-like figure: she gathers followers, starts a new religion, and does her fair share of preaching. Like those of Jesus, her teachings are often ignored, but eventually she too proves successful in creating a movement. Thus, *Parable of the Sower* offers an expanded retelling of the original parable.

In fact, the novel resembles a parable in several respects. Merriam-Webster defines a parable as a “usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.” While much longer than the average parable, *Parable of the Sower* may be read as an extended illustration of a “moral attitude” or “religious principle.” I would argue that if Butler had simply laid out the tenets of Earthseed without the rest of the narrative, readers would find them less convincing. Although she herself may not believe in every one of Lauren’s teachings, Butler has clearly taken pains to make Lauren seem credible. In fact, she has commented that “figuring out what I believed helped me figure out what she [Lauren] believed” (Fry 10, emphasis original). The centerpiece of Lauren’s belief system, and one of the most repeated phrases in the novel, is “God is change.” I think it is fair to conclude that at the very least Butler wants readers to recognize the importance of change. In fact, I would go further and suggest that she encourages us to alter the way in which we look

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12 Jesus is not the only biblical figure whom Lauren resembles. According to Tweedy, “Lauren is retelling the Moses myth. She positions herself as a prophet who will take her people to the Promised Land” (8). Lauren’s “Promised Land” is the other planet that she hopes her followers will reach some day.

at the world. If climate fiction is intended to dismantle prevailing ideologies, *Parable* might be read as an injunction to reexamine some of our present belief systems and consider alternatives. What exactly *Parable* tries to teach us will be explored in further detail in Chapter Two.

**Linguistic Apocalypse: Anxieties About the Death of Language**

The destruction of civilization inevitably leads to a loss of meaning, and with it the language used for sharing that meaning. Language is fundamentally relational, and its survival depends on its use. If the human population is drastically reduced, language will likely lose some of its complexity. Moreover, catastrophic events tend to destroy stores of human knowledge, such as libraries, further diminishing the archive of linguistic possibilities. As post-apocalyptic narratives, all three novels manifest anxieties about the “death of language.”

In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman reflects on the dissolution of meaning in a world of limited human interaction. For most of the novel, he thinks he may be the sole surviving member of the human race, meaning that he has no one other than the Crakers to talk to. Early on Snowman considers the importance of language: “From nowhere, a word appears: *Mesozoic*. He can see the word, he can hear the word, but he can’t reach the word. He can’t attach anything to it. This is happening too much lately, this dissolution of meaning, the entries on his cherished wordlists drifting off into space” (Atwood 39). Snowman mentally compiles lists of unusual words in an attempt to retain his vocabulary. Nevertheless, because he has no other people to talk to, he begins to forget the meanings of words. In fact, he lives in a tree like a monkey,
which raises the possibility that he has regressed to an animalistic state—part of the reason he is losing his grip on language.

Atwood’s concern about the loss of meaning seems to stem from a discomfort with the devaluation or degradation of language in contemporary society. The dissolution of linguistic meaning in *Oryx and Crake* has already begun long before the pandemic. The absurd branding practices discussed earlier constitute one example. In the pre-plague world, Jimmy is one of few remaining “word people” (Atwood 25). According to Kuznicki, Jimmy “represents the old world of ethics and the power of the word . . . [he] stands for the dying realm of language and art, for which there is no room in the new reality,” while Crake is “a man of numbers deprived of any traditionally understood morality and preoccupied with the possibilities of science” (385–386). Crake needs Jimmy to educate the Crakers precisely because he himself is a “man of numbers.” Even before the pandemic, Jimmy’s world of words and art is in decline, as evidenced by the pathetic state of the Martha Graham Academy, the “Arts-and-Humanities college” (Atwood 186) he attends, when compared with the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute where Crake receives his education. Yet through its privileging of language, the novel suggests that this decline implies a loss of the characters’ humanity. After all, if the arts and humanities are worthless, why write a novel? If Jimmy and Crake represent language-and-the-humanities versus science-and-numbers, it matters that ultimately Jimmy (Snowman) survives and not Crake. The mechanistic scientism that Crake epitomizes breeds only destruction, while art and language persist, despite efforts to suppress
them. Thus, *Oryx and Crake* criticizes the present tendency to privilege math and science over the arts and humanities.

Like Snowman, the man in *The Road* recognizes and mourns the loss of meaning in the post-apocalyptic world:

> He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He’d had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (McCarthy 88–89)

This passage presages a later one, in which the boy does not understand the meaning of “as the crow flies” because he has never seen a crow. The “world shrinks about a raw core of parsible entities” because life has been reduced to the bare need to survive, and any extraneous uses of language have begun to disappear. McCarthy repeatedly invokes the oppressive silence of the post-apocalyptic world. Just as in *Oryx and Crake*, the survivors of the apocalypse begin to forget the meanings of words and like Snowman, the man struggles to preserve what little meaning he can.

McCarthy’s restrained writing style emphasizes the slow extinction of language in a barren, desolate world. According to Mitchell, “Nature’s demise has withered language itself, evidenced by the figure of speech ‘as the crow flies’ (McCarthy 156), which simply bewilders the boy in a world without crows” (208). As

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14 For the same reason, Crake cannot breed music out of the Crakers without making them less human.
the man reflects earlier, words lose their meaning when stripped of their referents. However, it is not only nature’s demise but also humanity’s that causes language to contract. The man and the boy live in a world where art and culture essentially no longer exist. Their day-to-day lives are dominated by one simple imperative: survival. There is little time or opportunity to appreciate beauty. Thus, much of the novel consists of play-by-play narration of events, concrete descriptions of the landscape, and verbatim transcriptions of conversations.

In Parable, loss of language appears in the form of falling literacy rates. When Lauren’s brother Keith runs away from home, the people who take him in do so because he can read and write. Keith tells Lauren, “They’re older than me, but not one of them can read or write anything. They stole all this great stuff and they couldn’t even use it. Before I got there they even broke some of it because they couldn’t read the instructions” (Butler 105). Later on, Zahra asks Lauren to teach her to read and write. Much like today, illiteracy makes people helpless in a world designed for literate people. Literacy becomes a coveted skill and a form of power.

Naming

All three novels display a particular sensitivity to names. By recognizing the significance of names, they emphasize the way that language shapes our perceptions: naming something defines it and frames the way it is understood. Names also constitute an integral part of historical recollection because they serve as recognizable markers of identity. Naming also implies control: to name something is to “put it in a box,” pin it down and declare it known.
Oryx and Crake highlights the way that naming can contribute to the preservation of historical knowledge, but only if the name is fully understood. For example, all the members of MaddAddam, the rebellious anti-corporate group of scientists later coopted by Crake, re-name themselves after extinct animals. This naming practice arises because the group members communicate with each other through a videogame called Extinctathon.¹⁵ By adopting the names of extinct animals, Oryx, Crake, Black Rhino and the rest in some sense preserve the memory of these animals. The names serve as reminders of what has been lost. Nevertheless, the scientists make light of extinction, treating it as a mere game of trivia—the seriousness of the issue is lost on them.

Crake’s naming of the Crakers after famous historical figures (Madam Curie, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth) demonstrates a similar lack of understanding. In this case, not even a shred of the history of the names is preserved. Unlike the MaddAddam scientists, the Crakers possess no knowledge whatsoever of those for whom they are named, and there is no trivia game equivalent to Extinctathon to teach them. Perhaps Crake hopes that the Crakers will embody some of the traits possessed by these historical figures, thus incarnating the best of human society. However, deprived of historical knowledge of their names, and of history altogether, the Crakers have little hope of achieving the same renown as their namesakes.

Snowman is one of the few characters who demonstrate a fuller understanding of the importance of names. After the pandemic, Jimmy styles himself Snowman in order to mark a radical change in his life. Early on Snowman remarks that his name

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¹⁵ Players challenge each other to correctly guess the names of extinct species based on a series of clues (Atwood 80)
refers to the Abominable Snowman, which he characterizes as “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumors and through its backward self-pointing footprints” (Atwood 7-8). Snowman sees himself as “existing and not existing” and as both “apelike” and “manlike” because he has reason to doubt his own humanity. He thinks of himself as the last remaining human,\(^{16}\) but he also knows he lives an animal-like life (not to mention that he is going crazy), which means that he is not making full use of his (human) intellectual capabilities. His footprints are “backward” in the sense that he is a relic of the pre-epidemic past perhaps not wholly intact. Later on he wonders,

> Maybe he’s the other kind of snowman, the grinning dope set up as a joke and pushed down as an entertainment, his pebble smile and carrot nose an invitation to mockery and abuse. Maybe that’s the real him, the last Homo sapiens—a white illusion of a man, here today, gone tomorrow, so easily shoved over, left to melt in the sun, getting thinner and thinner until he liquefies and trickles away altogether. (Atwood 224)

Like the first explanation of Snowman’s name, this passage conveys his self-doubt. Snowman questions the point of his life, wondering if he is merely a “joke” or an “illusion.” Once again, he emphasizes his fragile position as the last human being. The melting snowman image suggests Snowman’s mental and physical decline as he struggles to survive in a world no longer fit for him. Regardless of the meaning Snowman himself assigns to his name, the word literally refers to an object that can exist only in a cold climate, symbolizing the fact that Snowman is one of the few

\(^{16}\) We later find out that he is not alone.
remaining members of a species that struggles to persist on a warmed planet. Thus, Snowman’s re-christening marks him as belonging to the past. His name historicizes him in much the same way that the names borrowed from extinct animals and historical figures historicize the MaddAddam scientists and the Crakers. The difference is that Snowman, having named himself, has at least some understanding of his name’s significance.

The novel’s title, *Oryx and Crake*, further illustrates what Atwood means to communicate about naming. Although the title consists of two character names, the reader cannot discern the full significance of these names, or even recognize them as names, without reading the novel. Looking at the cover, one might correctly identify “oryx” and “crake” as less well-known animals, but one would not typically associate those terms with people. As we progress through the novel, we learn more and more about Oryx and Crake as characters, and the title acquires increasing significance. Since Oryx and Crake are already dead at the beginning of the novel, the text in some sense memorializes them. Their history is preserved in the story that unfolds. Naming once again functions as an act of remembering, which can be properly carried out only if we understand the stories behind the names. In this case, reminiscence is doubled: we remember both the extinct animals and the dead characters.

*Oryx and Crake* suggests that naming has power in that it can preserve and re-collect the past. However, simply reusing a name is not enough—the history of the name is equally important. Both the extinct-animal and the historical-figure names come with meanings attached to them, thereby situating their bearers within historical narratives. However, it is doubtful that any of these characters fully comprehend the
significance of their names, which implies that much of their meaning has been lost. Only Snowman, as the teller of the story, has a fuller understanding of the power of names.

*Parable* also highlights the importance of naming. Lauren claims “Sometimes naming a thing—giving it a name or discovering its name—helps one to begin to understand it. Knowing the name of a thing *and* knowing what that thing is for gives me even more of a handle on it” (Butler 77). Here she is referring to the name “Earthseed,” which she has just chosen for her belief system. Lauren chooses “Earthseed” because she believes that the destiny of humanity is to “take root among the stars” much as plants seed themselves far from their parents (Butler 77). Thus, the name encapsulates Lauren’s chief purpose: survival via regeneration.

Names also tell stories. When Lauren meets Bankole, she comments, “Our last names were an instant bond between us. We’re both descended from men who assumed African surnames back during the 1960s. His father and my grandfather had had their names legally changed, and both had chosen Yoruba replacement names” (Butler 230). In this case, a name serves as a point of identification between two characters. Lauren learns something about Bankole simply by learning his name. Naming thus functions as a means of defining someone or something—a manner of marking, of historicizing a person or thing through the actions and identities associated with the name.

In contrast to the other two novels, *The Road* is marked by almost complete namelessness. The father is simply “the man,” the son, “the boy.” Only one character possesses a name, Ely, but he admits that it is not his real name. Ely defends his
choice not to reveal his true name, explaining to the man, “I couldn’t trust you with it. To do something with it. I don’t want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. But nobody could say that it was me. I could be anybody” (McCarthy 171). Perhaps the absence of names is simply one more manifestation of the death of language. However, practically speaking, anonymity means safety in McCarthy’s dystopia. Ely’s conversation with the man once again highlights the way that names define people, linking them with specific actions and giving them a past. Thus, in all three novels, names situate characters and objects within history. They signify a story that might be told.

**Speech and the Need for Conversation**

Speech and conversation are central to each of the three novels. In both *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road*, characters converse in a desperate attempt to cling to their humanity, stave off loneliness, and prevent the dissolution of meaning. Meanwhile, in *Parable of the Sower*, speech functions as a means of creating change.

*Oryx and Crake* posits conversation as a fundamental human need. Snowman feels that “he needs to be listened to, he needs to be heard. He needs at least the illusion of being understood” (Atwood 104). For this reason he accepts his role as Crake’s prophet—his representative to the Crakers. As we have said, Snowman struggles not to forget language because he values his humanity. Although Snowman can talk to the Crakers, they do not fully comprehend him, which gives him only “the illusion of being understood.” He lives in close proximity to the Crakers, but he does
not consider them fully human, and he therefore remains an outsider to their community.\textsuperscript{17} He can talk to them, but it is not the same as talking to another human being because their understanding is extremely limited. The Crakers resemble human children in some respects, but they are like children who have grown up without parents, on an alien planet (which, in a sense, they have). The Crakers would not understand Snowman’s word lists because they have no history, no traditions, and no texts. The novel suggests that part of what makes the Crakers less than human is their limited use of language.

Snowman copes with his solitude by imagining conversations with Oryx and other women he knew in his old life, by talking to himself,\textsuperscript{18} and by remembering snippets of text he once read.\textsuperscript{19} He draws on his memories of language to console himself. He also regards it as his \textit{duty} to remember: “‘Hang on to the words,’ he tells himself. The odd words, the old words, the rare ones. \textit{Valence. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious.} When they’re gone out of his head, these words, they’ll be gone, everywhere, forever. As if they had never been”\textsuperscript{20} (Atwood 68). Snowman sees himself as charged with preserving the last legacy of a dying species. If the ability to use language is one of the traits that defines us as human—if one of our basic needs is to be heard and understood—Snowman must do more than survive physically—he must also preserve language.

\textsuperscript{17} See also: “He feels excluded, as if from a party to which he will never be invited” (Atwood 106).
\textsuperscript{18} For example, see Atwood 12.
\textsuperscript{19} For example, see Atwood 45.
\textsuperscript{20} The emphasis on odd words parallels McCarthy’s use of unusual words; perhaps both McCarthy and Snowman attempt to preserve linguistic complexity by stretching the limits of their respective recollections.
Much of *The Road* consists of dialogue. Rather than crafting detailed expository passages, McCarthy frequently relies on conversation to narrate events and reveal what his characters are thinking. He often integrates dialogue into the text without quotation marks, using line breaks to differentiate between speakers. Since McCarthy does not identify the speakers explicitly, we must establish who says what based on our knowledge of the characters. When the man and the boy meet Ely on the road, an emblematic passage reads:

They watched him eat. When he was done eating, he sat holding the empty tin and looking down into it as if more might appear.

What do you want to give him?
What do you think he should have?
I don’t think he should have anything. What do you want to give him?
We could cook something on the stove. He could eat with us.

(McCarthy 164-165)

Like the rest of the prose, the dialogue between father and son consists of short, simple sentences. Based on our knowledge of the boy’s generous character, we assume that he speaks the second line, “What do you think he should have?” and the last line “We could cook something on the stove. . . .” while the man, true to his more practical nature, replies “I don’t think he should have anything.” Nevertheless, the lack of explicit attribution often makes the text ambiguous.

The centrality of dialogue in the novel further attests to the importance of conversation. The man and the boy talk to stave off loneliness and monotony, to give each other comfort, and to assert their humanity amid the brutal tendencies of those
they encounter on the road. When his son refuses to talk to him, the father repeatedly insists, “You have to talk to me” (McCarthy 77, 268). Later, when the man is dying, he tells the boy, “If I’m not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I’ll talk to you” (McCarthy 279). The prospect of the boy’s talking to his dead father echoes Snowman’s conversations with the women of his past. Like Snowman, the father seems to realize that conversation, even imaginary conversation, is necessary to maintain some level of humanity. The man’s insistence on the importance of conversation is tied to his realization that the decimation of humankind means that language is disappearing. He wants the boy to survive so that he can “carry the fire” which seems to entail preserving some understanding of what it means to be human (Mitchell 224).

*Parable* demonstrates the effectiveness of speech and conversation as a means of creating change. Lauren uses speech as the primary tool to spread her message. She learns from her father, a Baptist minister, how to speak persuasively. When he disappears, she preaches a sermon in his place (Butler 134–135). At the age of sixteen, she takes over teaching classes for her stepmother, Cory. These two formative experiences enable her to begin spreading Earthseed: “Given any choice at all, teaching is what I would choose to do . . . if I do it well, it will draw people to me—to Earthseed” (Butler 124). Lauren uses what she has learned from preaching and teaching to win over followers. Consequently, much of the novel’s explanation of Earthseed comes through her conversations with her converts. Each new Earthseed member goes through a phase of disbelief during which he or she contests Lauren’s truths and she must explain and justify her belief system. These back-and-forth
conversations, in which the parties are on equal footing, contrast with Lauren’s more formal, preacher-like addresses to the group as a whole, when she takes on a leadership role. Yet even when Lauren preaches, dialogue remains important: her followers are allowed to debate and challenge what she says. The dialogical structure of Lauren’s teaching once again highlights the importance of conversation.

Lauren’s efforts to create social change are inspired by traditional black theological practices. According to Tweedy, “For the Black church, God has been constructed and conceived of as an agent of social change, an avenger of social injustices, and a supreme being that desires the liberation of oppressed peoples” (2). Tweedy argues that black American religious practices cannot be understood without reference to the system of racial injustice in which they emerged, meaning that social activism forms an integral part of the teachings of the black church. Similarly, “Earthseed is a faith that hinges upon the ability and desire of the individual to work toward enacting social change in the face of extreme adversity” (Tweedy 4).

Earthseed reflects many aspects of black American Christianity, particularly its emphasis on civic responsibility and activism. Yet it also represents a radical revision of Christian doctrine, since God is no longer an anthropomorphized father figure but rather an abstract force. Lauren relies nonetheless on traditional speech-based preaching and proselytizing strategies to generate followers.

All three novels emphasize conversation. Importantly, the authors insist that in order to be effective, conversation must take the form of a true exchange. Talking to someone who does not respond does no good, and for this reason Snowman begins to go crazy. For the sake of their dialogue, the man insists that if the boy talks to him
after he is dead, he will answer. Similarly, Lauren maintains a constant dialogue with her followers even from a position of relative power.

**The Power of Storytelling: Reading, Writing, and Text**

Through storytelling, we communicate complex ideas and pass on histories. Each of the novels demonstrates how writing can preserve cultural knowledge through narrative.

In his role as prophet/messenger, Snowman establishes himself as a storyteller within a larger narrative tradition, much as Atwood situates herself through her use of allusion. He accepts his role as Crake’s prophet, answering the Crakers’ questions and telling them stories to explain their origins and the ways of the world. He frequently doubts whether he is doing the right thing: “What’s his life worth anyway, and who cares? Out, out, brief candle. He’s served his evolutionary purpose, as fucking Crake knew he would. He’s saved the children” (Atwood 107). Physically, the Crakers are safe, and Snowman has performed his duty. However, this passage suggests that something more is needed if the Crakers are to embody the future of humanity: 21 history, mythology, narrative. Snowman’s life has “worth” as a living archive of human experience. Even as he doubts his own importance, his citation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth—“out, out brief candle”—demonstrates the cultural knowledge he possesses. Snowman continues to watch over the Children of Crake because subconsciously he understands that he has something to give them that they cannot obtain on their own.

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21 It is doubtful that the Crakers can ever truly “replace” humanity as Crake hoped they would.
In a similar vein, *The Road* highlights the preservative power of books. One conversation between father and son reads: “There’s not any crows. Are there?/No./Just in books./Yes. Just in books” (McCathy 158). Now that crows are extinct, the only record of their existence survives in books and in the minds of those who were alive to see them. McCarthy himself acknowledges the importance of literary tradition. He told the *New York Times*: “The ugly fact is that books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written” (Woodward). Thus, *The Road’s* citations of earlier texts are an essential aspect of McCarthy’s project as a writer. McCarthy’s fragmented style in *The Road*, which resembles a jigsaw puzzle composed of bits and pieces of earlier literature neatly fitted together, reflects his dependence on other texts as sources of inspiration even as his character denies their worth.

Despite the man’s skepticism about books, *The Road* seems intent on establishing their value. The man recalls,

He’d stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He’d not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. The space which these things occupied was itself an expectation. (McCathy 187)

The destruction of human civilization is symbolized here in the destruction of the library, the archive of human knowledge. The image seemingly attests to the ultimate uselessness of books, which are nothing but “lies.” The survivors of the apocalypse
inhabit a world so markedly different from what came before that they have little use for the wisdom preserved in books, whose value as educational objects is predicated on the assumption that the “world to come” will at least to some degree resemble the world of the past. Thus, “the space these [books] occupied was itself an expectation”—an assumption of continuity between past and future. What, the man asks, can the texts of the past possibly reveal about this new, altered world?

Yet the man’s dependence on books for guidance belies his skepticism. According to Hillier, “The man clings to his humanity by making moral sense of his new world through his literary inheritance from the old world” (671). The man’s knowledge of literature informs his moral decision-making. In the post-apocalyptic world of The Road laws and rules no longer apply. Yet the man stolidly attempts to maintain a semblance of moral order by referring to himself and his son as “the good guys” and refusing to practice the atrocities that others commit. Meanwhile “the cannibalistic marauders and moral derelicts who predate upon the weak seem to have learned nothing from the past. The novel makes plain that these human monsters rehearse the most infamous atrocities of Western Civilization’s distant and not so distant past,” borrowing from the Holocaust, American slavery, and the brutalities of Greco-Roman civilization (Hillier 676–677). In the absence of external authority, the man relies on his knowledge of history, preserved in literature, to establish and maintain a moral framework for the boy. The prevalence of allusion attests to the man’s cultural knowledge, which he passes on to his son through storytelling.

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22 Hillier cites the example of the man’s decision to offer the blind man, Ely, hospitality, which is motivated by his recollection of Ovid’s Metamorphoses (Hillier 680; McCarthy 163).
The novel presents storytelling as an important means of preserving humanity’s legacy, even in the face of extreme destruction. When the boy remains hesitant to speak, the man suggests, “Why don’t you tell me a story” (McCarthy 268). Earlier on we are told that the father tells his son stories, “old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them” (McCarthy 41). In this way, the boy gains basic cultural literacy and a sense of right and wrong. The man wants his son to continue the tradition of telling stories in order to preserve that cultural knowledge.

Text likewise serves as a source of knowledge in *Parable*. The first time books appear in the novel, Lauren lends a stack of them to her friend Joanne in an attempt to persuade her to “get ready to survive” (Butler 55)—to prepare for the disaster Lauren predicts is coming. Lauren has been studying books on wilderness survival, botany, medicine, guns, and farming in an effort to learn anything that might help her survive. Joanne chooses not to listen to her, but Lauren’s foresight is rewarded when her community is burned and she is one of the few to escape.

By journaling, Lauren plays her part in preserving the archive of human knowledge, thereby securing her own legacy and participating in the ongoing effort to learn from the past. Lauren sees her writing as a means of ensuring that at some point her teachings will be heeded. She explains the purpose of *The Books of the Living* thus: “Then, someday when people are able to pay more attention to what I say than to how old I am, I’ll use these verses to pry them loose from the rotting past, and maybe push them into saving themselves and building a future that makes sense” (Butler 79). Just as the books Lauren has read have taught her how to survive, she hopes that her own writing will serve the same purpose. Journaling about her
experiences enables her to formulate the teachings of Earthseed, at which she arrives from her observations of the world around her. Lauren often turns to the verses she has written for *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* in order to explain certain concepts to her followers in a clear, concise, and compelling manner.

Finally, writing, like conversation, is understood in *Parable* as a fundamental human need. Lauren’s writing helps her gain perspective and peace of mind. After witnessing an especially disturbing scene of squalor and violence, she proclaims, “I have to write. I have to dump this on paper. I can’t keep it inside of me” (Butler 130) and again later, “I have to write, I don’t know what else to do” (158). For Lauren, writing is therapeutic, a coping mechanism. Much as Snowman longs to speak to someone (even an imaginary someone) amid the wasteland of the post-plague world, Lauren feels the need to share the horror she sees with an imagined audience.

**Conclusion**

*Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower* affirm the importance of meaning, conversation, the arts and humanities, literacy, naming, conversation, storytelling, text—in a word, language. After all, language is the essence of what makes us human. Despite their preoccupation with the loss of meaning, both in our own present and after the apocalypse, the authors place faith in the generative possibilities of language. One might say that in order for a signifier to be re-signified, it must first be emptied of its original meaning; the death of language holds the seeds of its rebirth. These authors take up older textual-cultural traditions and re-signify them to serve their own purposes—this becomes evident on both the stylistic and
thematic level. Through the act of writing and the stories they tell, Atwood, McCarthy, and Butler highlight how writing preserves cultural knowledge while at the same time generating new meanings and modifying old ones. It might also be employed as a means of changing the world.

The novels affirm the regenerative power of language. *The Road* depicts a simultaneous erosion and accretion of meaning, an ending and a beginning. As Saliba puts it, in *The Road*, “Representations of speech, writing, oral tales—all disintegrate while ecology and climate concomitantly decay . . . But language, like the planet, displays naturally regenerative powers, and *does* reaffirm itself—in the resurrection of thoughts, gods and speech” (153). Volker makes a similar observation about *Oryx and Crake*: “Both McCarthy and Atwood understand language as a fragile material resource that can become scarce or disappear altogether . . . But as we have seen in Atwood’s case, it also envisions the possibility of creating or reconstructing the world we inhabit, as both natural and social beings, by the act of writing and telling stories” (Volker 82). In *Parable*, Lauren transfigures language by writing *The Books of the Living*. Language structures the world around us; consequently it has the capacity to both reconstruct the past and shape the future.

All three novels might be understood as attempts to conceptualize the collapse of society and of language so that we may begin anew. In a sense, each of these novels invents a new language: neologism pervades *Oryx and Crake*, grammatical and lexical rule-breaking figures prominently in *The Road*, and an entirely new belief system dominates *Parable of the Sower*. While *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road* remake language stylistically, *Parable* carries out linguistic reconfiguration by imagining an
alternative way of talking about the world. Similarly, in order to discuss climate change meaningfully, we have to rethink and remake some of our basic understandings of how the world works. The collapse of civilization will inevitably lead to the destruction of language, but grasping the prospect of collapse in time to forestall it requires dramatic linguistic and cultural shifts.
CHAPTER 2

CHANGING THE WAY WE SEE THE WORLD: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction: Writing About Climate Change

This chapter aims to clarify what it means to write about climate change. In it I explore how climate fiction differentiates itself from traditional dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, how writing about climate change influences our perceptions of contemporary society, and how reading this type of novel might change the way we perceive and relate to the natural world. Climate fiction is still a relatively new genre—if it can even be labeled as such. Regardless of whether climate fiction deserves to be considered a separate genre, however, I believe the term can help us recognize some of the similarities between the three novels considered here, as well as the stakes of contemporary discussions of environmental catastrophe.

The Canadian author Margaret Atwood is an environmental activist (Hoby) and has expressed concerns about pollution, overpopulation, species extinction, natural resource exploitation, and, of course, climate change (Crum; PRI; The Independent; The Nexus Institute; Harvey). She grew up around biologists—her father was an entomologist, her brother a neurophysiologist—and acknowledges that she often heard predictions of environmental disaster as a child. She explains that her knowledge of biological principles influences her work (PRI; Science Friday).

Regarding the role of fiction in the environmental movement, Atwood has stated, “You’re a participant in any novel that you're reading. So let us say that it's an in-depth experience and for that reason, it can be very, very effective if you want to put a person into a situation that you wish to have them imagine” (PRI). Atwood
seems to agree with Heath and Heath in *Made to Stick*, who maintain that “mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we encounter that situation in the physical environment. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively” (18). Stories serve as thought experiments that enable us to work through situations before they occur. Atwood emphasizes the emotional potency of stories and wants her novels to force people to consider particular (unpleasant) futures. According to Atwood, “For the first time in human history, we see where we might go” (*Science Friday*) and she insists that she writes not about “possible” futures but “probable” ones (The Nexus Institute). We may thus infer that she wants us to read *Oryx and Crake* as having some predictive value, even though the novel is satirical and thus exaggerated.

The predictive value of *Oryx and Crake* stems from the novel’s ties to present reality—one of the characteristics of dystopia mentioned earlier. In interviews, Atwood emphasizes the importance of current events as a source of inspiration. For example, she has said that she tries to base her visions of the future “on realities that are with us today. . . everything that I put in has a basis in reality” (The Nexus Institute). In fact, many of the seemingly most farfetched inventions in *Oryx and Crake*, such as the luminous green rabbits, already exist (*Science Friday*; Hoby). Atwood admits to conducting a significant amount of biological research for the book and spending years collecting newspaper clippings (Kuznicki 385). She also stresses the importance of our taking responsibility for our own impacts: “Every time we invent a new technology, we like to play with that technology, and we don’t always

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23 Similarly, Snyder contends that “post-apocalyptic fiction serves as rehearsal or preview for its readers, an opportunity to witness in fantasy origins and endings that are fundamentally unwitnessable” (479).
foresee the consequences” (The Nexus Institute). As we will see later, *Oryx and Crake* warns against the unintended consequences that can result from careless experimentation.

As for categorizing the *Maddadam* trilogy as climate fiction, Atwood shies away from genre classification altogether. When asked if she thinks of *Oryx and Crake* as cli-fi, she told the *Huffington Post* that “Genre is a bookstore problem . . . They want to know where to put it on the shelves” (Crum). She does not see *Oryx and Crake* as belonging to a particular genre, in part because she considers climate change an “everything change” (Crum). She views the catastrophic rise in CO₂ levels as not just an environmental problem, but also as a political, economic, social, and cultural one, as do many prominent environmentalists, including Lester Brown, Bill McKibben, and Al Gore. Given that climate change affects so many areas of life, relegating novels like *Oryx and Crake* to a sub-category of eco-fiction might seem to downplay the scope of the questions these novels address. However, climate fiction is still a useful category insofar as it historicizes the novels it encompasses. I employ the label not in order to imply that these novels narrowly address a particular set of environmental issues, but rather to emphasize that they deal with a monumental change that originates in environmental problems at a specific time.

Phillips argues against reading *Oryx and Crake* as a climate-change novel: “Attempts to read the trilogy as climate change fiction . . . overlook the fact that climate change is not disruptive but constitutive of the world that Atwood’s characters find familiar; and in which they all seem to be more or less comfortable”

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24 See also *This Changes Everything* by Naomi Klein
25 For example, sea-level rise (as a result of ice melt due to warming) forces coastal communities to migrate, creating political strife over what to do with the refugees. See also Lester Brown’s *Plan B.*
This reading fails, however, to consider the possibility that the apparent noncentrality of climate change in the novel is part of Atwood’s environmental critique. As Phillips admits later on, “the culture the novel depicts . . . is one that has backed resolutely—and pre-posterously—into the future with its eyes closed, a culture that continues to ‘deny’ climate change even after it has happened, and which takes only minimal measures (like bullet trains and ‘solarcars’) to adapt to its ravages” (150, emphasis original). Even if the characters in Oryx and Crake seem not to be overly concerned about climate change, Atwood leaves her readers in no doubt as to its terrible effects. The culture of denial that Phillips describes sounds very much like our own. Thus, Atwood’s apparent lack of attention to climate change might be seen as a commentary on our own folly in continuing to ignore environmental damage even as it affects millions of people.

Furthermore, although climate change may at first appear to be a set piece in Oryx and Crake, it serves as the basis for much of the action. While the immediate cause of humankind’s demise in Oryx and Crake is the pandemic, Atwood makes it clear that the pre-apocalyptic world was already headed down a path of destruction. Crake’s actions are his misguided attempt to avert imminent environmental disaster. As Northover puts it, “The catastrophe—the virtual destruction of humanity on Earth . . . is not the result of ecological collapse caused by human activity but rather the consequence of a bioengineered virus meant to forestall such a collapse by killing off all humans” (81, emphasis mine). Crake recognizes that human civilization is on the brink of disaster: “As a species we’re in deep trouble, worse than anyone’s saying . . . we’re running out of space-time” (Atwood 295). He views the climate problem as
resulting from a demand for resources that exceeds the supply, an imbalance he attributes to the size of the human population. He decides to exterminate most of humankind in order to make room for his new species of humanoids, the Crakers. According to Crake, the Paradice Project is about “immortality”: he intends to preserve the human race, albeit in a modified form (Atwood 292). He reasons that “With the BlyssPluss Pill the human race will have a better chance of swimming” (Atwood 295). In other words, Atwood characterizes Crake not as an evil sociopath who kills for the sake of killing, but rather as an intelligent but arrogant revolutionary with more or less good intentions, if questionable morals.26 Crake sees the issue clearly; only his solution is problematic. In short, climate change indirectly causes the apocalypse in *Oryx and Crake*.

Our first entrance into Atwood’s fictional world indicates that environmental degradation will figure prominently in the novel. We immediately learn that something has gone awry:

On the Eastern horizon there’s a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that color still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. The shrieks of birds that nest out there and the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic. (Atwood 3)

The “greyish haze,” “deadly glow,” and “assorted rubble” convey a sense of wrongness. The passage juxtaposes the conventional nature imagery of nesting birds

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26 Similarly, Phillips asserts that “At no point in the trilogy does Atwood suggest that Crake’s diagnosis of the problems created by his fellow human beings is wrong, however ill-advised and mean-spirited his prescription for treating those problems seems to be” (154).
at sunrise with the destruction wrought by humanity: “offshore towers” (most likely oil rigs), “jumbled bricks,” and “rusted car parts.” We simultaneously become aware of a sense of loss: the sunrise, once “tender,” is now “deadly,” and Snowman nostalgically remembers a time when there were enough people to cause holiday traffic. As Atwood begins to flesh out her world, we learn that “noon is the worst, with its glare and humidity. At about eleven o’clock Snowman retreats out of sight of the sea altogether, because the evil rays bounce off the water and get at him even if he’s protected from the sky, and then he reddens and blisters” (Atwood 37). Even if the proximate cause of humankind’s demise is Crake’s plague, humans are obviously ill-equipped to survive on the novel’s dangerously warm planet. Atwood’s poignant descriptions of environmental catastrophe affectively impress upon us the dangers of climate change.

McCarthy shuns publicity, so information about his political views and where he sees The Road in relation to environmental action is limited. In a rare interview, he describes a trip he took with his son to El Paso, Texas during which McCarthy “had this image of what the town might look like in fifty or a hundred years” (The Oprah Winfrey Show). In light of this prophetic vision, which he describes as his inspiration for The Road, it seems reasonable to conclude that the novel expresses some of McCarthy’s fears about the future, including environmental catastrophe. When pressed to explain the nature of the unnamed disaster in The Road, McCarthy declined to give a definite answer, asserting instead that “It could be anything . . . the whole thing now is, what do you do now?” (Jurgensen). Similarly, when asked what he wanted the reader to “get out of” the novel, he replied, “to care about things and
people and be more appreciative” (Oprah). For McCarthy, what matters is how we react to his terrible vision—what we do to prevent such a disaster from coming to pass. While McCarthy does not explicitly frame The Road as a call to action (environmental or otherwise), he does seem to hope that his novel will have some degree of social impact.

Several critics have characterized The Road as a climate-change novel (Stark; Trexler and Johns-Putra; Hughes and Wheeler). Stark asserts that “The Road can be read as a warning about impending environmental catastrophe” and that it “can be seen to reflect anxieties about extreme weather events, deforestation, species extinction, and food shortages” (71,73). The man and the boy inhabit a world largely devoid of life, and only rarely can they obtain sufficient food. This scenario closely resembles what might happen in the event of extreme climate change. In fact, The Road has been called the “first great masterpiece of a globally warmed generation” (Hughes and Wheeler 5). Readers might hesitate to categorize the novel as climate fiction, given that the world it depicts is extremely cold as opposed to excessively warm. However, we must keep in mind that climate change entails all kinds of weather extremes, not just warming. According to scientific predictions, parts of the world will experience unusually cold weather.27 With many of the features of the scenario in The Road mirroring those we anticipate in our own future, the novel addresses climate change indirectly, if not directly. That is, even if the novel does not explicitly name climate change as the cause of the apocalypse, it still invites us to

27 For further information see https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/01/climate-change-colder-winters-global-warming-polar-vortex/
think about the consequences of environmental disasters, especially those related to climatic shifts.

The world McCarthy depicts in *The Road* is profoundly bleak. It is grey, charred, dark, polluted, and full of refuse and ruin. For example: “The country as far as they could see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk” (McCarthy 14). “The land was gullied and eroded and barren. The bones of dead creatures sprawled in the washes. Middens of anonymous trash” (McCarthy 177). “The thin trees down. The waterways a gray sludge. A blackened jackstraw land” (McCarthy 190). Once again, evocative imagery is employed to reach the reader on an emotional level. While the nature of the disaster that has led to such desolation is unclear, humans seem to be at least partially to blame.

Readers and critics have come up with several explanations for the calamity in *The Road*, yet McCarthy refuses to weigh in. One of the more plausible theories is the nuclear-winter scenario. Edwards champions this view, as do Sarvate and Sheikh. The “long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (McCarthy 52)—McCarthy’s only description of the disaster itself—along with the perpetually freezing temperatures, firestorms, ash, and omnipresent darkness, suggest a nuclear apocalypse. However, as Grindley points out, there is no sign of either nuclear weapons or radiation (1). Another possible explanation is a meteor collision (Palmowski 358). I find this possibility less convincing since it bypasses the problem of human responsibility, which I believe is important to McCarthy. Given
McCarthy’s deliberate ambiguity, speculation about the nature of the event seems rather beside the point. What does seem clear is that humans are at fault and the disaster was preventable. Since McCarthy has stated that he wants us to wonder, “What do you do now?” perhaps he hopes to push his readers to change their behavior in order to prevent something like this from occurring.

When the novel gives us glimpses of the past (presumably our own present), it becomes clear that mistreatment of the environment permeates even the man’s most idyllic memories. For example, when he reminisces about “the perfect day of his childhood,” he recalls “the edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps . . . the windfall trees of a hurricane years past,” “a dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water” and “a lardcan poured with concrete with an eyebolt in the center” (McCarthy 13). That these details stand out in the protagonist’s recollection suggest that even before the apocalyptic event, environmental disaster and exploitation, pollution, and refuse were inescapable. The man’s memories indicate that environmental degradation has been going on for decades. In this way, the novel locates the origins of the apocalypse in our own time, rather than in some imaginary future period.

_The Road_ emphasizes humanity’s problematic legacy in other ways as well. At one point, father and son come across an abandoned dam. The boy asks his father, “Will the dam be there for a long time?” to which the father replies, “I think so. It’s made out of concrete. It will probably be there for hundreds of years. Thousands even” (McCarthy 20). The road itself is a further testament to humanity’s long-lasting impact. People have manufactured materials that take hundreds, even thousands of years to decompose, disrupting natural processes. Whether we realize it or not, our
actions will continue to affect the Earth for centuries to come, perhaps even after we have gone extinct. Acknowledging the magnitude of our impact might lead to arrogance, yet it might also encourage us to become more thoughtful in our actions.

As in *Oryx and Crake*, the apocalypse in *The Road* stems from denial. One conversation between the man and Ely, the blind old man encountered on the road, reads as follows: “I knew this was coming./You knew it was coming?/Yeah. This or something like it. I always believed in it./Did you try to get ready for it?/No. What would you do?” (McCarthy 168). Ely forces the man to confront his own complicity by asking, “What would you do?” implying that the man would have behaved no differently if he too had known.28 After all, how could the man not have known? His memories reveal that he was not unaware of environmental degradation. According to Stark, “The novel’s repeated motif, of the man and the boy looking up and down the road, an image centrally concerned with vision, reveals their anxiety about their future and their guilt about their past” (74). The novel’s emphasis on sight, and especially blindness, serves as a metaphor for the man’s complicity in bringing about the apocalypse, or at the very least, his failure to do anything to prevent it. Like the rest of his society, he once lived in willful blindness, refusing to acknowledge humanity’s dangerous effect on the world until it was too late. The society of *Oryx and Crake*, which “continues to deny climate change even after it has happened,” finds its parallel here in a man who idealizes his past, at least when comparing it to his present, without acknowledging his participation in a civilization that refused to act in its own interests.

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28 Perhaps Ely also hints at humanity’s helplessness in the face of such dramatic natural processes by asking “What could I or anyone else have done?”
Butler was a prolific author whose fiction engages frequently with social and political issues. Like Atwood, she resisted genre classifications, asserting that “Labels tend to be marketing devices. All too often, they mean anything, and thus nothing” (Kenan 55). Like Atwood and McCarthy, Butler draws inspiration from the world around her as well as from previous literature (Sanders 2004).

As in *Oryx and Crake* and *The Road*, contemporary reality serves as the basis for the dystopian speculation in *Parable*. According to Butler, “*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* were largely inspired by the news, by the trends that seemed important” (“A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler” 339). Butler’s writing method is remarkably similar to Atwood’s in this respect. According to Butler, “The idea in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* . . . is to look where we are now, what we are doing now, and to consider where some of our current behaviors and unattended problems might take us . . . In particular I looked at global warming and the ways in which it’s likely to change things for us” (“Conversation” 337). She says of the series that it was intended to “give warning” (Sanders) about what might come to pass if we do not change our ways.

Although Butler is clearly preoccupied with what our future might look like, she maintains an optimistic attitude. In an interview with the *New York Times*, she stresses, “. . . I’m hopeful. The only problem that we human beings really suffer from, and this is important to us as a species, is that we tend to do the right thing when we get scared . . . we have to wait until disaster looms” (Marriot). *Parable* might be seen as an effort to bring the reality of climate change and social chaos closer to home—to convey a sense of impending disaster so that we will react before the situation
deteriorates further. The belief that change for the better is possible is central to any attempt to bring about social reform through writing. Thus, Butler hopes that “people who read Parable of the Sower will think about where we seem to be heading—we the United States, even we the human species. Where are we going? What sort of future are we creating? Is it the kind of future you want to live in? If it isn’t, what can we do to create a better future?” (“Conversation” 341).

Among the many grave problems that Parable depicts, climate change is one of the most important. As Butler observes, “Global warming is practically a character in Parable of the Sower” (“Octavia Butler Interview—Transcending Barriers”). Butler focuses on climate change because she recognizes that “We tend to go to the edge . . . the problem with something like global warming is you can’t just draw back and make it ok . . . with global warming, after you’ve spent over a century messing things up, by the time you decide to fix it, your grandchildren might see some results, but chances are, you won’t” (“Transcending Barriers”). Parable might accordingly be read as an effort to scare us by indicating just how close to the edge we already are, so that we will act sooner rather than later.

Few critics have explicitly identified Parable of the Sower as Climate Fiction. Fiskio, however, discusses Parable as part of a larger climate-change discourse, and Bennett, Miller, and Frazier all remark on environmental themes in the novel. Like the other two novels, Parable depicts a world of climatic shifts, ecological damage, and resource scarcity. According to Lauren, “Tornadoes are smashing hell out of Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, and two or three other states . . . and there’s a blizzard freezing the northern Midwest . . . in New York and New Jersey, a measles
epidemic is killing people” (Butler 54). Rainfall has become infrequent, and much of the water has been polluted, making it a scarce and valuable resource. In fact, water has become the new oil, costing “several times as much as gasoline” (Butler 18). Disease runs rampant and violence is commonplace as people fight to get their hands on basic necessities.

Like Atwood and McCarthy, Butler projects a future based on current trends, but unlike in the other two novels, in Parable no definitive cataclysmic event has taken place. Rather, the narrative depicts the decay of society via a process that Nixon refers to as “slow violence.” Social and environmental disaster have gradually and often invisibly taken hold, creating hellish conditions for the poor and marginalized (Nixon; Frazier 47-50). According to Frazier, “The most jarring element of Butler’s future California is its similarities in aesthetics and patterns to the world we inhabit presently” (48). For example, walled communities like Robledo, analogous to the compounds in Oryx and Crake, are more heavily protected versions of the gated communities that already exist in California and elsewhere. Miller suggests, “One might think of the process of reading Butler's books as a journey of exploration where the reader is able to try on new narratives about the future and consider various alternatives” (338). This novel, too, serves as a mental flight simulator.

Like the other two novels, Parable addresses climate-change denial. Lauren confronts several arguments against climate action. For example, Joanne’s father “doesn’t believe people changed the climate in spite of what the scientists say. He says only God could change the world in such an important way” (Butler 57). This attitude serves as a means of evading responsibility under the pretense of piety. While
Joanne does not necessarily agree with her father, she exemplifies another strain of anti-climate-action reasoning, the “It’s too late” argument. She tells Lauren, “It doesn’t make any difference . . . We can’t make the climate change back, no matter why it changed in the first place. You and I can’t. The neighborhood can’t. We can’t do anything” (Butler 57). Both of these standpoints enable those who hold them to avoid taking action by claiming inefficacy. Lauren’s sarcastic outburst in response to Joanne—“Then let’s kill ourselves now and be done with it!” (Butler 57)—illustrates that with respect to climate change, nihilistic attitudes are just as pernicious as denial.

Drawing on Janet Fiskio and Jim Miller, I maintain that Butler’s intersectional treatment of climate change sets Parable apart. The novel engages with issues of race, gender, and class in conjunction with ecological damage. These factors do not act independently on individuals but often overlap, resulting in aggregate or synergistic effects. While climate change impacts everyone in the long run, its consequences are often felt unevenly. Certain areas are more vulnerable to environmental destruction (i.e., sea-level rise, pollution, disastrous storms, warming). Moreover, the under-privileged do not have the resources to simply pick up and leave affected areas as the wealthy do. Parable presents environmental degradation through the lens of environmental justice, showing how race, gender, class, and the environment are bound up with each other and suggesting that we cannot truly make progress on environmental issues unless we also change our relationships to each other.

In sum, the three novels share an unmistakable anxiety about where we are headed, and each condemns our refusal to act in spite of obvious indications that we
are running out of time. All three depend on evocative images of environmental catastrophe, heavily inspired by our own present. While *The Road* and *Oryx and Crake* take more traditional approaches to environmental disaster, *Parable of the Sower’s* intersectional perspective allows it to better account for the complexity of environmental crises. While these novels do not offer a recipe for how we should proceed with respect to the environment, they at least show us some of the ways in which we have gone wrong.

**Nature With a Capital “N”**

When we speak of Nature with a capital “N,” we usually mean to invoke Nature in the transcendental or Romantic sense: the myth of the pristine world, untouched by human intervention, sublime. In *Nature*, Emerson evokes the supreme beauty of nature, its mysteries, its power, and its divinity. While the novels considered here readily acknowledge the fallacy of so-called “pristine” nature, they retain the trope of Nature as an all-powerful and mysterious force. They build on the transcendentalist concept, seeing hope in the non-human world’s ability to endure and regenerate.

*Counterbalancing the obvious desolation of the world, Oryx and Crake* alludes to Nature’s extraordinariness in several places. The opening passage cited earlier recurs at the end of the novel, with several important alterations:

> On the eastern horizon there’s a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow. Strange how that color still seems tender. He gazes at it with rapture; there is no other word for it. *Rapture*. His heart is seized, carried away, as if
by some large bird of prey. After everything that’s happened, how can the world be so beautiful? Because it is. From the offshore towers come the avian shrieks and cries that sound like nothing human. (Atwood 372)

This passage differs from the earlier one in the emphatic insertion of the word “rapture.” Snowman wonders at the fact that even after humans have polluted it, the world remains beautiful. The replacement of “holiday traffic” by “nothing human” constitutes another important change. Instead of looking back and expressing nostalgia for a time when holiday shoppers clogged the roads, Snowman looks forward into a future largely devoid of humans. The implication is that the Earth has the capacity to regenerate, but humankind may not. Yet to some extent, instead of grieving for the past, Snowman seems to accept the present as it is. This passage also attests to the mysteries of nature: Snowman can think of no other explanation for why the world remains beautiful other than “because it is.” In many ways, the world exceeds human comprehension—something that arrogant scientists like Crake fail to understand. Nature will outlive humankind and destroying the natural world will primarily harm us.

In an earlier scene Nature similarly awes and befuddles Snowman:

A caterpillar is letting itself down on a thread, twirling slowly like a rope artist, spiraling towards his chest. It’s a luscious, unreal green, like a gumdrop, and covered with tiny bright hairs. Watching it, he feels a sudden, inexplicable surge of tenderness and joy. Unique, he thinks. There will never be another

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29 Tellingly, the word Snowman chooses to convey his feelings, “rapture,” is unique—“there is no other word for it.” Snowman once again delights in the richness of language and its ability to capture specificity.
caterpillar just like this one. There will never be another such moment of time, another such conjunction. (Atwood 41)

Here, too, the natural world inspires feelings of tenderness in Snowman. His awareness that “there will never be another such moment of time, another such conjunction” establishes him as fully present in the moment, caught up neither in memories of the past nor worries about the future. For the time being, he is captivated: the caterpillar holds all of his attention. The vividness of its coloring and the creature’s intricacy (“covered with tiny bright hairs”) amaze him. Moreover, this minute creature has managed to survive the apocalypse—a remarkable feat in itself. It is difficult to imagine Crake, with his cold intellect, appreciating a caterpillar in the way that Snowman does. Snowman fully acknowledges humankind’s influence on the natural world while at the same time sustaining an almost spiritual connection to nature.

_The Road_ underscores the raw power of Nature, depicted as beyond the human ability to comprehend:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing darkness of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (McCarthy130)

This passage expresses a profound sense of inadequacy on the part of humankind. As in _Oryx and Crake_, the end of civilization has returned the human species to an
animal-like state. Father and son can do nothing more than run and hide. Moreover, “borrowed time” and “borrowed world” suggest that humans never truly had control to begin with—they were always at the mercy of the world around them. The Earth is “relentless” and will keep on turning, regardless of humankind’s fate. Furthermore, even the man’s moment of enlightenment is infused with blindness: he cannot see through “darkness implacable” and his sense of inadequacy is mapped onto the sun itself, with its “blind dogs.” The man envisions the Earth as an unfathomable entity possessed of immense power. A further example of the unparalleled power of Nature appears in the form of the eighty-foot waterfall the man and boy encounter, which inspires awe and fear in the boy. Humankind’s insignificance in comparison to these natural wonders implies that we should not presume to control Nature, but should humbly accept what she provides.

While much of the imagery in *The Road* is bleak and desolate, a few passages recall the beauty that has been lost. The novel ends with a nostalgic recollection of vibrant Nature:

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.” (McCarthy 287)

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30 A “sundog” is a term for the atmospheric halo effect around the sun (Stark 79).
Once again, Nature appears mysterious, inscrutable. However, the brook trout with their delicate patterns have vanished, along with the crows, and the changes that have taken place cannot be reversed. The “maps of the world in its becoming” suggest that Nature had set the Earth on a trajectory with which we humans have interfered because we have failed to understand it. To us, these maps are only “mazes.” Edwards maintains that McCarthy deploys Nature in the Emersonian sense, as a “sacred text,” and as a “source of poetry and metaphor and truth” (56). This passage offers a prime example of Emerson’s influence.

In *Parable*, Butler imbues nature with mystery and divinity. One of the most important features of Earthseed is its emphasis on the natural world. Lauren writes,

Create no images of God. Grubs to bees,  
Accept the images bees to swarm.  
that God has provided. From one, many;  
They are everywhere, From many, one;  
in everything. Forever uniting, growing,  
God is change— dissolving—  
Seed to tree, forever Changing.  
tree to forest; The universe  
Rain to river, Is God’s self-portrait.  
river to sea; (Butler 315)

Lauren’s concept of God is profoundly bound up with Nature. The name “Earthseed” itself foregrounds the importance of natural processes, as does the Parable of the Sower. According to Tweedy, “Earthseed re-positions God from being outside of the natural order to being within the natural world. In this sense, God re-affirms peoples’ hope, while encouraging self-agency in confronting a state of political and eco-collapse” (4). If divinity abides in the natural world, God is all around us, which is at once a source of hope and a reason for self-agency, since God is not
anthropomorphized and therefore cannot explicitly direct us. The God-as-change
concept compels people to think for themselves about how they might improve their
lot and that of the people around them, even in the midst of extreme destruction.
Lauren’s creed thus spurs her followers to be better stewards of the natural world and
of each other.

*Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower* draw on traditional
Romantic representations of Nature as a source of hope. We need faith in Nature’s
capacity to regenerate in order to resist the nihilistic belief that all is lost and we
should simply give up, as Lauren’s friend Joanne does. Moreover, if we see Nature as
a source of divinity, an edifying text, a thing of beauty, a sublime and mysterious
entity, we might be more inclined to treat her with respect. All three novels call upon
us to enter into an almost metaphysical relationship with Nature, without ignoring the
damage we have caused.

**Rethinking Neoliberalism: Individualism, Progress, and the Tragedy of the
Commons**

In recent years, neoliberalism has become the predominant ideology embraced
by politicians and economists in developed countries. Neoliberalism promotes
economic deregulation, free-market competition, and individual liberty. It defines
human progress in terms of sustained economic growth (Harvey). However,
unmitigated liberty has its drawbacks. Free-market economic systems have been
linked to environmental exploitation ever since Garrett Hardin, inspired by William

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31 For a useful summary of neoliberalism and its history, see George Monbiot’s article in *The Guardian*. 
Forster Lloyd, published “The Tragedy of the Commons” (1968). Hardin’s basic formulation—according to which in “a pasture open to all,” “each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain” by adding animals to his herd, resulting in overgrazing—culminates in the declaration that “each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited” (1244). In other words, free-market capitalism inevitably leads to environmental exploitation because each individual has an incentive to compete for scarce resources in spite of generalized consequences. The fundamental mechanism of environmental destruction is individual self-interest. Many scholars have expanded on Hardin’s theory, and it remains a key component of environmental discourse, particularly with respect to the concept of sustainability.\(^\text{32}\)

An important aspect of Atwood’s environmental ethos in *Oryx and Crake* finds expression in her denunciation of free-market economics. Crake admits the extent to which the laws of supply and demand rule Atwood’s dystopian society when he reveals that corporations like HelthWyzer have been intentionally manufacturing and releasing diseases to make a profit:

Naturally they develop the antidotes at the same time as they’re customizing the bugs, but they hold those in reserve, they practice the economics of scarcity so they’re guaranteed high profits . . . The best diseases, from a business point of view . . . would be those that cause lingering illnesses.

Ideally—that is, for maximum profit—the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out. (Atwood 211)

\(^{32}\) The United Nations’1987 Brundland Report (Our Common Future) first defined the term “sustainable development” as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”
Obviously, the prospect of a society populated by businesspeople so intent on turning a profit that they intentionally inflict disease and suffering on unsuspecting victims is horrifying. Yet as recent developments have demonstrated, Atwood understood the logic of corporate behavior all too well. Pharmaceutical companies are notorious for pushing drugs on patients when they do not really need them, often in spite of painful, even lethal, side effects.33 The society Atwood depicts is completely dominated by corporations. It is laissez-faire in the extreme, utterly free of government regulation. In the absence of formal sanctions against self-interest, the profit-at-all-costs mentality outweighs any ethical considerations.

*Oryx and Crake* plays on many aspects of the Tragedy of the Commons. For example, Crake articulates his concerns about the state of his society in terms of sustainability (Phillips 154): “Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts; but very soon, demand is going to exceed supply for everyone” (Atwood 295, emphasis original). As discussed earlier, Atwood satirizes commercialization and commodification through her pervasive use of neologistic brand names. Corporations have attempted to package and sell every aspect of life, from beauty (AnooYoo) to sex (HotTotts) to death (hedsoff.com). What’s more, they have mined the Earth for its resources until there is nothing left. The result, as predicted by Hardin, is ruin.

Rampant development of technology without sufficient forethought for the environmental consequences is another outcome of individualistic, profit-oriented

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33 See for example the lawsuit against Purdue Pharma which alleges that the company knowingly caused the opioid crisis by deceptively marketing OxyContin so they could make billions of dollars both on the drug and on treatments for addiction. [https://www.cbsnews.com/news/purdue-pharma-lawsuit-massachusetts-attorney-general-blames-sackler-family-for-creating-opioid-crisis-oxycontin/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/purdue-pharma-lawsuit-massachusetts-attorney-general-blames-sackler-family-for-creating-opioid-crisis-oxycontin/)
societies that Atwood critiques. Corporate scientists arbitrarily create genetic hybrids with little regard for the outcome: “Create-an-animal was so much fun, said the guys doing it; it made you feel like God” (Atwood 51). Many of the products of bioengineering in the novel, such as Jimmy’s apparently lovable and harmless rakunk (a raccoon-skunk hybrid), although morally suspect, display no obvious dysfunctions. However, unfettered genetic splicing clearly has the potential to create problems, as Jimmy notes “a number of the experiments were destroyed because they were too dangerous to have around” (Atwood 51). The consequences of genetic modification are unpredictable. According to Northover, discussing one of Atwood’s non-fiction works, “In Payback (201–202), Atwood points to technology as the machine over which humans no longer appear to have control yet which initially gave them the ability to exploit the environment and reproduce beyond sustainable limits” (Northover 82). Oryx and Crake similarly thematizes the misuse of technology, most importantly, biotechnology, in a society that does not impose sufficient constraints on its citizens.

Ultimately, in Oryx and Crake environmental exploitation as a result of neoliberalism leads to apocalypse. As Grimbeek observes, “The central premise of the novel” is that “late capitalism is intimately connected to death and extinction” (92). Crake’s project fails because he continues to think within the parameters of capitalism: “Crake comes up with a market solution to the problems of collapse and sustainability, but not one of the sort favored by business and government because it is also a meta-solution” (Phillips 154). Crake does not question the basic law of

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34 A further manifestation of the dangers of genetic modification are the creepily-intelligent and malevolent “pigoons,” giant pigs designed to produce organs for transplant.
supply and demand; he merely attempts to increase the supply of resources by reducing demand. He cannot conceive of sustainability without falling back on the capitalist framework.

The Road has been read as a condemnation of American individualism. According to Palmowski, “The American dream of the Road,” as articulated in Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road, “represents absolute freedom, the liberation from daily cares, and the demands and expectations of society” (365). That is, the Road traditionally represents self-reliance in the Emersonian sense and the ability to make one’s own way in the world. In contrast, “In McCarthy’s world the Road is a place of exile. It is not the life that the characters embrace voluntarily but the one that they are condemned to. But most importantly, the story that McCarthy tells is the story of self-denial and responsibility, underscoring the fragility and limitations of individuals. It is also a grim reminder of how much humans depend on Society…” (Palmowski 365). I hesitate to say that The Road underscores the “fragility and limitations of individuals,” given that the novel glorifies its protagonists’ perseverance—their ability to survive despite immense obstacles seems to point not to limitations but to an incredible strength of will. Nevertheless, the novel does paint a gruesome picture of a world without “Society,” suggesting that pure individualism as embodied by the man and the boy is not something to aspire to, but rather a necessary adaptation, given their circumstances.

Alternatively, one could argue that The Road privileges a certain brand of white masculine individualism. The man and boy are on their own, independent, with no family or community other than themselves. As Stark points out, the novel
contains few female characters. Those that do exist, he argues, “embody the archetype of women as Madonna or whore” (81). These women are reduced either to the caring mother figure (like the woman who adopts the boy at the end of the novel) or the selfish and cowardly whore, as represented by the boy’s mother, who commits suicide and describes herself as a “faithless slut” with a “whorish heart” (McCarthy 58-59, Stark 81). I would argue that we never learn enough about McCarthy’s female characters to warrant such a harsh condemnation of his representation of women, but the scarcity of female characters is worth noting in itself. According to Stark, “The man, whose very existence fulfills American exceptionalism, embodies the characteristics associated with self-reliance, resourcefulness, and independence. These are qualities that the man cultivates in the boy, who becomes hardened through learning that they cannot help others at the expense of their own survival” (81). While I agree that the man exemplifies “self-reliance, resourcefulness, and independence,” I disagree that the boy becomes as much like his father as Stark makes him out to be. The boy repeatedly demonstrates his generosity and willingness to help others, and more than once he persuades his father to show kindness to strangers despite the man’s reluctance to do so. Whether the novel ultimately embraces or criticizes this specific strain of individualism is open to debate, but at the very least, The Road shies away from uncomplicated celebration of individualism.

Like Oryx and Crake, The Road reveals how absolute individualism and economic self-interest lead to environmental degradation and misery. In The Road, years of disregard for environmental destruction culminate in an unnamed

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35 One salient example is the scene in which man and boy share a meal with Ely, the old man they meet on the road (161-174).
catastrophe. Like Atwood’s, McCarthy’s characters live out the consequences of the Tragedy of the Commons. In both cases, when individuals act only on their own behalf, social and environmental disaster results. According to Schleusner, “With regard to *The Road*, one could thus argue that the world that is portrayed here appears less like an imagination of alterity and difference, but instead seems like the delineation of a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ extrapolated from the basis of our own experience of dog-eat-dog capitalism” (4). In other words, *The Road* depicts the end of government and a return to the chaotic “state of nature,” yet it also eerily allegorizes laissez-faire capitalism. The sheer brutality depicted in the novel seems to contradict any notion of civilization, yet, as Dominy points out, the cannibalism to which some survivors take recourse can also be seen as a metaphor for blind consumerism (143). Schleusner also aptly points out that *The Road* challenges neoliberal progressivism by evoking a world in which “the concept of the future seems to have almost completely vanished” (5). In short, *The Road* collapses the categories of “civilization” and its opposite, “nature” or “savagery,” thereby disrupting neoliberal concepts of individualism and progress.

One cannot talk about capitalism in *The Road* without discussing the Coca-Cola scene. As Schleusener observes, the presence of the brand name is striking in a novel where most of the characters and products remain nameless (Murphet 119; Schleusener 6). The man finds a single can of Coke in an abandoned supermarket and gives it to the boy to drink (McCarthy 22-23). The scene is noteworthy for the way “the Coke, as maybe the last of its kind, is elevated here from an everyday product of

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36 For example, the end of the novel reveals that the man’s one goal, to reach the seashore, is nothing more than an arbitrary destination. Similarly, “no list of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later” (McCarthy 56, Schleusner 5).
mass consumer culture to a singular item, a rare artifact surrounded by a mystical aura” (Schleusener 6). Mitchell concludes that in *The Road* ordinary objects “take on a lustrous glow when framed against privation” (209). Thus, the obvious interpretation of this scene is that the Coke becomes special simply because it exists in a world of scarcity.\(^3^7\) Perhaps the scene is merely a nostalgic recollection of an iconic beverage, yet it raises “the question of whether our behavior as consumers might change were we to think that each Coke we get to drink could be our last one” (Schleusener 6). This latter interpretation aligns with McCarthy’s enjoinder to “care about things and people and be more appreciative.” Schleusener goes further, arguing that the scene represents the “end of capitalism” through the consumption of possibly the last of an emblematic consumer product.\(^3^8\) Whatever the significance of the Coke, its presence in the novel serves as one more source of continuity between the world of the novel and our own.

Perhaps more significant than the can of Coke, is the shopping cart in which the man and boy transport their belongings. In a dark parody of the blissful shopper who wanders around filling his cart with whatever his heart desires, man and boy raid houses and abandoned supermarkets in a desperate, never-ending search for supplies. Just as consumers are never entirely fulfilled by their purchases but are repeatedly seduced into buying more, the man and boy find just enough food and supplies to keep them alive and on the hunt but not enough to make life comfortable.\(^3^9\) The

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\(^3^7\) In fact, capitalism depends on scarcity insofar as demand is frequently increased by limiting supply.

\(^3^8\) Yet this apparent ending proves false when the protagonists encounter another Coke later on, which “reminds the reader of the sheer magnitude of serial mass production” (Schleusner 6-7), that is, capitalism is a difficult beast to kill.

\(^3^9\) The shopping cart also evokes familiar images of homelessness, since homeless persons in cities often transport their belongings this way.
failure of the shopping cart’s wheel might also symbolize the breakdown of civilization, with the man’s ability to fix it one more demonstration of his self-sufficiency.

In short, the seemingly anachronistic presence of consumer products in The Road’s post-civilization world functions as a reminder of the far-reaching legacy of capitalism. McCarthy ostensibly represents the end of civilization, yet post-apocalyptic existence mirrors pre-apocalyptic life in unexpected and unnerving ways, suggesting that neoliberal ideals are more ingrained than we realize.

Butler likewise portrays the destructive potential of free-market capitalism. Her criticism of privatization and corporatization emerges from her discussion of the takeover of the town of Olivar by Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton and Company (KSF), a multinational conglomerate. When KSF buys Olivar, it underpays the town’s workers, forcing them into debt slavery. The company also intends to gain control over farming, water, and solar and wind energy throughout the Southwest. Butler thereby suggests that even attempts to fight climate change (i.e., through sustainable energy) can be abused by corporations seeking to turn a profit. Later on, we find out that Emery Solis and her daughter Tori were in a similar situation: the farm Emery and her husband were working on was sold to an agribusiness conglomerate that paid its workers in company scrip and charged them more for rent and supplies than they could earn. Once again, the workers became debt slaves who “could be forced to work longer hours for less pay, could be ‘disciplined’ if they failed to meet their quotas, could be traded and sold with or without their consent, with or without their families” (Butler 288). This situation reproduces indentured servitude or slavery. One
might say that the current climate of deregulation and the systematic attacks on labor unions, exaggerated in *Parable of the Sower*, are gradually reviving slavery and other outdated practices. Like the other authors, Butler seems skeptical of progressive rhetoric.

Miller has commented on the significance of Olivar, suggesting that “Butler's portrait of Olivar is suggestive of both the shift of real power in the world from nation-states to multinational capital, and the consequences of this shift for ordinary peoples' ability to control their economic destinies” (354). As Miller observes later, Butler reverses the common practice of American companies underpaying their foreign laborers, thereby putting “the American reader in the shoes not of some oppressed ‘Third World’ person, but of someone with whom they can more directly identify” (354). Butler herself cites the Reagan administration’s deification of capitalism as a source of inspiration for *Parable* (Miller 353). KSF epitomizes some of today’s worst forms of corporate exploitation.

Like the other authors, Butler blames economic policies for environmental degradation. *Parable* is the only novel in which some form of national government still exists. However, Butler’s government is completely under the sway of corporate interests. For example, President Donner’s “plan for putting people back to work” includes suspending “‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws” (Butler 27). Donner stands for many of today’s conservative politicians, who advocate lifting environmental regulations in order to ease financial burdens on businesses. Moreover, Donner’s plan foreshadows the corporate takeover

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40 That is not to say that slavery does not still exist in some parts of the world. I mean only that it is currently a less commonly accepted practice.
of Olivar, which would violate worker protection laws were they in place. We should plainly not follow Donner’s example if we want to avoid environmental catastrophe, let alone slavery.

Finally, *Parable* highlights the way in which neoliberal economic systems aggravate environmental inequities. The concept of environmental inequality or environmental injustice suggests that certain groups are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards. In particular, racial minorities and people of lower socio-economic status are more likely to experience health problems related to environmental contamination (Brulle and Pellow 104-105). By exacerbating economic inequalities, free-market economic systems make it even more difficult for impoverished individuals to escape the effects of climate change. In *Parable*, the wealthy live in walled communities, protected from the worst of the chaos. Meanwhile, “‘There’s cholera spreading in southern Mississippi and Louisiana . . . There are too many poor people—illiterate, jobless, homeless, without decent sanitation or clean water. They have plenty of water down there, but a lot of it is polluted” (Butler 53). Even though geographically these people should have an advantage because they have access to water, they face health hazards because they are economically disadvantaged and likely lack the means to decontaminate the water. Through passages like this one, *Parable* shows how climate change is intertwined with other forms of injustice.

Read concurrently, *Oryx and Crake, The Road*, and *Parable of the Sower* offer a harsh exposé of neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism promotes economic deregulation and individualism, both of which lead to environmental exploitation,
social inequality, and general strife. Moreover, these novels suggest that conventional notions of progress as economic growth, according to which human society is continually moving toward a better state, obscure the dangerous direction in which we are headed.

**Future Directions: The Importance of Interconnectedness and Responsibility**

Not only do these novels critique aspects of contemporary society, most importantly neoliberal ideology, they also suggest alternative ways in which people might relate to the environment and to one another. Although they do not propose specific solutions (that would be a utopian project), they compel us to reassess our present beliefs and practices by representing them to us in a new light. Moreover, they urge us to take action. Specifically, I maintain that these novels encourage us to assume responsibility for the consequences of our activities and to recognize our place as agents within a larger web of life and non-life. The neoliberal emphasis on competition and self-sufficiency is one aspect of our estrangement. In this section, I focus on our disregard for our impact on the natural world and on each other. I also challenge the assumption that we as humans are discrete self-contained units. In conclusion, I suggest that we might benefit from a worldview similar to Jane Bennett’s *vital materialism* and Michelle Murphy’s *alterlife*.

One of the features that makes neoliberal ideology so pernicious is the artificial divide it creates between humans and nature, apparently justifying and therefore encouraging environmental exploitation. Murphy proposes that Atwood
is at pains to show how genetic engineering in the public realm and virtual reality gaming in the private realm combine to create a fundamental disconnect between humans and their environmental household. Rather than innovations, both represent static responses to changing realities, one through a discrete rather than holistic perception of nature and the other through escapism that functions as a denial of complexity and complicity. (88)

Genetic engineering in *Oryx and Crake* is carried out in an arrogant and haphazard manner. The scientists fail to exercise caution in their experiments and blatantly disregard the possible consequences of their actions, because for them genetic experimentation is a mere “hobby” and they are just “fooling around” (Atwood 51).

Similarly, virtual reality enables characters like the young Jimmy and Crake to escape from the unpleasantness of their everyday life into another world where they have more control over what happens. Separating themselves from the natural world allows the characters in *Oryx and Crake*, much like us, to continue to live in denial of the environmental damage they have caused.

Not surprisingly, in *Oryx and Crake* the culturally imposed disconnect between humans and nature results in serious unintended consequences. Crake is the ultimate example of someone cut off from reality. In his arrogance, he believes he can control the fate of humanity. Unlike Snowman, he has no appreciation for the beauty of nature—he sees it only as a means to an end, an instrument to be manipulated for his own purposes. At some level, Crake seems to realize that he is not truly in control, yet he acts as though he is. As Snowman observes, “The whole world is now one vast uncontrolled experiment—the way it always was, Crake would have said—and the
doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate” (Atwood 228). While Crake realizes that the world is “one vast uncontrolled experiment,” in his eagerness to steer the course of history, he assumes he can predict the consequences of his actions. However, following his intervention, the world remains as unpredictable as ever, and humankind’s plight, rather than improving, has worsened dramatically.

In The Road, this disconnect manifests itself through the man’s alienation from the natural world and from what remains of humankind. The man expresses his loneliness and estrangement in the opening pages of the novel: “Barren, silent Godless. He thought the month was October but he wasn’t sure” (McCarthy 4). The world no longer has anything to offer the man—not sustenance, not beauty, not even spiritual connection. He feels that he and the boy have been abandoned by everyone, even God. Moreover, the man has dissociated himself from the Earth’s natural cycles to the point that he does not even know what month it is. The novel’s final lines, cited earlier, pay elegiac homage to a lost connection to Nature in the transcendental sense.

Parable differs from the other two novels in that it presents a far more comprehensive effort to rethink and remodel our relationship to nature and to each other. While the other two novels reveal some of the ways in which we have gone wrong, Parable begins to think through alternative ways of living. First of all, Butler offers us an entirely new belief system: Earthseed. As Lauren presents it, Earthseed is less about a particular set of religious beliefs and more about giving people a reason to take action. When Travis Douglas wonders why Lauren personifies change as God instead of simply teaching that “change is important,” she responds, “People forget ideas. They’re more likely to remember God—especially when they’re scared or
desperate” (Butler 221). Religious conviction can remain strong in adverse circumstances because it does not depend on reason—one does not have to believe that something is logically possible to have faith that it will happen. According to Lauren, “There’s power in knowing that God can be focused, diverted, shaped by anyone at all. But there’s no power in having strength and brains, and yet waiting for God to fix things for you… God will shape us every day of our lives. Best to understand and return the effort” (Butler 220). Lauren’s God is a god not to be worshipped but to be “shaped.” That is, in order to follow the teachings of Earthseed, Lauren’s followers must take charge of their destiny and act on their own behalf. Some might argue that while Earthseed seems to identify itself with the natural world (i.e., images of God are to be found in nature), it stops short of promoting environmental stewardship. If “the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars,” Lauren seems to imply that we should just abandon the Earth to its destruction. She even goes so far as to say that “Fixing the world is not what Earthseed is about” (Butler 276). One counterargument is that Lauren’s world has already passed a critical tipping point past which it is no longer possible to recover. In Lauren’s estimation, “The world is in horrible shape” (Butler 84). By implication, we should not allow this to happen to ourselves, or else we too will be forced to seek asylum among the stars. Moreover, I would argue that Earthseed’s interstellar destiny is distinct from its mission on Earth. While Lauren’s long-term goal is space exploration, her immediate imperative is to establish Earthseed communities that will allow her followers to live prosperously amid the chaos. Miller suggests that “This dream of another place is the horizon which drives Lauren, and eventually others, to
work to better their immediate circumstances. . . . Lauren's dream allows her to work her way through the dystopian present” (Miller 355, emphasis mine). Promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability serves the interests of Earthseed because it will allow its members to survive long enough to make it to the stars. According to Lauren, “This world would be a better place if people lived according to the teachings of Earthseed” (Butler 276). By spreading her religion, Lauren is helping to rebuild the Earth. Emigrating to the stars is only one means of saving humankind—Lauren’s back-up plan in a desperate situation. The other plan entails protecting her followers on Earth.

Many of the teachings of Earthseed align with the views of environmentalists. For example, the idea that “God is change” goes against the conservative impulse of opponents of environmental stewardship who deny that we need to change our ways, believing instead in a mythical golden age gone by. This standpoint finds expression in Donald Trump’s campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” which implies that we should model our society on the past rather than moving toward the future. Furthermore, in an era when “climate change” has become such a buzzword, it is difficult to imagine that Butler was entirely oblivious to the connotations of the word “change.” Lauren’s insistence that change is inevitable implies that change, climatic and otherwise, constantly occurs, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not.

Finally, Butler’s decision to use an environmentally-conscious black female as her protagonist adds a new dimension to conventional environmental paradigms. The fact that Lauren is black challenges the erroneous notion that “black people, do not care about or are indifferent to issues pertaining to the natural environment” (Ruffin
Lauren displays extraordinary leadership, and the fact that she chooses to travel on the road demonstrates her bravery, because both her race and her gender expose her to greater risks than someone like Harry Balter, a white male who joins her group. We are told that mixed-race couples “catch hell” and that the road is a dangerous place for a woman (Butler 171-172). Yet Lauren does not think of herself as a victim or allow herself to become discouraged. Instead she takes practical measures to improve her chances of survival: she disguises herself as a man and pretends to be the boyfriend of Zahra Moss, another member of her group. Butler says that her characters, “who are often black and female, behave as if they have no limitations” (“Transcending Barriers”). Lauren recognizes the danger she faces but chooses not to let it stop her from doing what she thinks is right. Butler insists that we recognize the obstacles people of color, especially women of color, must confront, without turning them into passive victims.

**Conclusion**

I would like to build on Miller’s contention that *Parable* embraces a philosophy based on radical reciprocity and vital materialism. Furthermore, I contend that the other two novels point us in the same direction. Jane Bennett’s concept of vital materialism insists on the vitality or aliveness of all matter, in defiance of the typically hierarchical relationship between humans and everything else. By downplaying the difference between organic and inorganic, she calls into question the assumption that humans are separate from each other and distinct from the world around them (Bennett 224; Frazier 45). In a similar vein, Michelle Murphy’s concept
of alterlife stresses the continually changing interactions among living beings, and between life and non-life: “Alterlife names life already altered, which is also life open to alteration . . . Studying alterlife requires bursting open categories of organism, individual, and body to acknowledge a shared, entangling, and extensive condition of being” (498) Like vital materialism, alterlife eliminates the distinction between life and non-life, between bodies and their environment. Both of these conceptual frameworks compel us to recognize that we operate within a complex and constantly evolving network of interaction. If we understand this principle, perhaps we will be more wary of the consequences of our actions and more prepared to take responsibility for them.

Patrick Murphy contends that contemporary literary works such as *Oryx and Crake* help us realize that “the earth is more a process than an object” (77). He observes that “our body is not a static construct, but a procession of changes from the genetic level to the entire organism level” (85) and that “we are always performing our sense of unique individual existence within a household of the more-than-human world at the same time that our own bodies are households for other organisms performing their own identities and transformations. In both cases, we are in process and undergoing dynamic interactive change and adaptation” (89). This sense of entanglement manifests itself at a structural level in *Oryx and Crake*: As Snyder puts it, “When the pandemic hits, the novel’s domestic plot crashes into its global plot, or, rather, each plot explodes, blossom-like, to reveal the other within . . . the trouble at home at once predetermines and is retrodetermined by the cataclysmic world events around which the narrative is structured” (Snyder 479). Thus, the novel unflinchingly
depicts the consequences of disconnection while at the same time implicitly asserting our inescapable embeddedness.

In *The Road*, the boy repudiates his father’s disconnectedness. While the man avoids, out of fear, all human contact with anyone besides the boy, the boy seeks out interactions with others despite the danger. It is the boy who wants to stop and help the man struck by lightning, the boy who wants to go back for the other “little boy” he sees (or thinks he sees), and the boy who persuades his father to share a meal with Ely. At the end of the novel, the boy meets a compassionate family, and he finally has a chance to establish a connection to someone besides his father. The boy embodies hope for the future. His goodness and purity, which contrast with the man’s hardened practicality, may imply that the father has somehow managed to protect his son from the harshness of the world. Late in the novel the man sees the boy “standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (McCarthy 273). The boy becomes God-like, the ultimate example of goodness, a ray of hope in the darkness. Through the boy, *The Road* links goodness with love and care for others.

*Parable of the Sower* likewise bears witness to the importance of interconnection. Lauren’s “sharing” or hyperempathy syndrome causes her to physically experience the pain that she imagines others feel. According to Fiskio, “Hyperempathy syndrome blurs the boundaries between self and other, mind and body” (30). Lauren wonders, “If everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who would cause unnecessary pain?” (Butler 115). Lauren’s hyperempathy heightens her awareness of those around her and makes obvious her connection to
others. According to Miller, the Earthseed doctrine suggests that “We are all interrelated and responsible for each other” such that “One is free to act but not free of the consequences of one's actions” (Miller 356). Lauren explicitly encourages her followers to consider the consequences of their behavior: “To get along with God, Consider the consequences of your behavior” (Butler 86). She also emphasizes interconnectedness in her Earthseed verses: “All successful life is/Adaptable,/Opportunistic,/Tenacious,/Interconnected, and/Fecund” (Butler 125). Lauren’s teachings imply that the first step toward taking responsibility for our actions involves acknowledging the interconnectedness of all things.

These novels suggest that Climate Fiction examines our current treatment of nature and of each other and powerfully reminds us of the dangers we face if we continue our present behavior. Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower indicate that we should assume an attitude of respect toward everything and everyone around us. Structurally, the novels share one other important characteristic: they all depict a journey in some form. Snowman journeys back to the Paradise Dome to recover supplies, retracing his steps to the place from which the worldwide plague emanated. The man and the boy journey toward the coast, and Lauren undertakes a journey toward the North. These journeys provide opportunities to depict environmental degradation and social strife in poignant detail, but they also suggest that we cannot escape the danger we have caused. No matter how far we go, perhaps even if we reach the stars, we cannot escape our legacy of destruction.
CLOSING THOUGHTS

Having explored the stylistic and thematic accounts of language and nature that these novels offer, all that remains is to understand how, as representatives of the genre of climate fiction, they might contribute to a larger environmental discourse. Snyder suggests that *Oryx and Crake* is characterized by a “dialectic between despair and hopefulness” (486). This dialectic lies at the heart of climate fiction.

Fundamentally pessimistic in that they force us to confront the severity of the ecological disaster toward which we are headed, these novels nevertheless contain elements of hope, however small and tentative. In *Oryx and Crake*, hope appears in the form of the survivors of the pandemic who gradually come together and form new communities (this development, only hinted at in *Oryx and Crake*, occurs in the subsequent books in the series). Hope also manifests itself in Snowman’s reflections on the enduring beauty of nature. In *The Road*, the boy’s survival, together with the novel’s closing lyrical passage, allude to the possibility of a brighter future. In *Parable of the Sower*, the Earthseed community that forms during Lauren’s journey north, along with Lauren’s determination, hold promise for her world’s redemption. These glimmers of hope are indispensable if the authors intend to spur social, cultural, and economic reform. If we give in to nihilism and assume that it is too late to do anything, there is no point in attempting to change our behavior. As Butler observes, “We tend to do the right thing when we get scared” (Marriot). By depicting in vivid detail the horrors environmental apocalypse can bring, these novels perform the critical work of scaring us just enough so that we will act.
Hope is one of the features that differentiates post-apocalyptic fiction from apocalyptic fiction. As we have seen, these novels act as mental flight simulators, preemptively imagining the end of the world. Yet they also envision survival beyond the apocalypse. Hence, the apocalypse represents a radical alteration rather than an ending—death holds the possibility for rebirth. The Mayans understood this, as did Christian philosophers; both describe the apocalypse as the end of an older cycle and the beginning of something new. Similarly, recent discussions of climate change as a paradigm shift take up cyclical apocalyptic thinking—an opportunity to do away with outdated ideologies and practices and enter into new relationships with the natural world and with each other. Thus, we might see climate fiction as a new chapter in the saga of dystopia that outlines disquieting future scenarios while retaining a hint of utopian optimism.

In representing collapse—destruction, disaster, chaos—these novels strip away the distractions of modern society in order to rediscover the essence of what it means to be human. If everything extraneous is destroyed, what remains? By reducing life to the bare need to survive, the novels threaten to dehumanize their characters. Nonetheless, the protagonists assert their humanity by clinging to language, to their relationships, and to purpose. In this way, the novels indicate the values that are most important to preserve. After all, the very definition of humanity is what is at stake in the concept of the anthropocene—an age in which human actions have an impact equal that previously reserved to geological forces. What are we if we are more than simply one of Earth’s many species? All three novels reveal, directly or indirectly, the importance of community. They depict the desperation and loneliness
of extreme individualism, suggesting that the only “happy endings” involve other people: Snowman finally faces the possibility of uniting with others of his kind, the boy finds a new family, and Lauren establishes her Acorn community.

These novels imply that we have been our own worst enemy. In all three stories, the biggest threat is not environmental disaster itself but what it causes people to do to each other. These novels unflinchingly depict human cruelty: child prostitution, cannibalism, infanticide, drug-induced arson and criminality—to name just a few examples. The images of graphic violence are meant to jar us—to shock us out of our complacency. Globalization and mass media force us to confront suffering constantly, to the point that we have become numb to it. These authors recognize that images must be profoundly frightening if they are to catch our attention. Climate fiction suggests that the greatest danger of climate change may be the collapse of society—climate change means everything change.

Ultimately, Oryx and Crake, The Road, and Parable of the Sower attest to the transformative power of storytelling. Reading such stories, one cannot help being moved by them. The social impact of these novels remains to be seen—it is far too early to determine their effects. Nevertheless, in accord with thinkers like Hanne and Kermode, I believe that fiction is capable of performing a social function, aside from entertainment. Stories convey ideas to us in a more profound way than other forms of expression because they appeal to our deepest emotions, our personal experiences, and our hidden fears. Scientific evidence certainly has its place in discussions of climate change, but the manner in which climate discourse finds expression through the stories we tell is equally important. As we attempt to discern the causes of
environmental disaster and mobilize to fight for our survival, we might turn to stories to strengthen our resolve.
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