

## Sowing Seeds of a Black Feminist Future

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In her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Carolyn Finney states, “There is no monolithic African American environmental experience” (98). However, centuries of racism and the overwhelming whiteness of mainstream environmental movements have fabricated a distorted perception of Black people in the United States; Black Americans are perceived as unconcerned about ecological issues and have no interest in participating in outdoor recreation activities. This fallacy has influenced media and literary representations of Black people as well—ignoring the historical barriers of access to green spaces that Black Americans have faced and the incredible work of Black environmentalists and organizations.

In the realm of science fiction, authors and filmmakers often construct futures that lack the presence of Black people or designate them as sideline characters with menial roles—displaying the prevalence of anti-Blackness in the sci-fi genre. White American sci-fi writers (typically men) could stretch their imaginations to feature supernatural and extraterrestrial beings, but “a black man or woman in a spacesuit was an image beyond the limits of [their] imaginations...If blacks appeared at all in the pages of the science fiction pulp magazines, they were presented as offensive ‘darkie’ stereotypes” (Saunders). On the relatively rare occasions that environmental academics do engage with Black communities, they tend to focus almost obsessively on slavery, as seen in the field of ecocriticism and the proliferation of research on plantation ecologies.

Despite these limiting and exclusive narratives in the sci-fi genre and academia, many Black writers, activists, and scholars have provided more nuanced understandings of Blackness and the environment by centering Black voices and thus highlighting the complex and

multifaceted African American environmental experience. In recent years, the growing field of ecofeminism in relation to Black women's ecologies has produced a new intellectual framework known as Black Feminist Ecological Thought. As a scholar working at the intersection of Black feminist literature and environmental humanities, Dr. Chelsea Mikael Frazier coined the term in 2020 to close the gap between ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the environment, and Black Feminism, a theory that centers the liberation and experiences of Black women. These two intellectual movements draw attention to overarching structures of oppression that allow for the unequal distribution of material goods. Still, by merging them, Black Feminist Ecological Thought acknowledges the ways that discourse about environmental degradation and harm tends to neglect Black women even though they suffer the brunt of ecological crises (Mikael 2019).

Dr. Melanie Harris, another Black feminist scholar focusing on environmental ethics, points out how this unfair burden limits the potential for transformative action since African American women have made and continue to make distinctive contributions to environmental movements (Conway 613). As such, Frazier and Harris emphasize the significance of Black women's alternative knowledge of the Earth that works in synchronicity with the health, well-being, and sustainability of Black, African-descended women. In particular, science fiction writer Octavia Butler exemplifies many of the features of Black Feminist Ecological Thought in her apocalyptic novel *Parable of the Sower* through the fifteen-year-old Black heroine Lauren Olamina. Lauren sits at the intersection of multiple identities of marginalization; she is Black, a woman, poor, and disabled. The culmination of all her identities uniquely situates Lauren to transform ecological wounds perpetuated by state violence into seeds of collective power, freedom, and hope for a better future. By reimagining Black women's relationship with nature

and including their presence in futuristic settings, Butler produces a counter-hegemonic narrative in resistance to the lack of contemporary literature and media representation of Black Americans in natural spaces. In the process of displaying the pioneering work of Octavia Butler, a deeper examination of Lauren and her interactions with her community and environment reveal the ways that Butler expands the Black Feminist Ecological Thought framework to arrive at a more tangible understanding of Blackness in/and the environment as it intersects with gender and sexuality; Octavia Butler provides a guide to achieving a Black feminist future through Lauren's actions.

While there is a vast array of Black experiences, each shaped by different economic, social, geographical, and religious backgrounds, Black people share common institutional barriers to natural spaces. Black Americans must navigate the lasting legacies of slavery and Jim Crow that have historically restricted Black people's access to the environment mentally and physically. Even a century later, Carolyn Finney exposes how slavery has disincentivized Black people to be in nature because of its painful and traumatizing associations to the past; "While most African Americans have never seen a lynching, the act of terror perpetrated on a Black person in the woods is remembered both for the place where it happened and the act itself. Evelyn C. White, an African American writer believed her fear of hiking in the Oregon countryside was justified by the murder of Emmett Till in 1955" (56). With the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man shot and killed by three white men just last year for jogging in his neighborhood, White's fears are not unreasonable. The United States has a long history of enacting violence on Black Americans in their natural surroundings. Another example is the legalization of segregation practices, such as redlining, that have disproportionately burdened communities of color with environmental hazards and health problems.

As a cautionary tale, *Parable of the Sower* stresses the importance of building upon and learning from these past histories and traumas. In Dr. Jasmine Yarish's article, "The Abolitionist Politics of Self-Care in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*," she advocates for tackling historical amnesia so that we can "build a world where institutions of oppression have not just vanished but will no longer re-appear"—a world that Octavia Butler urges her audience to work towards. In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler provides a sneak peek into a future where the failure to fix systemic racism enables the reappearance of slavery institutions. As such, Butler frequently alludes to the precursor slavery in the United States. For instance, Lauren refers to her crew as "a modern underground railroad...Slavery again—even worse than my father thought, or at least sooner. He thought it would take a while" (510). Reverend Olamina had already suspected that slavery would occur once again. Still, Lauren and her crew's journey to the North presents a sense of optimism mirroring the same journey that fugitive slaves embarked on to escape the shackles of slavery. Dr. Jasmine Yarish analyzes Lauren's resistance as "fugitive politics of the Reconstruction era, in which people tried to escape racial capitalism that degraded Black people to being sources of capital and labor." By rescuing several former slaves as well as providing them with food, shelter, and education, Lauren shows there are alternate options outside of slavery and society's expectations for people of color.

Although the "Great Outdoors" has been a key site of apprehension for Black Americans, Carolyn Finney admits that "positive stories are buried, marginalized, or forgotten by those in a position to shape the environment" (64). Outside of their labor on the land, slaves cultivated gardens, successful catching game methods, and medicinal knowledge about roots and herbs. In the 20th century, middle-class Black families organized to create "black beaches" such as Virginia Key and Amelia Island to recharge in nature and escape racism (Finney 63). Dr.

Stefanie K. Dunning delves deeper into this topic, specifically how pop culture and literary texts display Black women returning to “pastoral settings” or their natural surroundings to recharge and reclaim power in her book *Black to Nature*. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren views herself in a “sustainable partnership” with Earth and relies heavily on the environment for sustenance, as seen in her eagerness to grow food on Bankhole’s land, realizing that “any serious money we make here will come from here” (559). Earthseed’s emphasis on an interdependent and harmonious union between Lauren and her natural surroundings is reflective of Black Feminist Ecological Thought that suggests Black women hold ecological inclinations that inform their interactions with material resources like water and land (Mikael 2019).

It is no secret that the environmental field has a white face. We are more familiar with the work of John Muir or David Brower than Hazel M. Johnson and Wangari Maathai. However, in this white, male-dominated field, Octavia Butler skillfully sows a future rooted in Black Feminist Ecological Thought in her novel *Parable of the Sower*. Like its Bible’s namesake, Butler’s seeds sprang up and bore fruit a hundredfold—charting a path for the numerous Black women sci-fi authors, such as N.K. Jemisin, movies, and stories starring Black women as leads to come after her. Lauren is now one of the many Black women leading the movement tackling systems of oppression and ecological crises. Black Feminist Ecological Thought has also revealed tools that can aid in creating effective change for a sustainable future: adaptability and collective power.

#### Works Cited

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