LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Reading *Parable of the Sower* Online in a Pandemic: Collectively Imagining Different Futures with Octavia E. Butler's Speculative Fiction

Miranda Jeanne Marie Iossifidis

Newcastle University

miranda.iossifidis@ncl.ac.uk

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In this short piece, I suggest that online reading spaces that are created as collective, creative, collaborative spaces of coming together to discuss fiction, are forms of psychological, social and collective sustenance and care, which are generative of ambiguous hopefulness in the current context of a global pandemic. In May 2020, a group of friends – originally from California, now scattered around the world – began meeting via Zoom to discuss speculative fiction. The group describes themselves as a majority queer group of fifteen people in their mid 20s to early 30s, mostly working class migrants or children of migrants, white and people of colour, using pronouns of he/him, she/her and they/them, and are currently based in the Bay Area, Long Beach, Canada and London. Their occupations vary: the group includes artists, writers, people who work in service, care and tech industries, social work, reproductive justice. Many are involved in community organising, and in initiating this group they 'wanted to focus on speculative fiction, and the possibilities of imagining and organising towards more just futures' (Anne-Marie, reading group member). They chose to read Octavia E. Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* after having read adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* (2017) and Ursula K Le Guin's *the Dispossessed* (1974) and read *Octavia's Brood* (2015) afterwards. This is partly because the book is based in California, where the reading group members are from, and during the pandemic and 2020 "wildfire season" they wanted to

'explore struggles for black liberation, anti-racist organising, and individual and collective change' (Anne-Marie). The reading group is concerned with everyday, grounded and speculative practices of alternative worldbuilding, and as such I want to suggest that their collective reading could perhaps be understood as a modest form of 'imaginactivism' (Haran 2017, 2019) – a term that seeks to explore the ways in which 'interpretive and activist communities are formed, inspired and / or reinvigorated by fictional cultural production'. What forms of collective imaginactivsm are possible at present, and 'what happens to literary geographies when academic and social spaces are radically constricted by social distancing and isolation?' (Hones 2020: 11).

This piece explores the social and situated practices of a group collectively negotiating speculative fiction over video conferencing software across different time zones. They communicate via WhatsApp, share notes on Google Docs and curate a playlist to accompany readings on Spotify. Focusing on these kinds of interactions and conversations is attending to what Leszczynski has recently called the "digital mundane" – the 'taken-for-granted, seemingly ordinary and routine sites, objects, data productions and networked practices of everyday life' (2020: 1194). She argues that 'understanding how digital materialities, spatialities and praxes come to matter in and for the lives of everyday people is key to both recogising people's quotidian capacities to enact meaingnful social change and to rendering violence, insjustice and inequalities legible and tractable for intervention (1199). As such, this piece brings together work in feminist digital geography and recent debates in literary geography around critical worldbuilding 'as both a site of struggle and a terrain for experimentation with real world possibilities' (Martin and Sneegas 2020: 16). Focusing on readers engagement with speculative fiction builds on recent work in cultural sociology that seeks to focus on the importance of readers opening up to the plurality of the human condition through fiction (Olave 2018) as well as calls within geography for the mobilisation of the 'fictionable worlds' of postcolonial literature 'as a way of working toward multivocality in geographical knowledge,' allowing for a sometimes painful 'testing out' of a 'range of different plausible possibilities and for voicing a range of different perspectives,' (Noxolo and Preziuso 2013: 173).

Through an attentiveness to the knowledge production of readers, this piece is a modest addition to recent work which seeks to explore the relationship between speculative climate fiction and political change (Harris 2020; Martin and Sneegas 2020; Milkoreit 2016; Schneider-Mayerson 2018; Streeby 2018; Yazell 2020). In exploring how readers seek out and engage with utopian and critically dystopian fictions that nourish the capacity for individual and collective resistance and struggle, this piece – and the wider project it is part of – seeks to ground some of the claims made about the radical potention of speculative fiction (see Martin and Sneegas' edited Special Issue of *Literary Geographies* 2020 (6)1; Moylan 2014; Jameson 2005) by attending qualitatively to ordinary reading practices. This piece speaks to a wider project with online sf reading communities that focuses on how reading and discussing speculative fiction online is generative for collectively negotiating radically altered presents and futures (see Chambers and Garforth, forthcoming; Iossifidis 2018; Iossifidis and Garforth, in preparation). It builds on work that focuses on the ways in which texts "happen"

in the interaction of dispersed actors, are made and remade over space and time, generating multiple readings (Hones 2008, 2014) and are part of a relational understanding of literary geography which understands the ways in which 'page and place are co-produced in reading and writing practice' (Saunders and Anderson 2016: 115). It builds on earlier work on readers and reading (see Felski 2008; Long 2003; Radway 1984) as well as burgeoning seam of research on and with online reading communities (see Driscoll 2016; Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019; Gruzd and Rehberg Sedo 2012; Hones 2014; Rehberg Sedo 2003, 2011; Yap 2011).

Through their fortnightly meetings and more regular interactions via other apps, the group enact a kind of creative, collaborative, caring sf reading practice that I cautiously suggest constitutes a form of sustenance that is generative of ambiguous hopefulness in the contemporary context of an ongoing pandemic. Ambiguous hopefulness is a thread articulated throughout discussions of *Parable of the Sower* and is linked to strategies of survival, but also in relation to community building, organising, and dealing with change through the inherently *social* aspects of the future of *Parable.* In using the term ambiguous hopefulness, I follow David Bell in the sense that hope should be 'differentiated from both a vaguely optimistic fatalism and confident expectation' (Bell 2017: 8). As Bell argues, hope 'is distinguished from "confidence" through its careful grounding in the material conditions of the present – what Bloch called 'the darkness of the lived moment' (1986: 1178, in Bell 2017: 8).

In the spring and summer of 2020, *Parable of the Sower* felt prominent in anglophone online publics; Tananarive Due and Monica A. Coleman held weekly discussions via zoom and YouTube, entitled "Octavia tried to tell us: Parable for today's pandemic" which had different special guests including Ayana Jamieson, adrienne maree brown, Toshi Reagan and Nishi Shawl.[1] The book became a New York Times bestseller for the first time in August 2020.[2] Octavia E Butler's influence is indeed 'widespread and multivalent' coming 'from both within the academy and out of communities of readers, practitioners, independent scholars, artists, laypeople, radical farmers, filmmakers, and more' (Jamieson and Bailey 2019: 1). In this context, I focus on a few excerpts from the informal *Parable* reading group discussion, which touch upon the role of imagination, survival, penal abolition, Black Lives Matter and the pandemic, to suggest that practices of 'receptive generosity' (Scott 2017) are central to the ways in which online reading groups are generative of creative, collective and caring forms of knowledge production.

Early in the discussion, Kyle initiates an exchange about the group's experience 'in terms of reading this book during this moment.' He says that he 'kept going to the book,' whenever he read the news, talked to people or 'would get kind of overwhelmed and the book was comforting in a way,' because he 'felt like it is so applicable right now':

> I've been seeing people post quotes from Earthseed in conjunction with this moment. So I'm just curious how people are connecting the two, or what connections you saw or felt with the book and what's happening right now? (Kyle)

A playful, intimate and rich exchange ensues, allowing for the discussion of collective forms of organising, intelligence, survival and envisioning. They ask each other 'what would you do,' or 'would you try it' and theorise different aspects of the novel (Peekaboo, reading group member). Danielle says: 'it's resonating so much right now' because 'it's a book about pure survival … about well, what do you grasp onto when everything around you is shitty? You just grasp onto the hope that something can change for the better'. Modes of identification are tied to how 'real' it feels: for Rhianydd, the book's depiction of a 'slow Apocalypse made it feel really real,' alongside its depiction of 'denial, imagination and change. The way that things were disintegrating but there were still people clinging to this false skeleton of the old reality with taxes, property ownership, police, firemen – these last semblances of an old civilization'.

The group are particularly invested in forms of community organising, and Anne Marie is drawn to how Lauren Olamina, the main protagonist of *Parable* is 'so strategic about how to do something right, how to change someone, to give them knowledge without their fear or defence mechanisms first flaring up so they can't hear you,' which she considers practical 'great advice.' Jessie adds:

> she shows you as a reader how to think in a survivalist way … Whenever she sees something, she … literally writes: take a mental note, take a mental note. I think that right now you can use the way that Lauren was thinking about the world and drawing from the world to survive – it's a way to have these conversations with people or how to come up with plans and come up with, basically strategies for the future. So I think *that's* the most relative way I think we can use the book.

Parable's depiction of the social practices of forging communities allows readers to articulate ambiguous hopefulness in part due to the novel's 'commitment to the material details of remaking the social' which explicitly draws on Black Feminist notions of 'collectivity, dignity, and self-protection' (Lemenager 2017). Chelsea M Frazier (2016) argues that *Parable's* ecological ethics points to *new* and fundamentally *different* possibilities and *not* improvements of existing ones: e.g. new forms of collective organising. The fragility and vulnerability of community-building in the context of racial capitalism, white supremacy, rising authoritarianism and ecological devastation is discussed by the group. They articulate affective allegiance (pertianing to ethical or political values) and empathetic attachments (the notion of co-feeling) with Lauren Olamina (Anderson et al. 2019). This is woven through complex tensions between the dystopian questions of survival foregrounded in the narrative, and the prospects of ambiguous hopefulness. Notions of adaptation and change are often tightly attached to Lauren Olamina and richly intertwined with readers' fears, hopes and desires. Discussion of survival in the 2020s comes to the fore, with readers drawing parallels between their present and Butler's projected 2020s future, building on the histories of violence, oppression and slavery that informed Butler's writing. This resonates with what Bailey and Jamieson term 'palimpsestuous memorialization' (2017) to describe the ways Butler's work is 'extracted, reconstituted, and fictionalized from her personal histories and histories at large

while being inextricably linked to the geopolitical landscapes and locations of southern California, Los Angeles and Pasadena' (2019: 2; see also Streeby 2018). The intimacy of the reading group with these geographies was often intermingled with their pleasurable, painful and complicated engagement with it. In some of the discussion, the actions of Lauren Olamina and Octavia E Butler are discussed in parallel: 'just in exactly the way her character does, I really feel that she wants to provide a blueprint for what she felt the black community needed to do to survive into the future' (Anne Marie).

The reading group compares their experience in the group itself to Lauren's Earthseed philosophy, which Kyle suggests is always 'pushing against this individual thing and pushing it towards collective ways of understanding'. He considers how the book group is not a matter of 'individuals [who] come together as a collective' and explicitly draws on his understanding of Earthseed as a relational philosophy, to consider 'that we are who we are *because* of the book club'. This builds on Jessie's earlier comments about how Lauren Olamina 'is her own person and she's a leader, but at the same time, that doesn't matter [...] All she wants is a group of people ...to be able to work together' She continues to relate Earthseed to the summer of 2020: 'Right now we all feel a lot you know, we all are yearning for this collective group to move forward ... we've realised that no one can get there alone... We always think of intelligence of what's in *my* head but it's collective for sure" (Jessie).

Through their critical, creative and collective negotiation of *Parable*, the relationship between hopefulness, collective survival and the Black Lives Matter Movement comes to the fore, intertwined with critical reflection of hyperempathy, histories of black struggle, and white supremacy. Jael reflects that while 'none of the people in my family have died in the hands of police, all these people around me are a part of my community and a part of me and it's important to remember that.' In response, Jessie notes that Lauren's hyperempathy reminds her of Jael, and reiterates Caitlin's remark that 'white supremacy has tried to erase hyperempathy as a concept'. For Jael, the book 'helped me to remember how we're – maybe this was some sort of sci fi – but we really *are* all connected … even if it's just like a sci fi thing of you *feeling things,* at the end of the day, it's still gonna affect you, because we're all a community and because we're all actually connected, in that we're all part of this society together. We're all going through COVID together and this Black Lives Matter movement *does* really … not affect [everyone], but this *is* for everyone … We need to have these systems so we can *sobrevivir* – to survive, to be able to learn and survive together'.

In considering what kind of hope is offered in *Parable*, Patrick Bresnihan suggests that 'it is not even a hope that is hopeful,' (echoing Bloch) but that the book constructs a scenario in which '[t]he possibility of a new life is unthinkable without the transformative power of shared moments of bodily intimacy, vulnerability and kindness' (2017: 47). Kyle highlights moments within the book where the protagonists decide that they are going to act, even if they don't think it will work, as particularly important:

> I feel like that's what it takes. The ability to imagine that it's even possible is such a necessary step in any social change movement, and especially right now. The first step is just imagining that we don't need police. And everyone you tell, the first thing that

you hear is "we need police. That's impossible" … Just the idea that we can try to not have police or imagine it, is the hopeful part of Earthseed, that she was trying to put into Earthseed. I think it's also directly tied to blackness and black history in America specifically but elsewhere around the world; that hope that can never be squashed, is tied to struggle and how they're always connected. There's never been a moment where there's one without the other.

As such, *Parable* stimulates a lot of reflection *on* collective modes of being, relating, and organising in the wider world within the reading group, whilst the group itself also *enacts* together a form of collective sense-making, building collaboratively on each other's theories and interpretations in a joyful and generous way. This resonates with Scott's (2017) notion of an ethics of receptive generosity, which draws on Roman Coles' idea of 'receptive generosity' to explore an ethics of receptive generosity as being committed not merely to giving to others, but to receiving from them as well (117). It is the group's 'vulnerable openness to learning from others' (2017: 117) that allows for a cautious and ambiguous hopefulness to emerge through their engagement with the character of Lauren, Earthseed, and the book's depiction of California of 2024. Scott theorizes thinking-aloud *with* others as both a mode of speaking *as well as* a mode of listening, which suggests precisely an ethics of *responsiveness* to difference' (115). Furthermore, it is an ethics which is alert to 'human action's frailty and plurality, and vulnerability to time and the collision of irreconcilable or incommensurable ends,' (117). This generative nature of learning together resonates with the ethos of the Octavia E. Butler Legacy Network, through which Ayana Jamieson and Moya Bailey 'seek to witness and reveal patterns that emerge in her work and the strategies people use for survival and self-actualization. We continue to ask what strategies emerge from Butler's published work, her archives, and the field as a whole. We continue to document, commemorate, conjure, imagine, investigate, instigate toward a more wholistic approach to learning in community that evolves and is not static' (Jamieson and Baley 2019: 3).

Informal, collective and creative forms of reading speculative fiction – such as those discussed in this piece – enact such ethics of receptive generosity, and play an important role in 'learning in community'. Reparative modes of reading (cf. Sedgwick 2001) which are pleasurable, for solace and replenishment (Felski 2015), for autobiographical recognition and ways of encountering difference (Procter and Benwell 2015) have been explored in relation to speculative fiction by Garforth and Chambers (forthcoming). Speculative fiction also offers ways of (re)learning and knowing our social and political worlds (Felski 2008) and make sense, collectively and individually, of social life as we experience it, desire it, imagine it (Long 2003).

In this short piece, I have suggested that online reading spaces that are created as collective, creative, collaborative spaces of coming together to discuss speculative fiction, are forms of psychological, social and collective sustenance and generative of ambiguous hopefulness. The reading group is concerned with everyday, grounded and speculative practices of alternative worldbuilding, and as such their collective reading could perhaps be understood as a modest form of 'imaginactivism' in the context of an ongoing pandemic, but

more importantly it is evident that such practices of coming together, sharing and creating new forms of knowledge – especially now – constitute a form of collective care.

Notes

[1] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyLsqaFjl44 for the first session.
[2] See https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2020/09/13/trade-fiction-paperback/.

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